

*“Give thanks in all circumstances” 1 Thessalonians 5:18 / Luke 6:46-49 (11/10/24)*

Today’s Scripture, 1 Thessalonians 5:18, is one of the verses that gave me a lot of pressure throughout my whole Christian life. “Give thanks in all circumstances.” I loved this verse, and I still love it, so I try to give thanks in all circumstances, as this verse said. However, “Give thanks in all circumstances” was impossible for me. How does a human can give thanks in all circumstances? It is impossible. I am still young, but I know that life is not always happy. When my life was good, it was very easy to give great thanks to God. But when I felt my life was not good, I could not give true thanks to God. When I could not give thanks to God during a challenging time of my life, this 1 Thessalonians verse made me feel guilty.

For talking about “Give thanks in all circumstances,” I hope to share two special cases that I encountered during my chaplain work at a hospital in Evanston, Illinois. I worked as a chaplain intern at a hospital early this year. I did pastoral care for the patients in the hospital. One day, I experienced two cases in which I could not understand God’s plan.

While I was staying at the chaplain’s office, I received a pager message from the ICU unit. A patient’s family was looking for a chaplain. So, I went to the

ICU unit and met the family. When I entered the ICU room, I was surprised because a very young brother and sister called a chaplain for prayer for their mother, who was the patient. The young family said their mother fell down at home, and her bone (I don't remember clearly that it was a thigh bone or pelvis) was broken. And she came to the hospital to have surgery. They said their mother was fine when she came to the hospital, and they did not worry about the surgery. However, their mother had a heart issue during the surgery. Then she transferred to the ICU, and this young brother and sister called a chaplain for a prayer.

I was very impressed by this young family because they knew how they should rely on God when they were suffering. They said their mother was a faithful Christian. She raised them in Christian faith so they could have faith and be religious. So, I prayed for them and the patient, then came back to the office.

On the same day, just right before the work-off time, I received another pager message from the ICU unit. A family decided to transfer the patient to hospice care. The patient was not responsible and was at the end of her life. However, the patient woke up after having a very strong pain reliever from hospice care, then she requested communion from a chaplain before dying. Because it was close to work-off time, my supervisor asked me to check how the

patient's condition was serious. So, before I went into the room, I asked the nurse about the patient's condition. The nurse said, "I cannot guarantee when she will die, and I also cannot guarantee that she can live tonight." Her condition was not really good. So, my supervisor and I decided to provide communion for her before we went home.

We entered the room and provided communion for the patient and her family. It was the saddest communion that I experienced in my life. Can you imagine that receiving communion before the death? The patient knew that she would die soon. Everything could be the last for her. The conversation with her family, breathing, and sleeping in the night. She knew that the next day was not guaranteed for her. While we were sharing communion together, the patient and family were crying and in deep sorrow.

After communion, my supervisor and I came back to the office. My supervisor checked her chart to see how serious she was. After checking the chart, my supervisor told me the patient had a heroin addiction. And the patient's organs were damaged by heroin. I was sad for one person's life, the life of a drug addict, and finding God at the end of life. This day, with unique experiences, was an emotionally tough day.

However, a more shocking thing happened a few days later. During the internship time, I went to the hospital on Wednesday and Friday to do work. I had the tough day on Wednesday. When I came back to the hospital on Friday, I found the heroin addict patient's chart first to see if she was still alive. I was shocked by the patients' cases when I found the names. The heroin addict patient was still alive, and the faithful Christian patient was dead on that night. After that day, the heroin addict patient lived a few more days and got better, so she was discharged! Anyway, the heroin addict patient came back to the hospital a few months later. However, she lived a few months more after communion day.

The faithful family encountered the loss of their mother suddenly. They did not expect death, and they could not share the last word with their mother. However, the heroin addict patient lived with drugs, but she could have the last preparation. And she could have a few more months of life.

At that time, I could not understand God. I felt very confused after those experiences. 'Can I give thanks to God in this situation? What kind of thanks should I give to God?' My mind and heart were full of confusion on that day.

In our lives, pain, sorrow, suffering, sadness, unexpected accidents, and

unexpected results happen all the time. Then, how can we obey and follow the Scripture, “Give thanks in all circumstances”? We could “Give thanks in all circumstances” because Jesus is the rock that is the base of our thanksgiving.

While preparing today’s sermon, I reflected on the experiences I shared, and God helped me realize that I was connecting “Give thanks” to my emotions. So, my thanksgiving was not based on faith. Of course, I gave a lot of thanks to God whenever I was happy and sad. The gratitude I gave to God when I was suffering was not true gratitude but forced gratitude. I forced myself to give thanks in all circumstances. I am not saying that my efforts to find thanks in all circumstances were wrong. But thanksgiving, based on my emotions and feelings, could not bring any of the power of thanksgiving. “Give thanks in all circumstances” brought more pain and sorrow in my life when I connected thanksgiving and emotion together. And the hearts of giving thanks easily disappeared when I was not happy.

Some scholars argue that today’s Scripture, 1 Thessalonian, was Paul’s first letter to the church. When Paul wrote this letter, people in the Thessalonian church expected that Jesus would come again very soon. However, Jesus did not come back for about 20-30 years. Some people in the church died and could not

see the second coming of Christ. People started to be disappointed and despair. In this context, Paul encouraged people to “Give thanks in all circumstances.”

How can we give thanks to God when we are disappointed, despairing, and unexpected things happen in our lives? We can give thanks to God because Jesus died for us. We can give gratitude to God because Jesus is the rock of our thanksgiving. We should build not only our faith but also our Thanksgiving on Jesus, who is the rock. We should connect our Thanksgiving to Jesus, who is the base of our faith.

Emotions and gratitude are two different things. People who do not know Jesus express gratitude when they experience good things in their lives. But we, who are Christians, give thanks to God because of Jesus Christ. Christians are living the second life, which God gave to us. We can give thanks when we are happy because Jesus came to us. We can give thanks when we are sad because Jesus died for us. We can give thanks when we are suffering because Jesus is resurrected. We can “Give thanks in all circumstances” because of Jesus.

This week, I hope to encourage us to connect our thanksgiving to Jesus. Hope we can build our thanksgiving on Jesus. Hope we can find our thanksgiving

from the sacrifice of Jesus. May God lead us to give thanks in all circumstances.

Amen.