

Continuous Thanksgiving

1 Thessalonians 5:18
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As Paul wrapped up his first letter to the Thessalonians, he added a few final instructions in verses 16 through 22. This morning, we'll look at just one of them, viz., verse 18 — *In every thing give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you.*

The first thing we note here is that this verse is comprehensive. It tells us to give thanks in *everything*, i.e., in connection with everything. It leaves nothing out. But isn't this too much? Aren't there times when giving thanks would be inappropriate or too hard?

Maybe the answer here is that Paul wrote *in every thing*, not 'for everything.' Even in our worst circumstances, there's always something to be thankful for, isn't there? If we're out in the desert dying of thirst and our tongues adhere to the roofs of our mouths, and we know our organs are failing, are there things we should be thankful for? Of course, there. We can be thankful for the life God gave us. We can thank him for family and friends, and for his saving mercy to undeserving sinners. And we should especially thank him for the expectation of seeing Jesus very soon.

Even so, I'm not convinced this is what Paul meant. He wrote something similar in Philippians 4:6 — *Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God.* In everything, pray with thanksgiving. But this doesn't help because it says the same thing. However, Ephesians 5:20 answers our question. Paul wrote, *Giving thanks always for all things unto God and the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.* Note here that Paul wrote, *Always* (i.e., in everything), and, *For all things* (for everything God brings into our lives). It all comes from the Lord. Therefore, as Paul wrote in Romans 8, even in tribulation, anguish and peril, we are more than conquerors through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

This takes us back to where we started. How can we give thanks to the Lord for pain and suffering? How can we bless him when we're struggling with sin and temptation? How can we be grateful when we can't understand what he's doing in our lives?

Times Are in God's Hands

Let's begin today by admitting a very basic truth, viz., there's hardly ever a time in our lives when everything is perfect. I know I've never experienced such a time, and I doubt any of you have.

In our fallen world, there's always a fly in the ointment. So, if we can't thank God until everything's just right, we'll never thank him at all. Thanksgiving becomes a useless and meaningless concept.

This is exactly the opposite of what Paul wrote. He told us to give thanks *in every thing* and for *all things*. He must have meant the bad and the good.

Another equally important truth is that our lives are never as bad as they could be. Sometimes we feel like it, though, because our pain — physical or spiritual — is so great that it's like our whole world crashed before our eyes. Times like these threaten our hope, leaving us devastated.

Job understood this. He lost everything — his livestock, his children and his health. Even his wife advised him to end it all: just curse God and die. But what did he do instead? He first confessed that our times and circumstances are always in the hands of God, who gives us what we need when we need it and sometimes takes it away for our good. This is a good thing. Job said, *Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither: the LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away.* But he went even further. He also thanked God for taking away what he no longer needed. He said, *Blessed be the name of the LORD* (Job 1:21).

When everything seems as bad as it can be, we need to remember that our Savior suffered even more and he did it for us. He felt completely bereft of his Father's comforting presence when he cried out, *My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?* (Matt. 27:46). Yet, he endured it all to the bitter end, always trusting his Father to do right. And when the time came, he said, *Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit* (Luke 23:46). And then he gave up the ghost. But he did so with God's promise. Hebrews 12:2 says that went to the cross *for the joy that was set before him*. His joy was our salvation.

We're almost always somewhere in between everything's good and everything's bad. The Lord gives us many good things. James 1:17 says, *Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning.* But he also sends many unpleasant things our way. Job confessed that all things come from God when he said to his wife, *What? shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?* He spoke rightly. Scripture adds, *In all this did not Job sin with his lips* (Job 2:10). The Lord gives good things to confirm his love and favor to his people. He gives us unpleasant things to perfect his work of grace in us. Hebrews 12:11 says, *Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby.*

In his first epistle, Peter compared our trials to a refiner's fire that gradually removes dross to expose precious gold. Here's how he described it: *Wherein ye greatly rejoice, though now for a season,*

if need be, ye are in heaviness through manifold temptations: that the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ (1 Pet. 1:6–7). This doesn't make our trials easier; it guarantees they'll be hard. But at least we know that they serve a purpose in God's plan and that his purpose is to perfect his work in us. In them, he teaches us precious lessons about his holiness and sovereignty and our frailty. So, if he causes all things to work together for our good, how can we not be thankful?

Despising the unpleasant things God gives us is just as evil as ignoring or wasting his good gifts. We need to receive both from his hands, as Job did, and bless his name.

