

**The Choice to Give Thanks**  
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**November 20, 2018 – Thanksgiving**  
**Philippians 4:4-9 and Psalm 100**

Paul was in prison, and he had a choice to make. He could choose to be bitter, focusing on all that he had suffered and all that he had lost. He could choose to give in to fear and anxiety over what the future might hold. Or he could choose to focus on the positive, on all that was right, on all he was thankful for. As we read Paul's letter to the Philippians, it is clear that he chose the latter. It is easy to imagine Paul wrote this letter for himself as much as for the church and Philippi

Being in prison, Paul had every reason to be sad and depressed, but instead he wrote: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice." He had every reason to complain and plead with God about his situation, but instead he wrote: "Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." He had every reason to be worried and afraid, but instead he wrote about the "peace of God, which surpasses all understanding." Instead of focusing on the concerns that would weigh most people down, Paul encourages them to think about the things that are true and honorable and just and pure. He promises that if they pay attention to these things, the God of peace will be with them. It seems like he was writing what he most needed to hear. It's kind of like a Christian pep talk, but one grounded in deep faith in the promises of God.

There is no denying Paul was in a tough spot, and we sometimes find ourselves in tough spots as well. We can't always control what happens to us, but we can choose how we will respond to whatever happens. It has been said "Our greatest freedom is the freedom to choose our attitude" (Viktor Frankl). On this Tuesday before Thanksgiving, I want to remind you of the choice we can make no matter what may come our way. It is the same choice Paul faced in prison – to choose an attitude of gratitude and choose to be thankful.

It is a choice the Pilgrims had to make that first winter. It was a horrible time. The weather was bitterly cold; the work was hard; and food was in short supply. We are told that at one time the ration was only five kernels of corn per person per meal. It was called the "starving time." Almost half the colony died that first winter. I am sure many of them became anxious and depressed, but some chose to focus on what they still had, rather than bemoan all they had lost. They concentrated on the positives rather than the negatives, and that helped them make it through the bitter winter to better times.

In those difficult situations in life, we all have the choice of how to respond. The person who has learned to choose an attitude of gratitude, can make the best of things in the worst of times. I hope that as you face life's difficult challenges, you make that choice. Count your blessings. Find something to be grateful for, even in the midst of disappointment.

There is also another situation in which we have choices to make. We can choose our attitude not only in the difficult days, but also in the good days, when the harvest is plentiful.

After working long and hard on their farms during the spring and summer of that first year, the Pilgrims experienced a bountiful harvest with plentiful food. And once more, they had a choice to make. They could have said, "We've worked hard for this, and we deserve it." But instead, they chose to be grateful to God for blessing them. They gathered on that first Thanksgiving to give thanks to God for the rich harvest and they shared what they had with their Native American friends who had helped them. It is that spirit of genuine thankfulness that we celebrate this week.

We face the same choice. Do we smugly believe we deserve all the good that has come our way, or do we give thanks to God for his many blessings? That can be a hard choice, because we may not even notice that there is a choice to make. As Americans, we are so accustomed to believing that "success" comes to those who work hard. It's part of our American identity. We tell our children "Work hard and you will be rewarded." We look up to people who have reached the top thinking they got there by their hard work.

But I was struck by a survey of business leaders regarding their own understanding of the reasons for their success. You might think they'd have talked about their hard work and long hours and being a "self-made man (or woman)." But, surprisingly, they didn't. Instead, they were honest enough to say that much of their success could be explained only by "sheer luck." They just happened to be at the right place at the right time or they knew the right people or they made a lucky decision. That is a more humble attitude than I would expect from these business leaders.

What about us? We work hard at our jobs. We try to eat right and take good care of our health. We try to be smart with how we handle our money and how we spend our time. To some extent we are responsible for our achievements. It could be tempting to take credit for all the good that has come our way. But, when you look beneath the surface, you'll find there is more to it than that. There are lots of people who have worked hard and done all the right things who find themselves in difficult situations.

