

DEVELOPING A HEART OF THANKSGIVING (1)

“ In All Things Give Thanks- But Why?”

1 THESSALONIANS 5:16-18

When you hear these words, “In all things give thanks”, what comes to your mind? Things are not always good in life. Innocent people get killed in untimely car accidents. People die prematurely! And to be honest, things are not always good. No doubt this time of the year finds a number of people longing to buy Christmas presents for their children, when the barely have money to get by. Other would love to buy a Christmas present for a child that was taken through tragedy this past year, either in an accident or through some fatal disease. One particular house that we pass each Sunday morning on the way to church is a house of a family of four- or it was meant to be- but this past year on vacation- the husband and both children were suddenly killed in the early morning hours making their way back home. Things are not always good and life is not always wonderful!

In the day in which this passage was being penned, Paul was giving encouragement to the church at Thessalonica. They were walking through persecution, and many of them had been killed for their simple belief in Christ. Yet, regardless of all that had happened, Paul doesn't waver one iota. He says this- rejoice evermore. Pray without ceasing. And in everything give thanks. But why?

1. WHY GIVE THANK- OTHERS PERSECUTE YOU? In the Old Testament Book of Genesis 37, there stands a man by the name of Joseph, who would know personal family rejection, probably as much as any one in the Old Testament. The truth is, if we follow God, God never said that all is going to go the way we desire. In Genesis 37, God comes to Joseph and gives him a dream as to how He is going to use Joseph. Joseph simply gave his life to obedience. But when his brothers heard the dream they persecuted him verbally. They made fun of him, and laughed at him. No doubt Joseph, would wonder in his own heart, why his own brothers, his own flesh and blood were persecuting him so. The fact is, there are countless things that go on in our lives that we simply cannot understand.

Only God knows the countless individuals who are living in homes this morning who are continually facing persecution from someone within the home. That was exactly the case with Joseph. All he was attempting to do was obey God, and obey his father. But in spite of the fact that he obeyed his father, and was obedient to God, his brothers wanted nothing to do with him. No doubt Joseph felt confused, bewildered. After all he was one of the youngest sons, and why would his own blood brothers do all this to him. But in fact, that is exactly where many people are this morning. God alone knows the husbands that are being persecuted by their wives, or the wives that are being persecuted by their husbands. God knows the parents that are being persecuted by their children, and children that are being persecuted by their parents. From a human vantage point, we often times want to say, “Surely God don't want me to give thanks for this thing that is happening to my life!” But the truth is, we have only a short sighted picture in our minds of what is really going on. And the same was true about Joseph. Though Joseph was hurting from persecution, he didn't have the understanding of what God was up to in his life. The truth was, part of God's plan for Joseph included the “spiritual gymnasium” of persecution.

2. WHY GIVE THANKS- OTHERS REJECT YOU? Not only did Joseph face persecution, but his brothers went another step further. They decided to “kill him”. The Bible makes it clear in Gen. 37:18, that the brothers declared, “they decided to kill him”. No doubt, Joseph could hard come to terms with the thought of what his brothers wanted to do to him. He didn't know how much they resented him, until that day they threw him into the pit, and no doubt were going to leave him there to die, until there plans changed. Imagine life from Joseph's vantage point for a moment. He is going out to obey his father, to check on his brothers work, when all of a sudden they lay hold of him, strip him and Joseph finds himself in a pit, begging and asking for his brothers to let him out. Their rejection showed that they wanted nothing to do with Joseph. Why would God want a person to “give thanks” when they are experiencing what appears to be total and complete family rejection. It would have been bad enough if only one brother rejected Joseph, but it wasn't just one, it was all his brothers.

You may be like Joseph, you are experiencing personal ongoing rejection and you feel that there is no way to give thanks. Although you are a child of God, life isn't getting better and better, it is getting worse and worse. You may feel that your family wants nothing to do with you, and you may feel that your friends can't be counted on with any degree of confidence. You feel like Joseph, all alone. But it doesn't stop there- things get worse.

3. WHY GIVE THANKS- OTHERS WANT TO DO YOU HARM? The fact that Joseph's brothers wanted to do him harm is evident. They threw him in a pit to starve to death. No doubt Joseph would remember this scene in his life for years to come. When he hit the bottom of the pit only God knew what he thought, and how he felt. But the sheer agony of his brothers desiring and wanting to hurt him was more than he could bear. You may be saying something like this, "Why should I give thanks when it seems that all others want to do is destroy me, hurt me and harm me?"

