

Always Thankful? Even in the Worst Year Ever?

Upsetting the Equilibrium

These unbearable words from Scripture seem so trite in their brevity and so offensive in their simplicity. **Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.** Seriously? Nothing more said than that? No caveats, no nuances, no exceptions? Always thankful? Even in the worst year ever? People are sick and dying, yet again. Hospitals are on the brink, yet again. PPP is running low, yet again. Students have been sent home, yet again. Churches are going virtual, yet again. A stay-at-home order has been issued, yet again. Restaurants are shuttered, yet again. Twelve million are set to lose unemployment benefits after Christmas unless another relief package somehow gets passed in a lame duck session. People don't know where they'll live, what they'll eat, or how they'll stay sane. Families are torn apart in an emotional back-and-forth between CDC guidelines and precious holiday traditions. "I don't want my family and friends to get sick; it's just not worth it." Yet, "I don't want to offend them by being one of those über-cautious people; we still need to live life." At this point, what are you supposed to think and what are you supposed to do? So many have cancelled plans last minute or settled for video calls that just aren't the same as gathering around the Thanksgiving table for hours. We are all sick and tired of this pandemic! And God wants us to be thankful in a year like this? The only thing to be thankful for is New Year's Eve, when we can kick the worst year ever to the curb and kiss it goodbye!

Analyzing the Discrepancy

It's easy for us to throw ourselves a pity party right now, but it would have been equally easy for Paul to throw himself a pity party. Just who is this author, and just who are these recipients? Paul wrote this letter to the Christians in the city of Thessalonica. This is the man who walked into the city of Philippi on his second missionary journey, only to get publicly beaten and thrown in prison—contrary to his rights as a Roman citizen, by the way—all for healing a slave girl of an evil spirit. Did it get any better in the next city of Thessalonica? No! After he preached Jesus in the synagogue, jealous Jews formed an angry mob, rioted in the city, stormed the house where Paul was staying, and forced him to flee for his safety under the cover of night. Page earlier in this letter, and Paul recounts the severe suffering and strong opposition he and this congregation faced, so much that it looked like this baby congregation was going to get snuffed out. All that makes it all the more striking: Paul opens this letter with thanksgiving and closes this letter with these short and sweet commands. **Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances.** In fact, in the original text, he emphasizes the adverbs by bringing them to the front. *Always* rejoice; *continually* pray; *in everything* give thanks.

So this brings up a much larger deeper question, Why is it that once a worse year comes, our thanksgiving goes away? Or more simply, why is it so easy to give thanks in good times but so hard to give thanks in bad times? If we're brutally honest, it's because we treat our relationship with God like a contract. You give me blessings; I'll give you thanksgiving. You don't give me blessings; I won't give you thanksgiving. Now just consider what you've done. You, a mere human who would have nothing without him, have dictated to the almighty God, who has created all things and still preserves all things. You have fashioned this tit-for-tat

arrangement where you pay back God for what he has not given to you. But what if God would do that to us? What if he would pay us back for all that we have not given to him? We wouldn't just be looking at the worst year ever; we'd be looking at the worst eternity of hell ever!

Disclosing the Clue to Resolution

Here's the ultimate issue. This year it's easy to create a long list of things we aren't thankful for: death, sickness, unemployment, stress, virtual learning, curtailed freedom. If you take that approach, there's always things you can find to not be thankful for. For argument's sake, let's even envision a normal year. The college graduate, instead of focusing on a diploma from a great university, focuses on how she doesn't have a house. The busy parent, instead of focusing on the blessing of children, focuses on how they can't behave. The successful person, instead of focusing on a very sufficient paycheck, focuses on how he doesn't earn six figures. That's the perpetual problem: focusing on things we don't have, instead of focusing on what we do have. So if we can't be thankful in *difficult* situations, we actually won't be thankful in *any* situation! We'll always find more things we don't have, more things to complain about. You'll be digging yourself a vicious hole that will result in stress, envy, and discontentment in the worst year ever *and* in the best year ever. What's the one thing that can get us out of this hole? What is the one unchanging constant you can be thankful for – no matter what? That would make all the difference!

Experiencing the Gospel

The last phrase, *in Christ Jesus*, is that one unchanging constant. In his worst year ever, my Savior Jesus suffered death itself for me. So I am not afraid in our virus-cursed world filled with death. His worst year ever has turned into my best year ever. When so many people have seen their loved ones taken away from them, their health taken away from them, their jobs taken away from them, their classes taken away from them, their freedom taken away from them, no one can take away my Savior Jesus. Christ Jesus is my joy. Christ Jesus is whom I pray to. Christ Jesus is what I'm thankful for. He doesn't change in any circumstance, and that's why my attitude doesn't change in any circumstance. Even in the worst year ever.

Anticipating the Consequences

In preparing for this sermon, I read this interesting point from a commentary that's very relevant this year. These words to be joyful and thankful in all situations, the good and bad, actually constituted out-of-the-ordinary encouragement in the ancient world. No other religions or philosophies did this. The closest you got in Paul's day was Greek Stoic philosophy that emphasized how your life is determined by fate.¹ Think of what that means today. Sure, you could feign joy by buying into fate, "Well, the coronavirus is what it is; we can't do anything about it. We've put up with it for the better part of the year, so let's just put our best foot forward with a happy smile on our face." Or, you could stand out as the rare person who actually and sincerely gives thanks in the worst year ever, "I have a reason to give thanks that no one else has. Not even the worst year ever can take away the salvation my Jesus has won for me. That is why there is joy in my heart, prayer on my lips, and thanksgiving on my mind."

The Christian life is marked by joy, prayer, and thanksgiving – always, in any situation. What if, instead of sadness because of the worst year ever, our hearts exuded with joy? What if,

¹ Gene L. Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans Pub.; Apollos, 2002), 258.

instead of turning to the news to see the latest projections, we turned to the Lord in prayer? What if, instead of complaining about how we're so fed up with the pandemic, we gave thanks? That's what Christians do, who know everything Christ Jesus has done for them, who are connected to him by faith through the thick and thin of life. Always thankful? Even in the worst year ever? Change those question marks to exclamation points. Always thankful? Yes! Even in the worst year ever? Yes! Amen.