

# Giving Thanks in Hard Times

A Sermon  
by  
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There is the Scripture that says,

*In everything give thanks, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you.*

It's good to know God's will. Don't you often wonder what God's will is? Most of the broad situations of life are discussed in the Bible, but sometimes I get a little frustrated when it's not spelled out exactly the way I think it should be. Where should I live? What should I do? How should I respond to certain situations? We can get broad guidelines, but sometimes we wish we had more definite direction with reference to God's will.

But here is a statement that directly reveals God's will for us--we should be thankful.

*But this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you, **in** everything give thanks.*

If there is anyone in all the world who should be thankful people, it's God's people. And it is of course easier to give thanks to God for the good things than it is for the difficult things. I know that many of you keep journals, and I say to you, God bless you, keep it up. I've never done it, but it would be great now to have a journal and look back and see how God has blessed--how He's provided, how He's answered prayer, and how He has taken impossible situations and put them into our life and molded our life in the way that we can now see how God's providential care has blessed us. It would be great to have a journal of blessings. I'm not going to start one now; maybe you can. Perhaps your mind is racing with many things for which you are thankful, and we praise God for that. The good times, the good things, the people who come into our lives, the ones we love and the ones who love us.

It's a little more difficult, though, to give thanks **for** the difficult things. But there is a verse that tells us we should do that too. Over in Ephesians chapter 5 verse 20 it says,

*Give thanks always **for** all things, unto God the Father in the*

*name of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

Give thanks to God **for** all things. In Thessalonians "in" all things; in Ephesians "for" all things. It's more difficult to give thanks for what we say are the bad things, the hard things, the disappointments that come into our life, the sad times, or even the people that we don't like, or the people that hurt us or intend to hurt us.

I just read a short account of an army chaplain who lost his life about two months ago in Afghanistan. He mentioned one of the areas of his ministry difficult to get the men to respond to--praying for their enemies. Praying for the ones you're going to be shooting at this afternoon, or the one who tonight is going to plant a roadside bomb to try to kill you. It's a little more difficult to pray in those situations and for those people. Most of us have faced difficult times, and maybe you are facing some difficult time now. No doubt, if we live much longer, we'll all face more difficult times. To give thanks for the hard things, the difficult times, the sorrows, the hurts, takes primarily two things.

- First, it takes a mature faith. An immature and a weak faith can almost be blown away by certain circumstances. It takes a strong, mature faith to stand the test of giving thanks during difficult times.
- Second, it takes a yielded heart. We have to, as it were, let God be God.

I read of a fellow who, when he was old, was asked, "What have you learned in life?" He answered, no doubt in jest, "There is a God in charge, and it's not me." We often live like it is me, don't we? Like we're in charge. It takes a mature faith and a yielded heart to be thankful for all things. We should be thankful for who God is as well as for what He does for us. Think about that for a minute. God does amazing things for us, and we don't know how these things are going to turn out. And that's where Romans 8:28 comes in:

*We know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are called according to his purpose.*

We need to know that, but there is a sense in which we need to know that before the tough times come. We need to be prepared for difficulties. Suppose we have not prepared our heart and determined, "I am going to praise God no matter what comes." If we're not of that mindset, then when the hard times come and the preacher says, "Well you know that all things work together for good to them that love God," you will say, "Oh, I know that. I've heard that over and over again and it just seems like a trite, flippant saying." It's not

real to us. So I believe a good deal of being able to thank God during difficult times is to prepare your heart and mind beforehand.

If you're in the middle of hard times now, I guess it's too late to prepare. But preparation is a great part of winning the spiritual battle. That's what I encourage us to do today--be prepared.

I'm reminded of the story of a man who traveled a great deal. You may be able to relate to this. He missed his children a lot when he was away, so it was his habit to bring his little ones a gift when he came home. So he would be gone, and when he came back he would have a nice gift for his kids. After a while it seemed to him that when he came home, the kids looked forward more to the gift than to seeing their dad. Now isn't that funny? Is that us? Are we looking forward to what God does for us, all the gifts He gives to us? Do we think so much of the gifts that we forget the giver? That's what I want to look at this morning.

Thankfulness is a choice. We make up our mind, and we determine that we're going to have a thankful attitude even in times of struggle, trouble, sadness, sorrow, and in view of church history, sometimes even persecution. Who God is never changes. His attributes never change; his nature never changes. We can *always* count on that. So here are some of the things we can count on, and for which we should be thankful.

1. The first is that ***God is sovereign.***

Like I said, if you're in the middle of a struggle right now and I say to you, let God be God, He's sovereign, you might say that doesn't mean much to me now. Just another trite saying from the Bible. But we need to understand that *God is sovereign*. I want to read you a couple verses from the book of Daniel that remind us that God is in control. When you watch the news and read the papers, it seems like this old world is in pretty bad shape. There's real heartache out there. But this world is not out of control and, more personally, neither is ours. Neither is yours. It may seem like it, but *God is in control*.

Here are the words of a speech made by King Nebuchadnezzar 600 years before Christ. He had just spent seven years acting like an animal, having been struck by a strange disease.

*Seven times shall pass over thee, [probably seven years] eating grass like an ox.*

From a king to an animal.

