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**Date: November 19, 2023**

**Title: THANKS FOR NOTHING**

**Text: 1 Thessalonians 5:18; Isaiah 8:17**

*“In everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you” (1 Thessalonians 5:18).*

*“The Lord has hidden himself from his people, but I trust him and place my hope in him” (Isaiah 8:17).*

Webster defines GRATITUDE as the state of being grateful; thankfulness, AND... INGRATITUDE is defined as forgetfulness or poor return for kindness received; ungratefulness. Basically, we could put everyone here in 1 of 2 categories. Those who are grateful or ungrateful; thankful or thankless. We all find ourselves on one degree of the spectrum between thankful and thankless.

Listen to see if you can discern where the farmer of this story fits on that spectrum. An elderly lady was born on a farm. It was her first home. Her early days held many special memories. Early in her life, her parents moved to the city, and the city was where she went to school, where she got married, where she had her children, and where she established her career. She never had the occasion to return to the farm, but she wanted to. She REALLY wanted to. So, she booked a stay at an Airbnb on a farm near the place where she was born. She was elated. She checked the days off on her calendar. The day came and she drove many hours and finally arrived just before dark. It was just like she had pictured. There was a big old beautiful farmhouse. The red barn trimmed in white, and the vast fields and its endless fences. By the time she unloaded her car and settled in her room, it was dark. It seemed VERY dark to this city gal. She went right to sleep and slept like a baby. Rather she slept like an adult who doesn't have a baby. Bright and early, the rooster took his place and he let out a “Cock-a-doodle-do!” She sat up in her bed feeling more rested than she could remember. The aromas of coffee and the farm-style breakfast were heavenly. She took her place at the breakfast table where she was showered with all the farm staples – fresh milk, eggs, sausage, ham, and bacon. She hadn't eaten like that in who knows how long. It – was – delicious! Her host, the farmer, asked if she'd like to go with him as he did his chores. Again, she was elated. First, they gathered eggs. Then they milked the cows. Next, they fed the chickens, the sheep, the cows, and the pigs. She loved every moment. The pigs may have been her least favorite due to the rather overwhelming smell. Then it was back to the house. By this time, it was almost lunch time. On the way to the house, she spotted an unusually large, gentle pig WITH ONE WOODEN LEG. She asked about the pig. The farmer said, “That's Betsy. She is one special pig.” Then he proceeded to tell her about the time the farmhouse had caught fire while the family was sleeping. Betsy oinked and squealed so long and so loud that it woke them. Betsy, the pig, saved the family and their house. Then he told her of another occasion when Susie, the youngest child, had wandered down to the large, deep pond. Susie fell into the deep end of the pond. Little Susie had never learned to swim. Again, ole Betsy squealed so long and loud that the farmer and his wife came running to see little Susie go under. Having seen where she went under, the ole farmer went in after her, AND... Susie was rescued thanks to Betsy, their incredible pig with the wooden leg. “But WHAT ABOUT THE WOODEN LEG,” she asked. To which the old farmer said, “Well, Ma'am, you just can't eat a special pig like Betsy all at once.” Remember the definition for INGRATITUDE? Forgetfulness or poor return for kindness received. Forget that Betsy saved your daughter. Forget that Betsy saved your house. Forget that Betsy saved YOUR life.

On Thursday I had the occasion to go to a Ravens game, thanks to Raven Ruth who watches us online each week. (“Hi Ruth! Thanks for the ticket. I AM grateful!) From the time we arrived at the parking lot and returned to the car at the end of the game, I SAW PURPLE. Walking to the stadium, it seemed that EVERYONE in front of me was wearing purple. When I got to my seat, the 20 rows in front of me – for the most part all standing – were mostly wearing purple. I had never seen so much purple in my life. I did see an occasional orange blur among the sea of purple jerseys, but it was quite rare. I must say it was rather conspicuous though. Do you know what? Grateful people are about as rare as an orange shirt at a Ravens game. Being truly

grateful puts you in a league of your own. It gives you an edge. It separates you from the crowd. AND... One's doctor or psychologist will tell you it's one of the healthiest things you can do. I've read research documents stating that grateful people live longer.

