

Give Thanks in All Circumstances
1 Thessalonians 5:16-18
Key Verse: 5:18

Sarah Barry, at IIT, November 23, 2008

"Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus."

This month we are celebrating Thanksgiving. This is a uniquely American holiday--different from Christmas and Easter, which have roots in European tradition. The celebration of Thanksgiving came to us from our Pilgrim and Puritan forefathers. It is the faith, commitment, suffering and thankfulness of these Christian forefathers that set the course of American history and brought God's blessing to America. We want to remember them as we think about why God wants his people to give thanks in all circumstances.

FIRST, GIVE THANKS

We give thanks in all circumstances because the sovereign God is working to accomplish his purposes in everything.

We have just had an historic national election. I believe that God was in control of this election. God has a purpose for America, and he is working it out in his own way. President-elect Barak Obama won a landslide victory. He is different from any president we have had in the past. He is our first African-American president. Whether we voted for him or not, we must pray for him. I believe that God is sovereign. God raises up kings and presidents, and God deposes them. God is the one who controls history as well as nature. God's word urges us "that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone--for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth." (1Ti 2:1-3)

There is a vocal minority in our country who wants us to forget our Christian heritage. They try to rewrite our history. They even deny the obvious truth that God is the Creator, because they don't want to be accountable to him. Ultimately, what godless people do is not important. What God is doing matters. Let us pray and study the Bible and share God's word with whoever will open his heart. May we see what the Sovereign God is doing and give thanks.

Thanksgiving is a time for us to remember the Pilgrim pioneers of our nation, and give thanks to God. They could see God working in all circumstances. So they were thankful.

SECOND, IN ALL CIRCUMSTANCES

"Be thankful in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." First and foremost, being thankful is a spiritual battle. Thankfulness has nothing to do with circumstances. It has everything to do with seeing the sovereign God at work in us and in our world. When we are selfish and only think about ourselves we become spiritually blind. We can't see what God is doing. So we can't be thankful. When we turn from self to God, we can see the world through his eyes and be thankful in all circumstances. The Pilgrims fought this spiritual battle. It was a battle to turn from their overwhelming problems to see the hand of the sovereign God working in and through them. The two ways of looking at circumstances are illustrated in the two colonies established in the new land.

There were two colonies founded in the early days of America. One was in Jamestown, Virginia, and the other was in Plymouth, Massachusetts. These colonies were established by immigrants from England. The colony at Plymouth depended on God; the colony at Jamestown tried to go it alone--every man for himself. There was great suffering in both of these colonies. One, however, was full of bitterness, quarreling, blaming. The other was full of thanksgiving and joy, marked by loving and serving one another. We learn from them that being thankful does not depend on circumstances.

The first permanent English settlement in the New World was Jamestown, Virginia, founded in 1607. These first settlers did not go to the new land build a godly nation; they did not take their families, so they did not intend to settle there permanently. Their goals were materialistic. They were looking for gold and for a Northwest passage to the Orient. They found nothing for which to be thankful. But they found much about which to complain. After a

short time, they thought they had discovered gold, and they shipped a load of ore to England. The ore proved to be worthless-"fool's gold". The colonists at Jamestown suffered through times of starvation, rebellion and sickness. Half of them died. They depended on buying, begging or stealing from the Indians. When food ran out, they ate dead bodies. This community was not interested in God's will or God's work. They were seeking material wealth--they wanted gold. The Plymouth colony also encountered difficult circumstances. But they sought God's will, saw his hand working in all circumstances and were thankful.

THIRD, SEEKING GOD'S WILL

The Pilgrims (who were they?)

The Puritans and Pilgrims who established one of the earliest English speaking colonies in America were different. They believed the Bible, prayed to God and gave thanks to him in every circumstance. The Pilgrims came to America in 1620. They came from Holland, but originally, they were from England. At that time, the Church of England was the State Church. It was governed, not by godly men, but by a political assembly called the House of Bishops. So the government told people how to worship and what to preach and teach. Ordinary people did not read the Bible. There was no freedom of religion or freedom of speech. The Puritans and Pilgrims shared the same faith in God and belief in the Bible as God's word. The Puritans wanted to stay in the Church and reform it.

