

Give Thanks in All Circumstances • 1 Thessalonians 5:18

How does one know God’s will when dealing with the worst or even the best of circumstances in life? Many Christians say, “I’d be willing to do whatever God’s will is, if only I knew what it was.” Their problem isn’t a lack of willingness to obey, it is a difficulty in knowing what to obey.

Well, I have the answer! I can tell you exactly what is God’s will when looking for a job, considering a divorce, recovering from grief or when dealing with delight. The answer is found in 1 Thessalonians 5:18. “*Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.*”

This is an extraordinary exhortation — one that needs to be handled carefully and gently. We must take great care not to tell the battered wife or the abused child or the recent widower to simply “say thanks for what you’re up against and you’ll feel a lot better.” Such counsel is cruel rather than kind and mishandles both the context and the intent of scripture.

Bear with me as I explain.

Our lives are a series of circumstances. One might say that the first circumstance is conception and the last circumstance is death with a billion other circumstances between. Only the smallest fraction of all the circumstances in our lives are known to us and we forget most of those.

For example, after a courtship of several years, you marry someone. You feel that you know him or her quite well, only to discover after marriage that there are all kinds of circumstances and situations brought into the relationship, perhaps from the family of origin or from some other source, that were completely unknown and perhaps even unknowable. Yet those

very circumstances begin to impact and shape your life in a way that you cannot control and cannot change.

Or perhaps you will walk into your boss’s office this week seeking a decision that is very important concerning your career and future. Unbeknownst to you, your boss is struggling with a brother who has a gambling addiction that has caused not only severe financial difficulties for the brother but for your boss as well. Now his own finances are in disarray, and his career and relationship with members of his family is at stake. All because of his brother’s behavior. You know nothing of that. In fact, you don’t even know that he has a brother; yet all of those circumstances are impacting the decisions he makes about you and your job.

Since we cannot know or remember all the circumstances, we generally group those circumstances together into stories because we remember stories better. We tell stories about our families, about work, about our health — all kinds of stories. We write about them in letters, talk about them on the telephone or during coffee breaks at work. Stories can be remembered

and passed on to someone else.

But stories are more than facts. Stories always have

interpretation along with them. When we tell a story we add opinion and emotion. When we tell a story, perhaps the story of a child’s birth or the story of a child’s death, it is nearly impossible to do it without emotion, without adding feelings and meanings.

When Pan Am flight 103 exploded over Lockerbie, Scotland, it was an enormous tragedy with great loss of life. As we listened on the television or the radio or read about it in the

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newspapers, the facts became real to us in stories. There was, for example, the story of the family in Kansas that received word that their son, a soldier in West Germany who was coming home for the Christmas holidays, had lost his life in that explosion. Then several days after the crash, in the midst of their sorrow, their son called home to explain that he had missed the flight. Their tragedy was turned into joy. Then there was the story of the family in upstate New York that had a daughter aboard Pan Am flight 103 and had the added heartbreak of having the wrong body shipped to them. Or the stories of one man who was caught in traffic and didn't make flight 103 while another who missed the previous flight, boarded Pan Am 103 instead.

Stories, circumstances, stories — all of us have them. Were they all written out for any one of us and bound into a volume, it would be too big for any of us to pick up. Every single one of us has within our biographies chapters of happiness and laughter and chapters of heartbreak and tears. Some of the stories could be written on the pulpy paper of poverty, others on vellum pages of wealth. Some have multiple volumes of sickness because much of life has been a medical battle, while others have hardly a sick page.

Many of us chose to remember only the good times; and even now as we run through the stories of our lives, one by one, it's hard to think of anything that is particularly bad. There are others who can hardly think of a single thing that is good. Some of us have stories that are so frightening and painful that we've tried to totally forget them, to erase them, to deny that they ever happened because the pain is just too great.

There is no escaping the living of life. Harry Emerson Fosdick wrote, "A man can put off making up his mind, but he can't put off making up his life." All of these stories, all of these circumstances, add up to what we call "life." They are all included in what 1 Thessalonians 5:18 describes as "*all circumstances.*" When

St. Paul wrote those words there was not a Greek word for "circumstances," only the word for "all." (The English translators added "circumstances" so we English readers could better understand.) What can be more comprehensive than "all"? All of life — all of the circumstances, most of them forgotten, a few of them remembered — make up the "*all circumstances.*"

The issue here is what we do with this "all." How do we understand it? How do we connect all the billions of circumstances together? An English major might ask, "What is the integrating motif of our stories?" A writer might ask, "What is the theme of this person's biography?" Is all of life just a series of unrelated events? Is there no glue, no sense, no meaning?

I can tell you how some people tie life's stories together. They say it is all a matter of luck; some have good luck and some have bad luck. And then there are some who try to hold their biographies together with blame and say it's someone else's fault -- their parents raised them wrong; their spouse didn't do the right thing; their boss gave them a rotten deal. They shift all responsibility to others and that becomes the integrating motif, the glue that holds all of life together — the blaming of others.

