

Sunday 20th February 2022
Glynde Lutheran Church
Sermon on 1 Thess. 5:16-18
Theme: “Count your blessings”

Introduction:

If you are like me, you have times when you feel ‘down’. Everything seems ‘pretty’ black at such times. All you can see at such times is problem after problem, trouble after trouble.... Maybe you are going through such a time at the moment....

Our Bible reading has something to say to us, I think, for times like this. And for life in general.... Paul writes in his first letter to the Christians at Thessalonica:

Be joyful always, pray at all times, and be thankful in all circumstances. This is what God wants from you in your life in union with Christ Jesus (1 Thess. 5:16-18).

In other words, Paul is reminding us to focus, in hard times and in good times, on our relationship with God, and to remember what He has done for us, is doing for us, and will do for us.

When we do this, *then* we can even smile even in the midst of our troubles....

In other words, I think Paul is reminding us in our Bible reading to “count our blessings”. I’ve never forgotten the chorus of that old Billy Graham hymn, *Count your blessings*. Do you remember it? It begins:

**When upon life's billows
You are tempest tossed
When you are discouraged
Thinking all is lost**

And the chorus goes like this:
Count your many blessings
Name them one by one
And it will surprise you
What the Lord has done

Part 1: Blessings of creation

Well, what blessings *are* ours? What *have* we got to give thanks to God for? Well, where do we start!?

With our birth, perhaps.... God has given us the gift of life. Consider how He created you and me.... Think of how He watched over our formation in our mother's womb, and how He smiled when you were born and when I was born....

What does the song writer in the Book of Psalms in the Old Testament say? He writes about this:

(God), you created every part of me;
you put me together in my mother's womb.
I praise you because you are to be feared;
all you do is strange and wonderful.
I know it with all my heart.
When my bones were being formed,
carefully put together in my mother's womb,
when I was growing there in secret,
you knew that I was there –
you saw me before I was born. (Psalm 139:13-16).

And what a wonderful world, God has placed us in. Another song writer in the same book of Psalms in the Old Testament gets carried away praising God for this world. And it's easy to do that.... Listen to some of the things he says:

Praise the Lord, my soul!
O Lord, my God, how great you are....
You have set the earth firmly on its foundations....
You placed the ocean over it like a robe....

**You make springs flow in the valleys,
and rivers run between hills.
They provide water for the wild animals;
there the wild donkeys quench their thirst.
In the trees near by,
the birds make their nests and sing.**

**From the sky you send rain on the hills,
and the earth is filled with your blessings.
You make grass grow for the cattle
and plants for man to use,
so that he can grow his crops
and produce wine to make him happy,
olive-oil to make his cheerful
and bread to give him strength (*Psalm 104:10-15*).**

And God has watched over us and cared for us throughout our life.
We are special to him....

Often we don't see His caring, loving hands as we negotiate the rapids of the river of life. Often, it is only when we look back over our life that we see God's hands in the things that happened to us. A while back, I wrote my life's story as part of a course I was doing.... And as I did that, I couldn't help but marvel at how God has protected me and cared for me throughout my life....

By the way, I think that this is a great thing to do, in order to see clearly God's care of you in your life. Make up a Time-Line of your life, and insert in it the major things that have happened to you.... And then think about what God was doing for you at those times....

And God's gifts to us are many.... He has given us family and friends. He has placed us in a free and prosperous country. He gives us food to eat, water and wine to drink, clothes to wear, a roof over our head, and much, much more. He has provided for all our basic needs, and has given even much, much more (*See Great Thanksgiving Poem at Appendix 1*).

These are blessings that we often take for granted. They are blessings that are ours by virtue of our creation. God created this world for us human beings, and He has filled it with wonderful things for us. Sure, it's a broken world, but that's not God's fault! It's ours! (*cf. Gen 3*).

In our Bible reading, Paul is reminding us to "give thanks in all circumstances". And we have much to thank God for, in regard to creation....

Part 2: Blessings of redemption

I find it interesting, though, to read Paul's letters closely and to see what he has mainly in mind when he talks about giving thanks to God. When Paul talks about giving thanks to God, he doesn't have the gifts of creation mainly in his mind, but rather he is thinking principally of the gifts of God that ours through Jesus and because of Jesus.