The Pilgrims belonged to a group called "Separatists." They wanted to separate from the Church of England and worship God according to the Bible. The Church of England branded them as fanatics and criminals. Persecution became intolerable. God led a large number of them to seek asylum in Holland. As foreign immigrants in Holland, they were forced to do the dirtiest and most menial jobs, and were paid sub-living wages. They didn't complain, but they prayed for direction to find God's will. They believed that God had led them there and that he was training them for his own purpose. Gradually, after more than 12 years of hard labor--and much prayer, they came to a conclusion. They became convinced that he was leading them to the new land, America. They knew how much the people in Jamestown had suffered, and that 50% of them had died from Indian raids, disease and starvation, but still they decided to go. They sought God's will to know where in America they should settle, and even more importantly, why they should go. Many small miracles happened. God closed and opened doors. Finally, God led them to settle in Plymouth, Massachusetts. William Bradford was a Pilgrim leader. He wrote in his journal reasons for going to America. He had a "great hope that God would use them and those who followed them to carry the Light of Christ to remote parts of the world." They were spiritual descendants of Abraham, seeking to walk in the footsteps of his faith. They must go in by faith and claim the Promised Land. They had to fight many enemies in order to do so. William Bradford knew that the devil's most potent weapons were fear and discouragement. He fought with the sword of the Spirit, the word of God. They gathered and he read passages like Isaiah 41:10: "Fear not, for I am with you, be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my victorious right hand." They claimed God's promise to Joshua, "Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the Lord our God will be with you wherever you go."

God was indeed with them. He protected them and he trained them on their journey to the New World. They were able to find a ship, the Mayflower, that would take them to America. Among those on board were the Pilgrims and the "strangers." The trip across the Atlantic was God's training. The weather was stormy, and the water was so rough that they were all seasick. The crew mocked them and the first mate in particular tried to frighten them with horror stories of people who died at sea. Then, the mate suddenly took ill and died--and the mocking ceased.

This dangerous and difficult voyage molded them--Pilgrim and stranger--together into a community. When they finally reached land, they wrote a document called the "Mayflower Compact." It was the precursor of our Constitution. For the first time in history, free and equal men covenanted together to create their own new civil government. It was secular government. Church and state were separate. Each person was free to worship God according to the dictates of his conscience.

God continued to be with them. He helped them to survive when survival seemed almost impossible. They arrived in November--just before winter set in. They knelt and thanked God. By God's grace they survived an Indian attack and found a cache of corn that helped stave off starvation; they found good water and good land, but there was no time to plant crops. The food supply was so short that they were down to 5 grains of corn a meal. Still, they thanked God and they kept the covenant to love one another. They shared food and worked together to build houses of mud

and straw with thatched roofs. But that winter 47 died--almost half of their original number. Through all of this, they loved God and kept their covenant with each other. They kept the Sabbath. The Sunday Worship Service was the high point of the week. In spite of all hardships, they depended on God and helped one another. They could give thanks in the hardest of times because they saw God working.

The First Thanksgiving

One day, a lone Indian dressed in a loin cloth walked into their camp. They didn't know what to expect, but they went out to meet him. Suddenly, he said in a booming voice in perfect English, "Welcome." He was Samoset, an Algonquin chief who liked to travel and who had learned English from sea captains. He told the Pilgrims that the part of the coast on which they had settled had formerly been the territory of an extremely fierce and hostile tribe, the Patuxet Indians. But the Patuxet Indians had been wiped out by a plague two years before. Amazingly, God had prepared a peaceful place for the Pilgrims to settle.

God had also prepared a man to help them. The next day, Samoset came back with Squanto, the only remaining Patuxet Indian. He had been captured and taken to England. He learned English, became a Christian and found a way to come back. But he found that his people were all dead from the plague. He had no mission and no reason to live. Now, God gave him a mission to help the Pilgrims. He taught them how to plant corn and pumpkin, how to refine maple syrup, how to stalk deer, how to discern edible berries, how to trap beavers for pelts--generally, how to survive in the new land. God had a purpose for America. He prepared Squanto just as he had prepared Joseph in Genesis to save the lives of his people. Surely God's hand was on America.

In the summer of 1621 they planted crops, built houses and traded with the Indians. God gave them a bountiful harvest. So Governor Bradford declared a day of public Thanksgiving, to be held in October. They knew that it was by God's help that they had survived. They invited Chief Massasoit, the wary but basically friendly chief of the Wampanoags. His tribe was the nearest Indian tribe. He came a day early with 90 Indians. What would the Pilgrims do? They didn't have enough food for 90 hungry Indians. They prayed. God provided. The Indians themselves brought 5 dressed deer and more than a dozen fat wild turkeys. There was abundant food. The Pilgrims remembered the previous hard winter. And they remembered God's grace. The first course of the meal was a plate with 5 grains of corn on it which was set before each person. They thanked God. After the abundant dinner, they had contests--foot-races, Indian wrestling, and other games. They had such a good time that the Indians stayed for 3 days.