It's rather easy to be grateful when – the wallet is fat, the checkbook looks good, the refrigerator is full, you feel good and the doctor's report is great, the car purrs like a kitten and everyone speaks well of you. BUT... What about when – the wallet is thin, there's NO BALANCE to use for checks, the refrigerator and cupboards are bare, the car isn't running at all, there's NO money for gas and the friends have disappeared and there are more insults and criticisms coming your way than compliments or flattery?

We all know that life isn't always easy, and sometimes it gets unusually hard. Isaiah 8:17 states that God has hidden Himself. From whom? HIS people. I'm not so sure how a God who is omnipresent CAN hide Himself, BUT... I have had times when it SURE SEEMED that God was hiding. Anyone, besides me, ever wonder who God is or where God went? Have you ever felt that God was hiding FROM YOU? You aren't alone. Whether we verbalize it or not – the Lord's absence tends to make it hard for us to praise Him.

1 Thessalonians makes it very clear that it is GOD'S WILL that we give thanks. That includes thanks to Him. Not only that, but to NOT thank Him removes you from the center of God's will. The Word says, "IN everything give thanks..." IN not FOR... This really has little to do with regard to WHAT we are to give thanks for. Rather it tells us WHEN to give thanks. When God's face is present AND when God's face is absent. When God feels close AND when He seems distant. When times are good AND when times are hard. When you are living in plenty AND when the abundance has dried up. When times are grand AND when times are NOT so grand. When it's easy to rejoice AND when we can't help but sorrow and the tears continue.

It is easy to worship God when things are going great in your life – when things are good with the family, you've got plenty of friends and plenty of food, your wallet is fat and the back account is overflowing, and when your life is filled with health and happy situations. BUT life isn't always grand, and circumstances are not always pleasant. How do you worship God then? What do you do when God seems a million miles away? How do you thank God when your pain makes you struggle to think of something to thank Him for?

The DEEPEST level of worship is – praising God in spite of pain, thanking God during your trial, trusting Him when tempted, surrendering while suffering, and loving Him when He seems distant. Friendships are often tested by separation and silence; when you are divided by physical distance, or you are unable to talk. In your friendship with God, you won't always feel close to Him. Philip Yancey wisely said it this way – "Any relationship involves times of closeness and times of distance, and in a relationship with God, no matter how intimate, the pendulum will swing from one side to the other." That's when worship gets difficult. To mature your friendship, God will test it with periods of seeming separation – times when it feels as if He has abandoned or forgotten you. God may feel a million miles away. Some have called it "the ministry of absence" or "the winter of the heart." A.W. Tozer called them "the ministry of the night."

Besides Jesus, DAVID must have had one of the closest relationships with God. God took pleasure in calling him "A man after my own heart." Yet David frequently complained of God's APPARENT ABSENCE. David, the Psalmist, alone asked: Psalm 10:1 – "Why do You stand afar off, O LORD? Why do you hide in times of trouble?" Psalm 22:1 – "...My God, My God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me. And from the words of my groaning?" Psalm 43:2 – "Why do you cast me off?" Psalm 44:23 – "Awake! Why do you sleep, O Lord? Do not cast us off forever." Psalm 74:11 – "Why do you withdraw Your hand, even Your right hand? Take it out of Your bosom..." Psalm 88:14 – "LORD, why do You cast off my soul? Why do You hide Your face from me? Psalm 89:49 – "Lord, where are your former lovingkindnesses, ..." "Why aren't things like they used to be? "Lord, why are You standing aloof and far away? Why do You hide when I need You the most?" "Why have you forsaken me?" "Why do you remain so distant?" Why do you ignore my cries for help?" "Why have you abandoned me?" Of course, God hadn't really left David, and He doesn't leave YOU either. He has promised repeatedly, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." But... God has not promised you will always FEEL

