

*“TEARS AND THANKS”*  
*1 Thessalonians 5:16-18*  
November 19, 2023  
David Hull, Preaching

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 New International Version (NRSV)

*<sup>16</sup> Rejoice always, <sup>17</sup> pray without ceasing, <sup>18</sup> give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.*

He served as a Pastor during one of history’s most devastating wars – the Thirty Years War – from 1618-1648. During this time Martin Rinkart was a Pastor in Eilenburg, Germany. In 1637 alone he was responsible for 4500 burials. I can’t even imagine a pastoral ministry that averaged over 85 funerals per week! He is most remembered today not for all his work during those struggles, but for the table grace that he had written. We sang it a few minutes ago:

*Now thank we all our God  
With heart and hands and voices  
Who wondrous things hath done  
In whom His world rejoices.*

During a time of great tears, he was able to give thanks.

This hymn story took a personal turn for me eleven years ago. My mother was dying. For about a week she was lying in her bed without any response. Family was gathered around her. We would talk and pray and tell stories – wondering if she could hear, always assuming that she could. Then my sister, Susan, wanted to sing. We found a hymnal and began to move through the hymnal singing around Mom’s bed. I wasn’t sure that I was up for singing at this time, but Susan encouraged us to keep going. And then she picked the hymn “Now Thank We All Our God.” I didn’t make it through the first verse before the tears had overcome my singing. I had never really paid attention to those words in the first verse –

*Now thank we all our God  
With heart and hands and voices,  
Who wondrous things hath done,  
In whom His world rejoices;  
**Who, from our mother’s arms,**  
Hath blest us on our way  
With countless gifts of love,  
And still is ours today.*

“Who, from our mother’s arms . . .” Just as I was giving thanks for my mom’s life I was overcome by tears. Tears and thanks. They often go together.

How can we rejoice always and give thanks in all circumstances? When we feel more like crying, can thanks come through our tears? I have certainly thought about those questions over the last few years. With all the pain that we see around us, how can we continue to give thanks?

The answer lies in Jesus Christ. It was Paul who said in Philippians 2, “Have this mind in you which was in Christ Jesus.” We need to understand the mind of Christ on the subject of giving thanks. A study of the Gospels produces some very interesting results. There are three instances when Jesus is recorded as offering thanks to God. In the Gospels, the Greek word *eucharisteo* was used. It means to give thanks. In fact, many Christians call what happens at the Lord’s Table the Eucharist. This comes from the fact that Jesus offered thanks to God even as he broke the bread and poured from the cup. In every one of these three situations of Jesus giving thanks, he could have shed tears instead. Every time Jesus said “Thank you” to God the times were hard, life was dark and bleak, challenges and obstacles were facing him.

Perhaps you are one who is living in the season of tears. If so, let’s learn how Jesus gave thanks. It might make a difference in the way we can face tomorrow.

#### I. Give thanks for Simple Gifts

***<sup>11</sup> Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. John 6:11 (NRSV)***

You know the story of the feeding of the 5000. It is the only miracle of Jesus that is recorded in all four Gospels. Jesus had been teaching the large crowd for hours, but now they were getting hungry. In fact, some of them may have been getting “hangry!” Do you know what I mean? Without any fast-food places around the corner, there was a large crisis on hand. How are they going to feed them? Jesus asks this question to Philip to test him. Andrew, meanwhile, has been scouting for some answers and he comes back with a boy’s lunch. It is not much, just five barley loaves and two fish. He even commented, “But what are they among so many people?”

Jesus could have focused on what they did not have. That is a scarcity mentality. Instead, Jesus started by giving thanks for something that was so small and simple – a little boy’s lunch. He was grateful for the abundance represented in a small boy’s small lunch. Then the miracle of multiplication happened.

That is the way to live. Give thanks for the simple gifts. Rather than focusing on what we do not have, thank God for what you do have. Instead of focusing on scarcity, give thanks for the abundance of simple gifts. And let God begin to multiply all over again!

We can always focus on what we don’t have, or we can be like Jesus and give thanks for the simple gifts that we do have. This is true for us as individuals, as families, and for our church family. It is so easy to be overwhelmed by the challenges of a hungry crowd of 5,000 that we miss the possibilities of a small boy’s lunch. We can always compare ourselves to others and

come up short. Or, we can give thanks for the simple gifts that we do have and live with abundant gratitude.

