

In Everything Give Thanks

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 (Thanksgiving)

The year 1637 was especially hard for the city of Eilenberg, Germany and a Lutheran pastor named Martin Rinkart. The Thirty Years War was ravaging Europe and refugees were coming to Eilenberg. While that created its own set up hardships within that city, what made the year even more difficult was not necessarily an enemy force you could see, but a sickness you couldn't see - the Bubonic Plague. That year, the plague claimed the lives of 8,000 people in Eilenberg. Eventually with nowhere to bury them, the dead were being buried in trenches instead of graves. Pastor Rinkart was never affected by the plague. However being the only pastor remaining in the city had its own challenges not only trying to care for the spiritual needs of those still living in the city, but also comforting them in their grief. At one point he was doing 40-50 funerals a day. Can you imagine? I can't. If that wasn't hard enough on Pastor Rinkart, the tragedy affecting the city entered his own home as his wife was struck by the plague and died.

It sure feels like 2020 isn't much different than 1637, does it? It has been an extremely difficult year, one I know that none of us ever thought would happen. For some, it has been more difficult than others. Maybe that would describe your year as the plague that has crippled the movements of our country and our world has affected you personally. Even if it may not have affected you directly, in some way every one in this county has been impacted. We all feel its effects one way or another. Like those people who lived in Eilenberg, in the midst of pandemic, conflict and hardship the temptation is to look at the purpose of this holiday we call "Thanksgiving" and sneer at the very thought of what the Apostle Paul encouraged the believers in Thessalonica to do.

"Rejoice always? Why? There's no reason to rejoice at all when people are getting sick and dying. Pray without ceasing? Since this whole thing started that's what it seems like I've been doing. I've been praying that all of this would just go away and life would return to normal. It doesn't seem to be working. In everything, in all circumstances, give thanks? God, you expect me to give thanks this year with all that has affected our lives and made 2020 a living nightmare?"

Through all that Pastor Rinkart endured and witnessed as he faithfully served the people of Eilenberg, you might think he would lament sinking into a deep depression with all of the troubles he personally and his city endured. Far from it. Instead he composed a hymn. In this hymn he invites the people of Eilenberg and God's people in 2020 to give thanks. "Nun danket alle Gott," he says. "Now thank we all our God with hearts and hands and voices, who wondrous things has done, in whom his world rejoices, who from our mother's arms has blessed us on our way with countless gifts of love and still is ours today."

How could he write those words amidst so much sickness and death all around him? How could thankfulness so fill his heart causing him to raise his hands and voices in thanksgiving and praise to God when one of those deaths was his own wife? Could he have been thinking about those words from the Apostle Paul? **"Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing. In everything give thanks. For this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus."**

So why is it we can rejoice always, pray without ceasing, and in all things give thanks to God? The key is in the last phrase. "For this is God's will *for you* (believers, God's people), *in Christ*." Thankfulness in everything begins in Christ Jesus. When we understand and treasure Jesus as the greatest blessing we have, how can we not do just what Paul encourages us to do? In Christ Jesus we have all that we truly need. It is he who took our greatest sickness and hardship of sin on the cross for us. It is he who took sin's curse of death and overpowered it by rising from the grave. Connected to Jesus through faith we have forgiveness of our sins. We have salvation. We have life waiting in heaven for us all because Jesus lives! No matter what sickness or hardship may affect our life in this world, we have blessings that reach beyond this life all in Christ Jesus.

As a result, our hearts overflow with praise and thanksgiving to God. We are led to rejoice always even when many around us see no reason to rejoice. We pray without ceasing to our God who hears us, helps us, and continually blesses us in some way according to his will. Even though human reason might say it isn't worth wasting your time, we approach God's throne of grace on bended knee and with folded hands. In everything, in all circumstances of life, with hearts filled with gratitude, we give thanks. We raise our voices to say thank you to our God who loved us so much that he gave us his only Son so that we might live with him forever. We raise our hands to offer up our time, our abilities, and our treasures in thankful service to him who continues to bless our lives in so many other ways too.

This Thanksgiving as you also take time to reflect on God's continued blessing of your life in this world, maybe, like me, you are looking at things a little differently than other years. Lately, I've been thinking more about blessings which seem to have always been there. However now I have a deeper appreciation and gratitude for them as a result because of the year we have had.

I give thanks even more for every opportunity there is to worship together around God's Word and Sacrament. When the year began, it was just a given that we could worship together in one place. For a time that wasn't really possible and even now it still isn't easy. We still aren't all together. Yet how much more do I rejoice and give thanks for worship and fellowship together.

I give thanks for the technology which helps people to communicate. During that time when getting together with family, close friends, or even with fellow believers wasn't possible or easy, without the ability to communicate electronically, it would have been even more difficult to remain connected to each other. Phones and computers will never replace the value of face to face communication, but for that technology and those who know better how it works than I do, I give thanks.

I give thanks for health in my own family. As many of you know, good health wasn't the case this whole year. My household so far has been healthy, but last month, my brother was hospitalized with COVID experiencing severe symptoms. It didn't look good, Now he is doing much better and at home recovering. Even though every day still has its challenges for him because of how the virus affected his body, today I rejoice and give thanks to God for his healing hand.

I give thanks for people who I may not have always taken the time to give thanks to God for, people all around me. I give thanks and praise God for health care workers who work day in and day out to care for the sick. I give thanks for those who work in some way to make sure that shelves of stores are stocked with what we need. I give thanks for policemen and others in public safety for their daily work to keep us safe. Of course I can't forget those closest to me. I give thanks for my family, my friends, and you whom I share something more with than just an earthly friendship. In everything this year, for what are you personally giving thanks?

Even if those earthly blessings might seem from a worldly standpoint to not offer much reason to rejoice, in Christ we do indeed have reason to rejoice always. What we have in Jesus fills us with joy every day leading us to pray without ceasing confident in God our Savior. Since God has already blessed us beyond our comprehension. So in Christ, we have a unique viewpoint that leads us to give thanks in everything even in 2020. If God has blessed us with life and salvation through Jesus, how could he not graciously continue to bless? So even when things don't look so good and blessings aren't so obvious, we look closer not just on Thanksgiving, but every day to see how the source of all good things continues to richly bless our lives. Pastor Rinkart had it right when he said, "Now thank we all our

God with hearts and hands and voices, who wondrous things has done, in whom his world rejoices, who from our mother's arms has blessed us on our way with countless gifts of love and still is ours today." Amen