



Philippians Thankfulness

Philippians 1:3 NIV

I thank my God every time I remember you.

How Can You Be Thankful Now?

The other day someone sent me a message complaining about how hot it was. Someone else was upset with the behavior of one of her children. I had problems moving my wrist because of the pain and wondered why it had to happen to me. My son had a flat tire. My daughter lost her volleyball game. Someone broke into the fellowship hall and stole the hotdogs, hamburger meat and drinks. School has started. I didn't sleep well last night and I can't stop feeling tired. So how was your day?

Some people are naturally thankful and others have to work at it. Most of us are thankful sometimes and a little whiney at others, grateful and complaining within the same hour. Where would you say you fit on the frustration/thankfulness scale today? We have in Philippians 1: 3 a rather soft call for thankfulness. It is not a sermon on it and you could not say Paul is really pushing us to be thankful. Yet there is an important lesson for us in this short declaration of the Apostle worth talking about today. This often overlooked verse has been somewhat difficult for translators to be certain what Paul was indicating. It can be translated two different ways. First, as we read in the NIV text, "I thank my God every time I remember you." The second way to render the verse is, "I thank my God for your every remembrance of me." Translators choosing the second option believe that vs. 3 was Paul's subtle way of showing gratitude for the gift they sent him as described in 4: 18. However the context of the verse and the word order in the text would seem to point to the first translation as being Paul's intent.

It is interesting phrasing for Paul to use to describe his thankfulness. Every time he thought of the Philippians he thanked God. Nearly every memory we have is at least somewhat mixed. Even the happiest sources of celebration had aspects of struggle and difficulty. Paul's time in Philippi was not always easy. It was there that he was mercilessly beaten and thrown in jail. Synteché and Euodia were bickering and dragging others in the church into the conflict. Jews in Philippi were beginning to stir up trouble and casting doubt in the hearts of at least some in the church that faith in Christ was not sufficient, they also needed to follow Jewish laws and regulations in order to be right with God. To say that it was easy for Paul to be thankful to God for the Philippians every time he remembered them would not be necessarily accurate.

But we must consider the object of thankfulness if we are to understand thankfulness properly. True and life-changing thankfulness requires an object. For Paul that object was his God. It is not accidental that Paul says, "I thank my God" rather than "I thank God." If he was merely thanking an impersonal God with whom he had little if any relationship, he probably would rarely have been thankful when he recalled the Philippians. For the casual Christian whose relationship with God is built on watching "Touched by an Angel" episodes or looking at sunsets and feeling warm inside, this exalted level of thankfulness is frankly

almost never possible. But Paul knew God intimately. He drew close to Him when he was alone and when he was in a crowd. As God spoke to Paul, either intuitively or through scripture, by practicing obedience to Christ, Paul had developed a trust in God which was no longer shaken by the frustrating and demoralizing behaviors of others or the difficulties of life that plague us all.

This cannot be better illustrated than by Paul's letter to Philemon, a Christian slave owner who needed prompting his servant Onesimus. Onesimus had fled Philemon in an apparent attempt to escape his slavery but somehow Onesimus met up with Paul while the apostle was imprisoned and through that time together Onesimus became a born again Christian. Although Onesimus was a great friend and tremendous help during Paul's time of need, the Apostle sent Onesimus back to Philemon. However, Paul also gave Onesimus a letter for Philemon, calling for him to set Onesimus free. Paul, as he writes Philemon, tells him that he always thanks God for him when he remembers him in his prayers. **I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers,** (Philemon 1: 4 NIV) What a stupendous statement to make to a fellow who contrary to Paul's wishes maintained ownership of Onesimus as a slave, a man free in Christ. It would seem that there were times when Paul thought of Philemon and he had to have pondered Philemon's selfishness and greed came to mind. It would only be natural for Paul to consider Onesimus' bitter plight as slave and become angry with Philemon for allowing this to continue. But such was not the case. Paul says he thanks God every time he remembers Philemon. And this was not mere religious bluster or sanctimonious flattery, Paul was genuinely thankful to God for Philemon. Why?

Paul learned a most crucial lesson as he built his life in Jesus. Everything that comes our way, whether it is the gossiping coworker, the critical supervisor, the arrogant son or daughter, the chicken pox, the house break-in or the financial crisis is used by God for the benefit of every single man, woman or child whose heart has been given to Jesus. Not one occurrence in the Christian's life is accidental and each one has been carefully orchestrated that our lives might improve and prosper. So if that is true, then certainly Paul would thank God every time one of the Philippian Christians came to his mind. Because their contact with him and the events associated with them were blessed by God and used by Him to prosper Paul's life, Paul most certainly thanked God for them every time he remembered them.

To illustrate Paul's extensive confidence in God, he wrote in Romans 8 that although others may be flummoxed by trouble or hardship or persecution or danger, those things did not disturb him, because they merely were precursors to conquest and victory through Christ. **Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered." No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.** Romans 8:35-39 NIV

Without ultimate faith in God's good will in every circumstance, thankfulness is a rather flighty ambition. If though we don't have a thankful heart, we can easily become bitter and distressed and self-centered. It could be said that thankfulness to God is the one key that unlocks the heart imprisoned by hardship, pain and bitter memories. It puts everything into an eternal perspective that enlightens the murkiness of difficulties and difficult people. A thankful heart is a joyful and peaceful heart and for most of us, that is all we really need in life.