

1 Thessalonians 5:18 “Dealing with Unmet Expectations By Giving Thanks”<sup>\*\*1</sup>

Main Idea: In 1 Thessalonians 5:18 we learn that giving thanks is to be a regular part of our lives, for two basic reasons. One, it brings pleasure to God. And two, it brings benefit to us, one of which is joy when there are unmet expectations.

- I. Giving thanks brings pleasure to God.
  - A. It is a comprehensive activity.
  - B. It is a commanded activity.
  - C. It is a gospel activity.
- II. Giving thanks brings benefit to us.
  - A. It’s essential for overcoming anxiety (Phil 4:6-7).
  - B. It’s essential for overcoming sexual sin (Eph 5:3-4).
  - C. It’s essential for overcoming a wrong view of things in this world (1 Tim 4:1-5).
  - D. It’s essential for overcoming idolatry (1 Cor 10:14-17).
  - E. It’s essential for overcoming discouragement in a broken world (1 Cor 15:56-57).
  - F. It’s essential for overcoming difficulties in ministry (2 Cor 2:12-14).
  - G. It’s essential for overcoming stinginess (2 Cor 9:6-7. 15).

Make It Personal: Essential lessons for dealing with unmet expectations...

1. We must expect to have unmet expectations.
2. We must learn to submit our expectations to his Lordship.
3. We must realize that God intends to use our unmet expectations to accomplish something for our greater joy and His greater glory.
4. We must learn to give thanks when our expectations go unmet.
5. We must see and rejoice in God when we experience unmet expectations.

*Nepal trip update (continued from last week)*

On this Thanksgiving weekend, we’ll be taking a break from our Mark series. We’re going to turn to God’s Word and see an important connection between unmet expectations and giving thanks. I’ll explain in a moment, but first, let’s read our text.

*Scripture Reading: 1 Thessalonians 5:12-24*

The seed thoughts for the sermon I’m about to preach came one night two weeks ago in Nepal. I’d like to begin this message by sharing those personal thoughts, taken from my audio journal on November 10:

As I write/dictate these words, I am in Dharan Nepal. It’s early in the morning and I am in my hotel room. *I battle expectations*. I expect to sleep at night but do not, for the dog barks at 1 AM and the rooster crows at 3 AM. I expect a hotel bathroom floor to be dry, but it is not, for the pipes leak. I expect the food to be pleasant to my tastes, but at times it is not. I expect to feel healthy so I can serve well, but I have felt sick for several days, not unable to function, uncomfortable much of the time.

Will I have joy in this experience? By God’s grace, I can, but I must change my expectations. This is a simple but vital principle. The experience of joy in life and ministry is linked to what I do with my expectations.

Thanksgiving is the remedy! As God’s Word tells me, “In everything give thanks, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you.” Learning to give thanks for what I did not expect is vital for experiencing joy.

Unmet expectations. We all have them. To be transparent, here are some of mine. When I became a pastor, I expected the church to grow. I expected people to

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<sup>\*\*</sup>Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

<sup>1</sup> For a previous look at this passage, see the message preached at WBC on 11/24/13.

appreciate me. I expected to be healthy (at least most of the time). I expected my wife and children and congregation to embrace my expectations :-).

I did *not* expect the problems that came, the church split, the fifteen days per month of migraine pain, and a host of other unpleasant and unexpected realities.

So, what happens when my expectations are not met? What happens when my expectations become ruling desires in my heart, when they become my master, and I become their slave? What happens is that I experience discouragement, anxiety, and potentially depression. *Unless*, that is, I learn to engage a very specific, God-commanded activity.

Thanksgiving.

Those are some of the thoughts I journaled that night in Nepal, and I'll share some more later. But first, I'd like to take us into the Scriptures. The Bible has a lot to say about thanksgiving (the word appears 25 times in the NIV). It's certainly a God-honoring, God-deserving activity. But it's also an activity that's vital to our joy when we experience unmet expectations.

