# Thanksgiving – 2023

## *"Then, Now, and Later"*

Text: 1 Thessalonians 5:9-18

Grace, mercy and peace – certainly three of God's greatest gifts to mankind – be multiplied to each of you as you give thanks to your Savior God for his innumerable blessings on this Thanksgiving Eve. Amen.

Dear Fellow Recipients of God's incredible generosity:

Time moves on in everything but memories. A memory is a snapshot, a frozen frame of time. In fact that's the basis for the expression, *"You can never go home."* The reason you can't go "home" is that that "home" no longer exists. It was a memory, frozen in time – a mental picture of circumstances that in your mind never age. You probably have to experience the phenomenon to appreciate it. It's a testament really to how nothing ever really stays the same. Children, for example, that you haven't seen for many years often remain children in your minds. The reality, of course, is that they too have aged. Their lives went on in the time since you last saw them. Again, *"You can never go home"* refers to the fact that that "home" exists only in your mind as a memory. Life doesn't stop just because you lived for a time elsewhere. Maybe it is in understanding this immutable reality that makes goodbyes infinitely more poignant and difficult for some.

Nor are memories always all that accurate. Many of you have no doubt experienced that strange phenomenon where, returning to the place of your youth after many years, nothing was quite as you remembered it. It's almost never as big, never as nice, never as wonderful. Your memory may tell you that, as a child, you and your siblings played on lush green fields of grass not unlike golf courses or NFL football fields. The old pictures, however, show the reality of "lawns" that had more dirt than grass. "Spacious houses" look like efficiency apartments. Always sunny looks awfully cloudy. And yet somehow, in hindsight, it all seemed so good.

And, for the most part, it was. That's the point of true Thanksgiving – the backward look that reminds us of how richly we have been blessed by our God. It serves as a testament to the generosity of our Creator, and it reminds us of how right and fitting it is to thank him continually. We didn't even realize how good we had it, just as we tend not to notice how blessed our lives are still today. So it is that on this Thanksgiving Eve we first acknowledge the blessings of the past (*"Then"*), we resolve to thank our God by conforming our lives to his will (*"Now"*), and we thrill to the realization that the best is yet to come (*"Later"*).

For guidance, explanation, and encouragement we turn to our text for this special service of thanksgiving, found in Paul's First Letter to the Saints in Thessalonica, the Fifth Chapter:

ESV **1 Thessalonians 5:9-18** ***God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ,*** [10] ***who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him.*** [11] ***Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.*** [12] ***¶ We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you,*** [13] ***and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves.*** [14] ***And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all.*** [15] ***See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone.*** [16] ***Rejoice always,*** [17] ***pray without ceasing,*** [18] ***give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.***

This is God's Word, itself a precious *gift* for which we thank our God this evening. To help prepare our hearts for the study of these words, and to remind us of their divine origin, so we pray, ***"Sanctify us by your truth, O Lord. Your word is truth."*** Amen.

Have you ever wondered whether it would be a blessing or a curse to be able to experience an existence unmarred by any sin, just for a moment – a glimpse or a taste of perfection? Obviously it would be an experience that would leave you with tremendous hope and comfort. Experiencing the perfection of heaven, even for just a moment, would undoubtedly help to sustain us with images of what is to come as we trudge through life's struggles.

Yet it is also undoubtedly true that the experience would leave you in a very difficult position, for a variety of reasons. Think of it. After experiencing the perfection of the life to come, who wouldn't yearn, every moment of every day, for an end to this life so that the next could begin? Beyond even that, how thoroughly depressing not only to have to leave such a place, but to suddenly and unmistakably be able to see this present existence for the shabby, disgusting, superficial mess that it really is – *and yet to still have to live here*. Think back again to your childhood. You were content with less, in part, because you had never

experienced more. Your childhood stomping grounds were great, in part, because you had nothing to compare them to.

