

Thanking God for All Things

As we approach the Thanksgiving holiday, we have seen that expressing our gratitude provides clarity for the understanding that we have actually *received* salvation. We've already considered the blessings we can easily recognize such as our redemption, the fellowship of ordinary heroes around us, and the many provisions that remind us of God's goodness. Today, however, we turn to something deeper. We are going to look at being thankful in all things.

It's not hard to thank God when the table is full, when the family is near, and when the plans of life unfold as we hoped. But Scripture calls us to something higher than seasonal gratitude. It calls us to perpetual thanksgiving, even for the things we do not understand.

Jas 1:17 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.

God's goodness does not change when our circumstances do. But being thankful for disasters, diseases, and difficulties seems counterintuitive, because our natural instinct is to recoil from pain and to equate goodness with comfort, not with suffering. We tend to see hardship as something to escape, not to embrace with gratitude. It runs against every human impulse to thank God for what hurts rather than for what helps. But, that is exactly where faith learns to trust.

So today, I want us to look closely at what it means to thank God for all things. What is God doing when life doesn't make sense?

1. Thanking God for all things -

What does the Bible mean when it says that all things work together for good? Let's begin with Paul's familiar words in Romans 8:28.

Rom 8:28 And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to *his* purpose.

But what do we mean by good? Does it mean *our* pleasure? Does it mean for our good as we would define it? Does the good mean that we will ultimately be *successful*? Does the good mean we can have our best life now? Does the good even refer to an outcome that fits *our* expectations? What if the blessing is not positive by our standards? What if the good is not the thing that would make us most happy or bring us delight?

1Thess 5:17-18 Pray without ceasing.

18 In every thing give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you.

We are supposed to pray without ceasing and all the while we are supposed to give thanks for everything because God's will is being performed. What if God's will for you is like His will for Paul? Do you think when Paul was beheaded he might have faced his executioner and thought, "I didn't think this is what God meant by things working together for good"? Actually, we know he didn't think that at all.

2Tim 4:7-8 I have fought a good fight, I have finished *my* course, I have kept the faith:

8 Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing.

When Paul writes that we are to give thanks "for all things" unto God, it is not because every event is *pleasant*, but because every event is under God's *providence*. The world turns by the will of many: the selfish will of men, the erring will of scholars, the impulsive will of crowds. Yet, above the noise, there

stands one unshaken purpose—the will of God. Whose will would you truly trust to prevail? Yours, clouded by limitation and emotion? The will of mankind, fractured by pride and pollution? Or the sovereign will of God, whose wisdom is unsearchable and whose goodness is undiminished by the wickedness of men? Romans 8:28 declares that all things are being woven together by His hand—not by chance, nor by chaos, but by counsel. It is this certainty that allows the believer to bow his head in gratitude, not only for the sweet mercies of life but for the bitter ones as well, knowing that both are instruments of a good and omniscient God fulfilling His purpose in His people.

God's will in Christ Jesus concerning the good for you is for your *spiritual* success like Paul. The testimony of endurance to the end worked to the good of the legacy of his faith and the effect he has had on billions of people. What if the *good* is the vindication of God's righteousness as the testimony of our life?

The good of Romans 8:28 is not necessarily what *feels* good, but what *makes* us good. It is not defined by comfort or by the absence of pain, but by the accomplishment of God's purpose. The good that God is working is the conforming of His people to the image of His Son. It is the spiritual success of His will in us, not the circumstantial success of our plans before Him. When Paul says "we know," he means that we rest in this confidence: that nothing—no sorrow, no loss, no suffering, no disappointment—is wasted in the providence of God. Every thread of life's tapestry is being woven toward a holy end. The same sovereign will that ordered creation is at work in the chaos of human sinfulness, bringing about His good purpose for His people.

