



*Give thanks in all circumstances;
for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.
1 Thessalonian 5:18*

Some people, on social media, will post something for which they are thankful, every day of the month of November. It's very fun to see people express gratitude for everything from their family to the simple pleasures in life. Social scientists have reported that gratitude and happiness are a package deal. The people that spend their brain power on what they love instead of what bothers them tend to be more happy overall. Paul didn't have that kind of research at hand when he wrote the verse above, but he understood that being thankful could help people through the hard times.

Paul didn't write this letter with the expectation that it would be canonized as scripture. He could have never imagined that we would be reading it 2,000 years later. He wrote it to a small group of Christians, surrounded by a pagan society, to encourage them in their faith. In addition to encouraging words and advice to their church, he addresses their worries about delays in Jesus's return.

Paul and his missionary partners fully expected Christ to return from heaven at any moment. The Thessalonians were worried because some of their loved ones had died waiting for Jesus. Paul assures them that when the Son of Man returns, they will be raised from the dead to meet him in heaven. This would have been a relief to the waiting Christians as many would have been martyred by people like Paul had once been. He, better than most, knew exactly what the persecution facing Christians would have been – both as a persecutor and as one who was attacked for his faith in Christ.

Paul exhorts the Christians of Thessalonica to focus on Christ in the midst of their trials. He wrote:

See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit.

Following Jesus doesn't mean an end to suffering. It means that at the end of the story, we are promised resurrection to a life with "no more pain no more sorrow" (Revelation 21:4). As Christians, we are always holding a tension between the pain of this world and the hope of what is to come.

In this month of November, we will honor this tension. November 1 is All Saints. On the first Sunday, November 7, we will celebrate All Saints by remembering those we've lost. Later in the month, we will celebrate Thanksgiving with a feast. As Paul wrote 2,000 years ago, these two things belong together. We can hold the pain of our loss *and* give thanks in all circumstances. In fact, many people find making gratitude lists helpful to continue living beyond loss.

This month, we will also end the church year on Christ the King Sunday and begin a new year with the first Sunday of Advent. This is what it means to be resurrection people: when we think we have come to the end, Jesus is there waiting to usher in the new beginning. As Paul says at the end of his letter, "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you." For that, we can all be thankful. Amen