And we all have them, all of the time, these *unmet expectations*. Every time you do something, you have them. You cook Thanksgiving dinner, and whether you say it or not, you expect things. You expect people to come on time. You expect them to appreciate the meal you prepare, to have a good time, to leave the drama at the door, to help with clean-up, to not leave too early, to not stay too long, etc.

Then comes Black Friday. You expect your spouse to understand why you'll be gone shopping that day. You expect them to have the Christmas decorations up when you return. Or not, for you're not into decorations, and you expect others to agree with your reasons.

We expect our team to win the big game on Saturday. We expect the weather to cooperate with our plans. We expect to feel well when we get up in the morning. We expect to get a good night of sleep when the day ends.

This is life, every day. We keep churning out our expectations. And what happens to these expectations? Some of them are met, some unmet. And it's the unmet expectations that get us. Unless...

We learn, enabled by God's grace, to give thanks in all circumstances.

I want to come back to that vital connection at the end of this message. I want us to think carefully about how God enables us to deal with unmet expectations by giving thanks. But first, I want to put the biblical foundation in place, the one the Spirit of God gives to us through the apostle Paul in 1 Thessalonians 5:18.

*"Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you."*

It's a simple, straightforward verse. You may have memorized it. But you may not have grasped the practical, joy-producing power it unleashes for dealing with unmet expectations.

In 1 Thessalonians 5:18 we learn that giving thanks is to be a regular part of our lives, for two basic reasons. One, it brings pleasure to God. And two, it brings benefit to us, one of which is joy when there are unmet expectations.

### I. Giving thanks brings pleasure to God.

"Give thanks in all circumstances," says our text, "for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you."

The Spirit of God directed the apostle Paul to pen this letter we call 1 Thessalonians to a church he had established. This was a young church that had been birthed in hardship. In fact, just a short time after Paul introduced these men and women to Christ, he had to flee to avoid intense persecution and they were left without a spiritual father to guide them (see Acts 17:1-10).

Not long after, around AD 51, he wrote this letter to encourage and mentor them. He talks to them about a variety of subjects, chiefly, the second coming of their Savior, as well as exhorting them how to live while waiting for His return.

In chapter five he concludes with a series of very practical instructions regarding how to live the Christian life. Yes, we're saved by grace, not works, but grace works. If you have come to know Christ, you give evidence of that saving grace in some very practical ways.

Notice verses 16–18 (NIV), “Be joyful always; <sup>17</sup> pray continually; <sup>18</sup> give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”

Let’s focus on that third charge. *Give thanks*. Paul uses the Greek verb *eucharisteo*, which means, “to express gratitude for benefits or blessings.”<sup>2</sup> It’s not simply, *feel* gratitude, as in *be thankful*, but to express it. So it’s verbal. This is a call to do something with one’s mouth, to express appreciation and gratitude to the Giver when He sends benefits and blessings into the lives of His children.

Give thanks. The direction of this activity is away from self. The focus is on the Giver, particularly on His generosity. In this particular verse, we learn three insights regarding this activity of thanksgiving.

**A. It is a comprehensive activity.** “Give thanks *in all circumstances*.” In fact, Paul uses a series of superlatives in this passage, starting in verse 16, “Be joyful *always*; <sup>17</sup> pray *continually*; <sup>18</sup> give thanks in *all* circumstances.” Always, continually, all.

For many, Thanksgiving is a very selfish holiday in which we present to God the list of things we like about life. “Thank You, God, for all these good things, and I hope (I expect) You to keep sending them.”

It’s not to be so for the Christian. In *all* circumstances, says Paul (in the NIV). Not *for* all circumstances. We’re not masochists. “Oh, I love this migraine! Thank You for it!” No. It’s not *for* all circumstances, but *in* them. “Thank You, Father, for what You are doing in my life right now through this pain. Thank You for how You are using it for my good, and for how You are opening up ministries to others too.”