So, whose will would you rather have at work? Yours, with its lack of foresight? Mankind's, corrupted by sin? The will of philosophers, scientists, and sociologists who cannot even agree in all their doctoral theses? Or the will of God—omniscient, omnipotent, and good? We can thank God that His will is the one at work. For in His omniscience

and goodness, we can be assured that His good will be achieved in His people, in spite of the sinful machinations of men.

2. A matter of perspective -

I have felt for a long time that one of the particular temptations of the maturing Christian is the danger of getting accustomed to his blessings. Like the world traveler who has been everywhere and seen everything, the maturing Christian is in danger of taking his blessings for granted and getting so accustomed to them that they fail to excite him as they once did.

Emerson said that if the stars came out only once a year, everybody would stay up all night to behold them. We have seen the stars so often that we don't bother to look at them anymore. We have grown accustomed to our blessings.

Psa 19:1-3 To the chief Musician, A Psalm of David. The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork.

2 Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night sheweth knowledge.

3 *There is* no speech nor language, *where* their voice is not heard.

The Israelites in the wilderness got accustomed to their blessings, and God had to chasten the people (see Num. 11). God had fed the nation with heavenly manna each morning, and yet the people were getting tired of it.

Num 11:6 But now our soul *is* dried away: *there is* nothing at all, beside this manna, *before* our eyes.

Nothing but manna! They

were experiencing a miracle of God's provision every morning; yet they were no longer excited about it. Nothing but manna!

One of the evidences that we have grown accustomed to our blessings is this spirit of criticism and complaining. Instead of thanking God for what we have, we complain about it and tell him we wish we had something else. You can be sure that if God did give us what we asked for, we would eventually complain about that. The person who has gotten accustomed to his blessing can never be satisfied.

Another evidence of this malady is the idea that others have a better situation than we do. The Israelites remembered their diet in Egypt and longed to return to the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions, and garlic. They were saying, "The people in Egypt are so much better off than we are!" Obviously, they had forgotten the slavery they had endured in Egypt and the terrible from which God had delivered them. Slavery is a high price to pay for a change in diet.

—Warren Wiersbe, *God Isn't In a Hurry*, (Baker Books; Grand Rapids, MI, 1994)

An illustration is told of a father of a very wealthy family who took his son on a trip to the country with the firm purpose of showing his son how poor people live. They spent a couple of days and nights on the farm of what would be considered a very poor family. On their return from their trip, the father asked his son, "How was the trip?" "It was great, Dad."

"Did you see how poor people live?" the father asked.

"Oh yeah," said the son.

"So, tell me, what did you learn from the trip?" asked the father.

The son answered: "I saw that we have one dog and they had four. We have a pool that reaches to the middle of our garden, and they have a creek that has no end. We have imported lanterns in our garden and they have the stars at night. Our patio reaches to the front yard and they have the whole horizon. We have a small piece of land to live on and they have fields that go beyond our sight. We have servants who serve us, but they serve others. We buy our food but they grow theirs. We have walls around our property to protect us, they have friends to protect them." The boy's father was speechless.

Then his son added, "Thanks, Dad, for showing me how poor we are."

— Ron Blue, *Faith-based Family Finances*

The humorist Erma Bombeck survived cancer, though she ultimately passed way from kidney disease. Her humor took on a more thoughtful tone after her cancer. She wrote:

An estimated 1.5 million people are living today after bouts with breast cancer. Every time I forget to feel grateful to be among them, I hear the voice of an eight-year-old named Christina, who had cancer of the nervous system. When asked what she wanted for her birthday, she thought long and hard and finally said, "I don't know. I have two sticker books and a Cabbage Patch doll. I have everything!" The kid is right.

— Erma Bombeck, *Redbook*, October, 1992

In the Psalms, Asaph, one of the psalmists, had to deal with his perspective before God. At first, he thought of how the wicked seemed to be successful from a worldly perspective. He felt that *he* had "cleansed his heart in vain" because the wicked seemed

"blessed" in spite of the wicked ways.

Ps 73:2-28 But as for me, my feet were almost gone; my steps had well nigh slipped.

