

Small Things Lead To Big Things

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[0 : 00] Now we're back in 1 Thessalonians 5. 1 Thessalonians 5, verses 16-18.

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, and especially these words. Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God.

In Christ Jesus, for you. Give thanks in all circumstances. The great German theologian and pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his wonderful little book, Life Together, an exploration of Christian fellowship, he wrote these words.

Only he who gives thanks for little things receives the big things. We prevent God from giving us the great spiritual gifts he has in store for us because we do not give thanks for daily gifts.

Let me say that again. Only he who gives thanks for little things receives the big things.

[1 : 25] Only he who gives thanks for little things receives the big things. Bonhoeffer explains how if we want to see days of great spiritual refreshment in our churches, we need to start giving God thanks for the small things.

For small acts of service. For small movements of grace. Because only then, when we give thanks for little things, will God give us the great things he has in store for us.

Now, I have to be honest and say that I don't always associate Dietrich Bonhoeffer with thanksgiving. But perhaps here, more than anywhere else, we learn the secret of his world-changing spiritual achievements.

He gave thanks for little things. He was thankful for daily gifts. As we saw last week, thankfulness in the Christian life is the key to happiness in the Christian life.

In this verse, the Apostle Paul commands us, saying, give thanks in all circumstances. We saw that thankfulness has partners, joy, and prayer.

[2 : 43] We saw that Paul doesn't command us to give thanks for all the circumstances we face. And we saw that our thankfulness as Christians isn't based upon the circumstances we face, but upon the gospel we believe.

Tonight, as we conclude our short two-week study on thankfulness from this verse, I want us to see two things. Thanksgiving and its purpose.

And thanksgiving and its practice. Its purpose and its practice. If Bonhoeffer is right about giving thanks for the little things, being the key to receiving big things from God, then who knows?

If we will but focus more on thankfulness in 2022, perhaps we can look forward to a year of receiving amazing spiritual gifts from the storehouses of God's treasure house.

First of all, then, thanksgiving and its purpose. Thanksgiving and its purpose. Like it's not in the New Testament, you always find thanksgiving tied up with prayer.

[4 : 04] Thanksgiving and prayer go hand in hand. For example, in that most famous of texts in Philippians 4, the Apostle Paul calls upon us to be anxious for nothing, but by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.

And of course, here in 1 Thessalonians 5.18, the command to give thanks in all circumstances follows closely on the heels of the command to pray without ceasing.

There's always a clear link between prayer and thanksgiving. You cannot pray without giving thanks, and you cannot give thanks without praying.

Whenever I hear a non-Christian saying, well, I'm very thankful for my health, I want to ask him, well, I know what you're thankful for, but I still don't know to whom you are thankful for your health.

Thankfulness and prayer, you see, go hand in hand in their Godward focus. And it's really so important that thanksgiving plays a more significant role in our prayers.

[5 : 16] You know, when we pray, we tend to dive straight into requests, and in so doing, miss the great spiritual benefits that come when we first give thanks to God. Thanksgiving is the foundation upon which we must build our palaces of prayer.

Without thankfulness to God for the gospel of his son, Jesus Christ, listen carefully to me here, there can be no certainty that God will ever listen to or answer any of our requests.

Without thankfulness to God for the gospel of his son, Jesus Christ, there can be no certainty that God will listen or answer our requests. So let me suggest that thanksgiving plays three purposes in our prayers.

First of all, it gives perspective on the past. Second, it gives confidence in the present. And third, it gives hope for the future. This is the role of thanksgiving in our prayers.

This is why we are to thank God in prayer. First of all, it gives perspective on the past. Perspective on the past. Let's go back to last week and to the point we made about the proviso to thanksgiving.

[6 : 33] Namely, that the Apostle Paul does not say give thanks for all circumstances, but give thanks in all circumstances. Not every situation we face is one for which we may choose to thank God.

How can the Christian dying of terminal cancer thank God for her painful tumors? Such an action breaks our God-given humanity and is not Christ-like.

