

# Responses to Adversity

Psalm 34:1–10; 1 Thessalonians 5:16–18

All of us face adversity. In a sin-cursed, fallen world, things don't always go the way we want. Accidents happen. We are misunderstood. Enemies spread malicious rumors about us. Criminals use force to harm us. Tragedy strikes. When these things happen, we are disappointed. We nurse our wounds and feel sorry for ourselves. We get depressed. We get angry with God. We are even tempted to give up the faith. We might think: *I've been trying to live as a Christian, and look what's happened to me; I'm giving up.*

But these responses are wrong. We should know better. Jesus gave us advance warning. He said, "In this world you *will* have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."<sup>1</sup> Each of us should be forewarned that adversity is coming. We ought to be prepared for it.

What are the biblical responses to adversity? They are taught in our New Testament text, namely, "rejoice," "pray," and "give thanks." Let's take them in turn. First,

## 1. Rejoice

Our text says, "Rejoice always."

Here is a verse consisting of just two words. There are not a lot of these in the New Testament. I can think of just two—this one, and the poignant "Jesus wept" (John 11:35).

What is Paul saying? "Rejoice always." That ought to be simple enough. "Rejoice" means to feel or show great joy or delight. "Always" means *at all times, in all situations, no matter how dire the circumstances*. That is the teaching of holy Scripture. That is God's will for our lives.

The "always" of "rejoice always" receives its inspiration from the first verse of our Old Testament text, Psalm 34: "I will bless the LORD *at all times*; His praise shall continually be in my mouth." We can rejoice at all times because we bless the Lord at all times. This is what Job said when he lost everything: "The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD" (Job 1:21).

The Bible speaks of "good news from a far country." But we have to be realistic. Not all news is good news. Some news is disappointing. Some news is absolutely devastating. If you've never had any bad news, you haven't lived very long. I remember trying out years ago for one of the touring choirs at Moody Bible Institute. I had always excelled musically, so I thought, *This will be a cinch—I'll be a shoo-in*. But I was not chosen! I nursed my wounds and had a pity-party. But failure can be a good thing. It can help us to see that, ultimately, our sufficiency is in Christ. *He* must increase, *we* must decrease. All glory must go to Christ. When I

---

<sup>1</sup> John 16:33 NIV, emphasis added

went to that bulletin board to see who made the cut, and I was not on the list, that was something I needed to see. It was bitter news at the time, but the Lord used it to teach me a needed lesson. We must all learn to rejoice, even in difficult circumstances. Our Catechism observes, “The fall brought mankind into an estate of sin and *misery*.”<sup>2</sup> Misery is humankind’s present lot. The fact that there is any good news at all in this world is only because of common grace.

So here’s our clear duty: “Rejoice.” That’s easy to do when things are going well, but when everything is falling apart, it’s not easy. In fact, it is utterly impossible to do apart from the enabling grace of God’s Holy Spirit.

There are a number of places in the Bible that tell us to “rejoice *in the LORD*.” Here are a few of them. “*Rejoice in the LORD, O you righteous! For praise from the upright is beautiful.*” “*Rejoice in the LORD, you righteous, and give thanks at the remembrance of His holy name.*” “*You shall rejoice in the LORD, and glory in the Holy One of Israel.*” “*I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my soul shall be joyful in my God; for He has clothed me with the garments of salvation, He has covered me with the robe of righteousness.*” “*Yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will joy in the God of my salvation.*” “*Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord.*” “*Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I say, rejoice!*”<sup>3</sup>

You might respond: “Of course I can rejoice in the LORD. He is perfect and glorious in holiness. He is the covenant-keeping God to whom I owe my salvation and even life itself.” And that is correct.