His presence. In fact, God admits that sometimes He hides His face from us, at least, it appears that He has hidden His face from us. There are times when He appears to be missing-in-action in your life. Floyd McClung describes it: "You wake up one morning and all your spiritual feelings are gone. You pray, but nothing happens. You rebuke the devil, but it doesn't change anything. You go through spiritual exercises. You have your friends pray for you. You confess every sin you can imagine. Then, you go around asking forgiveness from everyone you know. You fast ... still nothing. You begin to wonder how long this spiritual gloom might last. Days? Weeks? Months? Will it ever end? It feels as if your prayers simply bounce off the ceiling. In utter desperation you cry out, 'What's the matter with me?'" The truth is, there might well be NOTHING wrong with you. This is often a normal part of the testing and maturing of your friendship with God. As far as I can tell, every Christian goes through it at least once, and usually several times. It is painful and disconcerting, but it is vital for the development of your faith. Knowing this gave Job hope when he could not feel God's presence in his life. He said, *"I go east, but he is not there. I go west, but I cannot find him. I do not see him in the north, for he is hidden. I turn to the south, but I cannot find him. But he knows where I am going. And when he has tested me like gold in a fire, he will pronounce me innocent"* (Job 23:8-10). When God seems distant, you may feel that He is angry with you or is disciplining you for some sin. It is true that sin does disconnect us from intimate fellowship with God. We grieve God's Spirit and quench our fellowship with Him by disobedience, conflict with others, busyness, friendship with the world, and a whole host of other sins. But often this feeling of abandonment or estrangement from God has nothing to do with sin. It is a test of faith – one we all must face. Will you continue to love, trust, obey, and worship God EVEN WHEN you have no sense of His presence or visible evidence of His work in your life?

**The most common mistake Christians make in worship today is seeking an EXPERIENCE rather than seeking GOD.** They look for a feeling, and if it happens, they conclude that they have worshipped. Wrong! God often removes the feelings, so we won't depend on them. Seeking a feeling, even the feeling of closeness to Christ, isn't really worship. When you are a baby Christian, God gives you a lot of confirming emotions and often answers the most immature, self-centered prayers so you'll know He exists, BUT... As you grow in faith, He will wean you of these dependencies. God's OMNIPRESENCE and the MANIFESTATION of His presence are two different things. One is a fact; the other is often a feeling. God is ALWAYS present, even when you are unaware of Him, and His presence is too profound to be measured by mere emotions. Yes, He wants you to sense His presence, but He's more concerned that you TRUST Him than that you feel Him. Faith, not feelings, pleases God. The situation that will stretch your faith most will be those times when life falls apart and God is nowhere to be found. He is EVERYWHERE, but you don't see Him ANYWHERE. This happened to Job. On a single day he pretty much lost everything – his family, his business, his health. The most discouraging part – for 37 chapters (37 of 42), God said NOTHING! How do you praise God when you don't understand what's happening in your life and God is silent? How do you stay connected in a crisis when there's no communication? How do you keep your eyes on Jesus when they're full of tears? You do what Job did: *"Then he fell to the ground in worship and said, 'Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; (BLESSED BE THE NAME OF THE LORD) may the name of the Lord be praised."*

**1. TELL GOD EXACTLY HOW YOU FEEL. A. Pour out your heart to God. B. Unload every emotion that you're feeling.** Job did this when he said, *"I can't be quiet! I am angry and bitter. I have to speak!"* He cried out when God seemed distant: *"Oh, for the days when I was in my prime, when God's intimate friendship blessed my house."* **C. God can handle your doubt, anger, fear, grief, confusion, and questions.** It has been said that admitting your hopelessness to God might be a statement of faith. Trusting God but feeling despair at the same time, David wrote, *"I believed, so I said, 'I am completely ruined!"* This sounds like a contradiction: "I trust God, but I'm wiped out!" David's frankness reveals deep faith: First, he believed in God. Second, he believed God would listen to his prayer. Third, he believed God would let him say what he felt and still love him.