We do not give thanks to God for our circumstances, for after all, not all our circumstances are good. Rather, we give thanks in all our circumstances, for even though life may have changed for the worse, our relationship with Jesus stands secure and immovable.

And yet, is it not true that it's often only in hindsight we can see how God was weaving together all the circumstances in our lives for our good and for His glory.

All those prayers we thought had gone unanswered. Actually, God had answered. Not the way we wanted Him to, but in the way that was best for us.

[7 : 58] So we prayed for God to take our anxiety away. But He didn't. We're still as anxious as we've always been.

And at that time, we couldn't understand why God was leaving us shaking in our shoes. But now as we look back, we realize that there were certain things we learned about how to rely upon the grace of Christ during the experience of our anxiety we could not have learned in any other way.

I've often wondered why it is that in Psalm 23, goodness and mercy are said to follow us all the days of our lives. Why don't they run alongside us?

Why don't they go before us? The answer is here. It is only in hindsight. It's only when we look behind us we can see truly how good and merciful God has been to us.

It's only when we look behind us in life we can see goodness and mercy following us. And in the same way, thankfulness gives us perspective on the past by forcing us to look back and see how lovingly and skillfully our heavenly Father has weaved together all the circumstances in our lives for our good and for his glory.

[9 : 29] When I was a child I sometimes struggled to understand why my parents wouldn't let me stay up late. Why they wouldn't let me watch certain kinds of television or eat certain kinds of sweets.

And at the time I thought they were being exceedingly unfair and unkind by not giving me what I wanted. But as I look back now of course I see their love and their logic in these things and I'm very thankful for them.

Thankfulness gives you perspective on the past yes, even on those things which at the time were very painful to endure. As we look behind us we see living evidence that the Father loves us and his steadfast love endures forever.

So thankfulness gives perspective in the past but second it gives confidence in the future confidence in the present rather confidence in the present we're talking here about the place of thanksgiving and prayer it gives us perspective in the past it gives us confidence in the present.

Well this early church in Thessalonica lived in difficult times. there was opposition from every side from the Jews who treated them like a cult to the pagans who thought they were clean mad and from the Romans who thought they were cannibals.

[10 : 54] However difficult you think it might be for you to live as a Christian today it was a hundred times harder to live as a Christian in Thessalonica in the mid first century AD and to add insult to injury sometimes their prayers seemed to go unanswered so they prayed for relief from the persecuting fires but instead of extinguishing them God made them burn all the hotter sure it takes away God's confidence in his our confidence in God's care for us in the presence if we cannot see him at work in our life and answering our prayers.

it's into this situation real life situation Paul writes give thanks in all circumstances. You know as we look back on how God has worked for our good in the past we can be confident that though we cannot see in the present he is still working in our lives as our loving heavenly father.

previously he has weaved the most magnificent tapestries of grace from our circumstances for our good and he's not going to stop now God's grace in the past gives us confidence in the present whatever is happening to us now will follow the same pattern surely God working in grace for our good so when I was trying to teach my children how to swim I'd get into the swimming pool and I'd ask them to jump into my arms and I'd say to them trust me I'll catch you I won't let you go and so time and time they would jump and laugh and I'd catch them supposing even the lights had gone out in the swimming pool based upon my 100% track record of catching them they would have had confidence that if they jumped

I'd catch them again now that they're all older whenever I'm at the swimming pool I always make a point of watching fathers do the same for their young children just to remind me that the God who caught me when I jumped in in the past is still ready to catch me when I jump in today but that's the word is it not track record our father has a track record of working all things together for good in our lives not that all things are in and of themselves good or that we can give thanks for these things individually but that in them and through them God is working to deepen our dependence upon his grace offered to us in the gospel of his son past answers to prayer give us confidence to ask today for our daily bread as we remember what Bonhoeffer said only he who gives thanks for little things receives the big things and then third the third reason that thanksgiving is so important in our prayers it gives perspective in the past it gives confidence in the present it gives hope for the future it gives hope for the future tell me if you had an option to know your future would you take it if you if you had an option that you would know what the future holds for you would you take it or are you content to leave all your tomorrows in the hands of God and not worry about them