3 For I was envious at the foolish, *when* I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

4 For *there are* no bands in their death: but their strength *is* firm.

5 They *are* not in trouble *as other* men; neither are they plagued like *other* men.

6 Therefore pride compasseth them about as a chain; violence covereth them *as* a garment.

7 Their eyes stand out with fatness: they have more than heart could wish.

8 They are corrupt, and speak wickedly *concerning* oppression: they speak loftily.

9 They set their mouth against the heavens, and their tongue walketh through the earth.

10 Therefore his people return hither: and waters of a full *cup* are wrung out to them.

11 And they say, How doth God know? and is there knowledge in the most High?

12 Behold, these *are* the ungodly, who prosper in the world; they increase *in* riches.

13 Verily I have cleansed my heart *in* vain, and washed my hands in innocency.

Then, Asaph was able to get a Godly perspective.

16 When I thought to know this, it *was* too painful for me;

17 Until I went into the sanctuary of God; ***then understood I their end.*** [!]

18 Surely thou didst set them in slippery places: thou castedst them down into destruction.

19 How are they *brought* into desolation, as in a moment! they are utterly consumed with terrors.

20 As a dream when *one* awaketh; so, O Lord, when thou awakest,

thou shalt despise their image.
21 Thus my heart was grieved,
and I was pricked in my reins.
22 So foolish *was* I, and ignorant:
I was *as* a beast before thee.

After reflection, Asaph saw the will of God perfectly.

23 Nevertheless I *am* continually with thee: thou hast holden *me* by my right hand.

24 Thou shalt guide me with thy counsel, and afterward receive me *to* glory.

25 Whom have I in heaven *but thee?* and *there is* none upon earth *that* I desire beside thee.

26 My flesh and my heart faileth: *but* God *is* the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever.

27 For, lo, they that are far from thee shall perish: thou hast destroyed all them that go a whoring from thee.

28 But *it is* good for me to draw near to God: I have put my trust in the Lord GOD, that I may declare all thy works.

3. The perfect perspective -

Rom 6:23 For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Eph 2:8-9 For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God:

9 Not of works, lest any man should boast.

2Cor 9:15 Thanks be unto God for his unspeakable gift.

4. The thing is not the thing -

I have been amazed at all the ways our paths have been altered to serve the Lord. Sometimes it might circumstances we encounter from day to day. Other times it is by the Holy Spirit prodding us

along. Whatever your lot might be, you can be sure God is in it and will use it to *His* purpose.

Prov 16:33 The lot is cast into the lap; but the whole disposing thereof *is* of the LORD.

I have learned to look for God's will in everything. I am delighted when I can discover at least some of the ways in which He is working—not only in my own life, but in the lives that touch mine. God is the great Conductor of providence, blending every instrument and timing every entrance so that what seems to us like separate melodies become one great symphony of His purpose. We hear only our part, but He hears the harmony. When we realize that even the discordant notes are written into His score, we begin to thank Him—not only for what we understand, but for all things.

I have been blessed to share some of the ways that the thing I thought I was doing was not the thing that God was doing. It is equally a blessing to hear testimonies of how you have resisted victimhood as you see God's purposes revealed in your life. Today I would like to share a post Nancy had written a few years ago:

Sunday is all about worshiping and serving God! There are numerous ways we can do that. One way is by singing. When I was a new believer, my pastor urged me to join the choir. I was ready with many excuses as to why that wouldn't work such as, "I don't have time," "I need rides to and from weekly practice because I'm too young to drive." "I can't read music." "I am already involved in other ministries" etc., etc. He didn't argue any of those points or offer solutions to them. He just started softly singing that old hymn, "I gave, I gave My life for thee, What hast thou given for Me?" My reasons suddenly sounded

pretty lame. I made the time, found rides to and from practice, and memorized my parts without reading the notes. It was one of the best decisions I ever made. I learned a lot about the difference between sacred music and worldly music, forged closer friendships with other members, and filled my mind and heart with hymns that I am still singing today. The choir actually gained three more members because two other people who drove joined when I did and gave me rides. Somehow, God gave me more time elsewhere during the week. No matter how much we give Him, we can never out give the Lord!

