

SINCERE REASONS IN GIVING THANKS

By Rev. Stephen P. Manurung
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Shalom,

Cain planned to offer the outcome of his handwork from agricultural products. His heart overflowed with thanks to God because that was the first time the earth had given results that he could enjoy. He made an altar and offered the first fruits to God. At first it seemed that there was no problem with the activity, all seemed very good and spiritual. Abel, his younger brother, copied the example of his brother. He offered the firstborn of a lamb (Genesis 4: 4). It turned out that Cain's thanksgiving was less sincere because there was wrong motivation in the thanksgiving activities he did. When God heeded Abel's offering but did not heed his sacrifice, jealousy and hatred arose which resulted in his vicious killing of his brother (Genesis 4: 5-8).

If Cain gave thanks with the wrong reasons and ways, it should not be the case for us who are here to worship and have sung songs of thanksgiving since we came. In fact, there are many reasons and motivations in giving thanks to God - some are sincere but some also have ulterior motives, etc.

What about the Apostle Paul? We are studying the Apostle Paul's letter to the Philippians. What is the overflowing of his heart which is written in his writing? Philippians 1: 3-8 write, "***I thank my God (= eucharisteo: to express gratitude for benefit or blessings) upon every remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine making request for you all with joy, for your fellowship (fellowship, participation) in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work (ergon: business) in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ; just as it is right for me to think this of you all, because I have you in my heart, in as much as both in my chains and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel, you all are partakers with me of grace. For God is my witness, how greatly I long for you all with the affection of Jesus Christ.***"

At that time, the Apostle Paul was again imprisoned in Rome but he could give thanks to God. What was the reason he was thankful to Him?

- Because he got **benefits**.
Everyone must be happy to get benefit/luck, and Indonesians are famous for the phrase 'still lucky', for example: a case of

house robbery, the owner felt 'still lucky' that the safe was not taken; another case, he was on the way and got into an accident and yet 'fortunately' his leg was not broken and so on.

Actually, thanksgiving is an activity that cannot be separated from our identity as believers. The Apostle Paul gave thanks because he benefited. Do you know what benefits / blessings Paul Apostle gets? The blessings from **handcuffs** and **imprisonment for Christ's sake** (Philippians 1: 12-13).

Honestly, it is not easy to give thanks when we are in prison, and the Apostle Paul was handcuffed not because of a criminal act. In fact, he experienced injustice in court. The fact is, there are law violators who have clearly committed crime and cannot accept the court verdict and asked for appealed. Even in some death penalty cases, some convicts do not want to ask for clemency from the president even though the president gives a sign for forgiveness. He did not want to file a pardon because he did not want to be considered guilty if he asked for a presidential forgiveness.

Unlike the Apostle Paul, he did not beg to be released from prison even though he was innocent. Precisely when suffering in prison, he gave thanks for getting profit and blessings. How could he turn "this kind of bad luck" into an advantage?

It seems that the gratitude that we express every day in our life is not determined by what we produce/get; whether it is profitable or disadvantageous - depending on how we respond to the situation at hand. For example: can we see the sun in the midst of clouds? Depending on where we look at it - from below or above the clouds. Can we still find God's goodness in the midst of the difficulties of our lives? Is it possible for us to rejoice in the midst of grief or to find profit in the midst of bankruptcy? All depend on which perspective we see it. The proof is the Apostle Paul felt fortunate when imprisoned.

The Apostle Paul always remembered the **church** (Philippians 1: 3) **who filled his heart**.

Judging from the literary/linguistic psychology, the Philippine Letter is a spark of the Apostle Paul's heart which was filled with the theological feelings and struggles of a servant of God. There were many things that the Apostle Paul thought when he was imprisoned, including: his condition, the church and the future of the church of God as well as the nation of Israel and so on. Paul's mixed feelings from the long struggle resulted in gratitude not a complaint about the cruelty of an unfair trial and difficulties because his independence as a Roman citizen was seized etc.

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Introspection: Do God's servants feel fortunate because of the acquisition of complete facilities and not because of the congregation? Or do they become the servants of God who complain more because of financial difficulties, being unable to bear the congregations who like make trouble etc.?