But there is a distinctively Christian way to tie life's stories together. It is thanks. For the Christian, the integrating motif, the glue, is gratitude—gratitude to God that ties all of the circumstances and all of the stories into a single unit that causes our biography to switch from nonsense to sense.

Arguing that gratitude should be life's characteristic brings an immediate hostile reaction from most of us. We say, "Do you expect me to be grateful for what I've got? Are you honestly suggesting that I be grateful for cancer, grateful for a marriage that is filled with conflict and unhappiness, grateful for unemployment? You want me to be grateful for rape, for abuse, for incest? Am I supposed to get down on my knees and say, 'Lord, thank you for the pain that never

goes away?”

No, absolutely not. For I cannot conceive that God is thankful for these things. God is not thankful for sin nor the consequences of sin, as inflicted in the lives of his dear children. And if God is not grateful for these things, surely God does not ask us to be grateful for them. God hates sin and all its consequences . . . and it is alright for us to hate what God hates!

There is enormous importance in the choice of the preposition in I Thessalonians 5:18. For God does not will for us to give thanks for all circumstances, but to give thanks in all circumstances. In other words, we are to turn to God with thanks even in the circumstances that we hate! Gratitude to God is to mark our lives and sew our stories together.

Maybe I can explain it better by telling you about my own experience. When we do a study through a book like I Thessalonians, I live with the text, I read and re-read it and try to memorize it. I study the passage in English and in the language in which it was written. I try to find out what others have said about it and I try to integrate it into my own life. And so, there is a sense in which I am closer to the text than others who may simply read it through.

I recall a time when I lay in bed in pain. It wasn't physical pain, but the kind of pain that comes from sad circumstances. It's a story that I shall not tell, except to say that it was filled with things that I would not choose. And then I found myself praying. You may think that a strange description — I found myself praying — for that sounds rather passive. But I can't really explain it any other way because I cannot recall actually choosing to pray. It was almost as if somehow the reflection on the sad circumstances just naturally flowed into talking to God about them. And so I prayed. I said, "Lord, thank you that you're here, that I'm not alone.

It is a recurring theme in Scripture that the strong are to help the weak.

Thank you that you fully understand things which just don't make sense to me. Thank you that you are strong because it is so obvious that I am weak. Thank you that you can do what I cannot do. Thank you that someday you are going to fit this jagged piece of my life into a puzzle that is complete and beautiful. Just thank you for being God and for making me yours."

1 Thessalonians 5:18 says, "*Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.*" You see, gratitude is really the ultimate expression of faith. And is it not faith that we say makes us Christians? Gratitude says that we really believe God when he says that he will make everything work together for good. Gratitude says that we are convinced that God is God, no matter how many arguments there may be to the contrary. Gratitude says that we are convinced that God will get us through whatever we face, even the worst of pains, the deepest of disappointments and finally death itself. Gratitude says that we have overwhelming confidence in God. It is God who makes sense of life. It is God who is the common thread through every story on every page of our biography.

Difficult? Yes, it's difficult to have the kind of faith that gives thanks to God in all circumstances. But consider the alternative. The alternative is to deny God. It's to go it alone, to be bitter and cynical. The alternative is to be

counted among those so vividly described in Romans 1:21, "*for although they knew God, they neither glorified him*

as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened."

To be sure, I don't want to minimize anyone's circumstances. I don't live anyone else's story except my own. But I tell you from experience and from scripture that the best way to live is to "*give thanks in all circumstances.*"

John Claypool's story includes a chapter that covered eighteen months and ten days, from the day that his ten-year-old daughter was diagnosed with leukemia until the day she died. It took a month before Pastor Claypool could stand in the pulpit and preach again, a sermon in which he sought perspective in the midst of agonizing grief. Here is just a paragraph of what he said:

Here, in a nutshell, is what it means to understand something as a gift and to handle it with gratitude, a perspective biblical religion puts around all of life. And I am here to testify that this is the only way down from the Mountain of Loss. I do not mean to say that such a prospective makes things easy, for it does not. But at least it makes things bearable when I remember that Laura Lue was a gift, pure and simple, something I neither earned nor deserved nor had a right to. And when I remember that the appropriate response to a gift, even when it is taken away, is gratitude, then I am better able to try and thank God that I was ever given her in the first place.¹

Let each of us reflect on our own stories, our own circumstances, and let us thank God. Thank him for giving the gifts that he gives. Thank him for being with us when times are hard. Thank him for making sense out of our nonsense. Thank him for the promise of ultimate good. Thank him for tying the stories of our lives together for eternity.

"Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus."

¹ John Claypool, Tracks of a Fellow Struggler, p. 82.

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