

THANKSGIVING IN HARD TIMES

“In everything give thanks because this is God’s will /Give thanks always **for all things.**” (1 Thessalonians 5:18 / Ephesians 5:20)

“Jesus took the cup, gave thanks, and said; ‘This is My blood’.”
(Matthew 26:27-28)

Bob Marcaurelle, November 2009

This week on the *Today Show* there was a young mother whose face had been disfigured in a plane crash and she was in the midst of many needed operations. Her little girl was asked how it all affected her and she said, “Mommy is nicer now.” This mother had received the blessing nobody wants, but all of us need; the blessing of pain. It is easy to sing God’s praises when all is going well; but what about when life caves in and our hearts are breaking? Scripture says we are to seek to be grateful not only IN bad times but FOR them. In every burden there is a hidden blessing. If we go through pain and get nothing good out of it, we pay the price and buy nothing.

A. Not Superficially

This is not a superficial “praise the Lord” that some dishonest Christians use to mask their sorrow or even their anger. It is born out of the realization of who we are and what we have in a right relationship with God. Jesus could thank God because He knew God would be with Him (Isaiah 43:1-3); the Holy Spirit would empower Him (Hebrews 9:12); His sufferings were part of the will of God (Luke 22:42); they had purpose and would draw people to God (John 12:32/Isaiah 53:10-11); and He knew the crown was waiting on the other side of the cemetery (Hebrews 12:1-4).

B. Not Because We Understand

1. It Is Natural To Question God

Part of being human is the desire to make sense out of life. When we believe God is loving and all powerful, most of us cannot help but ask Him why we are hurting. There are four possibilities:

(1) *We have brought it on ourselves.* We drive 100 mph and break our neck or drink alcohol to excess and destroy our liver or our home. (2) God sends it or allows it *as a punishment because we have sinned.* He took David’s baby (2 Samuel 11-13). (3) God *sends it to prune us,* not because we have sinned but because we need to learn lessons that make us better people (John 15:1 / 2 Corinthians 12). (4) Sufferings come because *we are part of the human race.* Job said, **“Man is born to trouble as surely as sparks fly upwards.” (5:7).** If

Christians did not experience car crashes, cancer, and kids on drugs; we could not build enough churches to hold all the people who would come for the wrong reasons.

Most of the time we think we have done something wrong (Number 2 above) and are being punished, but the whole Book of Job was written to disprove this as the primary reason. If God punished us every time we sinned we would all be dead today. God woos us with His love (Hosea 11); whips us in love (Hebrews 12:7-11); and in the end, if we do not repent, He often takes us to heaven early (1 Corinthians 11:30 / Moses in Numbers 27).

2. It Is Alright To Question God

Jesus, on the cross, quoted the Psalmist and asked **why** He suffered. (Matthew 27:26/ Psalm 22)

Job is 42 chapters of questions.

It is alright to question God. Jesus did. Before the cross He asked God if there was some other way to bring humanity the power to be forgiven (Mark 14:35-36); and during the cross He wanted to know why it was happening (Matthew 27:26).

People tell us it is not right to question God. This isn't true. If we have questions and pretend we don't we are not being honest; and talking with God honestly with our questions and even our complaints is how we grow in our understanding of His ways. The Bible's oldest and best treatment of this, the Book of Job, is forty-two chapters of questions. One I like is, "**God, why do you use me for target practice?**" (Job 7:20).

3. Our Task Is To Be Faithful

Jesus said of His mission, "**It is finished**" *after* He asked why (John 19:4/17:20). God is not obligated to give us answers. Much of the time He calls us to "**walk by faith and not by sight.**" (2 Corinthians 5:7).

Joseph spent years in one horrible situation after another. His brothers threw him into a pit to die and then sold him into slavery. Even though he refused the advances of his master's wife because it was against the law of God; he was put in prison for years (Genesis 37-44). In all this, he kept doing right and is known as the most Christ like man in the Old Testament. God finally showed up and gave him a high position in Egypt, which he used to give food to his family in Canaan. When his brothers were afraid he would take revenge, he told them they had nothing to fear because they sold him and got him there; but "**God had sent him**" ahead to save lives." (Genesis 37-45:4)

C. It Can Make Us Better People

Romans 5:3-5

“We rejoice (and triumph*) in our sufferings because we know that suffering produces endurance (we stand our ground*) and endurance produces integrity (approved faith, tested character-the right kind of person*) and integrity produces the joyful and confident hope of eternal salvation.”

(*Parenthesis = notes from the Amplified Bible)

1. Sympathy For Others (2 Corinthians 1:3-7)

“Blessed be/the God of all comfort (one who stands beside us to encourage and help) /who comforts us in our troubles so we are able to comfort those in any affliction with the same comfort with which we ourselves were comforted by God.”

