

Gratitude

letting others know you see how they've helped you

Give Thanks No Matter What

1 Thessalonians 5:18

MEMORY VERSE | 1 Thessalonians 5:18

As the wails of her baby brother filtered down the hall, Leigh turned over in bed to look at the clock and groaned. 2:35 a.m.

"Is he going to cry all night?" she mumbled.

Leigh had spent much of the last ten years begging her parents for a sibling. But babies were supposed to be cuddly and smiley, not howl all night.

On top of that, her room was too bright. "Where's all the light coming from?" she wondered. Sleepily she staggered to the window. A wild explosion of Christmas lights from next door met her eyes.

"Looks like Ms. Sue forgot to turn off her lights again," Leigh sighed. She yanked the curtains shut and curled up in bed again, trying to ignore the recurring cries.

At least they'd be going to get the Christmas tree tomorrow. Every year, Leigh's family cut down their tree on the Saturday after Thanksgiving. Then they came home and decorated while drinking Mom's amazing candy cane hot chocolate and listening to all their favorite Christmas music. Leigh was hoping for a super tall tree this year—one that would reach all the way to the ceiling. She fell asleep again dreaming of Christmas lights.

The next morning at breakfast, Leigh's parents looked exhausted and bleary eyed. Baby Tristan, on the other hand, slept peacefully in his swing.

"We're getting the tree today, right?" she asked.

Mom and Dad exchanged glances. "Maybe just you and Dad can go . . ." Mom suggested, stifling a yawn.

"What?" Leigh exclaimed. "No! This is something we do together. I mean, it's Tristan's first Christmas. It's got to be good!"

"Okay, sweetie," Mom agreed. "We'll make this a family adventure."

Leigh hopped up right away to grab her coat, but it took an entire hour to get out the door and into the car with all the bottles, diapers, and baby gear. Tristan slept through everything, and Dad grinned back at Leigh. "You always slept in the car seat just like that. No matter where we took you."

But as soon as the car engine started, Tristan woke up and began to cry.

Leigh groaned and muttered a line from one of her favorite movies: "Someone's an angry elf."

Mom sighed. "Can you just pop the paci in his mouth, Leigh?" she asked. But Tristan just spit out the pacifier and kept howling. For the next ten minutes.

"What is wrong with him?" Leigh asked.

**Leigh groaned
and muttered,
"Someone's an angry elf."**

"I guess he's not a sleep-in-the-car kind of baby," Dad began—just as they heard a loud bang and the car swerved.

"What was that?" exclaimed mom.

Dad quickly pulled off the road into an empty parking lot. "Must have driven over a nail," he said. "I'm going to have to change the tire."

Tristan cried the entire time Dad was changing the tire. Mom jounced him on her lap. At last, Leigh slithered up to the front and turned on the radio.

A vocalist crooned, "The cattle are lowing, the baby awakes, but little Lord Jesus no crying he makes . . ."

Leigh shut off the radio. "Ha! Someone tell that to Tristan."

"I know this is tough, Leigh," said Mom. "It's a big adjustment for all of us."

Dad finally hopped back in, streaked with grease. "Going to be a bumpy sleigh ride on the spare tire," he warned. "All set?"

But the moment the engine started, Tristan's wails increased.

Mom took a deep breath. "Actually . . . I think we better go back home. It's Tristan's naptime and he's clearly not going to sleep in the car."

Leigh gaped. "Seriously?!"

"Look, there's the Home Stop Store," Dad pointed out. "They've got precut trees."

"But we always cut our own," Leigh protested.

"Maybe you and Dad could go tomorrow," Mom began.

"Nevermind," Leigh snapped. "Whatever. Let's just get one now."

None of the precut trees were as tall as Leigh had hoped, but they picked one anyway. At home Mom and Tristan both disappeared for naps, leaving Leigh and Dad to decorate.

"What about the candy cane hot chocolate?" asked Leigh. "We can't decorate without hot chocolate!"

Dad opened the cupboard, searching. "I think we have some of those cocoa packets . . ."

"But Mom always makes it from scratch with milk and real chocolate and stuff," Leigh grumbled. Too frustrated even to hang decorations, she grabbed her coat and stalked outside, slamming the door behind her.

In the early dusk, Ms. Sue's explosion of Christmas lights shone brightly next door. Every Christmas, Ms. Sue added new decorations and then used light strands to write something all the way across the front of her house. Leigh couldn't quite see from her yard what Ms. Sue had written this year.

A voice interrupted her thoughts. "Like it?"

Leigh turned to find Ms. Sue standing next to her, wearing a light up elf hat over her pink-dyed pixie-cut hair.

"It's . . . bright," Leigh commented.

"I added the Candy Cane Forest and Swirly Twirly Gumdrops this year!" Ms. Sue pointed out.

Leigh brightened as she studied the decorations. "Like from *Elf*? I love that movie."

Ms. Sue grinned and nodded. "I just like to smile; smiling's my favorite!" she quoted.

Leigh managed to smile back. "What's it say on your house this year? I can't quite read it from here." She squinted, reading: "Always . . . something . . ."

"Always be grateful," Ms. Sue finished.

"Oh." Leigh didn't see a lot of reason for gratitude at the moment.

Ms. Sue grinned and nodded. "I just like to smile; smiling's my favorite!"

"Kinda the short form of a Bible verse I really like," explained Ms. Sue. "*Give thanks no matter what happens. God wants you to thank him because you believe in Christ Jesus.*"

"Sounds more like Thanksgiving than Christmas," Leigh noted.

"Myself, I think they fit right together like chocolate and peppermint!" said Ms. Sue. Then after a moment she asked, "How's the new baby?"

Leigh sighed. "Okay, I guess. Not what I expected."

"Never met a baby who was!" agreed Ms. Sue. "Now, I gotta go put Santa's sleigh on the roof. But you come by for hot cocoa anytime you want, deal?"

Leigh nodded. “Deal.”

Leigh watched Ms. Sue go. Then she glanced back at her own house, where she could see Dad decorating the tree all by himself. It actually was a pretty good tree. And Baby Tristan was super cute, even when he was crying. Even though Christmas was turning out so differently this year, God’s big gift hadn’t changed. Leigh took a deep breath and headed back inside.

“Hey, kiddo,” Dad said. “Cold out there?”

“Feels like Christmas,” said Leigh. “Can I hang up the Rudolph characters?”

“Sure thing.”

Just then, more baby howls echoed through the house. Leigh and Dad both glanced toward the upstairs.

“Dad? I bet Baby Jesus did cry,” Leigh declared.

Dad nodded, giving Leigh a half smile. “Won’t argue with you there.”

Together, Leigh and her dad finished decorating the tree. It was easy to focus on the disappointing things—but this Christmas, Leigh was determined to look for ways to be grateful, instead.



Let's Talk!

The Christmas season can be a lot of fun . . . but it can be stressful too—especially if things don’t go exactly the way you want them to.

Is there something difficult for your family this year at Christmas? Share with each other anything hard or frustrating that you’re facing right now, whether it’s small or big. No matter what you’re going through, God can help you be grateful in the middle of it as you focus on what He’s done for you and how He will work in your tough situation. Pray for each other, that you will have an attitude of gratitude to God and to others throughout the Christmas season, even when things get tough or stressful.