Are we really supposed to give thanks *always*? More than that, how are we ever going to give thanks for *everything*? Surely the author of this letter is engaging in a little sanctified exaggeration, a little holy hyperbole, right*?* Nope. Paul is purposely setting the bar high. Giving thanks, always and for everything, is an admirable goal. It may be difficult, but we should still try.

Practically speaking, always giving thanks means we will have to stop doing some things, like complaining! Think about it: it is impossible to complain if you are feeling grateful. Complaining is an odd thing. In a backhanded way, it makes us feel good; you know, “misery loves company.” We might prefer it if that huge, bodacious problem would just go away; but if it shows no signs of doing that, we will settle for some grumbling. We will milk it for all it is worth, with a ready supply of gripes to make others pay attention to us. We all know chronic complainers: folks who scarcely ever have a good word to say about anything and a whole lot of negative things to say about everything. What a drag they can be! What a dead weight for an otherwise pleasant summer day!

An Army chaplain once told the tale of being out on a training exercise with a battalion of soldiers assigned to the signal corps. In the days before satellite phones and GPS systems, these soldiers set up radio antennas and communications gear so the generals could communicate with officers in the field. Once they set up the antennas, they divided into teams to maintain the equipment.

It was difficult and exhausting work, but it was vital to the battalion’s success in the war games. The chaplain was out visiting one of these communications posts when he happened upon a soldier with a notably sour attitude. “Soldier, how’s it going today?” asked the chaplain. “Chaplain,” he admitted glumly, “it’s a pretty bad day.”

The chaplain went on to talk with the soldier about all the things that were bothering him. None of them had anything to do with the field exercise, which in fact was going rather well. The complaints were of a personal nature.

The next day, the chaplain moved on to another signal corps installation. He knocked on the door of the truck that served as both workstation and home away from home. To his surprise, the same soldier answered the door. He’d moved during the night. “Well, how’s it going *today?*” asked the chaplain. “Chaplain, it’s a pretty bad day…” the soldier began. Then, he went through the same down-in-the-mouth litany as before.

The third day, to his surprise, the chaplain ran into the very same soldier, in another part of the operation. You can pretty much guess what happened: same question, same gloomy answer. “You know,” the chaplain continued, “I met you yesterday and that was a pretty bad day. I met you two days ago, and you told me *that* was a pretty bad day. It seems to me, if this continues, someday you’re going to stand before your Maker, who’s going to ask you, ‘How was your life?’ I’ve got a feeling the only answer you’ll be able to give is, ‘It was a pretty bad life.’” Then the soldier smiled. The chaplain knew he was getting through to him. He’d gotten the point.

As should we all when it comes to this business of complaining, which is the opposite of giving thanks. Sure, there are times in life when complaints are in order, but when complaining becomes a constant habit, the only thing it can accomplish is to drag us down and very often everyone else along with it.

The antidote to that emotional spiral of doom is thanksgiving. To always seek, on rainy days and sunny days, to find something for which to offer thanks. That approach is at the heart of what this verse means by giving thanks “*at all times.”*

The apostle Paul also advises us to give thanks *for everything.* Here is where things get really sticky! Paul directs our attention not just to the timing of our thanksgivings, but also to their substance. It is one thing to thank God for a promotion at work. It is quite another to offer thanks for a pink slip. It is one thing to thank God for a family member who is helpful, cooperative, and a joy to be around. It is quite another to offer thanks for the black sheep of the family, the one who is nothing but trouble for everyone. There are circumstances when thanksgiving does not come easily, when the act of saying, “Thank you, God,” is the spiritual equivalent of hard labor.

Yet this is exactly what our text instructs us to do: “Give thanks for everything.” You may be inclined to think, “Why bother? What is the purpose of giving thanks for everything, when doing so is such hard work? Isn’t there something unnatural about trying to *make* ourselves feel thankful?”

Here is a little secret. You do not necessarily need to *feel* thankful, right at that moment, to offer thanks. It is like a parent saying to a child, “I love you,” when the child has done something naughty. Maybe you do not *feel* a whole lot of love for your child at that moment. Maybe there is a part of you that can imagine nothing beyond handing down the consequences for their actions. Yet, you tell your child you love them. You may not feel it right then, but you know on an intellectual level that you do love your child, very deeply.

It is the same with thanksgiving. It can be awfully hard to give thanks to God for the troubling medical test result your doctor just told you about; or the long list of problems with the car; or the pile of work your boss just dumped on your desk, but it can be done, even if it seems like a spiritual stretch. Giving thanks is a matter of good theology; it shows what we believe about God, that God is good to us, even when the going gets tough.