Job practiced this. After losing his possessions and his children, he said in Job 1:21, “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.”

The psalmist also practiced this in Psalm 34:1, “I will bless the LORD *at all times*; his praise shall continually be in my mouth.”

Paul puts it this way in Philippians 4:6, “Do not be anxious about anything, but *in everything* by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.”

Then in Colossians 3:17, “And whatever you do, in word or deed, do *everything* in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”

So the call is not for occasional thanksgiving, but in all circumstances. This is to be a comprehensive activity. When good things come our way, we say, thank You, Father!

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<sup>2</sup> Louw-Nida

And when not so good things come our way, again, we say, thank You, Father, for You are up to something for Your glory and our good through this.

**B. It is a commanded activity.** “Give thanks in all circumstances, *for this is God’s will for you.*” You say, “Sometimes it doesn’t make sense to express thanks. Why should I?” Here’s the reason. Because it’s God’s will for you.

Think about it. God’s will is to form a people who resemble His Son, right (see Romans 8:29)? So when we give thanks in the hard times, we are resembling our Savior, who Himself prayed, “Not my will, but Yours be done.”

Think of it this way. The activity of thanksgiving is like a thermometer that reveals the spiritual health of a person. Or to change metaphors, it’s like a growth chart on the wall that reveals the level of a person’s spiritual maturity.

We can tell so much about a person’s spiritual condition by noting *whether* they give thanks, and *for what* they give thanks, and *to whom* they give thanks.

Start with whether they give thanks. Have you ever done something for a child, like put food on their plate, or give them a ride home from a school event, or present them with a toy, or whatever, and *not* hear the child say “thank you”? It happens all the time, doesn’t it? Children don’t naturally say “thank you.” That’s why parents need to teach them how to do so.

Giving thanks is an indicator that a person is maturing, that he or she is growing up. And *not* giving thanks is also an indicator, for it reveals that maturing needs to occur.

Of course, it’s not just whether a person gives thanks, but *for what*. Kids are smart. *Big* kids (adults) are smart too. They quickly learn that giving thanks is the path that often leads to more good stuff. If you don’t say thanks, then you reduce your chances of getting more of the things you like in the future.

Hence, the question, *for what?* You can tell a lot about a person by noting the things for which they express thanks. *For what* do they tell their parents, and teachers, and coaches, and ultimately, the Lord, thanks?

So if a child says *thank you* for the broccoli, and you know that he doesn’t particularly care for the taste but understands you have his good health in mind, you’re probably seeing some evidence that your child is maturing.

And then consider *to whom* a person gives thanks. A person could give thanks, but to the wrong individual. That too is a revealer, again, it reveals immaturity, or perhaps a lack of discernment, or simply the hardness of heart. Like the Pharisee who prayed in Luke 18:11, “God, I thank you that I am not like other men.” There was a man who said *thank you*, but he wasn’t attributing his blessings to the true God, but to himself.

This is a comprehensive, commanded activity. We are like Christ when we give thanks. This is the will of God for us.

**C. It is a gospel activity.** Don’t miss the final three words in verse 18, “Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you *in Christ Jesus.*”

Friends, it’s not natural to verbalize thanks to the Almighty in all circumstances. In good times, yes. Anybody can do that. But when life doesn’t make sense? That’s not natural. In fact, it’s impossible. The natural man doesn’t have the power to fulfill this command of God, not in sincerity from his heart. That ability belongs only to those who are *in Christ Jesus.*

This isn’t natural, but supernatural. To give thanks in all circumstances, you must be *in Christ*, which is simply Paul’s way of saying, you must know Christ as your Savior.

When you put your faith in Jesus Christ and in the redemptive work He accomplished at the cross, He actually sends the Holy Spirit, the Helper, to live in you. And He, the Holy Spirit, energizes you, so you can do supernatural, Christ-resembling things, like giving thanks in circumstances.