For example, it is interesting to look at Paul's use of the phrase "*But thanks be to God for...*"

For example, he thanks God that the Christians to whom he is writing have been set free from their slavery to sin by Jesus... He thanks God for the victory over death that is ours through Jesus.... He thanks God for fellow Christians.... And so on... (*e.g., Rom. 6:17, 7:25; 1 Cor. 15:57; 2 Cor. 8:16 in Appendix 2*).

And that's really the tip of the iceberg so far as Paul's thanksgiving for what he has, and what his readers have, through Jesus and because of Jesus. His letters are filled with thanksgiving for the gifts of God that are ours through Jesus: God's forgiveness, God's Spirit in us, eternal life, and so on. And when I count my blessings, this is what mainly focus on....

Sure, I recall God's creation of me, His gift of a wonderful world, and His constant care and protection of me over the years.... How could I forget how he provided for me in the years of struggle, when I often

didn't know where my next dollar was coming from, or even where I was going to sleep, at times!?! How could I forget his protection of me, during my years of wandering this way and that!?! How could I forget His gift to me of a wife and two boys? (*cf. My Time-Line of my life, and "My Life Story"*).

But principally, when I count my blessings, *like Paul* I think of the gifts of God that I have because of, and through Jesus.

First of all, I think of my *forgiveness*. I know what I deserve from God: His judgement, His punishment, and eternal separation from Him.

But what does He give me!?! He freely gives me His forgiveness!! And it amazes me to think of the lengths that He went to in order to make it possible for me and all people to be forgiven.

He sent His Son, part of His very self, to this earth to be born as an ordinary baby, to live among as an ordinary human being, and then to suffer and to die for us on a cross. There God's Son, Jesus, took upon himself the total judgement and the punishment that I deserve, and that we all deserve (*Gal. 3:10-13; 1 Peter 2:24; cf. Isa.53*).

God's gift of forgiveness is a wonderful gift to have. As I trust in Jesus as my Saviour, I know that I am God's forgiven child. To know peace of mind, in contrast to the heavy weight of guilt that could be mine, this is what I thank God for again and again and again as I live out my life (*e.g., Rom.3:20-26, 28; 5:1; 8:1*).

And you know, this is the passion that drives me: to lead others to know how wonderful it is to have Jesus as your Saviour, and and to know how life-changing it is to know that you are forgiven by God and right with God.

As I think about my life, *as I count my blessings*, I think too of how my life has been wonderfully and radically changed because of God's gift

to me of His Spirit. When I was linked to Jesus as my Saviour at my baptism, God poured out His Spirit into me (e.g., Acts 2:38; 1 Cor. 12:13) . God came to live in me, and He has done some 'pretty' wonderful things in my life.

God has changed me into someone who has a family resemblance to Jesus. I can't put it much better than that. God has changed me by His Spirit in me, and made me *like Jesus*.

Sure, God still has a lot of work to do in me, but I can see the fruits of the gift of His Spirit to me: the fruits of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, humility, and self-control" (Gal. 5:22-23). I praise and thank God for changing me from what I could be, and I know only too well the sort of person I could be....

I thank God too, as I count my blessings, for the family that I now belong to. I am thinking of the many, many people who I have as my brothers and sisters in God's family. Isn't it great to belong to God's family, and have brothers and sisters who want to upbuild us in our faith, and support us as we go through life's troubles!

I thank God particularly for 'you guys'. It is great to belong to a Christian community like this, and I thank God for your support and encouragement of me and Jenine over the years that we have been with you.

And speaking of Jenine, I thank God for giving me a wife who loves Jesus and is a child of God.... You know, in my early years, I could have easily ended marrying someone who wasn't a Christian. I thank God that he protected me during those years, and led me to a wife who has supported and encouraged me in my faith, and has helped me lead our boys to grow in their faith.

It's great to have someone close to you who is a strong Christian, someone who supports and encourages you in your walk with Jesus. It may be your spouse, *or maybe not.... Maybe it's a dear friend or your child or your neighbor, or just someone here in the congregation who worships with you....*

That person, *or those people*, are wonderful blessings of God to you and to me.