Yet there would be another element here that would make even a momentary experiencing of perfection both profoundly disturbing and yet spiritually beneficial. How disheartening to recognize just how far removed every single one of our thoughts and actions is from the perfection of God's holy will. Could you imagine how hard it would suddenly become to try to "clean up our act" once we recognized the extent of the sin that pollutes all that we think, say, and do? How could you ever remain motivated to sweep the floor once you realized that you are living on top of a manure pile, and therefore to also realize that you could never sweep down to anything truly clean? The ever-present and demoralizing question would be, *"What's the point?"*

The point here is that we first acknowledge on this evening that every single thing that we touch in this life is soiled by our sin, including also our attempt to give special thanks to our God on this night. Far from causing you to despair, use this knowledge to draw you ever closer to your Savior-God. How blessed, how fortunate we are that God did not send his Son as an enabler, as a good example, or as one who came to show us what we owed or what we must do. He didn't come to teach *us* how to fix our sin problem; he came to fix it for us. We didn't need a coach, we needed a Savior – and that is exactly what we got. That's where you and I are right now – that's the present. As Christians, you and I have it really, really good *right now*. God, for Jesus sake, has forgiven us all our sins.

This is part of what we will call "pure thanksgiving." Pure thanksgiving does not look forward. It starts at the present and looks backwards – at all the blessings of the past and present – and responds with a heartfelt, *"I really do have it good. I have in no way received from my God what I deserved – spiritually or materially. I have received what I did not deserve – forgiveness, grace, and blessing."*

So pure thanksgiving is the realization of what God has already done for, and given to, each of us, but is that the end of it? The fact that every one of our thoughts and actions falls short of perfection is not news to us, but neither does that fact serve to discourage or prevent the ongoing struggle in the life of the Christian to walk, moment-by-moment, in harmony with God's will. The new man in the Christian knows nothing of "good enough." The new man doesn't see the failures of the past as a reason to retreat or surrender. The new man recognizes only the ongoing desire to advance and to do better.

Understand the danger here. The new man in us wants to be *like* Jesus, but it's the old Adam in us that wants to try to *be* Jesus. No matter how much someone claims to love Jesus Christ, trying to do what only *Jesus* could do (trying to earn forgiveness and admission to heaven) is, in fact, a rejection of Jesus – a slap in his face. Everyone therefore who tries to "do good" or "be good" as a payment for past sins is rejecting Jesus, *because Jesus has already done that.* Doing the right thing for the right reason (as a pure act of thanksgiving) is such a challenge because our natural inclination here is to do the right thing for the wrong reason; that is, to imagine that doing the right thing going forward will earn us something in God's eyes. Listen again to how our text excludes all such nonsense: ***"Our Lord Jesus Christ… died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him."***

Note well – with pure relief and gratitude – just who alone could pay the bill we owed: Jesus Christ. Who is it that enables us now to ***"live with him"***? Jesus Christ. Who or what is our greatest blessing for which we ought to give thanks? Jesus Christ. Christians have it so good here on earth because we exist, right now, in a perfect state of forgiveness in God's eyes. Colossians 2:13-14**:** ***"And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross."*** The payment has already been made by Christ on the cross, and God has already accepted that payment. The empty tomb is the proof. How silly, how depraved and ungrateful, to try to add our own works to what Jesus has already accomplished. We've got is so good precisely because Jesus was and is so good.

Why then bother with any thoughts of "trying to do better in the future"? Because that's what Christians do. Listen again to how our text put it – first the encouragement toward improvement in our Christian walk: ***"And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all. [15] See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone. [16] Rejoice always, [17] pray without ceasing, [18] give thanks in all circumstances…"*** And then comes the why: ***"…for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you."*** Note well the addition of the words ***"in Christ Jesus."*** Forgiveness and heaven have already been earned for us by our Savior. We already have the promise of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. That new

man in us always and only seeks to walk in God's will as our ongoing offering of thanksgiving.

So we've already got it good, and we seek to say thank you by bringing all of our words, thoughts, and actions into line with God's will. But the best news of all is that as good as we have it now, the best is yet to come.