That's what Ephesians 5:20 says. Listen to this important verse. "Always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Sounds like our text in 1 Thessalonians 5:18, doesn't it? But notice *giving thanks* is a participle in Ephesians 5:20. What does that indicate? It shows that this activity (giving thanks) is dependent on another activity. And what is that? It's the main verb that Paul used two verses earlier, in verse 18, "Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit."

So, *be filled with the Spirit* is the main verb, and it's followed by a series of participles that show the effect of the Spirit's filling.<sup>3</sup> This includes, *giving thanks*.

The point is clear. Giving thanks *always* and *for everything* is not natural. We simply don't do it, indeed, we cannot do it...*until* the Spirit of God takes control of us. For that to happen He must first enter our lives. That occurs, according to Ephesians 1:13, when we put our faith in Christ, the One who went to the cross to rescue us from our self-absorbed, God-offending condition.

My dear friend, if you have received Christ, you now have His indwelling Spirit. And if you have His Spirit, you now have the power to do what you could not do previously. You can now *give thanks in all circumstances*.

So thanksgiving is a comprehensive, commanded, gospel activity. This means we can do it. It also means that if we fail to do it, we are disobeying the command of God, and refusing to cooperate with His Spirit.

But leads to the question, *why?* Why does the Lord command us to give thanks?

You say, "Because He deserves it!" And you're right. "For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen." Giving thanks brings pleasure to God the Giver.

Yet there's another reason. While the Giver certainly deserves thanks for His gifts, *the one expressing thanks* also benefits. This brings us to our second point.

## II. Giving thanks brings benefit to us.

What kind of benefit? Thanksgiving is a vital part of the process of spiritual growth. Indeed, it's an evidence of it. Show me a person who is not giving thanks and I'll show you someone who is not growing, and they're not growing because they are either not a believer, or not cooperating with the Spirit's intent to bring them to maturity.

Remember, our text says, "Give thanks in *all* circumstances." All means all. That's true not just when we're in a circumstance we consider to be a blessing, but also in a circumstance where change is needed.

Suppose you're struggling with a particular sin. What's needed? You say, "To get rid of the sin." And that's true. But that's only half of the process. Put off must lead to *put on*, right? According to Ephesians 4:22-24, the key to lasting, God-honoring change

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<sup>3</sup> According to verse 19, Spirit-filled people speak (lit. "are speaking") with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, and sing and make (lit. "are singing and making") music. According to the participle in verse 21, they're also *submitting* to one another.

is replacement. We must replace the dishonoring vice with the appropriate Christlike virtue. Put off, then put on.

And specifically what must we put on? I find it very instructive that in NT text after text, dealing with sin after sin, a vital part of the necessary put-on package is *thanksgiving*.

Let me give you seven biblical examples. Let's start with one that most of us battle. It's called worry, or anxiety. Did you realize that the activity of thanksgiving is crucial if we want to stop being worriers? It is.

**A. It's essential for overcoming anxiety (Phil 4:6-7).** Take a look at Philippians 4:6-7 (NIV), "Do not be anxious about anything." There's the put off. There's no place for anxiety in the believer's life. My anxiety says, I really don't believe You are in control, Lord, and that You are wise, loving, and good. Don't do that, says Paul. Don't be anxious. That's the put off.

And the put on? "But in everything, by prayer and petition, *with thanksgiving*, present your requests to God. <sup>7</sup> And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

So the put on involves right praying. Right praying consists of bringing our petitions and requests to God concerning the things about which we're anxious. But not just requests. What else are we to put on in our conversations with the Lord?

*Thanksgiving*. Don't miss that. Thanksgiving is a vital activity for overcoming anxiety. Why would that be the case? If all we do is say to ourselves, "I'm not going to worry about this situation," we haven't really overcome anything. We're still being defined by the situation, in this case, its denial. But when we start praying and turning the situation over to the Lord, and we do so *with thanksgiving*, our whole perspective has changed.