When I count my blessings, too, I think of where I am headed: home to be with my Lord Jesus and with all my brothers and sisters in Christ in God's new kingdom (*e.g., John 14:1-3; 1 Thess. 4:13-18*). I look forward to living life in God's new kingdom, seeing Jesus face to face, and experiencing the dawn of God's glorious new day. Words can't capture how wonderful it will be to be home with Jesus... (*cf. Appendix 3 re C.S. Lewis' description in the final chapters of The Last Battle*).

Conclusion:

So, we have no need to be depressed about life. Sure there are times when each of us will feel 'down' about things, maybe even so far 'down' that we will need ongoing medical help. But at all times, and in all circumstances, God wants us to count our blessings and to remember what He has done for us, is doing for us, and will do for us. If that doesn't bring a smile to your face, nothing will.

As Paul writes:

Rejoice always, pray at all times, and be thankful in all circumstances. This is what God wants from you in your life in union with Christ Jesus (*1 Thess. 5:16-18*).

Appendix:

1) A Thanksgiving Poem

I AM THANKFUL:

For the wife

**Who says it's hot dogs tonight,
because she is home with me,
and NOT OUT WITH SOMEONE ELSE.**

For the husband

**who is on the sofa
being a couch potato,
because he is home with me
and NOT OUT AT THE BARS.**

For the teenager

**who is complaining about doing dishes
because it means she is at home,
NOT ON THE STREETS.**

For the taxes I pay

**because it means
I AM EMPLOYED.**

For the mess to clean after a party

**because it means I HAVE
BEEN SURROUNDED BY FRIENDS.**

For the clothes that fit a little too snug

**because it means
I HAVE ENOUGH TO EAT.**

For my shadow that watches me work

**because it means
I AM OUT IN THE SUNSHINE**

For a lawn that needs mowing,

**windows that need cleaning,
and gutters that need fixing
because it means I HAVE A HOME.**

For all the complaining

I hear about the government

**because it means
WE HAVE FREEDOM OF SPEECH.**

**For the parking spot
i find at the far end of the parking lot
because it means I AM CAPABLE OF WALKING
AND I HAVE BEEN BLESSED WITH TRANSPORTATION.**

**For my huge heating bill
because it means
I AM WARM.**

**For the lady behind me in church
who sings off key because it means
I CAN HEAR.**

**For the pile of laundry and ironing
because it means
I HAVE CLOTHES TO WEAR.**

**For weariness and aching muscles
at the end of the day
because it means
I HAVE BEEN
CAPABLE OF WORKING HARD.**

**For the alarm that goes off
in the early morning hours
because it means
I AM ALIVE.**

"THANK YOU GOD"

2) “But thanks be to God...”

¹⁷ But thanks be to God! For though at one time you were slaves to sin, you have obeyed with all your heart the truths found in the teaching you received. ¹⁸ You were set free from sin and became the slaves of righteousness (Rom. 6:17-18)

²⁴ What an unhappy man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is taking me to death? ²⁵ Thanks be to God, who does this through our Lord Jesus Christ! (Rom. 7:24-25).

**“Where, Death, is your victory?
Where, Death, is your power to hurt?”**

⁵⁶ Death gets its power to hurt from sin, and sin gets its power from the Law. ⁵⁷ But thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ! (1 Cor. 15:55-57).

¹⁶ How we thank God for making Titus as eager as we are to help you! (2 Cor. 8:16).

3) I love the way that C.S. Lewis, the writer of the Narnia tales, describes “heaven” in the last chapter of the last book in this series. One of the main characters, Lucy, says to the Jesus figure, Aslan the lion:

“We’re so afraid of being sent away, Aslan. And you have sent us back into our own world so often’. ‘No fear of that’, said Aslan. ‘Have you not guessed?’. Their hearts leaped and a wild hope rose within them. ‘There was a real railway accident’, said Aslan softly. ‘Your father and mother and all of you are – as you used to call it in the Shadowlands – dead. The term is over: the holidays have begun. The dream is ended: this is morning.

And as He spoke He no longer looked to them like a lion: but the things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write of them. And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all

lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in the world and their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on for ever: in which every chapter is better than the one before (*The Last Battle*, p. 165).