

**Irregardlessly Thankful**  
**1 Thessalonians 5: 16-18**

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Years ago there was a pastor in Edinburgh, Scotland who was renowned for his pulpit prayers. He always found something to thank God for, even in bad times. On this particular Sunday morning it was raining and cold, almost cold enough for things to start freezing. The rain was coming down in sheets. One of the few congregants who was there that day thought to himself, "The preacher will have nothing to thank God for on a wretched morning like this." Stepping up to the pulpit and lifting his eyes towards heaven, the pastor prayed, "We thank Thee, O God, that it is not always like this."

That pastor was irregardlessly thankful. Now I know the word "Irregardlessly" cannot be found in Webster's dictionary. It's a linguistic invention. Nevertheless, I cannot think of another word which so accurately describes that pastor's approach to thankfulness. Neither can I find another word which so accurately portrays what Paul said in his letter to the Christians living in the city of Thessalonica. He told them as we have already heard this morning, "Be joyful always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18) His admonition to those first century Christians was not only an expression of what he believed, but also an affirmation of what he had personally experienced. Let me explain.

In the sixteenth chapter of the book of Acts in the New Testament, there is an account about Paul and his traveling companion Silas. Because of a civil disturbance involving a slave girl, whom they had freed from demonic possession, Paul and Silas had been severely beaten and thrown into the deepest part of a prison where they were chained to the walls. Instead of being discouraged and complaining about the way in which they had been treated, they started praying and singing hymns to God. Their joy, their prayers and perhaps their expressions of thankfulness had a profound effect upon the other prisoners. They were listening intently to what these new prisoners were saying.

Then suddenly around midnight everything was thrown into a state of pandemonium. A violent earthquake hit the prison and probably the entire city. The walls shook, the chains fell out of the walls where Paul and Silas had been shackled and all the doors of the prison flew wide open. Waking up, the jailer knew that his life would be forfeit if the prisoners escaped. Taking matters into his own hands, he drew his sword and was preparing to kill himself when Paul cried out, "Don't harm yourself. We're all still down here." Running down the steps into the lower chambers of the prison and literally falling to his knees, the jailer

implored of Paul, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" Evidentially he had also been listening to this jailhouse prayer meeting. That night he and his entire family became believers and were baptized. A dreadful situation had been completely transformed because Paul and Silas had done precisely what he told the Thessalonians to do. In all of life's situations, especially the more difficult ones, he had told them to always possess a joyful spirit, to be constantly in touch with their heavenly Father through prayer and to remain thankful, no matter what. Or to use that earlier phrase, to be "irregardlessly thankful." Now let's see how these words, especially the last ones, can apply to you and me. Let me suggest three possibilities.

Being irregardlessly thankful, being unconditionally thankful no matter what we're facing, declares our faith and trust in God. We've all heard the story of Job. He loses everything, his flocks and herds, his children, even his health. His body is covered with painful sores. His wife tells him to curse God and die. Three friends arrive and they proceed to tell him how all of these tragedies are somehow his fault. It's not a pretty scene. Job responds by dismissing their accusations and expressing his desire to meet with God. He wants to know from the Lord Himself why all this pain and suffering had come his way. The ongoing conversation between himself and his three accusers continues for a multitude of chapters in this Old Testament book. Never, however, during this entire conversational diatribe does Job's faith and trust in the Lord waver, not even one little bit. In fact, he states that he will not turn away from God, even if it costs him his life. He declares, "Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him." (Job 13:15)

Fortunately, most of us will never have to face what Job encountered. But there are some who have. I'm thinking this morning of Joni Eareckson. She was a bubbly, vigorous teenager before a diving accident paralyzed her from the neck down. The only part of her body she could move was her lips. Like Job she asked God, "Why? Why did you let this happen to me?" Her faith and trust in Him were severely tested. Being strapped to a Striker Frame in which she was turned upside down for long periods of time to keep her alive, was pure torture. It brought her to the point of wanting to die, to end it all. But somehow she held on and her faith rebounded and became the springboard for a worldwide ministry. Not only did she become a recognized artist drawing beautiful pictures holding a felt tipped pen in her lips, she also had the opportunity to speak to young people all across America and was even interviewed by Barbara Walters on the *Today Show*, sharing her faith in God with millions of listeners. She had trusted her life, even her broken body, into the hands of God and that alone was enough.

