

Hallelujah Anyhow

"In everything give thanks, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you" (1 Thessalonians 5:18)

No one in their right mind is thankful for some circumstances of life: tragic death in the family, famine and poverty, incredible pain and illness, abuse of children and women, hurricanes, tornadoes, airplane crashes - the list is long for those things that bring sorrow and pain. It is the "God of all comfort" who leads us through the hard times. Paul's afflictions abounded, but he wrote, *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our tribulations, that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble, with the comfort with which ourselves are comforted by God. For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also abounds through Christ (2 Corinthians 1:3-5).*

When Paul told the Thessalonian church to give thanks, it was not "for" everything, but "in" everything. Acts 27 tells of one of Paul's experiences where, as a prisoner, he practiced what he preached. During a terrible storm where every life could have been lost, Paul encouraged everyone on board to eat and take nourishment for God had told Paul that although the ship would run aground, none of those on board would be lost. Before handing out the bread to the men on board, Paul *gave thanks to God in the presence of them all*. He literally gave thanks in the midst of the storm.

Life can give us circumstances that will make us happy, make us laugh, make us sad and make us cry. Our reactions to our circumstances tell a lot about our character. Are we only grateful to God when everything is going our way or are we grateful to Him no matter what?

In our international ministry, I have learned a great deal from people we work with. A friend in one country, who lived through the oppression and domination of Communist rule, developed a habit of saying, "Hallelujah anyhow" when things were not going well. For my friend, it was not a forced gratefulness and praise to God. It was his history with God that reminded him that God had always been with him and would always be with him, no matter the circumstances.

In telling his story to someone in another country, I noted the next time we visited him, and he recounted an adverse situation, he then said, "Hallelujah anyhow".

Thanksgiving to God should always be sincere. He knows our hearts. He knows whether we truly trust Him or if we are following the example of some who try to manipulate Him by telling Him what we think He wants to hear. That is the problem with the "prosperity gospel" - preachers and authors who tell us to praise God and thank Him in the hopes our thanksgiving will bring unending health and material blessing. They suggest that God is obligated to give us anything we want if we only ask in the right way because God's ultimate goal for us is to be happy. The problem with that is that it is not only manipulative; it is not biblical. The Bible talks about the joy of the Lord, but it does not tell us that God's primary goal for us is to "be happy."

Jesus' life was full of trials He did not deserve. He trusted and praised His Father throughout His ministry - not because things were easy - but because He trusted His Father to make all things right. Some have suggested that if we pray prayers of praise and thanksgiving, God will supply all of our **wants**. Jesus said God would supply all of our **needs** if we trust Him. Just as a loving earthly father may deny a request of his child because it is not best for him, God knows what we need in order for us to live a productive life and give Him glory.

In the Lord's prayer, Jesus tells us to ask the Father for our daily bread but it is in the context of submitting ourselves to the will of God, forgiving others and resisting evil, for His kingdom's sake. In times of hardship, we should remember Jesus taught us not to worry but trust in God.

In the 23rd Psalm, David acknowledges, "*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want*". David knew God would provide what he needed, but he also knew God would *restore [his] soul, lead [him] in paths of righteousness, be with him in the valley of the shadow of death, and prepare a table before [him] in the presence of [his] enemies.*

It is not wrong to ask God for blessings. It is wrong to expect Him to give us what we want when it is not what we need. There are two verses in the Bible about a man named Jabez. The first verse describes him as more honorable than his brothers. The second records his prayer to God to bless him, enlarge his territory, be with him and keep him from evil. (1 Chronicles 4:9-10).

Although God granted Jabez' request, He did not tell us his prayer was a "formula" to follow in order to obtain His blessings. In fact, this concept did not seem to apply to another man that God called *blameless and upright, and one who feared God and shunned evil* (Job 1:1). Satan said Job feared God because "*Have You not made a hedge around him, around his household, and around all that he has on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land*" (Job 1:10). God granted Satan permission to take all those blessings away. Job's "hallelujah anyhow" was recorded after he lost his possessions and his children. *Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I shall return there. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord" In all this Job did not sin nor charge God with wrong* (Job 1:21-22). When God allowed even more trials, Job remained steadfast in his allegiance to God. He was confused, to be sure. He was in great pain and anguish. Job's friends, who tried to speak for God and failed, received God's wrath. "*My wrath is aroused against you and your two friends, for you have not spoken of Me what is right as My servant Job has*" (Job 42:7). The Lord did restore Job's losses when he prayed for his friends. Job's experience gave him new insight into the majesty of God. "*I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees You. Therefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes*" (Job 42:5-6).

One of the most chilling chapters in scripture is found in Romans 1. God *gave up* (1:24,26,28) the men who *knew God, [but] did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful...* (1:21). Thanklessness was not the only reason God gave them up, but it was among the first listed.

God is glorified in our thanksgiving *in everything* and He defines the blessings in our lives. They may be unexpected and, at first, seemingly undesirable. Our blessings don't always come in material form. They can be relational, physical, developmental and our own spiritual growth. Above all, we are blessed *with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ* (Ephesians 1:3).

Our thanks to God should be based on our history with Him. We know Him and we know His faithfulness to bless in the valley as well as the mountaintop experiences. He is there in our fires, our lion's dens and our struggles. The battle is His and He will accomplish His eternal purposes in us.

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June 2016