It is one thing to be hurt accidentally, but when someone harms you deliberately and purposely it eats at our very soul. And the truth is many people this morning are saying, "I can't give thanks because my situation isn't worth giving thanks over". No doubt Joseph could say the same thing. Persecution, rejection, and deliberate harm were all a part of his life. But one thing that he learned through the process of time and life was to choose to give thanks. How is it evident? Because, God's protection was on him, even in the darkest hours whether he was conscious of it or not.

4. WHY GIVE THANKS- OTHERS DESIRE TO DESTROY YOUR NAME? If it wasn't enough for Joseph to lose his family, his brothers, and to be sold into slavery, he was seduced by an attractive woman who wanted him to go to bed with her. Rather than being disobedient to God, Joseph refused to go to bed with her or to even be with her. As a byproduct of his refusal to go to bed with her, he was accused of rape and thrown into prison.

The truth is, if there was anyone who could say, "I refuse to give thanks to God because of all that is happening to me", it could have been Joseph. A man rejected by his brothers, thrown away by his brothers, sold into slavery, accused of rape, and then finally thrown into prison for a crime that he didn't commit. The life of Joseph is a sobering reminder that life is not going to go easy for a person who genuinely desires to follow the Lord. A person who desires, "life to be easy and to go the way they want it to go", is a person that will never amount to anything in the kingdom of God. A brief overview of all the saints who made a difference in the pages of Scripture are those who "were willing" to face rejection, "were willing" to be talked about and remain faithful, "were willing" not to take justice into their own hands but leave it in the hands of God.

5. WHY GIVE THANKS- BECAUSE IT IS AN ACT OF OBEDIENCE. When Paul says, "Give thanks". Notice that the verse doesn't read like this, "Feel like giving thanks", or "Understand your situation and then give thanks". But rather it is a simple yet profound two words- give thanks. The act of giving thanks is not based on anything other than "choice". A person will either choose to give thanks or not give thanks based on their will. The problem with our humanity is that we "want something to be good, feel good" before we give thanks. We want an emotional high, money in our pockets, or life to go smoothly before we give thanks. The only problem with that is even an unbeliever can give thanks when good things come into their life. To obey God regardless of what happens to you is a matter of choice. It is a personal declaration before God, "I will thank you though what I am walking in doesn't feel much like giving thanks". I am giving thanks to you because I am going to obey You. The wonder of giving thanks is that God will always unconditionally bless the person, and the heart that gives him thanks. A brief overview of the life of Joseph was a life that was blessed. Why? Because Joseph learned to praise God, and thank God even when life was dark. The same holds true today. When your life seems pitch dark, and there is no knowledge of what is next, it takes a person of faith and confidence in God to give thanks.

6. WHY GIVE THANKS- BECAUSE GOD IS DIRECTING YOUR LIFE EVEN THOUGH YOU ARE UNCONSCIOUS OF IT. When you read Genesis 50:20, Joseph is looking back at his past. He is remembering that time he was thrown into pit, that time that he was sold into slavery, and all the things that happened to him, and he comes to this one sobering realization. God was directing his life, even when he was

unconscious of it. By the time he had become prime minister of Egypt and his brothers are brought to him, he realizes that God was working His will even though his brothers meant him harm, and desired to hurt him. If your heart is a heart that is bent on obeying him, God is consciously directing your life, your path, your plans, and at a point in time you will realize all that God had in mind for you, and why you had to undergo all you went through. The truth is nothing happens in our lives by accident. We call so many things chance, misfortune, a disaster, but the truth is our lives are under the eyes of Omnipotent God and He and He alone is directing our lives even when we are least conscious of it. In Genesis 37, Joseph thought his life was over. But in Genesis 50, he understood what God had in mind all along. In Genesis 39, he was thrown in prison for being accused of rape. But in Genesis 50, Joseph realizes that, it was in that prison where he would meet the man that would present him before Pharaoh.

7. WHY GIVE THANKS- THINGS ARE NOT WHAT THEY APPEAR? You may feel that you are forgotten by God, abandoned by God, and being totally and completely rejected by others. But Joseph learned a very sobering lesson in life. Things are not what they always appear! The fact is, for that person who is walking in obedience to God, God can cause anyone in the world to know where you are at any given time. When a person lives giving thanks and serving God, God makes it His business to vindicate him. God made it His business to dismiss the charges of “accused rape” because they were trumped up charges. What Joseph thought was a prison in Genesis 39, he realized in Genesis 50 was simply a meeting place for his being released to be a great servant over the land of Egypt. Your prison may be the meeting place to meet someone that will bring about your release, as you are faithful and wait for the Lord to act.