



Rejoice always,  
pray without ceasing,

...in everything

*give thanks*

for this is the will of God  
in Christ Jesus for you.

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18



# "Yes, we celebrate *Thanksgiving!*"

This was my response last year to a member who asked if we still celebrate our church Thanksgiving. The reason for his inquiry was because he had heard nothing about it in his congregation and was saddened by this.

Perhaps, others may have also experienced or wondered about this, so I would like to highlight a few ways in which we *very much anticipate and celebrate Thanksgiving*.

In 2017, we began a series of teachings and articles called ***Giving is...*** with aspects of thanksgiving woven throughout them. Simply put, we give because we know that God has given us everything! The additional resources developed for this theme have helped create the understanding that giving is a fundamental characteristic of true Christians and they can give in many different ways. Certain aspects of our international theme for last year, "Rich in Christ," focused on thankfulness. Our response to the richness that our Father shares with us must be thanksgiving, expressed through the use of our talents, gifts, time, resources and our offerings. In various small group sessions, we have reflected on the theme of giving and very intentionally connected it to thanksgiving and how this prompts us to action.

The Psalmist expressed so beautifully in Psalm 103 -

*Bless the Lord,  
O my soul; and  
all that is within  
me, bless His holy  
name! Bless the Lord,  
O my soul, and forget  
not all His benefits...*

We can understand in this verse that the expression "bless" means to *increase* or *magnify* God in our lives.

Thus, through various themes, writings, and encouragements, we have tried to inspire everyone to become a Christian that lives a life of gratitude and generosity, even beyond the celebration of a single Thanksgiving day once a year. Our individual nature and congregational culture must evolve to be one that continuously reflects on the goodness of God and discovers new ways to express our gratitude to Him every day, so that giving truly becomes part of our nature.

This is what Jesus taught in Matthew 25: 31-40... *for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink...* Interestingly, the Lord showed in this instruction that those who had freely supported and had given to others directly created a bond to Christ Himself, *inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me...* Further, the nature of giving had become such an integral part of their lives, Jesus had to remind them of their actions; without flourish or recognition they had simply provided when they saw a need.

As this attribute grows in us, it culminates in the celebration of Thanksgiving Sunday. Leading up to this event, over the past ten years, a Thanksgiving article has always appeared in the Summer Vision to remind everyone of this special church holiday. Beginning in October, a banner is generally posted on our website to make it easy for members to make their Thanksgiving offering electronically if they so desire. In addition, some years ago, through messages to our ministers and articles published in the Summer and Autumn Vision Newsletters, we have

encouraged congregations and families to create a *Season of Thanksgiving* starting in October, rather than only focusing on one day of Thanksgiving in November.

Of course, we still happily decorate the altars festively for Thanksgiving Sunday as a simple expression of thanksgiving for the harvest that our Father has richly provided. And, we bring our Thanksgiving offerings that we have prepared as a humble token of our gratitude and love.

Yes, due to the pandemic this year, things are different. Perhaps, not everyone may be able to attend Thanksgiving Sunday in their congregation. Yet, I encourage everyone to bring thanksgiving to the forefront by speaking to your ministers and brothers and sisters. If possible, volunteer to create activities or times of worship for your congregation to express gratitude, gather some members and do something for your community. After all, each one of us is *the church*. We all can contribute to the life of our congregation and share with others the joy, the feelings, the passion of expressing our humble gratitude to our ever-giving almighty Father.

**Ultimately, Thanksgiving is what each of us makes it for ourselves.**

I wish for you an enriched season of Thanksgiving and a blessed Thanksgiving Sunday.



**In October 2020,**

**a special devotional will be published on our website, Facebook page, and app to encourage intentional moments of personal thanksgiving. We'll also be making an at-home worship experience available called *Songs of Gratitude*.**

## *New ways to give thanks...*

The 2020 pandemic has hit South and Central American countries particularly hard. Social services, such as health care and unemployment assistance, are severely strained and, in some places, not able to keep up with the needs of the people. Many are unemployed or severely underemployed, often leaving individuals with the impossible choice of deciding whether they should go out looking for work and run the risk of bringing the virus home, or staying home and having nothing to eat.

During these six months of the pandemic, our brethren have stayed connected: viewing the Apostle services online, utilizing the Small Group material for the midweek experience, and frequently communicating with their local ministers.

In these countries, Thanksgiving Sunday is celebrated on the first Sunday of October. In spite of the difficult circumstances they are dealing with, our brethren have expressed concern about how they would be able to bring their Thanksgiving offering. In a number of countries where it is not yet possible to gather for divine services, they have come up with a solution. On Saturday, October 3, and Sunday, October 4, they will open the church. One at a time, families can enter the church, bring their offering and pray. Everyone will need to wear a mask and observe social distancing, but they are determined to bring their offerings. It is overwhelming to see this depth of love for the Lord and dedication to their relationship with Him. The Chief Apostle spoke about this in a recent service:

*The love that the Holy Spirit poured out in us (Rom 5: 5) creates in us the yearning to be in fellowship with God. Knowing that God loves us, we fearlessly submit all our material needs and wishes to Him. And because we love God, we place more value on fellowship with the Giver than on His gifts.*

**For those unable to observe Thanksgiving Sunday in your church, allow this account to inspire you and your congregation to find creative ways to make it a memorable celebration. - JWF**

Ideas for creating your own Season of Thanksgiving:

## IN YOUR FAMILY:

- Create a “thanksgiving tree” and write down what you are thankful for
- Leave one another notes of gratitude and appreciation
- Go for a walk in God’s creation and decorate your house with the things you find
- Pray together as a family at least once a day and devote the majority of your prayer to thanking and praising God for who He is
- Learn a new song with your family that expresses thoughts of gratitude and thankfulness to God
- Find song lyrics and Bible verses that reflect gratitude or worship and include them in your seasonal decorations, or write them on pieces of paper and read one at each meal and discuss

## IN YOUR CONGREGATION:

- Discuss gratitude and thanksgiving in your small group and find ways to let each member of your group know why you are thankful for them
- As a small group, find a member who is having a difficult time and love on them (send cards, make phone calls, drop off meals or necessities)
- Plan a congregational worship evening (on Zoom!), even just a short one where you can all sing and read from the Bible together
- Decorate the altar together, or have every family bring a “basket of gratitude”
- Create a display or decoration where members can write notes of gratitude, thanking God for one another
- Celebrate *Pastor Appreciation Day* on October 11 by sharing your appreciation for your rector or a minister in your congregation

## IN YOUR COMMUNITY:

- Participate in a food drive for a local food bank or city mission
- Find opportunities to volunteer with congregational members or your family at a local charity or community organization
- Practice small acts of kindness throughout October and November – bring cookies or dinner to a neighbor, cut their lawn, or rake leaves
- Plan a neighborhood donut and cider gathering on your street