Change here on earth is inevitable. Sometimes that's a good thing, but often that change brings sadness, frustration and heartache. We suffer. Our friends and family members suffer. And yet God's chosen children are always carried home. Through all of the inevitable trials of life we cling to God's promise that the best is yet to come. Listen to how Paul spoke of the relationship between the here and the hereafter in Philippians 1:21-23**:** ***"For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.*** ***[22]*** ***If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell.*** ***[23]*** ***I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better."***

Paul obviously had it right, didn't he? He knew he had it good as a child of God through faith in Jesus Christ, no matter what hardships and heartaches life on earth might bring. His idea of giving thanks for the rescue that was already his was to do better in his dedication and service to his Lord and his neighbor. And yet all the while he yearned for that best part that was still to come.

Pray for that same spirit and attitude. Live a life of thanksgiving, striving always for better service to your Savior God, remembering that as good as we have it right now the best is yet to come. Thanks be to God who has given us this life, this victory, through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

**The Sermon Text:**

ESV 1 Thessalonians 5:9-18 *God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, [10] who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him. [11] Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing. [12] ¶ We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, [13] and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. [14] And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all. [15] See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone. [16] Rejoice always, [17] pray without ceasing, [18] give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.*

***"Then, Now, and Later"***

**The Offertory –** [Sung by All]
*Supplement Insert, page 16*

**The Post-Sermon Hymn** - 425 (Stanzas 5-6) *(Red Hymnal)*
*"All Depends on Our Possessing"*

**The Thanksgiving Confession of Faith** *(See bulletin insert)*

**The Thanksgiving Prayer and the Lord's Prayer**

**The Benediction**

**The Closing Hymn** – 558 *(Second Tune)* *(Red Hymnal)*
*"All Praise to Thee, My God, This Night"*

**Silent Prayer**

# St Paul Lutheran Church
# Bismarck, North Dakota

## Thanksgiving 2023

# ST. PAUL EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH

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**Mick Johnson, President** **Angela Pfennig, Organist**
**Michael Roehl, Pastor**

## Thanksgiving Service – November 22, 2023

**The Opening Prayer by the Pastor**

**The Opening Hymn** – 39 *(Red Hymnal)*
*"Praise to the Lord, the Almighty"*

**The Confession of Sins and Absolution**

Pastor: If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.

**Congregation: If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.**

Pastor: From the conviction of our hearts we confess together:

**All: Almighty God, merciful Father, we confess that we were conceived and born with sin. We confess that we have, since birth, actively sinned against you by our thoughts, words, and actions. We are sorry for our countless sins, and we humble ourselves before your holy presence. Forgive us, for Jesus' sake, and renew us by your Holy Spirit.**

Pastor: God the Father has indeed declared you to be not guilty for Jesus' sake. By his command and according to his authority, I announce to you his divine decree that your sins are forgiven, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

**[Sung By All]**

**Praise God from whom all blessings flow!**
**Praise Him, all creatures here below!**
**Praise Him above, ye heav'nly host!**
**Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost!**

**The Prayer of the Day**

**The Psalm of the Day - Psalm 67** ***(See bulletin insert)***

**The Scripture Lessons**:

**The First Lesson:** ESV (1 Timothy 2:1-4) First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, 2 for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. 3 This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, 4 who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

**[Sung By All]**

**Now thank we all our God With heart and hands and voices,**
**Who wondrous things hath done, In Whom His world rejoices;**
**Who, from our mothers' arms, Hath blessed us on our way**
**With countless gifts of love, And still is ours today.**

**The Second Lesson**: ESV(Luke 12:13-23) Someone in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me." 14 But he said to him, "Man, who made me a judge or arbitrator over you?" 15 And he said to them, "Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions." 16 And he told them a parable, saying, "The land of a rich man produced plentifully, 17 and he thought to himself, 'What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?' 18 And he said, 'I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. 19 And I will say to my soul, "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry."' 20 But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' 21 So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God." 22 And he said to his disciples, "Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat, nor about your body, what you will put on. 23 For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing.

**[Sung By All]**

**Oh may this bounteous God Through all our life be near us,**
**With ever joyful hearts And blessed peace to cheer us,**
**And keep us in His grace, And guide us when perplexed,**
**And free us from all ills, in this world and the next.**

**The Pre-Sermon Hymn** - 425 (Stanzas 1-2, 4) *(Red Hymnal)*
*"All Depends on Our Possessing"*