But our text this morning is even more difficult than “Rejoice in the LORD.” We *should* rejoice in the LORD. He is magnificent, glorious in holiness, doing wonders. In him we live, and move, and have our being. No good thing will he withhold from them that walk uprightly. But our 1 Thessalonians text does not say, “Rejoice in the LORD,” it says simply, “Rejoice.” Our duty is to rejoice. With the plethora of bad things that happen to us as human beings, how can we do this? Because our God is on the throne! He is working out all things for his own glory, and our good. He has our best interest at heart, 100% of the time—no exceptions. No matter what evil circumstances may befall us in this vale of tears, it is he who has permitted it. He is almighty and does not lack for resources to accomplish all his holy will. And he is a faithful Father who loves his children and is infallibly bringing his many sons to glory. In the end, every one of us will say, “It is *good* for me that I have been afflicted; that I might learn thy statutes.”<sup>4</sup>

God has given us a lot of reasons to rejoice. At the final day every born-again soul will surround God’s throne saying, “You have done all things well.”

---

<sup>2</sup> SC 17, <https://opc.org/sc.html>

<sup>3</sup> Ps. 33:1, 97:12; Isa. 41:16, 61:10; Hab. 3:18; Phil. 3:1, 4:4

<sup>4</sup> Ps. 119:71, emphasis added

Here, then, is our first response to adversity: to rejoice. Certainly that is counterintuitive. It is not our first response. But if we want to be obedient sons and daughters of God, that is what we should do. Nevertheless, let's move on. Secondly, we should

## 2. Pray

“Pray without ceasing” (ἀδιαλείπτως, *without stopping, without leaving off*). What this means is: be always in constant communion with God, be always in an attitude of prayer.

Prayer is the believer's duty and privilege. What is prayer? The Shorter Catechism, summarizing Scripture, has a helpful definition: “Prayer is an offering up of our desires unto God, for things agreeable to his will, in the name of Christ, with confession of our sins, and thankful acknowledgment of his mercies.”<sup>5</sup> Let's unpack this: prayer is **an offering up of our desires to God**. His word offers this encouragement: “Delight thyself also in the LORD; and he shall give thee *the desires of thine heart*” (Ps. 37:4). “No good thing will he withhold from them that walk uprightly” (Ps. 84:11). **For things agreeable to his will**. “This is the confidence that we have in him, that, if we ask anything *according to his will*, he heareth us” (1 John 5:14). **In the name of Christ**. “If ye shall ask anything *in my name*, I will do it” (John 14:14). **With confession of our sins**. “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). **And thankful acknowledgment of his mercies**. “In everything by prayer and supplication *with thanksgiving* let your requests be made known unto God” (Phil. 4:6). God has certainly given us a lot of encouragement to “pray without ceasing”—without stopping, without leaving off, without giving up. The line to heaven must always be kept open. Clearly, God wants us to *rejoice*, he wants us to *pray*. Thirdly, he wants us to

## 3. Give thanks

The apostle writes, “In everything *give thanks*; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”

“Thanks” is somewhat of a hard word to define. *Thanks* is usually defined as *gratitude*. And *gratitude* is usually defined as *thanks!* It is an expression of politeness and courtesy. It recognizes the contribution of another person. Too often all we think of is ourselves. We are oblivious to all the ways we are indebted to other people. That is why Paul elsewhere teaches: “Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others” (Phil. 2:4). Ultimately we are indebted to God. Our lives are dependent on him. He upholds all things by the word of his power. He gives to all the children of men life and breath and all things. When the Bible says, “in everything give thanks,” that means, first

---

<sup>5</sup> SC 98, <https://opc.org/sc.html>

and foremost, that we should give thanks to *God*. But we should also give thanks to others. When Christ healed the ten lepers, and only one returned to give thanks, that one who gave thanks is commended. Each of us is indebted to the many contributions of our fellow man. When I eat a bowl of Cheerios in the morning, I am dependent on the farmer who grew the oats, the dairyman who milked the cow, the trucker who brought the products to market, the store employee who put them on the shelf, as well as the printer who printed the packaging, and a host of other people who worked in a myriad of other ways. Ultimately, I am grateful to God for giving conditions conducive to agriculture and who blesses our labor with increase. “In him we live, and move, and have our being” (Acts 17:28). Whether our life is rosy or gloomy, we know that God is in control, and he is working out his holy will for his glory and his people’s good.