Her story brings me to the second point in this message. Being irregardlessly thankful enables God to transform life's tragedies into triumphs. That has certainly been true with regards to Joni Eareckson's life. She's about my age now and still serving the Lord. I went online to see what is happening in her life. The

website reported that she had been diagnosed with a second bout of cancer and was receiving radiation. This is what she said, "When I received the unexpected news of cancer from my oncological surgeon, I relaxed and smiled, knowing that my sovereign God loves me dearly and holds me tightly in His hands. What good is it if we only trust the Lord when we understand His ways? That only guarantees a life filled with doubts." Yes, trusting in God, doesn't mean that we will always understand his ways. However, we do have this promise, a promise to which we can cling to, no matter what we are facing. It's a promise found in Paul's letter to the Romans. You've heard it before. "All things work together for good to them that love God, to them that are called according to His purpose." (Romans 8:28).

Let me provide you with an illustration of this uncontested truth. How many of you have ever enjoyed a glass of grape juice? Let me tell you about how it was invented. Years ago in the 1800's a young man desired to be a medical missionary to Africa. He was approved and he and his wife prepared to leave from New York City. Upon further investigation regarding their physical health, it was determined that his wife would not be able to withstand the harsh environment into which they were going. The young man was heartbroken. This had been the goal of his life, to share the gospel with the people of that far off continent. He and his wife returned to the home of his parents. What was he now to do with the rest of his life? How could he serve the Lord as a missionary in a distant country if he couldn't actually go there? His father, a Methodist pastor and dentist, had been experimenting with a non-alcoholic wine made from grapes for the communion services at his church. It was the dawn of the Temperance Movement. The young man thought his father's invention was a great idea and with his dad's blessing gradually transformed it into a profitable business. Even though he could not go to Africa, he could financially support those who did. That became the new goal of this young man's life. The young man's last name was Welch and I suspect all of us know the rest of the story. What could have been a tragedy, an unfulfilled dream, was transformed into a magnificent victory for everyone who loves grape juice.

Finally, being irrefragably thankful opens the door to God's salvation in Christ Jesus. What if Paul and Silas had not responded to their imprisonment in the way they did? What if they had just sat there in prison grumbling and complaining about the way they had been treated? Would this New Testament account end in the way that it did? No, I don't think so. The jailer might have very well killed himself realizing that his life would be forfeited in exchange for the escaped prisoners. Fortunately, that did not happen. He and his family were saved. They met the Lord Jesus Christ as well as I suspect a good number of those prisoners. As you will remember, the prisoners didn't flee. They were all still there even though the doors of the prison had been thrown wide open.

The fact of the matter is, we draw other people to God when we rise above life's tragedies and disappointments. When we can be thankful, even when life is headed in the wrong direction, it makes a difference. The year-end report of a New York businessman was not good. Sales were off. Debts had increased. The future was uncertain. The financial secretary was reluctant to present his report to the owner of the business. But he did. Instead of becoming angry, his employer said, "In spite of everything, it has been a very good year. We didn't cut corners and we didn't deal dishonestly, even though we were losing tons of money. Those losses brought me to my knees in prayer on more than one occasion, but they also instilled a measure of hope for the Lord has said, 'No good thing will be withheld from those who walk uprightly.'" In response, the financial secretary replied, "Sir, your steadiness under severe testing has made me want to know Christ as you know Him. Indeed, it has been a good year."

Being thankful, no matter what, is a character trait that every Christian should strive to possess. It declares our faith and trust in the Lord. It enables God to transform life's tragedies into triumphs. Finally and most importantly of all, it opens the door of salvation for those who know Him not. This year's Thanksgiving Holiday has come and gone, but being irrefragably thankful is a celebration that we need to observe each and every day.