

DEFIANT THANKFULNESS

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18, Romans 5:1-5 (NASB)

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One of the most unambiguous commands in all of Scripture is for the children of God to be thankful no matter what the circumstances. Paul the apostle wrote: "**Rejoice always; pray without ceasing; in everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus**" (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18). The original Greek words are simple. Our translations all say the same thing. There is no way for us to wiggle out of this three-part compound command to rejoice, pray, and give thanks always.

I fall miserably short of this standard. I am getting better, but I seem to have a default condition which tends toward pessimism, lack of prayer, and ingratitude. When we meet someone who is doing well with these commands we immediately sense that we are in the presence of a real Christian-- someone who genuinely "gets it."

A book by Ben Patterson called *He Has Made Me Glad* (InterVarsity Press, 2005) has helped me. In the fifth chapter he quotes William Law who wrote: "Would you know who is the greatest saint in the world? It is not he who prays most or fasts most, it is not he who gives most alms or is most eminent for temperance, chastity, or justice; but it is he who is always thankful to God, who wills everything that God wills, who receives everything as an instance of God's goodness and has a heart always ready to praise God for it...Could you therefore work miracles, you could not do more for yourself than by this thankful spirit, for it...turns all that it touches into happiness" (pp. 67-68). I want this, don't you?

Once we get over the shock of being commanded to rejoice, pray, and give thanks all the time we can perceive that God is a good god who never tells us to do anything silly or impossible. We must conclude, along with William Law, that gratefulness is a spiritual discipline, that it is a matter of faith, and therefore a matter of choice. That gives me hope!

WHY WE STRUGGLE WITH THANKFULNESS

My difficulty with grateful rejoicing is explained by Paul in Romans 1:21: "**For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened.**" The sin condition which we all share as human beings is marked by the darkness of ingratitude. Why is it so evil? Failing to give thanks to the God who has given us all life and breath dismisses God. Think back toward the last time someone treated you dismissively. You were deeply offended because the dismissal put a value judgment on you of zero--worthless. Imagine how deeply God, who is ultimately worthy, is offended when he observes the ingratitude of multitudes.

This failure does not have to be an open attack against God's worth. It could merely be the failure to give thanks, a void where there should be a constant positive expression. It is a flagrant omission given the facts, a raging sin expressed by disdain. Ingratitude can also be a sin of commission, an active complaint against God. The people of Israel, shortly after their deliverance from centuries of

slavery in Egypt, adopted a critical attitude of complaint against God. So they died in the sand by the judgment of God where their bones bleached away far from the land, the seed, and the blessing God had promised.

I remember a Thanksgiving service we had at church years ago where we invited people to share words of thanks about the good things God was doing in their lives. I was stunned to look out from the pulpit that year and observe that almost no one could think of anything. Finally a few folks spoke some rather weak thanks about small earthly matters. It was one of the most disturbing worship services I have ever attended.

WHAT TO DO WITH OUR DISTRESS

But we are all loaded with deep sorrows in this life, now or later. What are we to do with them? Is God simply telling us to shut up and fake it? A thousand times no! There is no human being who is able to stand my constant recounting of my sorrows without screaming at some point, but God is not limited in that way. In fact, he invites you to tell him everything, to cast "**...all your anxiety on Him, because He cares for you**" (1 Peter 5:7).

There is a place to offload the cares of this life! Many of the psalms reveal this deeply spiritual activity. Psalm 88 says: "**You have put me in the lowest pit, /In dark places, in the depths. /Your wrath has rested upon me, /And You have afflicted me with all Your waves. Selah. /You have removed my acquaintances far from me; /You have made me an object of loathing to them; /I am shut up and cannot go out. /My eye has wasted away because of affliction; /I have called upon You every day, O LORD; /I have spread out my hands to You**" (Psalm 88:6-9).