This, then, is God’s will for every Christian when we face adversity: (1) rejoice; (2) pray; (3) give thanks.

I want to make one final observation: all three verbs in this series are in second person *plural*. Bear with me. This is not just some arcane, obscure point of grammar. It has very practical ramifications, as I will demonstrate. Here are three verbs: “rejoice,” “pray” and “give thanks.” We’ve read them dozens of times. We think we know what they mean. They seem pretty straightforward. Maybe our eyes even glaze over when we hear them. But let me point out something that is not evident from the translations. It’s not particularly the fault of the translators; rather, it’s a limitation inherent in the English language.

When you read these words in your English Bible it is pretty evident that they are imperative. They are *commands*—commands from the Lord of the church. That much is apparent. Our wise heavenly Father wants us to “rejoice,” “pray” and “give thanks”! These words are imperative in the original Greek and they are imperative in the English translation. But what is not evident from the translation is whether these imperative commands are singular or plural.

In older modern English the distinction between singular or plural was represented by different second-person pronouns: “thou” (which is singular) and “ye” (which is plural). In some cases the King James Version made this explicit. When Paul wrote to Timothy and said, “Let no man despise thy youth; but be thou an example of the believers,”<sup>6</sup> the KJV made it explicit: “be *thou* an example.” Paul was talking to a single man, his protégé, Timothy, so he naturally used the *singular* imperative.

On the other hand, in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus was talking to a large crowd of people. He told them, “Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.”<sup>7</sup> He used the plural imperative: “be *ye* perfect.” In these

---

<sup>6</sup> 1 Tim. 4:12

<sup>7</sup> Matt. 5:48

cases the translators added English pronouns to make explicit in English what is explicit in the Greek. A few times they do that, but a translation that did that consistently, while it would be valuable for study, would make for cumbersome English. The King James Version was intended for public reading. It was, as declared on its title page, “appointed to be read in churches.” This was radical in 1611 when the translation was released. A lot of English-speaking churches then had no Bible in natural, spoken English. Over time the KJV was recognized as a superior translation in understandable English. It was widely used for over 350 years and has its ardent defenders today.

It should be evident from the context that 1 Thessalonians was written to a church congregation composed of numbers of individuals. The book begins: “Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” In the King James Version the word “ye” has been already used some 38 times in this epistle. Earlier in chapter 5 the KJV translates Paul as writing “But *ye*, brethren, are not in darkness, that that day should overtake you as a thief.”<sup>8</sup> He had said, “*Ye* are all the children of light, and the children of the day.”<sup>9</sup> In our present text the translators could have written “Rejoice *ye* evermore. Pray *ye* without ceasing. In everything give *ye* thanks,” but in these instances the translators, in their desire to make a translation that was understandable and clear for public reading, opted for a simpler translation that would have a more immediate impact upon the human ear. But the underlying Greek original uses the *plural*, not the singular, form of these commands.

So what do we make of this? How does this alter the way we understand and utilize these commands? This: “rejoice,” “pray” and “give thanks” are, in this context, things that we do *with the church*. They are not, strictly speaking, things that we do only in private. As I pointed out, all churches, everywhere on earth, will experience adversity—things that are troubling, disturbing, devastating and uncomfortable and will need to be processed, theologized and dealt with from a biblical perspective. This is life in a sinful, fallen world. In the midst of adversity God wants his church to *rejoice, pray and give thanks*. He wants us to do this as *congregations*—visible, organized manifestations of the universal body of Christ.

Here’s the bottom line: *the Lord never intended that we experience adversity alone!* The Lord himself, the King and head of the church, goes with us through the valley of the shadow of death, as we learn in Psalm 23. The gospel is *not*: “Keep a stiff upper lip and suffer alone.” It is *not*: “You’ve got the needed resources within you. Just deal with it.” God has placed us into local flocks of his sheep. This is his most wise and beneficent eternal plan for his people. The Good Shepherd in his infinite wisdom knew that his sheep (who were given to him by the

---

<sup>8</sup> 1 Thess. 5:4

<sup>9</sup> 1 Thess. 5:5

Father before the world began, and whom he came to save—every one) needed the care and spiritual support of the body—his spiritual flock.