I wonder if that was at the core of the Scripture reading we heard from Matthew 25:14 and following. It is known as the parable of the talents. Jesus told a story about one man who received five talents. He invested well and was rewarded. Another man received two talents. He invested well and was rewarded. But the man who only received one talent was afraid (v. 25) and hid his talent in the ground. Is it possible he was overcome by this scarcity mentality when he saw how others had five or two times as much as him? Instead of being thankful for what he had been given and working to invest this gift in the very best way, he grew fearful and suffered the rebuke of the landowner. Do you think it would have made a difference if he had approached his one talent gift with gratitude? I do.

I love what Alphonse Karr wrote. “Some people are always grumbling because roses have thorns. I am thankful that thorns have roses.” Giving thanks for the simple gifts makes all the difference.

## II. Give thanks for the God who Hears

***<sup>41</sup> So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, “Father, I thank you for having heard me. <sup>42</sup> I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.” John 11:41-42 (NRSV)***

Jesus’ friend Lazarus had died. Jesus was caught up in his grief over the loss of a friend. He also knew that he had let down the sisters of Lazarus who had hoped that Jesus would come in time to heal his friend. He was not there, and pain was in the air outside the tomb of Lazarus when Jesus arrived. A few verses before the ones I read we find that shortest verse in the Bible that I always like to use when I had to memorize a Bible verse. You know it. “Jesus wept.” Even in his tears, Jesus moved forward and gave thanks. He knew that God was hearing him in his time of need, and he was grateful.

We talk a great deal about us hearing God. We read Scripture and talk about the “Word of God for the people of God.” We listen for the voice of God and the promptings of the Spirit. But, there is also great comfort in knowing that God hears you. This conversation with the divine is not just about us hearing from God, it is about God hearing us.

It seems that every other TV commercial these days is for a cell phone company. Several years ago, we began to hear the question, “Can you hear me now?” – and even that guy has now switched phone companies. “Can you hear me now?” It is almost the question of our generation. We want to be in touch – we want to be heard. We don’t want our conversations to be dropped. This is true not only in our cell phone communications, but in our conversation with God.

So, Jesus thanks God that the Almighty heard him. In fact, Jesus clarifies that God always hears, but Jesus wanted to make sure that all the people knew that so he thanked God for hearing. It is something that we can give thanks for – even in days like this. God is always listening – so will you talk to God soon?

III. Give thanks in the struggles of life

***27 Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, “Drink from it, all of you . . .” Matthew 26:27 (NRSV)***

Notice the context here. This passage is describing the Last Supper of Jesus and his friends. The cross was the next day. He did not want to endure the struggles leading up to his death. But he knew that only through the pain of the cross could he accomplish his purpose. He continued with his difficult mission and offered thanks to the God who was present with him every step of the way.

The great artist Renoir had severe arthritis late in his life which made painting very difficult for him. His friends asked him, “Why do you continue to work? The pain is so great, and you have already accomplished so much.” His response was wonderful. He said, “The pain passes, but the beauty remains.” And so, he continued his painful work in gratitude.

Jesus picked up the cup on the table and gave thanks as he talked about his own blood – the pain passes but the beauty remains.

Then Jesus made his way to Gethsemane to agonize with God. Drops of sweat like blood came from his brow. Let this cup pass from me he said. But finally his prayer became, “Not my will, but thine be done.” The pain passes – but the beauty remains.

That night one follower betrayed him, and another denied even knowing him, but he continued his journey of struggle – the pain passes, but the beauty remains.

The next day he was flogged within an inch of his life by Pilate’s men as he stood for truth – the pain passes but the beauty remains.

Then he hung on a terrible cross taking the sins of all the world upon him – the pain passes but the beauty remains.

He had taken up the cup, the cup of suffering and struggle. He had drunk from this cup so that we might live. He had even given thanks for this cup!

And what happened three days later – the PAIN HAD PASSED AND THE BEAUTY REMAINED! Resurrection happened and the world changed that day! And there is our hope for the living of these days.

None of us wants painful struggles to happen in our lives. We really don’t want broken relationships, threatening diagnoses, or shattered dreams. But when the difficult journey comes to us, we can still approach the days with thanksgiving. We are not so much giving thanks for the struggles, but we are giving thanks in all circumstances, grateful for the God who walks with us in the tough times and whose grace is sufficient for all our needs.

Hannah Coulter looks back in her senior adult years and reflects on her life in a Wendell Berry novel that bears her name:

*You mustn't wish for another life. You mustn't want to be somebody else. What you must do is this:*

*"Rejoice evermore. Pray without ceasing. In everything give thanks."*

*I am not all the way capable of so much, but those are the right instructions.*

Yes, Hannah, you are correct. Those are the right instructions!