

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

¹⁶Rejoice always. ¹⁷Pray without ceasing. ¹⁸In everything give thanks. For this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

Thanking God in Tough Times

I.

"Tough times demand tough talk, demand tough hearts, demand tough songs." So begin the lyrics of a song.

Tough times. That's what 2020 feels like to many of us. Should one be giving thanks in 2020, or do the tough times demand tough talk, demand tough hearts, demand tough songs?

It's so much *easier* to give thanks when everything is going well, isn't it? When you are falling in love and getting married, it's easy to be thankful. Celebrating the birth of a child or grandchild.

Back in the old days—back in 2019—the extended family could get together for the Thanksgiving Feast. Laughter would fill the space; stories would be told by each subfamily to fill in the details of life for everyone else.

II.

Tough times.

This year is different. Screens flicker to life across the fruited plain as many families try to make do with Zoom or FaceTime or Google Duo or whatever all the family members can make work. This year the discussions will be about what adjustments each has needed to make to deal with the new realities of a life no one knew we had to prepare for.

Tough times are not confined only to a pandemic. Every year people get diagnosed with cancer or heart disease or any number of other life-threatening illnesses. Every year—every *day*—many people deal with depression and anxiety and mental illness.

"Rejoice always. ¹⁷Pray without ceasing. ¹⁸In everything give thanks. For this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus" (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18, EHV).

It's quite the statement Paul makes. In *everything* give thanks. This is God's will for you. Is it God's will for you to be thankful *for* tough times? For the surgery that you have to undergo? For the bout of COVID you have to deal with?

To thank God *for* such things might imply that God is *responsible* for the tough times—for the dark and difficult moments of life. Sometimes it's our own attitudes and actions that bring problems. Sometimes another person causes the pain and misery. Maybe 2020 just reminds us that we live in a world to which sin was added. After our first parents added sin to the world, God told them that tough times would be a part of life. *God* is not responsible for that. Sin is. Satan is. Not necessarily some specific sin, but the reality of sin in the world.

III.

Tough times. "Tough times demand tough talk, demand tough hearts, demand tough songs." Do they? The lyrics were written by an unbeliever, an agnostic who didn't think it was possible to figure out whether there is a God or not. Tough times, in his mind, meant that you were on your own. You just have to toughen up. Toughen your heart to deal with

the pain, toughen your talk to mask your feelings from others, find tough songs to reinforce your newfound toughened stoicism.

“Rejoice always.¹⁷ Pray without ceasing.¹⁸ In everything give thanks. For this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus” (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18, EHV). Rather than toughening your talk and your heart and your songs, maybe tough times can teach you a little bit about rejoicing and giving thanks.

The writer to the Hebrews applied what Moses told Joshua to every Christian. He wrote: “God has said: I will never leave you, and I will never forsake you” (Hebrews 13:5, EHV). Tough times can seem like the growing shadows as evening falls—darkness threatens to envelop and overwhelm. Tough times are exactly the times to remember the promise of God. “I will never leave you, and I will never forsake you.”

Remember sin? Tough times come to every generation because sin has added problems to the world. Jesus has overcome sin. He didn’t promise to do away with the tough times we have to face in life, but he *did* deal with the cause of the tough times. *That* is the primary thing for which we give thanks—we have forgiveness of sins and a restored relationship with God. That can ease the tough times. That’s why we’re here tonight, live and on livestream—to ease the tough times and to give thanks to God for forgiveness.

IV.

“Rejoice always.¹⁷ Pray without ceasing.¹⁸ In everything give thanks. For this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus” (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18, EHV).

In everything give thanks. *In everything*, not necessarily *for everything*. While we don’t give thanks *for* the COVID or the cancer or the heart disease, we give thanks even *in* and *through* such diagnoses that God has promised to be with us always. We give thanks that God has given skills to so many people in this world that are able to ease the suffering of those inflicted with all manner of diseases; and to create treatments and vaccines to slow the spread and the lethality of the illnesses that threaten our world. We give thanks for the technology that lets so many who might be vulnerable work and worship at home through tough times.

Above all, we give thanks for the forgiveness that means that these temporary pains will be replaced with eternal joys.

Tough times. “Tough times demand tough talk, demand tough hearts, demand tough songs.” Nope. Tough times make me glad to know my Savior-God. Tough times remind me of the love he has shown to the whole world in sending his Son. Demand might not be the right word, but tough times inspire me to rejoice always, to pray without ceasing, to give thanks in everything. Faith in the God of promise will lead you through tough times. Amen.