*At the end of these days I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted up my eyes to*

*heaven and my understanding returned to me and I blessed the Most High. And I praised and honored him who lives forever, whose dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom is from generation to generation. And all the inhabitants of the earth are reputed as nothing, and he does according to his will in the army of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth. And none can stay his hand or say to him, What doest thou?*

Well, he learned his lesson, didn't he? It was a difficult time in his life, but he came to understand that although he was king of Babylon, a very powerful kingdom at that time, there was someone higher, and that was God. We can thank God that no matter what the difficult circumstances of our life, or how mixed up this world seems to be, ultimately God is in control. That won't change. And it's good for us to remember that when our world seems to be crashing, God is in control. He can take the difficulties and the uncertain circumstances that we can't even understand and use them for his own purpose, his own glory.

2. The second thing we can be thankful for is that ***God's knowledge is unlimited.***

Our mind is so limited that we can't even understand what it is to say that God's knowledge is unlimited. He knows the past, He knows the present, and He knows the future, although there's been a minor theological debate as to whether God really does know the future. There are some outstanding theologians who say God doesn't know the future until it happens. Until it happens there is nothing to know, is how that theory goes. Well, He knows the past, and He knows the future. We don't. He knows actual; He knows possible. He knows what would have happened if you hadn't taken that step, gone that direction, made that decision, followed through on it. He knows what would have happened "if." We don't; God does. We should be thankful for that.

3. Third, we should be thankful that ***there is no limit to God's power.***

He can do anything he wants except, of course, contradict himself. He cannot contradict his own nature or his own attributes. He's not like a man that He can lie. He cannot sin. These things would contradict who He is. You no doubt have heard that question, "If God is so powerful, can He create a boulder that He can't lift?" This is pitting God against God, attribute against attribute. That can't happen. But He can do anything He wants. Job came to know this. In Job 42:2, he says,

*I know that You can do everything, and that no thought can be withheld from you.*

There is no such thing as an impossible situation with God. And we can always be thankful for that.

#### 4. Fourth, **God doesn't change.**

Certainly we can be thankful for that. In fact, it is recorded in Malachi 3:6,

*For I am the LORD, I change not.*

Now we can understand a little bit of that, because if you change, that means you were not perfect in the first place, or you are perfect now and you're changing to something different that would be less than perfect. It's pretty easy for us to understand that.

These last four items are what the theologians would call divine attributes of God. But there are other things for which we can be thankful that are based on his very nature, namely, who God is. They are all pretty much a mystery to me as to why God is this way.

#### 5. For instance, I say that **God is a God of love.**

In fact, the scripture says that God is love, describing his very nature. That's who He is--God is love. But why God loves us is to me the mystery. I believe we must take it back all the way to creation--God loves us because we are his creation.

We can relate to that. If you create something, it's special to you. I first think of building, because I spent many years while in school and for awhile after that in the building trade. There is a great deal of satisfaction that comes with doing something, making something, building something, and seeing it come out well. I think artists must take tremendous pride in their painting. I think poets or authors who create would take tremendous pride in what they write. They would highly value the poem, or the story, or the article they have created.

So we can see why God looked at all of his creation after it was done and said that it was very good. That's as close as I can come to explaining why God loves us. We go the wrong way if we try to put some value on ourselves and say that He created us because we were worth creating, or that He loves us because we are worthy of his love. We're going the wrong direction when we try to elevate ourselves and make ourselves so valuable that God would die for us. I just have to leave the question of why He loves us in the mystery of who God is. He loves us, and I can't really tell you why. But I can tell you this--He will never change. It's something for which we can always be thankful.

Now I do know that the way God demonstrates his love toward man depends upon men. He can't treat us all alike, I understand that.

6. But God loves us, ***He is also a forgiving God.***

Yet we should never take it for granted, should never presume that He is going to forgive us if we live a reckless life. But it is nevertheless true that He is a forgiving God.

As I think about that, I remember the illustration in the Bible of the paralyzed man and his four friends. Jesus was teaching in a house, surrounded by crowds, and these four men removed the tiles from the roof of the house in order to lower their friend down to where Jesus was teaching and preaching. The first thing Jesus said was, "Son, your sins be forgiven you." He's a forgiving God. The Pharisees reacted to this statement, and Jesus could perceive what they were thinking. So He said,

*"Why do you entertain evil thoughts in your hearts? 5 Which is easier: to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up and walk'? But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins." So he said to the paralyzed man, "Get up, take your mat and go home." Matt. 9:5-6.*

Yes, it's easier to say your sins are forgiven. Jesus could look at any one of them there, that man could tell him all that he had done, and Jesus could say, "I forgive your sins." But only God can forgive sins, and in healing the paralytic, Jesus demonstrated his authority to forgive sins.

God demonstrated his forgiveness. He's a saving God, and I take that from the story of Zaccheus in Luke chapter 19. At the end of that account in verse 10 Jesus said,

*The Son of Man came to seek and to save that which was lost.*

We can all be thankful for that.

I remember a pastor who once reminded me that we are on the winning team. Christ is victor. There are times in our life when it seems that we're not winning, that everything is going wrong. Let me remind you--we are on the winning team. Christ is the victor. Sin will be judged. No one is getting away with sin; it's all going to be judged. The sinner will be held accountable--except when he has trusted Christ as his Savior, then Christ died for that sin.

What about you? Have you trusted in Christ? Are your sins forgiven?