

Philippians 4:4-9 New International Version (NIV) and *The Message* (MSG)

4 Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!

Celebrate God all day, every day. I mean, revel in God!

5 Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near.

Make it as clear as you can to all you meet that you're on their side, working with them and not against them. Help them see that the Master is about to arrive. Christ could show up any minute!

6 Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. 7 And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Don't fret or worry. Instead of worrying, pray. Let petitions and praises shape your worries into prayers, letting God know your concerns. Before you know it, a sense of God's wholeness, everything coming together for good, will come and settle you down. It's wonderful what happens when Christ displaces worry at the center of your life.

8 Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.

8-9 Summing it all up, friends, I'd say you'll do best by filling your minds and meditating on things true, noble, reputable, authentic, compelling, gracious—the best, not the worst; the beautiful, not the ugly; things to praise, not things to curse.

9 Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.

Put into practice what you learned from me, what you heard and saw and realized. Do that, and God, who makes everything work together, will work you into his most excellent harmonies.

The Blessing of Thorns

Sandra felt as low as the heels of her shoes as she pushed against a November gust and the florist shop door. Her life *had* been easy, like a spring breeze. Then, in the fourth month of her second pregnancy, a minor automobile accident stole her ease.

During this Thanksgiving week she would have delivered a son. She grieved deeply over her loss. As if that weren't enough, her husband's company threatened a transfer. Then her sister, whose annual holiday visit Sandra coveted, called saying she could not come.

What's worse – Sandra's friend infuriated her by suggesting that Sandra's grief was a God-given path to maturity that would allow her to empathize with others who suffer. "She has no idea what I'm feeling," thought Sandra with a shudder.

"Thanksgiving? Thankful for what?" she wondered aloud. For a careless driver whose truck was hardly scratched when he rear-ended her? For an airbag that saved her life but took that of her child?

"Good afternoon, can I help you?" The shop clerk's approach startled her. "I...I need an arrangement," stammered Sandra. "*For Thanksgiving? Do you want beautiful but ordinary, or would you like to challenge the day with a customer favorite I call the Thanksgiving Special?*" asked the shop clerk. "*I'm convinced that flowers tell stories,*" she continued. "*Are you looking for something that conveys gratitude this Thanksgiving?*"

"Not exactly!" Sandra blurted out. "In the last five months, everything that could go wrong has gone wrong." Sandra regretted her outburst, and was surprised when the shop clerk said, "*I have the perfect arrangement for you.*"

Then the door's small bell rang, and the shop clerk said, "*Hi, Barbara . . . let me get your order.*" She politely excused herself and walked toward a small workroom, then quickly reappeared, carrying an arrangement of greenery, bows, and long-stemmed thorny roses. Except the ends of the rose stems were neatly snipped . . . there were no flowers! "*Want this in a box?*" asked the clerk.

Sandra watched for the customer's response. Was this a joke? Who would want rose stems with no flowers?! She waited for laughter, but

"The Blessing of the Thorns"

November 24, 2019 ~ Thanksgiving Sunday

Rev. Beckie Sweet

neither woman laughed. "Yes, please," Barbara replied with an appreciative smile. "You'd think after three years of getting the special, I wouldn't be so moved by its significance, but I can feel it right here, all over again," she said as she gently tapped her chest.

"Uhh," stammered Sandra, "that lady just left with, uhh ... she left with no flowers!"

"Right...I cut off the flowers. That's the Special...I call it the Thanksgiving Thorns Bouquet."

"Oh, come on, you can't tell me someone is willing to pay for that?" exclaimed Sandra.

"Barbara came into the shop three years ago feeling very much like you feel today," explained the clerk. "She thought she had very little to be thankful for. She had lost her father to cancer, the family business was failing, her son was into drugs, and she was facing major surgery."

"That same year I had lost my husband," continued the clerk, "and for the first time in my life, I had to spend the holidays alone. I had no children, no husband, no family nearby, and too great a debt to allow my travel."

"So what did you do?" asked Sandra.

"I learned to be thankful for thorns," answered the clerk quietly. "I've always thanked God for the good things in life and never thought to ask God why those things happened to me. But when bad stuff hit, did I ever ask! It took time for me to learn that dark times are important. I always enjoyed the 'flowers' of life, but it took thorns to show me the beauty of God's comfort. You know, the Bible says that God comforts us when we're afflicted, and from God's consolation we learn to comfort others."

Sandra sucked in her breath as she thought about the very thing her friend had tried to tell her. "I guess the truth is I don't want comfort. I've lost a baby and I'm angry with God." Just then someone else walked in the shop.

"Hey, Phil!" shouted the clerk to the balding rotund man. "My wife sent me to get our usual Thanksgiving arrangement ... twelve thorny, long-stemmed stems!" laughed Phil as the clerk handed him a tissue-wrapped arrangement from the refrigerator.

"Those are for your wife?" asked Sandra incredulously. "Do you mind me asking why she wants something that looks like that?" "No...I'm glad you asked," Phil replied. "Four years ago my wife and I nearly divorced. After forty years, we were a real mess, but with the Lord's grace and guidance, we slogged through problem after problem. God rescued our marriage. Jenny here (the clerk) told me she kept a vase of rose stems to remind her of what she learned from "thorny" times, and that was good enough for me. I took home some of those stems. My wife and I decided to label each one for a specific "problem" and give thanks to God for what that problem taught us."

As Phil paid the clerk, he said to Sandra, "I highly recommend the Special!" "I don't know if I can be thankful for the thorns in my life," Sandra said to the clerk. "It's all too...fresh."

"Well," the clerk replied carefully, "my experience has shown me that thorns make roses more precious. We treasure God's providential care more during trouble than at any other time. Remember, it was a crown of thorns that Jesus wore so we might know His love. Don't resent the thorns."

Tears rolled down Sandra's cheeks. For the first time since the accident, she loosened her grip on resentment. "I'll take those twelve long-stemmed thorns, please," she managed to choke out.

"I hoped you would," said the clerk gently. *"I'll have them ready in a minute."* "Thank you. What do I owe you?" asked Sandra. "Nothing." Said the clerk. *"Nothing but a promise to allow God to heal your heart. The first year's arrangement is always on me."* The clerk smiled and handed a card to Sandra.

"I'll attach this card to your arrangement, but maybe you'd like to read it first." It read: Dear God, I have never thanked you for my thorns. I have thanked you a thousand times for my roses, but never once for my thorns. Teach me the glory of the cross I bear; teach me the value of my thorns. Show me that I have climbed closer to you along the path of pain. Show me that, through my tears, the colors of your rainbow look much more brilliant. Amen.