

Published based on [How Can I Thank God in Tough Times?](#)

How Can I Thank God in Tough Times?

What is thanksgiving?

Today is Thanksgiving Day in America. A day when many families get together and celebrate a holiday. A day of food, fellowship, football games on television, and a day of searching the web and the newspaper to discover what will be on the best sale on the day after Thanksgiving.

And as I pause today to thank God for his blessings and others for their love and kindness, I wonder if I can define "thanksgiving".

Does giving thanks mean that we deny any difficulties which might be in our lives at the present time? Does it mean that we are thankful even for the very difficulties themselves?

Well, Christians throughout the ages have wrestled with those questions.

You see, it is easy to be thankful when life is good, things are pleasant, you are at peace in all your relationships, your relatives are doing well, your church is growing, there is money in your bank account, and your body is healthy. But we know life does not always give us that Polaroid moment. So how do we give thanks, in truth and without religious frameworks which deny the reality of our lives, in those tough times?

Paul was an apostle during New Testament times, and he wrote to the church at Thessalonica and talked about thanksgiving, saying...

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

Do you think he really meant that? After all, to rejoice, pray, and give thanks is not always easy. Life consists of good days and bad, happy and sad times, times of failure and times of success. Yet Paul encouraged these believers to rejoice always, pray incessantly, and give thanks no matter what their circumstances were.

So often when life is not going as we wish, we find ourselves doing exactly the opposite of these things. We grumble, complain, abandon prayer because it seems God is not listening, and do everything but thank God.

Did Paul have his head stuck in the sand when he wrote these words? He must have had an easy life. Right? Wrong. In 2 Corinthians 11:23-29 Paul talked about his life...

I've worked much harder, been jailed more often, beaten up more times than I can count, and at death's door time after time. I've been flogged five times with the Jews' thirty-nine lashes, beaten by Roman rods three times, pummeled with rocks once. I've been shipwrecked three times, and immersed in the open sea for a night and a day. In hard traveling year in and year out, I've had to ford rivers, fend off robbers, struggle with friends, struggle with foes. I've been at risk in the city, at risk in the country, endangered by desert sun and sea storm, and betrayed by those I thought were my brothers. I've known drudgery and hard labor, many a long and lonely night without sleep, many a missed meal, blasted by the cold, naked to the weather. And that's not the half of it, when you throw in the daily pressures and anxieties of all the churches. When someone gets to the end of his rope, I feel the desperation in my bones.

Sounds like he was complaining to me! And therein we find insight into Paul's words. He knew what it was like to find it difficult to rejoice, challenging to pray, and almost impossible to find any reason to thank God for the situations he found himself in so many times.

Yet, he had learned the importance of thanksgiving. He wrote to the church in Philippi and said, ***... I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content: I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. (Philippians 4:11-13)***

Paul had learned. He sang his way right out of prison one time. He had friends who rescued him on another occasion. Paul had learned through the faithfulness of God. Paul had found God to be worthy of his thanksgiving even during the difficult days.

And I love what he said in 2 Corinthians 11:29, ***When someone gets to the end of his rope, I feel the desperation in my bones.*** Paul knew what it was like to try to remain in peace when he himself was at the end of his rope.

So what is thanksgiving? It is more than a trite phrase. It is not a confession that some would teach is a magic charm to change our circumstances. It comes from a heart that pleases God because Hebrews tells us that without faith it is impossible to please God and it takes true faith to thank God and rejoice and pray when times are difficult. It takes a heart which can say during the difficult times, "God, I don't understand why things are as I find them right now. I am at the end of my rope and don't know how I can hold on any longer. It feels like you are not listening to me. Yet, I thank you that in the midst of these difficulties, and somehow I believe that you are with me and you are listening. I thank you that even when I cannot see any evidence of your hand, I know it is there, shaping and molding me in the midst of trouble."

Thanksgiving comes from a heart that knows just as Paul did that it is Christ who strengthens in all situations. True thanksgiving comes from a learner's heart. A heart on a journey.

And I am truly thankful that God doesn't require a heart of perfection for there have been many times when I had to also cry "Lord, help my unbelief," and thankfully, God is willing to do just that.

So today, as we Americans stop to give thanks to God and others, maybe one of the great points of our thanksgiving should be a prayer of thanksgiving for a real God who allows real people to journey along in a world of both good and bad and commits himself to us, not just to change our circumstances, but to change us in our circumstances.

If you enjoyed this blog, you might also enjoy Mikki's blog from earlier this week entitled [A Time to Die at mikkiblogs.com/2009/11/25/a-time-to-die/](http://mikkiblogs.com/2009/11/25/a-time-to-die/)

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