I for one would probably rather not know the future because it's only then when I would get there that I'd need the grace to cope even though I do tend by nature as you all know to look on the darker side of things the truth is we're all going to face challenges this year of one kind or another the Bremner family are already facing the loss of their mother some will be good circumstances for which we can give thanks others will not be nearly so good and still others just plain bad do we have a hope for the future how are we going to cope when bad situations arise in our lives thankfully situations we know nothing about right now yes our hope is this surely the God who has acted in the past to give grace in our time of need and to weave all things together for our good and is at present doing the same thing will continue to care and look after us into the future when these bad situations arise and they will he'll give us what we need to cope and to win through all the time continuing to weave that tapestry of grace he's been spinning since before any of us were born this is our hope for the future and surely it breeds within us the most profound thankfulness our heavenly father is worthy of our trust in tire our heavenly father is worthy of our trust in tire this is the function and purpose of thanksgiving in our prayers looking back to God's help gives us confidence that God will answer our prayers today and gives us hope that whatever we may pray for be it daily mercies or stupendous spiritual gifts our father is more than able and willing to give us more than we can ever ask or imagine so what then of thanksgiving perhaps it really should play a larger part in our prayers thanksgiving and its purpose and then secondly thanksgiving and its practice thanksgiving and its practice and so to the conclusion of this short two week series how shall we practice thanksgiving now part of the answer to that surely lies in the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer when he talks of giving thanks for the little things yes giving thanks for the little things in life is a very good practice when receiving or enjoying one of life's little things we give thanks to God for his generosity and his love for us and Bonhoeffer talks about giving thanks for daily gifts another good practice not merely to give thanks for our food and for our drink but for the clothes we wear for the air we breathe for the jobs we have for the friends we enjoy these are the small things perhaps the daily graces for which we are to give thanks by nature you all know

[18 : 25] I'm not really a very happy person and so I often try to read blogs which talk about thankfulness and gratitude and one of these blogs recently suggested that we should write down five things every day for which we are thankful five different things every day for which we are thankful and pray through them thanking God for them a good sleep taste of toothpaste it's a good exercise actually especially when the cold damp winter days seep into your bones likewise surely if what we said in our previous point is correct it's a good practice to look behind us to see how God has weaved all the circumstances together in our lives for our good and thank him for it tell me how many times has God answered our prayers but we've not gone back to say thank you to him so we prayed for someone's recovery to health we prayed for Alistair when he had

COVID but did we really give God thanks when Alistair recovered and came back to be with us again we can be very ungrateful to our father at times it's good now and then to pause and to look back at where we've come from and give thanks to God for his protecting and leading grace at work in our lives of course there are times when it's really hard to give thanks but even then there are other ways we can look at a problem which allows us a thankful spirit want to be really careful with us because as I've said there are certain situations I believe for which it would be wrong to give thanks however there are others which seem on the surface really bad but if we think about them a different way they might be occasions actually for us to give thanks for example the great English commentator

Matthew Henry was once robbed in the street mugged and robbed his response was to thank God for four things he said first I thank you Lord that I'd not been robbed before second that although the wallet the robber took my wallet he didn't take my life third although the robber got everything in my wallet it wasn't really very much and fourth I was the one who was robbed I was not the robber I wonder are there situations in life which if we viewed them from another direction might give us options for praise and thanks I'm not saying it's easy but situations for a time which might seem quite painful to us sometimes when we look back we realise they're the best things that could have ever happened to us for example and I know I'm getting close to the bone okay so please forgive me you lose your job you lose your job and it seems like a total total disaster but it gives you an opportunity to take time out with your family and to realise over time how stressful unenjoyable and unproductive your job was and to plan out a more fulfilling future for yourself sometimes the bad things that happen to us turn out to be good things at the time it would have been wrong to give thanks for them but perhaps afterwards as we look back it's a different matter and so these are some of the ways in which we can practice thanksgiving when Bonhoeffer talks about being thankful for the small things he's referring to our lives together as

