May gratefulness live in your heart

The holiday of Thanksgiving has just passed by but Christians are called to be thankful to God always. The Bible is full of God’s people thanking Him for who He is, for all good things, even for what He can bring out of evil. This is such a lesson for us: Be grateful to God.

It’s always nice to hear someone say “Thank you” when we’ve done something for them. God is no different. He is pleased when His creation shows Him gratitude for the good blessings He provides. All we have, all our abilities, are gifts from God. How appropriate for us to say thank You.

Above all else He has done for us is the gift of His Son. Jesus has won salvation for us by His work on the cross. Each of us was on the way to an eternity in hell. But God offered the gift of Jesus and if we accept that gift, our final destination is heaven. A priceless gift for which we can never be thankful enough!

*Praise the Lord!
Oh give thanks to the Lord, for He is good;
For His mercy is everlasting.*

 Psalm 106:1

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1 Thessalonians 2:17 – 3:13

Paul had led a missionary group into Thessalonica and they were successful in planting a church. These people turned so fully and completely to God through Jesus Christ that Paul became deeply attached to them. He was only there a short time before he was forced to leave or risk his life. As we read this letter, we can see that he was truly in turmoil.

Perhaps this is an encouragement to us. We would think that the great apostle Paul would have never worried about anything; but here he is, worried sick about the Thessalonian church. He talks about being *eager* and having *great desire* to see the Christians face to face. He wants to talk with them and encourage them. He had lots more that he wanted to teach them.

Paul had done his best to warn the Thessalonians that they would have to suffer for the name of Christ. But he had only been with them for a short time; perhaps, he thought, not enough time to prepare them. The persecution started and immediately Paul had to be snuck out of town. He didn’t get to stand with them for a while and show them how to withstand the persecution. Now, he knew they were suffering but he didn’t know how they were taking it. He was afraid they might turn from Jesus.

Imagine his frustration: he had tried several times to go back and visit this church. They had actually made plans and preparations, only to have their plans get ruined; and ruined by satan himself. Paul had to wonder what satan was doing to the church while he was unable to be there. He had to wonder what God’s purpose was in letting satan stop him. But he also understood that it was satan hindering and not the Holy Spirit preventing him as had happened in Asia. Because of this understanding, he kept trying.

Paul feared that the Thessalonians might have believed that he had abandon them. This thought bothered him and he desperately wanted them to know that he hadn’t. He spent a lot of time in prayer for them and in prayer asking that he might go back to see them personally. Paul did eventually get to go back to visit, but it wouldn’t be for another five years. See, God had this, and He had other things for Paul to do.

I don’t say this to belittle Paul. His faith was extraordinary; he was used mightily by God; his writings are still being used. Sometimes we forget that Paul was just a human-being. He had to deal with all the things we do. Sometimes we get worried or anxious, and sometimes that makes us feel guilty that we don’t have enough faith.

When those times come where anxious thoughts crowd into your mind, the first thing to do is pray. Tell God what is going on, let Him know that you realize that it’s beyond your control, and give it to Him to take care of. Next is to try to let go of the worry. Easier said than done. If something is really bothering you, it is time to read the Bible and let the powerful word of God wash over you. It may be time to call a Christian friend for companionship, encouragement, and prayer together.

I want to go back to the guilt. God wants us to trust Him in all things; He knows how weak and frail we really are. He knows we are going to worry about things we care about and have no control over. We simply do our best to leave it in His hands. What I’m saying is, don’t let the guilt in. Even if we have to continually wrestle with the worry, we are pleasing to God when we try to leave it to Him. The guilt is an attack of satan and it will just compound the problem. God loves you and He cares about those things that concern you.

Paul got to the point that he could endure it no longer; he couldn’t stand it. He had to know how the church was doing. Timothy was sent, by himself, back to Thessalonica. He was going to encourage them, but also to bring back word of how they were doing. Silas was probably sent to Philippi at this time, and Paul was left in Athens with all its horrendous idols and fools who did nothing but discuss new ideas. Poor Paul, Timothy’s trip would have taken at least a month; he had to wait that much longer.

When Paul writes about Timothy’s return, he is jubilant. Not only is the church still intact and enduring, they hold no ill will toward Paul and they want to see him too. You know what it’s like to be intensely concerned about something for a long time and you suddenly get the good news that everything is alright. Paul’s relief must have made him weep with joy. His beloved church is alive and well and they love him still.

This brings us to what Paul was so deeply concerned about, “*for fear that the tempter might have tempted you*”. He was afraid that satan may have caused the Thessalonians to turn away from Jesus; he was afraid that they may have become apostate. Let’s look into apostasy a little and try to get a handle on what it’s all about.

In a Christian context, apostasy has two manifestations. One is somebody who teaches false doctrine, who teaches heresy; this person denies the truths about Jesus Christ presented to us in the Bible. This person is an apostate. The second is the one we will concern ourselves with today. This is a person who professes belief in Jesus Christ as Saviour, with an understanding of who He is and what He has done, and then turns away from Jesus and denies who He is. This one is scary because we must check to make sure it isn’t ourselves.

Confusion sets in about this issue because the Bible tells us that once we belong to Jesus, He will never let us go, so we can’t lose our salvation. At the same time, the Bible strongly warns us about apostasy; about falling away from Jesus. These warnings are important and we must take them seriously. The question becomes: If we can’t lose our salvation, how can we become apostate?