Gal 2:20 I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me.

Two of the many people who commented, spoke about how this resonated with them. One friend commented and spoke of how her life-path had been affected:

Some of my fondest memories of singing, is having had the privilege of singing with you. I think God smiled and was pleased as I felt His comforting presence quite a bit.

Another lady, a stranger, was impacted by the post:

I began in choir in seventh grade and continued as an adult. I think of all the things I miss since losing my hearing, music is right up at the top. I still sing when I'm alone but I know I'm out of tune.

Nancy responded:

I can somewhat relate. I'm hearing impaired now, too. It hasn't stopped me from singing, though. Looking forward to being with the Lord someday soon when health problems will be a thing of the past!

God often uses what seems like a limitation to redirect us toward His greater purpose. He interrupts our plans to unfold His plan. He takes what looks like loss and turns it into leading. Again and again in Scripture, we find men and women whose lives were changed forever by one divine interruption—one moment when God stepped in and turned the ordinary into the extraordinary.

Saul, in the Old Testament, had lost his mules, but his life trajectory was interrupted and changed in the day he sought counsel from Samuel and became king.

David was a shepherd whose life trajectory was changed the day he heard the blasphemy of a giant.

Moses was living a quiet life of defeat until one day he saw a burning bush.

Paul was on his way to Damascus to continue his persecution until one day the Lord blinded him for a time and called him to preach.

Abram left Ur of the Chaldees, old and without children, until one day he became the Abraham, the Father of Faith and the ancestor of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The same thing can be said of saint after saint in the Scriptures.

One day I was hoping to become a military officer and the next day I heard a call to preach.

And now, the same thing can be said of you. The reality is not just that *one* day this can happen, but *every* day and numerous times in each day God can direct and work His will through the circumstances of your life.

If you are hearing this message [or reading it], you need to know that this is no accident. Everyone here who has been saved can relate to how God has placed people and events in their life to bring them to salvation. God has been doing

this for you, but you are now the one who is called to respond. What will you say to God? How about, "Forgive me for being a sinner, Lord." And then, "Thank you Lord!" This message is another thread of God's providence calling you to Himself. Don't let the purpose of your pain, or even the blessings of your life, end short of the One who gave them. Come to Christ today. Trust Him, and you will find that the story of your life—every joy, every sorrow—has been leading you to this moment.

If you are a child of God and see yourself only as a victim of circumstances. Someone once asked a Christian friend, "How are you doing?"

He smiled and said, "Pretty good—under the circumstances."

To which the other replied, "What are you doing *under* the circumstances? Get *above* them!"

That's exactly what Paul meant when he wrote,

Rom 8:35-39 Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? *shall* tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?

36 As it is written, For thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.

37 Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us.

38 For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come,

39 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.

Stop measuring God's goodness by how things feel and start seeing His hand in how things fit. The very trials you wish would go away may be the instruments tuning your heart to sing His

praise. Gratitude, like faith, doesn't live *under* life's weight. It lives *above* it, resting in God's will. We don't take charge of life, we submit to *God* taking charge. We only *charge* into life and marvel at how God orchestrates the battle. Ask God how you can *live out* the life that God has for you. At the end, you will say "Thank you" for all things! Thank Him even for the things you don't yet understand. Say, "Lord, I don't see the whole pattern, but I trust You. Thank You for working all things together for good." That is the heart of true thanksgiving.

Jas 1:17

1. Thanking God for all things - Rom 8:28, 1Thess 5:17-18, 2Tim 4:7-8
2. A matter of perspective - Psa 19:1-3, Num 11:6, Ps 73:2-28
3. The perfect perspective - Rom 6:23, Eph 2:8-9, 2Cor 9:15
4. The thing is not the thing - Prov 16:33, Gal 2:20, Rom 8:35-39