Thanksgiving week is here! Then, of course, we start the Advent season, and Christmas is just five weeks away.

I love having Thanksgiving preceding the Advent and Christmas seasons. I think it helps us prepare by reminding us of God’s goodness and posturing us to receive Jesus with grateful and humble hearts. Soon, we will hear our favorite Christmas music or not (some of you are already doing that, just couldn’t wait), eat delicious food, and visit with family and friends.

What are your experiences of Advent and Christmas? What are your memories? When I was a kid, the Advent and Christmas seasons meant going to grandma’s home and eat of all kinds of sweets and tamales. It was a time when I would see my uncles, aunts, and cousins and meet some family members for the first time. If there ever was a season to wear stretchy pants and stay up late, that was it!

For these and many other reasons, I always looked with anticipation for this time of year. It was a magical, joyful, and full-of-life season for a child like me. It had little to do with the presents, but much more so with the experiences because I was with the people that loved me and I loved. I was not joyful because I did not lack anything or had no troubles, but because I belonged with people.

I know sometimes we ask: How can I be grateful when I struggle and lack so much? How can I have joy when I have been treated unjustly and suffered greatly? What would I give thanks for if I have so little to thank for or have lost so much?

Sometimes we only look at life through the lenses of disappointment and loss, and we fail to notice everything else that is good and life-giving. I believe God wants us to appreciate the gift of life—even with the challenges, losses, and suffering we may face. Through our faith in Jesus, we can experience peace and hope even in the saddest and darkest times because we are reminded we are not alone, and that life is more than what we see or have at any given moment. In other words, when we see life through the lenses of faith and hope, we can experience the present and see the future with grateful hearts despite our lacking and heartaches.

The apostle Paul experienced all this and spoke of thanksgiving and joy in the middle of his difficulties—which were tremendous. This is what he said in Philippians 4:10-13,

“I rejoice… for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through [Christ] who strengthens me.”

Paul’s joy and strength in Christ “to do all things” was based on his ability to be grateful in all circumstances—even as he may have been upset, discouraged, or disappointed. His attitude of gratitude made him strong not for selfish gain but to remain faithful to his faith, knowing he had a promised future and life in Jesus—even beyond this life. His faith and hope for the future helped him celebrate life even during difficult times.

Now, when we read this, we need to keep in mind the context of this letter. When Paul wrote this letter, he was in a cold jail cell, chained to a Roman soldier, as if he was a violent criminal. In the last five years, he was arrested for preaching the gospel, held captive unjustly, shipwrecked, stranded on an island, and awaiting trial before the heinous Caesar Nero. It would have been understandable if he had become a cynic, bitter, and resentful person. And beyond what happened to him, he still remembered when he persecuted the church and caused so much harm to people. So, instead of writing to the Philippians saying, “I thank God for your faithfulness and rejoice with you” or “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me,” he had many reasons to complain and abandon hope, to feel rejected and cursed. But he is doing the opposite; he is expressing his joy, contentment, and strength because he was experiencing and seeing life through the lenses of faith and hope.

To this Paul, no matter what happened to him, he knew life was much more than having plenty or little, and he was not a hostage of his past or present adverse circumstances. He would not have had a reason to give thanks if he had been.

We can relate to this because not everything goes how we want it. We don’t always have what we want, and our prayers are not always answered the way we expect or demand. The bad memories from our past may even yell at us to shame and hold us back and down. Or we may have lost so much that we can’t imagine we have anything left to give thanks for.

Here is the question you may be asking: How did Paul do it? How do I do it? How can I be grateful when I struggle so much and my life experiences tell me otherwise?

First, don’t ever let go of your faith. Keep the faith because it will help you keep an open mind and perspective about yourself, other people, and everything else. In others words, it will give you hope. When we keep our faith, those times when we hit rock-bottom become a springboard that launches us toward new opportunities, growth, and self-improvement instead of victimization and defeat—just like Paul experienced it. Keeping faith positions you to learn from your experiences instead of quitting. Faith gives us the power to transform challenges into opportunities. Faith gives us an attitude of gratitude.

Second, surround yourself with loved ones and people that care about you. When life is rough, the temptation is to give up and go away, thinking we are unlovable and done. Paul could have done that, but he did not. Don’t you do it either. Just like when you are sick and don’t run away from medical care, when you are having a hard time, don’t cut off your relationships. Your family and friends can be the beacons of light you need. In fact, God uses them to care for you. This is what happened to Paul. His letter was a “Thank you” note to the churches who had supported his ministry. He was not angry or resented because of his struggles; he was grateful because he had people that cared for him. Keeping the relationships that nurture you will provide you the endurance you need to help you keep going even in the toughest times.

Last, allow yourself to have bad days, just like Paul did. For some misguided reason, many of us have thought that our faith will exempt us from hardship, or if we believe hard enough, we will get nothing but a blissful life. Many people lose faith not because they don’t experience blessings but because they think they should not experience hardship. We are going to have bad days and seasons, but hardship does not remove the blessings we already have or we will get.

Psalm 23 gives us such warning and hope when it says, “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for you are with me.” This means that we will face difficult times, even death, but God will not let us walk alone in this life or the next one. Bad seasons do not change who God is, whose we are, and how he loves us.

Here is the invitation and good news: If you are grieving or hurting, grieve and hurt with hope. Don’t suffer as though you had no faith. Instead, get hold of faith, for it will remind you to whom and where you belong. Don’t let yourself go into the dark, but get hold of your faith and hope and seek the light. There are many things we can give thanks for; use those blessings in your life that you may have taken for granted and allow them to provide strength to keep going on. Then, when you realize how much you have to live for, you will say, as Paul did, “I rejoice and can do all things through Christ who gives me strength.”

And the good news is that God is with you, so you can say, “I fear no evil or lacking, or anything else, for you are with me.”

My friends, faith and hope do not change what happened to you in your past, what may be happening to you right now, or exempt you from future hardships, but they will help you see the reasons to be grateful and give you a good life despite the challenges.

Embrace life. Be grateful.