When we thank the Lord, we're acknowledging His goodness to us and His sovereign control over our lives. It will sound something like this.

"Father, as You know I'm feeling anxious right now about the biopsy report, but I want to turn this over to You. I ask that You use my health situation to glorify Yourself, to teach me and others looking at me how sufficient Your dear Son is. And right now, by faith, I thank You that You will do this, whether You choose to heal me or not. You will work this for my good. Thank You!"

Now if we do this, if we pray like this, *with thanksgiving*, what will we experience? Paul says that the peace of God will do something for us. What is that? It will guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. There are those three words again. *In Christ Jesus*. Only those who are in Christ can experience the mind-guarding ministry of the peace of God. But that's exactly what they do experience, when they turn their anxiety into prayer requests with thanksgiving.

Let's look at another example. We've seen how thanksgiving is essential for overcoming anxiety. The same goes for sexual sin.

**B. It's essential for overcoming sexual sin (Eph 5:3-4).** Listen to Ephesians 5:3-4 (NIV), "But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people. <sup>4</sup> Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving."

This passage is right in the middle of the put off/put on instruction the apostle Paul is giving the church. It starts back in 4:17 and runs through 5:18. If we're in Christ, we're not to live as we used to and as the world still does. We're to put off the old ways of thinking and behaving, and put on new ways of thinking and behaving (4:22-24).

It's called progressive sanctification. Every day we need to put off and put on. In what areas? In whatever area in which we presently do not resemble Christ.

Paul gives a series of examples. If we have a deceitful tongue, we need to put off falsehood and put on speaking the truth (25). If we have an anger problem, we need to put off letting the sun go down on our wrath and put on using the emotion generated by our anger to deal with our problems in God-honoring ways (26-27).

If we've been takers instead of givers, we need to put off our stealing and get a job, provide for our own needs, and start helping others in need (28). If unwholesome speech is our problem, then we need to put it off and put on speech that builds others up (29). If we've been carrying around bitterness, rage, and slander, we need to put it off and replace it with kindness, compassion, and forgiveness.

In every sin the pattern is the same. We must put off, then put on.

The very next category of sin that Paul addresses is sexual sin. How do we overcome sexual sin? It starts, not surprisingly, with putting off some things. We're told in 5:3, "There must not be even a hint of" six things. First, *sexual immorality, impurity, greed, obscenity, foolish talk, and coarse joking*. These also must be put off. Why? Because they're out of place.

I think all six of these have to do with sexual sin, the act of it, the desire for it, and the talk about it. Every trace of it we must put off. It must not be on our television sets, or in our music, or in our jokes, or on our computer screens. When it comes to overcoming sexual sin, the first thing we must do, and keep doing, is put it off.

But again, that is just the first thing, not the final thing. A thief who merely stops stealing is just a thief between jobs. He hasn't really changed until he puts on a good job, starts saving, and starts being a giver instead of a taker.

So with the man who struggles with pornography. Or the woman who moves from one illicit relationship to another. Or the teen who has a filthy mouth. Can they change? Yes, if they know Christ. But if they do, they must both put off the sexual sin, and then put on something in its place.

And what is that? Verse 4 says (ESV), "Let there be *thanksgiving*." So if I want to overcome sexual sin, I must learn to give thanks. Give thanks to whom? To the Lord. For what? In this context, for the gift of sex as He intended it.

You see, sex is a wonderful gift from the Lord to be enjoyed by a husband and wife in the covenant of marriage. And so, the overcomer will express that. "Thank You, Lord, for my spouse, and for what You have given me in this precious person. Thank you for the privilege of being a giver and meeting his/her physical needs. I used to be a taker, and still would be had You not set me free in Christ, free to serve."

What if the person is single? He or she also needs to put on thanksgiving. "Thank You, Lord, for my singleness. According to 1 Corinthians 7, You have given me a valuable platform for serving in Your kingdom because I'm now single. Thank You. And also, thank You for the spouse You may have in store for me, and if so, the

enjoyment in the gift of sex as You intended. And if not, for Your sufficiency for my every need now as a single. I give You thanks.”

