

- ***Read I Thessalonians 5:16-18*** A well known text to us all concerning God's desire for us to be a thankful people. Certainly, this verse has been read any number of times all throughout this country as this past week we took some time to specifically focus on those things that we ought to be thankful for. Many of us stood around tables with family and loves ones and thanked God for the many blessing of this life. We were thankful for our families, our health, the food, our material blessings, and so many more good things that our Good God has given us in this life. However, I'd like for us to reexamine **v.18** one more time.
- Notice that **v.18** says that in "everything" we ought to give thanks. It doesn't say that we are only to be thankful for the good things in this life, but it says that in everything we ought to give thanks. Even in those things that we deem as being not good we ought to take a moment and recognize that there are things to be thankful for. Let me suggest to you that we have a great example of someone who did this in the life of the Apostle Paul.
- In **II Corinthians 12:7-10**, we see Paul writing to the Corinthians concerning an issue that he had been having in his life. He had this thorn in the flesh, of which we don't know anything specifically, that he had implored the Lord three times to remove from him. But instead of removing it, the Lord allows it to continue to be in the life of Paul. You'll notice that Paul doesn't pitch a fit or pout about his poor circumstances, but he instead shows a thankful heart even for the bad situation he was in. Certainly Paul wasn't thankful for his actual affliction, but let me suggest that Paul was thankful for some of the results that come from life's difficulties. Paul recognized, as we should, that life's difficulties present us with an opportunity to do one of two things. We can either allow the difficulties to negatively affect our faith and push us farther way from God, or we can embrace the temporary difficulties of this life and allow them to push us closer to God in greater trust and faith. The choice was Paul's and the choice is ours. This morning, let's consider how it is that we too can be thankful for life's difficulties or at least be thankful for some of the things they do for us and remind us of.

4 Reasons We Can Appreciate Life's Difficulties

I. Difficulties keep us humble. (v.7)

- A. The whole reason Paul mentions this thorn in the flesh is to counteract the honor that we presume was given to him by being able to see the glory of heaven through a vision. **(12:1-6)** This was mentioned by Paul because he was having to defend his apostleship. There were some false teachers who were vouching for each other and attacking Paul. Therefore, he writes to these brethren confirming that he is truly from God based upon these miraculous happenings.
- B. Paul had every reason to boast because of his apostleship and work for the Lord. However, here in our text and even back in **II Corinthians 11:23-28**, Paul speaks to the fact that the difficulties he faced in this life kept him humble. He mentioned specifically that they kept him from exalting himself. **(12:7)**
- C. There can be a very strong temptation for us to become puffed up when things are going very well in this life. We can get into the mindset of thinking that we can't be touched for whatever reason. We might get to thinking that we are something great and get "a little too big for our britches" as we say here in the south.
- D. There are a few example's in Scripture of people who thought they were big stuff, and then they were humbled directly by God. I think about Pharaoh and his people (**Exodus**) and kings Nebuchadnezzar (**Daniel 4**) and Herod (**Acts 12**). All of these individuals were prideful and thought they were big time, but God humbled them by afflicting them. They and those around them quickly realized (as best they could) that they were but human. Our difficulties in this life remind us that we too are just human and not in control of everything surrounding us.

II. Difficulties remind us that we must rely upon God. (vv.8,9)

- A. Because we are not in control, we are forced to rely upon the one who is in control of all things and gives us every good thing in this life...God and our Lord Jesus Christ.
- B. Paul shows us that our difficulties out to cause us to put more faith and trust in God to make things better. Concerning Paul's thorn in the flesh, he tells us that he implored, not just asked, but he implored God 3 times that it might be taken away. **(12:8)**
- C. Paul recognized and we must recognize that God is in control and that He is the one we must rely upon for help to handle the struggles in this life, whatever the thorn in our flesh might be. As Peter is instructing the younger men on how to be godly in their behavior, he instructs them to be humble in their character because God opposes the proud person. The humble person goes to God when difficulties rear their head, and God exalts the humble person because he relies upon God. **(I Peter 5:5-7)** The difficulties of this life force the wise person to look to the Mighty God of heaven for strength and comfort. We don't enjoy the difficulties, but we can be thankful that they push us to God.

III. Difficulties give us an opportunity to see God's strength perfected. (vv.9,10)

- A. Paul is humbled, goes to God, and then we see the Lord's response to Paul in **vv.9,10**. God's response centers around the fact that it is in moments of weakness where the power of God is made evident. True power isn't shown when things are going well, but it is shown when there is adversity. Surely we've all heard something along the lines of "the strongest steel is forged in the strongest fire."
- B. Paul certainly lived through many strong fires in his life. Sure there was the thorn in his flesh, but consider all of the other things he went through in his life in **II Corinthians 11:23-28**. Paul suffered in ways unimaginable to us, yet he persevered. How was he able to do so? The Lord and Paul answers that in **vv.9,10**, but Paul answers it very succinctly in **Philippians 4:13**, when he says that he can do all things through Christ who strengthens him.
- C. The verses preceding this verse gives greater context to what Paul means. He is able to not be anxious because he relies upon God. When he relies upon God then he is showered in peace that only God can provide **(Phil. 4:6-12)**
- D. When we struggle, when we encounter difficulties then we are provided with an opportunity to allow God's strength to be shown in our lives. Our victories over the struggles are opportunities to praise God for His strengthening of us. Sure the difficulties themselves aren't enjoying, but the opportunity to praise God for His providing for us is something we can come to appreciate.

IV. Difficulties help us to long for the perfect home with God in heaven.

- A. Paul doesn't mention this specifically in this text, but I think Paul's mentioning of his vision of heaven is another reason that Paul was content with the difficulties of this life. He knew there was something better waiting for him. He had seen Paradise and he heard inexpressible things. He knew how perfect that place was, and he was willing to endure difficulties in this life to be there.
- B. In **II Corinthians 4:16-18**, Paul makes the point that the difficulties of this life are bringing about a great result which is eternal glory that is beyond comprehension. Our reliance upon God is producing within us a strong faith that will lead us to heaven. Our temporary pain is leasing us to amazing eternal gain.
- C. We know that this world is not our permanent home. This life is but for a little while and then it is gone. Life's difficulties simply remind us that this world isn't for us. The difficulties remind us that there is a place that is so much better than what we see all around us. The difficulties, while not enjoyable, cause us to desire that better place and keep things in perspective. In this life there are struggles, pains, and tears, but we know that after this life we will be able to enjoy the perfect home with God in heaven. **(Revelation 21:3-7)**

Let's be honest. If given the choice we would just rather not have to suffer through difficulties in this life. Whether it be personal illness, illness of other, family struggles, job struggles, whatever it may be we would just rather not deal with it. I think Paul would understand that. He even tried to get the Lord to take away his thorn. But when the Lord said be content, Paul was content and he embraced the difficulties and was thankful for the good things that came as a result of the difficulties. May God help us to have this same type of mindset. Sure we don't enjoy the difficulties, but we can learn to embrace them and use them to produce something within us that will be good for us not in this life but the next life. May God be glorified in our difficulties in this life, and may His strength be made perfect and evident in our lives.