This first Thanksgiving was a day full of joy and thanks. They worshiped and thanked God who had brought them to a new land and enabled them to survive. They suffered and many of them died, but they left behind a heritage of freedom, a heritage that set the direction of our country, one nation under God. We can give thanks in all circumstances when we see God's hand working in and among us. We remember and give thanks.

God wants us to remember his grace and thank him. Then he can teach us his will. He is the source of every good and perfect gift. (Jas 1:17) The Psalmist said: "Praise the Lord, O my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name. Praise the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits ..." Remember what he has done. (Ps 103)

In Exodus, God taught his people to remember God's grace of deliverance from slavery in Egypt by keeping the Passover, the feast of unleavened bread. They remembered God who gave them freedom. They remembered how the blood of the Passover lamb sprinkled on the door frames had protected them when the angel of death passed through Egypt. They remembered how God had led them across the Red Sea as on dry ground, while the Egyptians who tried to do the same thing drowned. They remembered how he led them through the desert to the Promised Land. Every time they celebrated the Passover, they were thanking God for his grace and re-affirming their identity as God's people. Even in times of exile and suffering they could remember what God had done and be thankful.

It is God's will that we be thankful. God doesn't want his people to be grumblers or complainers. He wants us to be thankful. Ingratitude is a serious matter. The Bible tells us that pride and unthankfulness is at the root of sin. (Ro 1:19-20) When we are proud and unthankful, our foolish hearts are darkened and our thinking becomes futile. Jesus taught his disciples and us to remember the new covenant in his blood, be thankful and keep our identity as God's people.

Even though they had experienced such a great deliverance, the Israelites grumbled and complained about the food. They even threatened to stone Moses and go back to Egypt. Many grumblers and complainers died in the desert. God wanted them to celebrate the Passover so that they could remember and be thankful.

Thanksgiving is a time for us who live in America to remember the Pilgrim's vision and sacrifice. It is time to remember God's good purpose for our country. God has blessed us abundantly. He made us a city on a hill which has shone the light of hope and freedom into a dark world. He has used us to feed the hungry and defend the helpless. We give thanks for those who spilled their blood on this land to make all men free; for soldiers who have lost their lives in the defense of freedom on foreign shores. We give thanks for missionaries who have obeyed God's call and gone to dark and dangerous places with the gospel of light. We give thanks for those who will go in the future.

We are disturbed when we see the moral consensus that under girds our democracy eroding. We become angry with those who rewrite our history and remove prayer and Bible reading from our public institutions. We see the foundations of marriage and family crumbling. Alexis de Tocqueville wrote a classic book on Democracy in America. He said that our democracy would not work if we did not maintain Christian values and a Christian moral consensus. This is not done by laws and politics. It must be done by men and women of sacrifice, vision and prayer.

It is time for us to remember our history. It is time to affirm our Christian heritage; it is a time to thank God for that handful of men and women who celebrated the first Thanksgiving and set the course of our country. Let us repent, thank God, pray and teach the Bible. Lord, forgive our sins and heal our land. Use us as Bible teachers and prayer warriors.

FOURTH, IN CHRIST JESUS How can we be thankful in all circumstances?

"Be thankful in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." The circumstances don't matter. It matters that we are "in Christ Jesus." We must accept God's sovereignty and his love. We must surrender our selfishness, turn away from ourselves to God. We must welcome Jesus to come in and dwell in our hearts through the Holy Spirit. We are "in Christ" when Christ is in us. When we are transformed by the renewing of our minds and no longer conform to the pattern of the world we can test and approve God's will. (Ro 12:1-2) Then, we can look beyond our small, petty, personal problems to God's big picture. Like the Pilgrims, we can participate in what God is doing. Then we can give thanks in all circumstances. Fighting selfishness was the real battle the Pilgrims fought. So they thanked God for the persecution that drove them to America. They thanked him for the hard trip that bound them together into a covenant community. They thanked him for his discipline, for their failures which made them depend on him. With them, we thank him for loving us so much that he did not withhold his own Son but gave him up for us. Through Jesus our sins are forgiven. By his grace, we are "in Christ Jesus." We thank him for giving us his Holy Spirit to dwell with us and in us throughout our pilgrimage on this earth. We thank him for the inheritance in heaven which will not perish, spoil or fade, but is kept for us. When we are "in Christ Jesus" we can be thankful in all circumstances. Let us affirm God's presence and his work in our own lives, in our Church and in the life of our nation. Let us pray for our nation and give thanks to God. May God make America a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.