You see, thanksgiving is essential for overcoming sexual sin. Indeed, if you’re not expressing thanks to the Lord for your spouse, or for your position if you’re single, and for all His other blessings, you’re in a very vulnerable place.

In reality, sexual sin is fundamentally a worship sin. According to Romans 1, it’s worshipping a creature (whether a creature on a computer screen or a living person) rather than the Creator. So the solution for sexual sin isn’t just to stop violating the creature, that’s a given. We must also then start worshipping the Creator, by celebrating the gift of eternal life in His Son.

So if you want to overcome the sin of anxiety, you must, by God’s grace, make giving thanks an important part of your life. The same goes for overcoming sexual sin.

But that’s not all. Here’s another example.

**C. It’s essential for overcoming a wrong view of things in this world (1 Tim 4:1-5).** In 1 Timothy Paul is giving his associate, Timothy, counsel on how to help the church he was shepherding in Ephesus. Apparently, there were some teachers who were spreading some very God-defying notions to the flock. So in chapter 4 Paul tells Timothy how to deal with these teachers and their heresy.

Listen to 1 Timothy 4:1–5, and notice how Paul mentions thanksgiving twice: “The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons. <sup>2</sup>Such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron. <sup>3</sup>They forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods, which God created to be received with *thanksgiving* by those who believe and who know the truth. <sup>4</sup>For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with *thanksgiving*, <sup>5</sup>because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer.”

Apparently, the false teachers were promoting asceticism as the highest form of spirituality. If you want to be really spiritual, you must deny yourself the normal flesh and bone experiences. You don’t get married. You don’t eat certain foods. Anything material is bad.

Sounds like some forms of spirituality in our world today, doesn’t it? Don’t drink coffee or tea. Stay celibate. Don’t eat beef. You can’t be godly if you do.

What’s Paul think about such notions? According to these God-inspired words, he says those teachings are demonic and come from hypocritical liars whose consciences are seared. Not a very flattering description!

So how should we treat the material things of life? Paul says that what God has created is good, and we should receive them. How? With *thanksgiving*. Twice he says *with thanksgiving*.

Perhaps you’ve come out of a background in which you lived for the physical stuff of this world and went for the gusto in every sensual experience imaginable. That’s *not* the person Paul’s talking about here (although he addresses that person elsewhere, as in Ephesians 4:17-24). Here he’s talking to those of us who struggle with a tarnished view of the material world, those who tend to define godliness in terms of what they *don’t* do.

So there’s the libertine and the legalist. Actually, they both have something in common. In both cases, there’s a wrong view of the things of this world. And in both cases, the solution involves the same activity. *Thanksgiving*.



If we're going to overcome our sensuality *or* our asceticism, we must learn to express thanks to the Lord for what He has made, and for the purpose for which He made them.

Here's another example where thanksgiving is required.

**D. It's essential for overcoming idolatry (1 Cor 10:14-17).** Listen to 1 Corinthians 10:14–17, “Therefore, my dear friends, flee from idolatry. <sup>15</sup> I speak to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say. <sup>16</sup> Is not the cup of **thanksgiving** for which we **give thanks** a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ? <sup>17</sup> Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf.”

What's the solution for idolatry? Verse says, “Flee from it.” There's the *put off* again. But a person who merely stops bowing before idols hasn't really changed (and keep in mind that an idol can be a stone image of a deity, or something else you're worshipping in your life, like a job, or a child, or a car). To overcome idolatry, you must flee from it, yes, you must reject false worship.

But then comes the put on. What's needed? Become a true worshipper. And what does the true worshipper do? He gives thanks for the cup of thanksgiving, says Paul. What's that mean? It means he participates in the communion service, but not just ritually. He truly *gives thanks* to the Lord for what it represents, for the cleansing from sin he enjoys because of the shed blood of Christ.