Until we walk where others walk, we usually don't care much about what they are going through. This is why so many people who experience tragedy, start support groups to help others like themselves. Until we hurt we are not much help. We are like the Queen, who, when told her people were starving, said, “Let them eat cake.”

We put on our cars, “*I fight poverty – I work!*” and never give a thought to those who need transportation to get to work. Sympathy leads to action, the positive love of the “Good Samaritan” (Luke 14). Sympathy has been defined as “your pain in my heart.”

2. Faithfulness In Spite Of Pain

The term “endurance” means “to remain under”. The idea is that we can quit serving God and man, and living right, any time we want to; but we don't do it. We are like the man who welded his weather vane so it would not turn. When asked why, he said; “No matter which way the wind blows, I want it to point north.” The three Hebrew boys facing death in the furnace for not bowing down to an image, said to the king:

Daniel 3:17-18

“Our God is able to deliver us, but even if He doesn't, we will not worship the image.”

3. Assurance Of Salvation (Romans 5:5)

Refusing to leave our post when the going gets rough gives us **“tested character”** and the **“confident hope of eternal salvation”**. We have assurance of salvation. Tested under fire, we know our conversion was real. Peter compares it to burning off the worthless ore, until the pure gold is seen (1 Peter 1).

Jesus said false Christians **“fall away when trouble or persecution comes” (Matthew 13:21)**. The theme of Job is that no matter how much we suffer the true child of God will keep believing and serving. Job said, **“Though He slays me, I will still put my hope in Him.” (13:15)**. When asked if they would leave, like others were doing, the Apostles said, **“Where would we go, you have the words of eternal life.” (John 6:68)**.

4. Closeness to God (Job 42:5)

It was after his suffering and barrage of questions to the Almighty, that Job said, **“I had heard of You / but now I see You.” (Job 42:5)**. The Psalmist said, **“When I was in distress I sought the Lord”(Psalm 77:2)**. M.R. Dehaan commented, “We never learn to pray---really pray---until there is nothing left to do but pray.” This is true of almost everyone; but most of the time, God, to them, is little more than a spare tire they turn to in emergencies. To us, He is our traveling Companion holding a map and telling us which way to go. We feel like the Israelites in the desert. The way is hard and sometimes confusing, but God is our leader. Moses said of the forty years:

Deuteronomy 8:3-5

“He allowed you to hunger /and fed you /so you might know that man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from God.”

5. Appreciation For Heaven (Romans 8:18)

Paul’s sufferings began when he became a Christian (Acts 9). He was beaten, slandered, shipwrecked, and suffered constantly from chronic pain (2 Corinthians 4; 12). And he said of heaven in,

Romans 8:18

“I consider the sufferings of this present life,
are not even worth comparing
with the glory that is to be revealed.”

Heaven is not “pie in the sky by and by.” It is the only thing that makes this trail of tears we call life, make any sense. It is an incentive to keep on; knowing that our work is **“not in vain.” (1 Corinthians 15:58)**.

And old missionary returning home by ship saw a band and a

crowd on the dock. He thought, "They didn't forget me." Getting off the ship he saw the band was for some returning celebrity. He rode in a cab to his little hotel room and had a "pity party". He felt no one cared that he had given his life, and buried his wife and two of his children for foreign missions. Then God spoke to his heart saying, "Don't you know why there was no band to welcome you home? It is because you are not home yet."

D. It Can Make Us Bitter People

Thankfulness and joy are not automatic. Job's wife suffered exactly what her husband suffered, and when she told him to "**curse God and die**" (**Chapter 1**) she was no doubt on the verge of doing just that. Job worked his way through his hurt by being honest with his questions and complaints to God. We can only hope she did. Not all do, and not all Christians do. King Asa was one of the finest servants God ever had, but life's problems beat him down and somewhere he either felt like God let him down, or grew bitter against God. When he was dying the Bible says:

2 Chronicles 16:11-13

"In the thirty-ninth year of his rule he got a very bad foot disease; but he relied on the doctors and refused to ask the Lord for help. He died two years later."

It is tempting to write him off as a counterfeit Christian, but that may not be the case at all. A lot of Christians shrivel up into cheap imitations of the real thing as they wallow in self pity and miss the joys of Christian living. Remember: Suffering can make us *better*, but it can also make us *bitter*. It is not what happens to us in life that matters, but what we let happen to what happens to us. One man's girlfriend leaves him and he turns to the bottle. Another man's girlfriend leaves and he writes "The Tennessee Waltz" and becomes a millionaire.

"Two men looked out of prison bars;
One saw the mud the other the stars."

"I walked a mile with pleasure
She chattered all the way;
But I was none the wiser
For all she had to say.
I walked a mile with sorrow
And not a word said she;
But oh, the things I learned
When sorrow walked with me.