Is a member of our congregation experiencing adversity and difficulty? Then, what Paul is saying is, “*Hey, you all, pray!*” The chief Shepherd never intended that his suffering sheep should suffer alone. When one part of the body suffers, the whole body suffers with it.

Some Christians are very private and do not want other members of the flock to know that they are suffering. They think it is more spiritual to suffer alone. It is *not* more spiritual! It is utterly contrary to Father’s will. These three commands—“rejoice,” “pray,” “give thanks”—are not written to solitary individuals with no connection to the church. These are commands for the church! There are a lot of would-be Christians in our day who want to have Christ without the church. But make no mistake: it is *impossible* for a solitary Christian to obey these commands as they are written! It might appear so from the English translations, but the knowledge that these commands are plural is a game-changer. It changes everything. And with the tools available to us in the present day, you do not need to be a Greek scholar to ascertain this for yourself. There is a word-by-word grammatical analysis of the New Testament available on Bible Hub. If you have trouble finding it, I can give you the link.<sup>10</sup> These commands, “rejoice,” “pray,” and “give thanks,” were not given to private individuals but to the *church*. Do you want to obey them? You have to be part of the church. God never intended his sheep to wander about alone, with no connection to the flock. Wandering, solitary sheep are going to get picked off by wolves. If you think you haven’t yet found the perfect church, and don’t want to commit yourself, if you think it’s more spiritual to be alone and doctrinally correct rather than part of an imperfect congregation, then you are setting yourself up to be picked off by wolves. You are setting yourself up for failure. Come to the Good Shepherd! Where is he to be found? With his sheep, with his flock—with his church!

When a member of the flock wanders off, then the Good Shepherd leaves the flock in the care of his undershepherds and goes off to look for the wandering sheep. And when he finds that sheep, what does he do? He brings it back to the flock! He doesn’t administer first aid and leave that poor, lonely sheep out in the wilderness to be attacked by another wolf. He brings it back to the flock. Read your Bible, you can ascertain this for yourself.

A person who knows this and resolutely determines *not* to be a part of a flock is probably not a sheep at all; he or she is probably not born again. Christ’s sheep hear his voice and follow him. Those who do not follow him are *not* sheep but confused individuals who have been deluded by false teaching. If you love the

---

<sup>10</sup> [https://biblehub.com/1\\_thessalonians/5-16.htm#lexicon](https://biblehub.com/1_thessalonians/5-16.htm#lexicon); [https://biblehub.com/1\\_thessalonians/5-17.htm#lexicon](https://biblehub.com/1_thessalonians/5-17.htm#lexicon); [https://biblehub.com/1\\_thessalonians/5-18.htm#lexicon](https://biblehub.com/1_thessalonians/5-18.htm#lexicon)

Shepherd, then come to him! His word says that if you come he will in no wise cast you out. Come to the Shepherd. Put yourself under his protection. What this means in plain English is: join the flock, join the visible church, join a faithful but imperfect congregation of the visible church. By the way, there is no perfect visible church. All you have to choose from are imperfect churches. The best churches are those whose teaching and worship is closest to the Bible. The church doesn't have the right to make up doctrine or invent new ways to worship. Its duty is to teach and practice what's in the Bible—and nothing that is not in the Bible. Jesus said, “Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you”<sup>11</sup>—that's it! Nothing more!

Brothers and sisters, when adversity comes, let us *rejoice* with the church that God is on the throne and has not abandoned us, let us *pray* as a congregation for those who are struggling, and let us *give thanks* that God is working in our midst to bring glory to himself and to purify us and make us more like our Savior, Jesus Christ, who died for us to bring many sons and daughters to glory. And let us dedicate ourselves to care for our fellow sheep. Amen.

---

<sup>11</sup> Matt. 28:20