Christians for the small things we give thanks for in our fellowship with each other the very fact that you're in church tonight is something for which I'm very thankful the very fact that someone who we didn't expect to be in church tonight is here is something for which we're thankful we give thanks that they're with us someone's faithfulness in presenting the Psalms although Evan might be a fixture and fitting in our church we give thanks for him for God's gifting to him someone who makes tea and coffee again there may be a fixture and fitting in the church they've been doing it for so many years but thankfulness for small things opens up our eyes to their faithfulness being able to sing in church hopefully soon without these pesky masks shows that we have breath in our lungs a heart which is set for praise and ears which can hear the voices of a hundred others they may be small things to us but perhaps to God these small thanksgivings are a lot bigger than we think there is nothing worse among us than a constant spirit of gurning and grumbling at the shortcomings of others there could be nothing better among us than a constant spirit of thanksgiving for the faithfulness of others even if that faithfulness is imperfect however put all these things to the side in the last analysis what allows us to give thanks in all situations aren't the situations we face themselves it's for the gospel we believe remember the following verse tells us or the end of this verse tells us that giving thanks is God's will for us in Christ

Jesus it's God's will for us in Christ Jesus we are so amazed at the stupendous love of God for us in Jesus Christ we are so blown away by the depths to which Jesus went to save us we are so astounded by the supreme value of the spiritual gifts Christ has given us in the gospel that our circumstances become somewhat dimmed in comparison what becomes of primary importance to us is our relationship to Jesus it's the gospel for which we give thanks it was the gospel which was the secret of the apostle Paul's contentment in any and every situation it is the gospel which is the reason for our rejoicing always our praying unceasingly and giving thanks in every circumstance how then can we in practice increase in thanksgiving how can we do this study meditate upon pray through apply the gospel more effectively in your life study the life of

[25 : 53] Jesus in the four gospels study the great exposition of the life and the death and resurrection of Jesus in the letters of Paul meditate upon what it means and pray it in deep that he died for me pray the gospel in even as a joiner hammers a nail into a piece of wood praying for repentance and forgiveness for new resolve and strength toward holiness pray and then apply apply the gospel into every area of your life apply it to your low self-esteem apply it to your obsessive fears apply it to your anxiety apply it to your spiritual lukewarmth apply it to your doubts this is the practical path to the thankful Christian heart the Christian who's able to give thanks in all circumstances and actually in conclusion it brings us back full circle to where

Dietrich Bonhoeffer began he says only he who gives thanks for the small things receives the big things he's right there is no doubt about it Bonhoeffer is right but there's another sense in which we can turn what he says around and it's still true only he who gives thanks for the big things will ever give thanks for the small things only he who gives thanks for the big things will ever give thanks for the small things the big things here being the gospel the blessings and benefits of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ only when we are truly thankful for this biggest of things the gospel will we be able to give thanks in all circumstances only when we realize that these bad situations we face cannot affect our standing as justified and beloved sons and daughters of the living God will we begin to see them from a new perspective and give thanks for them only he who gives thanks for the big things will give thanks for the small things also and only he who gives thanks for the small things will give thanks for the big things also so you see thankfulness is a far bigger subject than at first sight in fact I wonder whether we can say

I think we can the more we understand and apply the gospel into our own lives the more thankful we'll become and therefore when we find ourselves grumbling gurning and complaining as I often do our first instinct must be to go back to the gospel and start again Bonhoeffer I'm sure if he was here would applaud the sentiment so the apostle Paul but more than anything else it is a it is the key to a deeper relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ and a more grace filled holy life and which among us don't want that let us pray Father we recognise the path forward in the Christian life often consists in repentance and faith in fact it doesn't often it always so Lord we repent of our ungratitudes our ingratitude and our unthankfulness we pray that you would give us that practice of daily thanksgiving for the small things help us to see our problems perhaps from a different perspective as opportunities to grow in our faith but also help us first and foremost to give thanks for the biggest thing in our lives the gospel of your son Jesus Christ for it's only in the light of Jesus Christ and all he's done for us will ever really be able to give thanks for the small things we ask these things in Jesus name

Amen Amen Amen Amen