This leads us to a crucial distinction. Complaining to other people is sin, but letting our sorrows be known to God is a valid part of prayer. So when we are commanded to pray without ceasing the Lord knows that we need to do more than say "Hallelujah!" The psalms tell us that all subjects are fair game, all feelings can be acceptable before God when expressed to him in a spirit of humility, and there is no possibility that we can wear him out.

GIVING THANKS AS AN ACT OF DEFIANCE

Ben Patterson and the saints of the ages commend the giving of thanks as a spiritual discipline by which we express our hope in God and speak our defiance against every earthly sorrow or pain. We can, indeed, decide to rejoice in our hope in God whether he chooses to deliver us or not. We can choose to defy our circumstances, to say to them that God determines our well-being, not accidents of this life, and certainly not the world, the flesh, and the devil.

Imagine that you were one of the Israelites who had just been rescued from the murderous hand of Pharaoh in Egypt, delivered from a life of poverty, enslavement, and abuse. You have followed God's leader, Moses, out into the desert on God's orders along with millions of your brothers and sisters. The group has made it as far as the western bank of the Red Sea by the leading of God. And then the Egyptian army arrives with trained swordsmen, archers, and charioteers breathing death and revenge upon you all. How would you feel? What would you do?

This is all hypothetical because we know that Israel expressed a total lack of faith at that moment even though God had interposed a pillar of fire between their camp and the Egyptian army. From Israel's point of view, his promise to deliver them seemed to be failing in the worst way: **"Then they said to Moses, 'Is it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? Why have you dealt with us in this way, bringing us out of Egypt?'"** (Exodus 14:11). Would you or I be able to trust in the Lord at that time, even to give thanks to God by faith? Israel often danced when rejoicing in the Lord. If we had been with them, would we have been able to dance on the Egyptian side of the Red Sea?

That is precisely what the Lord is commanding and enabling us to do when he tells us to give thanks in all things. Paul wrote to the Romans: **"Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand; and we exult in hope of the glory of God"** (Romans 5:1-2). Paul tells us that children of God have a different objective reality than others who are going through the same problems. We have peace with God because of our justification by faith. We stand forgiven and cleansed before God by grace through faith. So we exult or rejoice in him no matter what else may be happening to us, as Paul explains: **"And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope..."** (Romans 5:3-4). By faith, as a matter of choice, we defy our circumstances and choose thankfulness even though we are being squeezed very hard. We even know that God brings good things directly out of our sufferings as we walk through them with him--shining virtues of perseverance, character, and hope.

Finally, we can choose to rejoice, pray, and give thanks always because, if we believe in Christ, we already have the precious possessions of the love of God and his Holy Spirit: **"...And hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us"** (Romans 5:5). Defiant thankfulness based on hope in God looks stupid to those without faith. Even Christians will counsel us to abandon our hope when things seem very dark.

But we, knowing that nothing can separate us from the love of God, choose instead to dance on the Egyptian side of the Red Sea. When cancer rears its ugly head, or deadly infection, or loss of a loved one, loss of work, loss of our mind or emotional stability, loss of Christian leaders who fail out of the ministry right before our eyes, or whatever, we choose to live in the hope which is our birthright. We sing praise to God in private and in public. We continue reading the word of God as the food for our soul. We guard our hearts against despair, even in great sorrow, because we will not be forsaken. If the Holy Spirit has come to dwell in our hearts we know that can never be alone.

This does not mean that the steam rollers of this life will not crush our bodies or put the squeeze on our bank accounts. We have been told in advance that believers in Christ will die in great numbers during these last days. Even then, we will say with Paul: **"O DEATH, WHERE IS YOUR VICTORY? O DEATH, WHERE IS YOUR STING?"** (1 Corinthians 15:55). If God be true then let us dance in the face of prayers as yet unfulfilled. Let us rejoice always, pray without ceasing, and give thanks to God in everything, for he deserves it and, as William Law wrote, "it turns all that it touches into happiness."

[clip from YouTube, <MosesPartstheSea.avi>, 3:30]