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WHEN GIVING THANKS SEEMS MASOCHISTIC

By Jeff Bonzelaar, Executive Director

Life Challenge is a spiritual gymnasium of sorts. We train men and women to be holy. We do this by acquainting our students to various spiritual disciplines. These include Bible study, prayer, fellowship, outreach, and the giving of tithes and offerings.

Some disciplines are easier than others (depending on one's personality, background, etc.). Each one has its place, though, in a believer becoming well-rounded. In Ephesians, Paul commends to his congregation one of the more difficult of these disciplines: "Always (give) thanks to God the Father for everything" (5:20).

Gratitude is not something that comes naturally. Ask any parent. I can't count the number of times I've said in exasperation to one of my sons after having received a gift, "Now what do you say?" Children have to be trained to say, "Thank you."

But adults are no different. In the Ephesians text, Paul reminds his flock to give thanks. And he tells them to

give thanks *for* everything.

Don't miss what Paul is saying. Not only are we to give thanks *always* and *in* everything. We are to give thanks *FOR* everything.

"Paul wasn't suggesting that we dance around the coffin. He wasn't saying that we couldn't cry if we have cancer."

Now let's be clear about something. Paul was not in some ivory tower when he told the Ephesians to always give thanks to God for everything. He was

stoned and beaten multiple times. He was imprisoned. He often went without food and clothing and shelter. He was harassed in almost every city he visited—never knowing when his life would end by some killer for hire. On top of all this, he suffered some kind of chronic ailment (see 2 Cor. 11:16—12:10).

Of course, Paul wasn't suggesting that we dance around the coffin. He wasn't saying that we couldn't cry if we have cancer. He wasn't telling us to celebrate when we lose our job. But he was saying that we are to ALWAYS give thanks to God for EVERYTHING.

Now if this seems strange, we must not immediately look for a way to soften the text to make it more palatable. May we be like Mary who, when the angel said she would conceive a son without a husband, humbly asked, "How can this be?" Gabriel, in response, gave her not a whole explanation, but all she needed to know: "The Holy Spirit will come on you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. . . . with God nothing will be impossible" (see Lk. 1:26 ff.).

Paul makes this link between the Spirit's indwelling and human possibility in our Ephesians text. No sooner does he charge, "Be filled with the Spirit" (5:18) than he writes, "Always (give) thanks . . . for everything" (5:20). Interpretation: "It is beyond your understanding and

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emotional ability to give thanks to God for all things. Thus, you must be filled with the Spirit."

Paul was not commanding something he himself did not follow. He gave thanks for weaknesses and afflictions and persecutions (see 2 Cor. 11:18; 12:5).

I know this sounds unreasonable. It sounds inhuman. In fact, it sounds downright masochistic. (Who, after all, enjoys pain?!) But notice what Paul says in 2 Cor. 12:10: "For when I am weak, then I am strong." How is this so? It is in times of difficulty and stress and pain and heartache that we are especially drawn to Christ. As we cry out to God in these times, He pours out His grace, and we discover anew His sufficiency. Therefore, Paul declares, "I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, *so that the power of Christ may rest upon me*" (2 Cor. 12:9).

One truth that has helped me in my journey as a struggling Christian has been my conviction that everything that comes our way is ultimately mercy—*however it is packaged*. Even the experience of the valley of the shadow of death did not dissuade David from saying, "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow (lit., pursue, chase after) me *all the days of my life*" (Ps. 23:6).

Jeremiah's words found in Lamentations, a book of intense suffering written during Israel's exile, also give me great comfort: "Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning" (3:23). This passage is declaring that every morning God has prepared for us a whole new batch of freshly chosen mercies perfectly suited to our every need. Wow!

It doesn't always seem like this. Death of a loved one, loss of health, financial crises, relational conflicts, etc. may cause our spirit to waver and our soul to sink. God's "mercies" can, indeed, be strange. But we must affirm that an all-wise and all-loving God knows what is best for us.

Friend, be assured that no matter what disappointments or suffering comes our way, God is going to work it all out for *good* (lit., benefit, advantage) (see Rom. 8:28). Knowing this, we can be thankful even when sorrowful.

*THROUGH IT ALL
(Andrae Crouch)*

*I thank God for the mountains,
And I thank Him for the valleys,
I thank Him for the storms He brought me through.
For if I'd never had a problem,
I wouldn't know God could solve them.*

Chorus:

*Through it all, through it all,
I've learned to trust in Jesus,
I've learned to trust in God.
Through it all, through it all,
I've learned to depend upon His Word.*



**Testimony
Robert Figgins**

"I was raised in a small town in Western Michigan. When my mom joined the army, my dad was left to raise an 8 year old on his own. I found it hard to be an only child in a one-parent home.

Out of anger I began to rebel against my father's authority. Thinking a change would improve things, my father agreed to let me live with my mother.

There I had even less supervision. I started hanging out with the troublemakers. I began drinking and doing drugs. I ran away from home trying to get attention from my mother.

When I was 18 my mother gave me another chance, and I moved in with her. I started working as a roofer and selling drugs on the side. I was in a relationship with a woman I loved. I thought I was living the good life.

My girlfriend became pregnant but decided to not

have the baby. I was devastated. I was filled with guilt and found that using drugs helped the pain.

Over the next few years I lost everything. I felt worthless and had no hope for the future. I didn't care whether I lived or died.

One day a friend of mine said that the only thing that would help me was Life Challenge. He said it was different than any rehab I had been in. It was a Christian program centered on Jesus Christ. I was open to anything.

I entered the program, and for the next 12 months learned about the wonder and glory of God and His Son Jesus. In the chapels and Bible classes I learned about a God who created me for a purpose and loved me just as I am.

I submitted my life to Jesus Christ. He has since freed me of the guilt of my sin. I am learning to wait on the Lord and not act on my own.

I am grateful for God's grace working through the prayers of friends and family who never stopped loving or caring about me. What's more, my mother's faith has been renewed through the miracle God has performed in me. All things are truly possible with God!"

P.S. Robert graduated from the program in December 2006. He completed a six-month internship and is currently a staff member serving in our Operations Department.



Gratefully His,

Jeff

P.S. We rejoice in God's goodness as we saw 44 of our men and women graduate our 1-year program in 2007.