

Give Thanks in all Circumstances • I Thessalonians 5:18

How does one know God's will when dealing with the worst or even the best of life's circumstances? It seems to me that most serious Christians have often said, "I'd be willing to do whatever God wants me to do if only I knew what is was."

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

There is no doubt that that is an extraordinary exhortation, one that must be handled carefully and gently. For example, we must never tell the battered wife or the abused child or the recent widower to simply say thanks and they'll feel a whole lot better. Such counsel is far more cruelty than kindness and horribly mishandles the content and the intent of the Bible.

I would like to talk to you about all of life's circumstances. I admit the thought journey I want to take you on is hard to explain. I hope you will hang in there with me. It is rooted in the understanding that our lives are a series of circumstances—from the circumstance of conception to the circumstance of death and all the billion circumstances in between. There are so many circumstances that we could never know even a small percentage and we cannot remember most of the ones we do know.

For example, we may have a friend who later becomes our spouse. We may have known this person for a year or more only to discover after marriage that all kinds of circumstances and situations have been brought into the relationship that we may not have known anything about. Yet those circumstances impact and shape our lives in ways we cannot control or change.

Or we may walk into the boss's office totally unaware of the pressure he is under because of his brother's gambling debts. We may be seeking a raise; however, those pressures the boss is

experiencing have created circumstances that can enormously effect the decisions the boss makes about our job.

Since we cannot know or remember all the circumstances, we generally remember stories instead. In fact, if we listen to ourselves and others we realize we group those circumstances together into stories because we remember stories better. We tell stories about our families, our jobs, our health, our friends and our recent vacation or the problems we're having with the car. We tell our stories on the telephone, in letters and at coffee breaks at work.

Circumstances are usually packaged and remembered in stories. But stories are more than facts. Stories always have interpretation along with them. We add opinion and emotion. No one can just tell the story of a child's birth or death without adding feelings and meanings.

When Pan Am flight 103 exploded over Lockerbie, Scotland, it was an enormous tragedy with great loss of life, not only those who were on the 747 but several on the ground as well. After the tragedy there were many stories about passengers on that flight.

There was a story of a family in Kansas who received word that their son, a soldier who was going home from West Germany for the Christmas holidays, had lost his life in the crash. However, they received a

telephone call a few days later from their son explaining that he had missed the flight. Somehow the tragedy was turned upside down for them.

Or the story of the family in upstate New York who lost a daughter aboard Pan Am flight 103 and experienced the added pain of having the wrong body shipped to them.

There was also an account of a man who was caught in traffic and didn't make flight 103. However, another man missed the previous flight and boarded Pan Am 103 instead.

Stories, circumstances, stories, circumstances, stories—we all have them. Were they

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written out our biographies would become books too thick and heavy to lift. Every single one of us has within our biographies stories of happiness and laughter, chapters of heartbreak and tears. Some of the biographies would be written on pulpy pages symbolic of the poverty that's marked our lives while others would have biographies written on the most expensive of vellum because life has been prosperous and financially secure and good. There are others whose books would have volume after volume of sickness while others would have hardly a page that included sickness because life has been essentially quite healthy.

Some of us chose to remember only the good times. Many of us choose to remember mostly the bad times. Some of us have stories so frightening and painful that we try to totally forget them, to erase them, to deny that they ever happened. But 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. And they are all included in what 1 Thessalonians 5:18 describes as "*all circumstances*." Actually, there is no original world for "circumstances". In Greek there is only the word for "all". What we are talking about is all of life.

The issue here is what we do with this "*all*". How do we understand it? How do we connect all the circumstances together? What is the integrating motif of our stories? Is all of life just a series of unrelated events? Is there no glue to hold it together? No sense; no meaning?

I can tell you how some people tie life's stories together. Some say it's all a matter of luck. Some people have good luck and some people have bad luck. Others say it's someone else's fault: their parents raised them wrong, their spouse doesn't respond correctly or the boss gave them a rotten deal. Some people tie all of life's stories together by blaming others.

But there is a distinctively Christian way to deal with life's circumstances. It is with thanks. For the Christian, gratitude to God weaves all the stories of life into a biography that makes 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 we honestly supposed to be grateful for cancer? Are we to be grateful for a marriage filled with conflict and unhappiness? Does God expect us to be grateful for unemployment, rape, incest, abuse or the pain that never goes away?

No! Absolutely not! I do not believe that God is thankful for any of these difficult circumstances nor do I believe he expects us to be grateful for them. God hates sin and all its consequences and God does not ask us to be thankful for that which he is not thankful for.

There is enormous importance in the preposition in 1 Thessalonians 5:18. God does not will for us to give thanks *for* all circumstances; he wants us to give thanks *in* all circumstances. In other words, we are to turn to God with thanks even in the circumstances we hate. Gratitude to God is to mark our lives and sew our stories together.

Maybe I can explain it best by telling you my own experience. When I prepare a study through a book like 1 Thessalonians I live with the text of what the Bible says for a very long time. I read it, reread it and try to memorize it. I study it in English and in the language in which it was written. I see what others have said about it and I try to integrate it into my own life.

Well, recently I lay in bed in pain. It wasn't physical pain; it was the other kind of pain, the kind of pain that comes from sad circumstances. It's a story I won't tell you except to say that it was filled with things I would not choose.

Then I found myself praying. You may think that's a strange description—I found myself praying—because that sounds rather passive. But I can't really explain it any other way because I cannot recall choosing to pray. It was almost as if somehow 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. Thank you that I'm not alone. Thank you that you fully understand things that don't make any sense to me at all. Thank you that you are strong because I am so weak. Thank you that you can do what I cannot do. Thank you that someday you are going to take this jagged piece of my life and fit it into a puzzle that will be 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. Gratitude says we really believe God when he says 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 no matter what we face, even the worst of pains, the deepest of disappointments and finally death itself. Gratitude says that we have overwhelming confidence in God, that it is God who makes sense out of our lives.

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It is God who is the common thread through every story on every page of our biography.

Is that difficult to do? Oh, yes, it’s difficult. 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. The alternative is to go it alone. The alternative is to become bitter and cynical. The alternative to be counted among the heathen 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 minimize anyone’s circumstances. I don’t live anyone else’s story but my own. I can’t. 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 was 18 months and 10 days long. It went from the day his 10-year-old daughter was diagnosed with leukemia until the day she died just two weeks after Christmas in 1970.

It took a month before Pastor Claypool could stand in the pulpit and preach again. When he finally did preach it was a sermon in which he sought prospective in the midst of his own agonizing grief. Here is just a paragraph from his sermon taken from his book *Steps Of A Fellow Struggler*:

Here, in a nutshell, is what it means to understand something as a gift and to handle it with gratitude, a prospective 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.

I invite you to take a moment and pray. Reflect on your own story—your own circumstance—and thank God. Thank him for giving the gifts he gives. Thank him for being with you when times are hard. Thank him for making sense out of nonsense. Thank him for the promise of ultimate good. Thank him for tying the stories of your life together for all eternity. “*Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.*”

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