**2. FOCUS ON WHO GOD IS – HIS UNCHANGING NATURE.** Regardless of circumstances and how you feel, hang on to God's unchanging character. Remind yourself what you know to be eternally true about God: He is good. He loves me. He is with me. He knows what I'm going through. He cares. He has a good plan for my life. Raymond Edman said, "Never doubt in the dark what God told you in the light." When Job's life fell apart, and God was silent, Job still found things he could praise God for: That He is good and loving. That He is all powerful. That He notices every detail of my life. That He IS in control. That He HAS a plan for my life. That He WILL save me.

**3. TRUST GOD TO KEEP HIS PROMISES.** God is a Promise Keeper, never a promise breaker. During times of spiritual darkness or dryness you must patiently rely on the promises of God, not your emotions, and realize that He is taking you to a deeper level of maturity. A friendship based only on emotion is a shallow relationship. Don't be troubled by trouble. Circumstances can NEVER change the character of God. God's grace is still in full force. He is still FOR you, even when you don't feel it. In the absence of confirming circumstances, Job held on to God's Word. He said, *"I have not departed from the commands of his lips; I have treasured the words of his mouth more than my daily bread."* It was his trust in God's Word that caused Job to remain faithful even though nothing made sense. His faith was strong in the midst of pain: *"God may kill me, but still I will trust him."* When you feel abandoned by God yet continue to trust Him in spite of your feelings, you worship Him in the deepest way.

**4. REMEMBER WHAT GOD HAS ALREADY DONE FOR YOU.** Here's the Thanksgiving part. If God never did anything else for you, He would still deserve your praise for the rest of your life because of what Jesus did for you on the cross. God's Son died for you! There is no greater reason to worship Him. Unfortunately, we forget the cruel details of the agonizing sacrifice God made on our behalf. Familiarity breeds complacency. Even before His crucifixion, the Son of God was stripped naked, beaten until almost unrecognizable, whipped, scorned and mocked, crowned with thorns, and spit on contemptuously. Abused and ridiculed by heartless men, he was treated worse than an animal. Then, nearly unconscious from blood loss, he was forced to drag a cumbersome cross up a hill, was nailed to it, and was left to die the slow excruciating torture of death by crucifixion. While His lifeblood drained out, hecklers stood by and shouted insults, making fun of His pain and challenging His claim to be God. Next, as Jesus took ALL OF MANKIND'S SIN AND GUILT ON HIMSELF, God looked away from that ugly sight, and Jesus cried out in total desperation, *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"* Jesus could have saved Himself – but then He could not have saved you. No words are adequate to describe the darkness of that moment. Why did God allow and endure such ghastly, evil mistreatment? Why? So YOU could be spared from eternity in Hell, and so you could share in His glory forever! The Bible says, *"Christ was without sin, but for our sake God made him share our sin in order that in unison with him we might share the righteousness of God."* Jesus gave up everything so you could have everything. He died so you could live forever. That alone is worthy of your continual thanks and praise. Never again should you wonder what you have to be thankful for. Thanks for nothing should never, ever touch our lips again. ALWAYS be thankful for the work of Jesus on the cross. Literally – Your LIFE – your ETERNAL life depends on it. Never again wonder WHEN to be thankful. As the songwriter said so aptly, "Blessed be Your Name in the land that is plentiful, where Your streams of abundance flow...When I'm found in the desert place, when I walk through the wilderness...When the sun's shining down on me, when the world's all as it should be...On the road marked with suffering, though there's pain in the offering... BLESSED BE YOUR NAME!" Now and forevermore!