Are you thankful for Christ's shed blood? Do you make the communion service a priority on your schedule so you can tell Him?

Here's another example of how indispensable thanksgiving is.

**E. It's essential for overcoming discouragement in a broken world (1 Cor 15:56-57).** In 1 Corinthians 15 Paul addresses the subject of the coming resurrection. Some say this life is all there is. Not so, says Paul. This body is going to die, and one day, if you're in Christ, be raised from the dead and transformed into a glorified body. He sums up the argument at the end of the chapter.

Notice verse 56, “The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law.” Friends, we're living in a broken world. Our bodies are breaking down. Relationships often break down. Society is breaking down. We cannot escape the realities of the sting of death and the power of sin. They're all around us.

So how do we overcome the discouragement that so naturally accompanies life in this broken world? Here's the answer, verse 57, “But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Listen to what James Boice had to say in his commentary (By the way, keep in mind that Pastor Boice practiced what he preached when he himself died of liver cancer at the age of 61), “Perhaps cancer or some other debilitating disease has invaded your body, and you suspect that you do not have a very long time to live. ‘What a waste,’ you are saying. ‘Why can't I be strong and healthy and live a long, long life?’ I do not know the answer to that. What God does with us in detail is not revealed in Scripture. It is one of the secret things that belong to God only. But that does not mean the painful path he calls you to walk has no purpose. It is how you conduct yourself in such ‘wasting times’ that is the stuff of victory... Set an example for us by lifting your eyes from what is material and tangible and passing away, and point us to him who is invisible and who does everything

well. Show us how light and momentary these earthly troubles are. We need to know that. Show us how they are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.”<sup>4</sup>

The point is this. People who overcome discouragement in this broken world don’t just *believe* the doctrine of the coming resurrection. They *give thanks* to God for it, and then live in light of it.

For the sake of time, I’ll just mention two more examples. Sixthly...

**F. It’s essential for overcoming difficulties in ministry (2 Cor 2:12-14).** We don’t have time to recreate the context, but suffice it to say Paul was very discouraged in the situation he describes in 2 Corinthians 2:12–13, “Now when I went to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ and found that the Lord had opened a door for me,<sup>13</sup> I still had no peace of mind, because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I said good-bye to them and went on to Macedonia.”

Ministry is like that sometimes, lonely, frustrating, uncertain. So what do you do to be an overcomer? Here’s what Paul did, and calls on us to do. Verse 14, “But *thanks be to God*, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him.”

Right now, Jesus Christ is making Himself known to the world through His people, and He’s using their weaknesses and hardships to accomplish it. So thank Him for what He’s doing. Thank Him that He is leading you in a triumphal procession.

One more example...

**G. It’s essential for overcoming stinginess (2 Cor 9:6-7. 15).** In 2 Corinthians 9 Paul talks to the Corinthian church about giving, and offers this counsel in verses 6–7, “Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously.<sup>7</sup> Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.”

Notice those words. Not reluctantly, but cheerfully. By nature, we don’t want to part with what we have. What’s a vital part of the process of learning to be a cheerful giver? You guessed it. *Thanksgiving*. Notice verse 15, “Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!” As we take time to express thanks to the Lord for His gift, His *indescribable* gift, it does something to us, namely, inspires us to be joyful givers like Him.

So thanksgiving pleases God, yes. But it also brings benefit to us. By giving thanks, we actually overcome anxiety, break the power of sexual sin, break free from the prideful lure of asceticism and idolatry, as well as the stronghold of discouragement, ministry difficulties, and stinginess. And there’s one more benefit, and this takes us back to where we began. Unmet expectations.

#### Make It Personal: Essential lessons for dealing with unmet expectations...

Allow me to take you back to my November 10 audio journal. Here is some more of my entry that night:

I expect numbers, good health, dry bathroom floors, and when these expectations do not happen, I am not happy. Yet, in contrast, look at Paul. He is in jail in Philippi (see Acts 16). He is miserable with rusty chains on his wrists. Yet what is he doing? Complaining? No. He is singing!