Let’s begin with the assurance of salvation. Just from a logical standpoint, it is absurd to think that Jesus somehow needs our help to save us. His work on the cross is complete. He gives us the faith to believe through the Holy Spirit; if we take that faith and choose to have Jesus as our Saviour, we are saved. Repentance is also involved, but true repentance is also the work of the Holy Spirit.

Even more important than logic is the Bible. John 10:27-28, “*My sheep listen to My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give them eternal life, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand.*” Once we become Jesus’ sheep, He gives us the gift of eternal life and He will not take it back! No one will take us from Him because no one is able to take us; not even ourselves.

In Philippians 1:6 we are told, “*For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work among you will complete it by the day of Christ Jesus*.” Once we become a Christian, God begins the lifelong work of our sanctification. This work is only completed after we leave this earthly existence. God doesn’t leave things undone; He will finish making us like His Son. This promise couldn’t be fulfilled if we could lose our salvation. These are just a couple of words in the Bible that assure us that becoming a Christian is permanent.

Another thing we need to understand is the difference between apostasy and backsliding. Apostasy is the complete denial of Christ; changing one’s mind to say that He doesn’t exist or that He can’t save. Backsliding happens when we stop doing those things that identify us as a disciple of Jesus: We stop reading our Bible, we stop going to church, we start doing some of those things we gave up when we first became a Christian. We stop behaving as a disciple, but we don’t turn against Jesus. A backslider has just let life get in the way of following Jesus.

The backslider truly accepted Jesus as their Saviour; they truly became a Christian. Many times, a backslider will turn back to living as a follower of Jesus. But even if they don’t, they will not lose their salvation. They won’t have much waiting for them in heaven in the way of reward, but they’ll still get there. In 1 Corinthians 3, Paul describes how our Christian works are tested by fire. The backslider is described in verse 15, “*If anyone’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet only so as through fire*.”

Once we are saved, even we can’t keep ourselves out of heaven. But please don’t try this; you don’t want the smell of smoke on your heavenly robes.

So, with all this, how does one become apostate. 1 John 2:19 provides a very good answer*: They went out from us, but they were not really of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but they went out, so that it would be evident that they all are not of us*. Simply put, apostates were never saved in the first place. They had never truly accepted Jesus as Saviour.

The scary thing is that apostate Christians can be very hard to spot. Let’s look at the example of Demas. Demas was an associate of Paul during some of his missionary travels. He comes up three times in Paul’s letters. Colossians 4:14, *Luke, the beloved physician, sends you his greetings, and Demas does also*. Then in Philemon verses 23 and 24, *Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, greets you, as do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers*.

But then we come to 2 Timothy 4:10, the last letter we have that was written by Paul. In it he says, “*Demas, having loved this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica*”. Demas is an apostate. He certainly made profession of belief in Christ and, with Paul, taught others to do the same. Even Paul, with all his discernment, was not able to tell that Demas was apostate.

Apostates have nowhere else to turn. Hebrews 6:4-6, *For it is impossible, in the case of those who have once been enlightened and have tasted of the heavenly gift and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance, since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God and put Him to open shame.* The apostate understands what Christ is all about, they are not deceived. They think it sounds like a good idea and they will participate for a while. But they aren’t willing to pay the price to be a true disciple of Jesus.

It is very difficult to spot an apostate. They act like Christians. They attend church, participate, read the Bible and fellowship. Usually it is not until they leave the church body that we find out. This is why we must consider ourselves. This is why Paul was so concerned even though the Thessalonians had professed Christ. People can find themselves teetering on the edge of salvation without making the commitment. We can discover this before it’s too late.

In 2 Corinthians 13:5, Paul tells us to make sure. *Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves! Or do you not recognize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you—unless indeed you fail the test?* Paul wanted to get back to the Thessalonians to make sure they would pass the test, in case some of them hadn’t really made the commitment to Christ. I ask you to test yourselves. It is easy to love church, love the music, love the fellowship with good people; but miss loving Jesus, which is the necessary part. If you fail the test, there is still time: repent and choose to take Christ as your Saviour.

How do we test ourselves? The first test is love. 1 John 4:7-8, *Beloved, let’s love one another; for love is from God, and everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. The one who does not love does not know God, because God is love*. If we are saved, the Holy Spirit works in us to give us the ability to love God and others. Secondly is good works or bearing fruit. Galatians 5:22-23, *But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law*.

As we are sanctified in Christ, we should see these things increasing. That doesn’t mean we won’t mess up or have times of little progress for a while. But we ought to see changes in our lives that are in line with these fruits; we ought to develop a desire to have these characteristics. All these things are evidence of our salvation, not the cause of it.

The Christian confession we hold to and believe is that Jesus is our only Saviour; He is the only begotten Son of God, yet He is God Himself; He was born of the virgin Mary; He suffered and died to pay the price for our sins so that we could be saved. Just check once in a while to make sure that this is your confession and the fruits of the Spirit are building in you. Then your salvation is assured.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, how terrible it would be to spend eternity without You. Keep us from hearing those unfathomable words from Your lips, “Away from Me, I never knew you.” You have for us that wonderful promise that You will never turn away any who come to You; call us, that we may hear Your voice and come into Your presence.

We ask that the fruit of the Spirit be brought forth in our lives. Both as evidence of our salvation, but more importantly, to bring You glory. May our lives reflect the goodness of Christ, that others be drawn to You and Your kingdom increase.

We ask Your protection over this church body. Lead each of us to be willing servants of Yours. May each one here have counted the cost and chosen to be a disciple of Jesus. Strengthen Your church with Spirit filled and Spirit directed people, and shield us from false teaching.

We pray these things in Jesus’ name

Amen