I just heard this morning about a family in California whose house was burned by the fire. Despite having home owner's insurance, when the husband contacted his insurance company, he learned they are under insured. There is a \$60,000 gap between what the

insurance company will reimburse him for his lost house and the amount he owes on his mortgage. So, they owe \$60,000 on a house that is destroyed! What a tough spot to be in!

These kinds of things happen. During the economic downturn of a decade ago many good, hard working people lost homes, and businesses, and life savings, through no fault of their own. Bad things do happen to good, hardworking people every day. None of us is immune to life's tragedies. Likewise, none of us can take credit for all the good that comes our way.

We were given the gift of being born into this country where opportunities are more available to us than to most people around the world. We have clean water to drink – unlike over a billion people on the planet. We have plenty of food. We have electricity. We have good roads and schools. We live in peace and security. These are things many people just dream about.

And there's more! We were born into families, with parents who loved us and cared for us and raised us well. We were given the gift of good health. Some poor souls start out life with all kinds of health challenges, but we were born with 10 fingers and 10 toes, eyes that see, ears that hear, and brains that work. We were given the gift of faith which is not of our own doing but a gift from God.

When you really think about it, we have to realize that whatever good fortune, good health or success we've enjoyed is not all our own doing. It's not all under our control. Others have helped us along the way. We're not entitled to it. The good that has come our way truly is a gift. It is the gift of God's grace poured down on us. We can choose to say it's all due to our own efforts and pat ourselves on the back, or we can choose to be grateful and thank God for his gracious gifts. That's what Thanksgiving is really all about, choosing an attitude of gratitude.

Each day of life is a gift of God's grace. A gift for which we can choose to be grateful. The writer of our psalm for today, expresses that gratitude with such joy!

*Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth.  
Worship the Lord with gladness;  
come into his presence with singing.  
Know that the Lord is God.  
It is he that made us, and we are his;  
we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.*

So what should we do?

*Enter his gates with thanksgiving,  
and his courts with praise.*

*Give thanks to him, bless his name.  
For the Lord is good;  
his steadfast love endures forever,  
and his faithfulness to all generations.*

What a joy to join with the Psalmist in celebrating God's blessings with praise and thanksgiving!

We have so much to be thankful for. We have so much to be joyous about. Even if there are things in our life that we wish could be different, there are even more blessings we just take for granted every day.

Did anybody watch *60 Minutes* on Sunday? I did. I was impressed with one story in particular. It was a feature on Tim Green, an NFL football player. Tim had the world by the tail. He had a successful career in pro football, a lovely wife of 29 years, a nice family with 5 kids, a beautiful home. Two years ago, he was diagnosed with ALS, that degenerative muscle disease also known as Lou Gehrig's disease.

They showed an interview of him from 20 years ago when he was in good health and very articulate. There was also footage from 2 years ago when he was first diagnosed and still doing quite well. What a contrast to his slurred speech and limping walk of today!

When Steve Kroft, the reporter, asked him about when in his life he was the happiest, he said "Right now!" Steve Kroft responded with surprise. Tim Green explained that right now is the only time he has any control over. Every day is a gift. As the old saying goes: "Yesterday is history, tomorrow is a mystery, and today is a gift—that is why it is called the present."

Tim Green has learned the attitude of gratitude. He has chosen to give thanks for the blessings of today rather than lament losses the losses of what used to be. In that way Tim Green serves as a wonderful example for us this Thanksgiving week.

As you prepare to celebrate this holiday, as you prepare your home or your table or your food, also take the time to prepare your heart. Take time to reflect on all the many things you have to be grateful for. Open yourself to an attitude of gratitude. Choose to give thanks for all the blessings in your life. Choose to give thanks to God who is the giver of all good gifts.

May you be truly blessed with a thankful heart this Thanksgiving. Amen!