Faith teaches that God created the heavens and the earth and that when each stage of creation was completed, God pronounced it good. That means, even though some parts of creation defy explanation, parts that may, in our estimation, fall short of the glory of God, they are still part of an otherwise good universe. It can be hard, for example, to give thanks for mosquitoes. Which one of us has *ever* offered a prayer of thanksgiving for a mosquito? That prayer may be too big a leap for us! Yet, our theology tells us that God created mosquitoes, and that somewhere in the great scheme of things, mosquitoes have their part to play, along with the leaping dolphins and the soaring eagles. We may not see that purpose right at this moment, but maybe we will someday, in the next life if not this one! Maybe one day you will be able to thank God for the predacious bug perched on your forearm, knocking back a hemoglobin cocktail. Maybe not today, but someday.

In all seriousness, though, even suffering can have a positive aspect. It may sound pollyannaish to say that “every cloud has a silver lining,” but there is a fair bit of truth in that statement. In the meantime, consider offering this honest prayer, or something like it: “Lord, I don’t know what you’re doing with this situation, but give me the faith to thank you for it, anyway.” Surely that fits within the definition of “giving thanks for everything!”

There is a famous historical example of that kind of prayer. It was uttered by Teresa of Avila, a notable spiritual leader of the medieval church. One day, Teresa was walking with several of the sisters from her order, when they happened to cross a small footbridge. The bridge began to swing and sway, and before long, Teresa and all her sisters found themselves standing knee-deep in the frigid waters of the stream. Teresa is said to have offered this prayer: “Lord, I know you have promised never to give us more than we can handle, but sometimes I wish you didn’t trust me so much!” It may not be an out-and-out prayer of thanksgiving, but it comes from a stubbornly thankful place. “Give thanks always and for everything.” May we always speak to God from a stubbornly thankful place, trying “at all times and for everything,” to give God praise.

Prayer: Gracious God, I thank you for what you’ve done in my life. I thank You for each day, for Your work on the cross, and for helping me overcome the toughest battles of my life. Forgive me for the times I do not operate from an attitude of sincere gratitude. Teach me to be thankful always and in everything and to share your goodness with the world around me. Help me never grow weary of praising you for all you’ve done. In Jesus Name, Amen.

**Source:** Marlena Sloss and Marisa Iati, “What they saved from the flames,” *The Washington Post*, August 14, 2021.

**Thanks for Everything**

Sunday, August 18, 2024 [Ephesians 5:15-20](https://biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Ephesians+5%3a15-20&language=en&version=NRSVUE)

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

What do you take with you when you may never come back? That was the question residents of Greenville, CA. faced in July 2021, hours before the Dixie Fire, the most expensive wildfire in American history in terms of firefighting costs. Not much in Greenville was green after the fire roared through destroying the place. When the evacuation order came, residents had just a few hours to decide what to take with them as they fled.

Stephanie (33) took the ashes of her two deceased dogs, some antique meat grinders and some antique bottles she’d collected.

Harvey (43), an artist who designs T-shirts and decals, took his sketchbooks.

Brianna (10) grabbed the family cat, her guitar, a few favorite books, a Polaroid camera, a photo album, and her Pokémon card collection.

Josh (32) rescued his grandmother’s antique sewing table.

Teresa (61) carried out her Jack Russell Terrier, a few bags of clothes, her mother’s ashes and a rosary she wears around her neck.

Lou (85), who immigrated to the United States in 1964, saved his old German passport with the photo of himself as a young man. It was a link to an earlier time in his life.

Mary (44), a Native American of the Maidu people, brought an antique baby basket in which she and each of her sisters had once slept.

Mary (69) carried out her family photos. “I can’t replace any of these,” she explained. “Anything else around the house, I can replace that.”

What would *you* take if you had only a couple of hours to decide, and you knew you might never come back? It is a question of profound spiritual importance. Disasters have a way of sharply focusing our priorities. Keep the experiences of these survivors in mind as we turn to Ephesians 5:20 which talks of “giving thanks to God…at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

When we first hear those words, we may think, “What a ho-hum verse! Giving thanks to God…what else is new*?* Isn’t that what every Christian is supposed to do?” Yes, it is, but…there is more to it than just giving thanks. The apostle Paul adds: “at *all times* and for *everything*.” So now, what had been a matter of common courtesy, dropping God a little thank-you prayer from time to time, is now something much bigger and far more difficult.