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<sup>4</sup> James Montgomery Boice, *Romans* (Grand Rapids, 1993), III:1447

What made the difference? This did. Paul learned to express thanksgiving, even when he experienced what he did not expect. That's Philippians 4:6–7. Be anxious for nothing, but in everything, *with thanksgiving*, let your requests be made known to God.

Here are five essential lessons for dealing with unmet expectations.

1. *We must expect to have unmet expectations.* This is just life in the real world! So expect it. We're in serious trouble if we don't expect it.

Unmet expectations can lead to discouragement, substance abuse, pornography, depression, and even suicide. It is vital to see, however, that these problems are a symptom, not a cause. They are the fruit, not the root. The heart of the problem is the problem of the heart. Misplaced expectations are a heart problem.

So expect it. In the words of James 1:2, "My brothers, count it all joy *when* you face various trials." Not if, but when. And here's one type of trial that's common to all. We must expect to have unmet expectations.

2. *We must learn to submit our expectations to his Lordship.* Jesus Christ is Lord. Do you believe that? If we do, then we can rest in it. If He is truly Lord, that means He's in control. Of all things. Including our unmet expectations. So when our expectations don't materialize, then we can be sure He's up to something.

The day before I dictated my journal entry, I met an 87-year-old man who had been a pastor for fifty years in this third world country. He shared his story with me about how God saved him in 1957, about how he later went to prison for being a Christian, about one of his children who now works with leprosy patients. And I saw the joy in his face!

How do you experience joy in such difficult circumstances? This man learned to submit his expectations to the lordship of Christ. By God's grace, I must do the same, tonight, and every time I face unmet expectations.

3. *We must realize that God intends to use our unmet expectations to accomplish something for our greater joy and his greater glory.* This is Romans 8:28-29. All things work together for good. And what's the good? God is conforming me to the likeness of His Son. This is what gives me joy when my expectations don't materialize. He has something eternally better in store.

4. *We must learn to give thanks when our expectations go unmet.* I emphasize the word *learn*. If we are in Christ, we have the power to do this. But we learn to do it. We must resolve to do it. And it takes practice.

I think lists can help us. Like Psalm 103. In Psalm 103 the psalmist talks to himself and says, "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits." Then He intentionally recounts five benefits he has received from the Lord, such as...

He forgives all my iniquities. He heals all my diseases. He redeems my life from destruction. He crowns me with loving kindness and tender mercy. He satisfies my mouth with good things.

When I'm feeling the sting of unmet expectations, I must not be passive. I must begin to rehearse the blessings I have received which I did not deserve.

So let's make lists, and let's make it a regular part of daily living to turn our lists into prayers of thanksgiving.

5. *We must see and rejoice in God when we experience unmet expectations.* Every unmet expectation gives us the opportunity to express what means most to us. Not the things God gives us, but God Himself.

**Closing Song:** #563 "*Count Your Blessings*" (verses 1, 2, 4)

Community Group Discussion:

1. In this morning's message from 1 Thessalonians 5:18, we saw two reasons why it's vital that we be people who give thanks. Take time to read this passage again. Take time to share with your group some of the highlights from the message that stood out to you, and why.
2. What is the difference between giving thanks "for all circumstances" and "in all circumstances"?
3. What does it mean to say that giving thanks is a *gospel activity* (as a reminder, consider those important words "in Christ Jesus")?
4. At the end of today's message, we suggested that thanksgiving is the perfect remedy for dealing with unmet expectations. Take time as a group to unpack this reality. What are unmet expectations? What must happen if we are to give thanks for our unmet expectations? Share some examples from your own lives.
5. Spend time as a group expressing prayers of thanksgiving. Keep in mind the importance of giving thanks "in all circumstances".