

## Give Thanks for God's People

✠ **Firm encouragement in distress (vv.7-10)**

✠ **Strong hearts of overflowing love (vv.11-13)**

In the name of Jesus, our greatest reason to give thanks, dear Christian friends:

“Most of you know I recently returned from a mission trip abroad. There were many joys and sorrows. After suffering severe trials in one city my partners and I traveled through several towns to reach a major metro-area with a large church. For three days of worship I went to their church to show them from the Scriptures that the suffering and death of Christ were predicted by the prophets. Some of the church people believed along with others from town, including many prominent women. But our success only made the major church leaders jealous and angry. You should have seen how they recruited ruffians from the market place and started a full scale riot in the city. They even stormed the congregation president's house looking for me. The authorities threw him in jail, so that he had to post bond to get out. We had to hide until nightfall when brothers sent us on to the next town.”

This was not my trip to China, but Paul's challenge in Thessalonica on his Second Missionary Journey. (Acts 17:1-10) Our travels took us on planes, trains and buses, with much less danger and excitement. Yet I'm intrigued by similarities I see for this Thanksgiving Day. Mostly I see a problem when we try to find reason for thanks in our personal circumstances. Not just for things, and not just for our families, God wants us to **Give Thanks for God's People**. Here we find...

✠ **Firm encouragement in distress (vv.7-10)**

After enjoying Thanksgiving Day every year of our lives, it's tempting to think thanksgiving is natural. But back in 1621, the first Pilgrims were all set for another day of fasting and sorrow until an old man got up in the assembly. He said he thought that they had brooded long enough over their misfortune. It seemed high time that they should consider their blessings instead. The colony was growing strong, harvests were more plentiful, the rivers were full of fish and the woods with game, the air was sweet and the climate pleasant. Above all, they now possessed what they had come for, full civil and religious liberty. Accordingly he recommended that they appoint a day for thanksgiving rather than for fasting.

Presidents George Washington and John Adams led the new nation in Thanksgiving. But Thomas Jefferson opposed such a national observance and let the day fall into obscurity. Then in 1863, during the depths the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln reestablished Thanksgiving Day. It's been celebrated on the 4<sup>th</sup> Thursday of November ever since. But still we cannot say giving thanks comes naturally.

What if we could go back to that first Thanksgiving in 1621, not as a Pilgrim, but as family back home in England worrying about the Pilgrims across the Atlantic in the New World? Can you imagine your sorrow to hear that nearly two thirds of the settlers died the first winter? What anguish to wait for news. But what relief to read a letter yellowed from many months of sea crossing relating how your loved ones were still standing tall, in fact, growing stronger with God's blessings.

That was Paul's Thanksgiving when Timothy brought news from Thessalonica. The riot had forced him to flee at night without even saying "Goodbye" to his dear Christian friends who were more like family to him than his own. Time constraints made it impossible for him to teach them enough of God's Word to comfort them in their sorrows. Physically, emotionally and spiritually he was drained with anxiety as he kept praying for the Lord to bless them and keep them in the faith. But Timothy's arrival told how they too were remembering Paul with joy and hoping to see him again. The pain of Paul's distress and persecution were eased by the fact that the Christians in Thessalonica were "**standing**

*firm in the Lord. How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you? Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith.”*

Maybe you can imagine at least a little how much I feel that way about the Christians I met in central China. My two-week trip does not deserve consideration with missionaries who moved their families to foreign fields, much less Paul’s mission treks across the ancient frontiers of Christianity. Missionaries have come and gone from China for centuries. As Jesus told His disciples, **“Others have done the hard work, and you have reaped the benefits of their labor”** (John 4:38 NIV). My partners and I rejoiced to find faithful Christians who survived thirty years of Communist purges. Now they are taking advantage of the new Chinese policy accepting Western business and culture. For the twenty years we’ve been spreading the Gospel in these northern suburbs of Saint Paul, Minnesota, they have been building a seminary from scratch which is numerically about the same size as our Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, in Mequon, north of Milwaukee. Two city churches have mothered more congregations than they could number so that in Hubei Province alone, 600,000 Christians – about the same number as our entire Wisconsin Synod – are served by 60 pastors who don’t know a day off or a weekend or a vacation.

It may be that your personal circumstances leave you in dire straits like the Apostle Paul, bereft of family and friends, cold and hungry inside and out. You may be working so hard you can’t remember the last time you could relax or take a vacation. And your hard work may sometimes seem to only take you backwards in whatever life you wanted to build. You can fast. You can sorrow. You can let sin turn you hard inside. Or you can hear the Gospel call of God in Jesus Christ the only Friend who ever died for you. You can hear His loving command to **“give thanks in all circumstances”** (1 Thessalonians 5:18). And you can lift up your heart to God in gratitude for your brothers and sisters in central China who want your prayers for **Firm encouragement in distress**. The joy of looking at Christ and praying for them brings...

### ✠ **Strong hearts of overflowing love (vv.11-13)**

Did you ever stop in the middle of your frustrations and just think about how many people are praying for you? First, there’s the God-Man Jesus Christ our Brother interceding at the throne of grace. Even if you fear God is too angry at you to listen, how can our Father in heaven turn away from His own Son of whom He said, **“I am well pleased”**? That loving heart and nail-pierced hands are not the only trophies of our victory in heaven. The Holy Spirit Himself **“intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express”** (Romans 8:26). It strengthens our hearts to see Bible descriptions of believers past and present on earth and in heaven who want us to succeed. Here we have the Lord’s own Apostle Paul setting aside his personal privations to include you and me in his prayers. As long as we have received the Word of God in the same faith as the Thessalonians, these three petitions are prayed for us too:

1. **“Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you.”**

✠ Think about it. There’s always someone wanting to come to you with the greatest hope and encouragement our God of love can supply. *Clearing the way* in China often means trying to get government officials to apply the new religion laws to allow more freedom to preach and teach God’s Word, the Bible. In America, *clearing the way* means clearing your schedule to let God bring His grace and mercy to bear on your life like a skillful metal worker, wood carver or potter shaping the clay into something useful and cheerful. *Clear the way, O Lord!*

2. **“May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you.”**

✠ The warmth of love among Christians in China wraps up your heart like warm sunshine breaking through the clouds on a windy day. Paul is praying that we will have the same sincere affection for each other in America because if we’re busy doing for others, the undeserved blessings and surprises God keeps giving flow like an artesian well from our hearts and lives to others.

3. *“May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.”*

✠ In the midst of persecution Christians pray most earnestly, *“Come, Lord Jesus.”* In our own trials Paul prays God to give us stout hearts fully loyal to our Lord and Savior and longing for the sight of Him and His angels coming in glory. This eager anticipation helps us focus on Christ and His righteousness in our lips and lives.

Whether your life of late has been grand and glorious or sad and lonely, God wants to lay a gentle hand under your chin and have you look up into the eyes of Christ who gave His life for you. He wants you to hear His gentle whisper, “Don’t worry, I’m here. Don’t get wrapped up so tight in your joys or your sorrows that you forget how many others need your prayers for them. First, **Give Thanks for God’s People** that there are so many others like you longing for my return in triumph on the Last Day. Then whatever heartaches and troubles you may have, remember they have them too. Pray for them. Let their success mean **Firm encouragement in distress** for you. And I will use my Word and sacraments to give you all **Strong hearts of overflowing love**. You’ll find a full heart for Thanksgiving every day. I’ll see to that.”

Thank-you, Lord, for your promises and your people. Amen.