An excellent illustration of this comes from the book of Acts. Paul and Silas had been beaten with rods and imprisoned on a false charge. But did their miserable situation cause them to stop worshiping the Lord? No, it drew them even closer. At midnight, they *prayed, and sang praises unto God* (Acts 16:25). Whoever heard of prisoners, who had been beaten, singing songs of joy into the night? Were they out of their minds? No, they rejoiced because they knew that every blessing and every trial comes from God.

Leon Morris explained it like this:

As worldly people go on their way they meet with some things that make them happy, and some about which they complain bitterly. They conceive of life as a matter more or less of chance. Accordingly they welcome those workings of chance which favor their purposes and object to those which do not. But when anyone comes to see that God in Christ has saved him, everything is altered. Now it is apparent that God's purpose is being worked out, and the evidence of this becomes clear in the believer's own life and in the lives of those about him. This leads to the thought that the same loving purpose is being worked out even in those events which the believer is inclined not to welcome at all. When we come to realize that God's hand is in all things, we learn to give thanks for all things. Tribulation is unpleasant. Yet in the midst of tribulation who would not give thanks, knowing that the Father who loves us so greatly has permitted that tribulation only in order that his wise and merciful purpose might be worked out?

This is what it means to give thanks in everything.

The Will of God

The second half of our text explains why we must give thanks. Paul wrote, *For this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you*. Giving thanks isn't something Paul and Silas invented. It originated in the mind of God. It's his will.

Here *the will of God* refers to his precepts, i.e., what he commands us, his creatures, to do. Several passages speak of God's will in this way. Earlier in this letter, Paul wrote that abstaining from fornication is God's will. More precisely, he said that it's God's will that we be sanctified, which includes avoiding fornication. First Thessalonians 4:3 says, *For this is the will of God, even your sanctification, that ye should abstain from fornication.* First Peter 2:15 adds that it's God's will that we silence the ignorance of foolish men by our godly behavior, and two chapters later the apostle wrote that God wills that we obey him instead of wasting our time on evil lusts (ch. 4:2).

Two things stand out about this.

One is that Paul explicitly said, *This is the will of God in Christ Jesus.* God's will is God's will. So, what do the words *in Christ Jesus* add to it? They show how central Jesus Christ is to the Christian faith and how it applies to our daily lives. As Calvin wrote in his *Institutes*, we can't really know God or ourselves unless God first makes himself known, and he makes himself known preeminently in the person and work of his Son, who's both complete in his Godhead and complete in his manhood. He fully represents both. And maybe there's a little of this and the fact that Paul identified our Savior both by the name he went by in his humanity (Jesus) and the title that represents his work in the Father's plan (Christ or Messiah).

But let's be even more explicit about this. The only way we can do the will of God and give thanks to God in everything is by going to the Father through Jesus Christ. Hebrews 13:15 says, *By him [i.e., Jesus] therefore let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to his name.* And Colossians 3:17 says, *And whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him.* This is why one commentator calls God's will in Jesus Christ "his sweet gospel will."

A second consideration that stands out is the latter part of our text: giving thanks to God is God's will for us, his people. We who have been redeemed by the blood of our Savior must be especially thankful because the Lord has blessed us so much through his Son. He saved us when we couldn't save ourselves. But now, *Ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God* (Col. 3:3).

This being so, we should welcome every opportunity to thank God regardless of our circumstances. None of our circumstances will ever remove us from God's saving purpose. Paul wrote, *For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord* (Rom. 8:38–39). John Stott commented as follows:

We may not always feel like praising, praying or giving God thanks. Our circumstances may not be conducive to these things. Yet we are to do so all the same. Why? Because *this is*

God's will for you in Christ Jesus (18b)... It is God's will, as expressed and seen in Jesus Christ, whenever his people meet together for worship, and whatever their feelings and circumstances may be, that there should be rejoicing in him, praying to him and giving him thanks for his mercies.

There's never a time that's not fit for thanksgiving. Nothing the Lord sends our way is unworthy of our gratitude.

The command in this morning's text is comprehensive. It's comprehensive not just because we should be thankful for everything and at all times, but because it comprehends everything we are as the redeemed children of God, bought and paid for by the precious blood of Jesus Christ.

Are you thankful in everything? Are you thankful for all things? Is your entire life comprehended by an overwhelming gratitude that's unaffected by your circumstances, either positively or negatively? Genuine gratitude goes beyond what we see and hear and feel. It sees God's hand in every part of our lives. With Job, it says, *The LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD (Job 1:21)*.

So, this Thanksgiving let's embrace a spirit of thankfulness that goes beyond one day each year. Let it be how we live all the time now and forever. Amen.