It turns out that the Apostle Paul remembered not only the church but also the elders and deacons. Like it or not, they become a burden on the Apostle Paul's thoughts. The congregation does not need to feel guilty that they have become a burden on the mind of the pastor/servant of God, because - like Paul, the memory of them actually made Paul more enthusiastic, entertained and able to pray joyfully. Indeed the work of God's servants is to deliver the Word of God, visit sick people, pray for those who are in trouble and so on but more than that there is an inner connection between the Lord's servants and the congregation, the elders and are not merely business relationships or limited to the work of a servant of God. The closeness of this relationship makes God's servants happier to serve God.

Application: There should be a fairly good relationship between the pastors-the elders-congregations so that each of them is more excited and joyful in worshiping and serving God. Do not even aggravate the pastor's burden or damage the relationships between congregations with careless words and actions! When relationships and good communication occur, the heart becomes joyous as if to get extraordinary benefits. Do not also like to compare one preacher with another preacher; on the contrary, have we ever been grateful to the pastor who has shepherded and prayed for our souls and family for years? Illustration: Psychologically, a wife will feel very happy when her husband compliments her and feels lucky to marry her; likewise a pastor will be even more eager to serve God when he receives thanksgiving from a congregation blessed with his sermon.

To whom does Apostle Paul give thanks? To God for whom he was imprisoned (Ephesians 3: 1; 4: 1; 6:20; Philippians 1: 7,13; Colossians 4: 3; Philippians 1: 9,13). Strange, shouldn't the words of disappointment and revenge have deserved to be said to God? Honestly it must be admitted, how often we are disappointed and angry with God when our business goes bankrupt even though the fault lies with us in managing it; or we get angry at God when our grades in school are terribly bad even though laziness in learning is the cause and so on.

The Apostle Paul wrote "I give thanks to **my** God ..." (Philippians 1: 3)

He said "**my**" God (pronoun ownership of the first person singular) - not "our" God (plural second person pronouns) even though this letter

was clearly written to the Philippians. This confirms that his relationship with God is personal, exclusive and special. All the disappointment, anger, and pain were gone because God was special to him.

There are times when we use the word ownership in general (ours/us) but some are private (my/mine). Example: when inviting guests to the house, we say, "This is **our** home, come in and sit down." But when introducing a wife, we say, "And this is **my** wife."

Application: In "*Koinonia*" (fellowship with one another), our relationship with God in worship and adoration must be exclusive, personal and special. A husband/wife does not follow the wife's/husband's God, but each must enjoy a personal relationship with God without 'piggybacking' their spouse. A child must also have personal experience and ensure that the God being worshiped is no longer his father's/mother's but his own "God". If our relationship with God has come to this point, anything may happen but we will never stop giving thanks.

- Because he **got the support** (Philippians 1: 5-8). All living things need support so that they can live healthy and well, even the lawn needs support from us so that it stays alive, if we step on it or don't water it, it will wither and dry. Likewise, our children need to be supported and given motivation and praise so that they grow up healthy.

The Apostle Paul gave thanks to God because he received extraordinary support from the church at Philippi. What support did he get from them? The Philippians gave an all-out support to this servant of God. They fellowshiped/participated in the preaching of the gospel. Apparently the Philippians congregation loved giving financial support (debt = giving and receiving) to Paul (Philippians 4: 14-15). Their support clearly alleviated Paul's trouble both morally and financially although they did not go with Paul to preach the gospel. In conclusion, when the congregation supports a servant of God, in fact they are supporting the preaching of the gospel and not for God's servant in person. Illustration: A businessman sees that his church and the pastor do not lack financially, and he decides to give his tithe to small churches thinking that they are more in need. His act seems spiritual and generous, but the truth is he doesn't care more on the works of God but merely to the financial condition of the pastor instead. Indeed, the greater the church, the greater the needs and costs used for the preaching of the gospel. Throughout the Bible (Old and New Testaments), offerings to God are governed by God Himself and not according to human preference under any circumstances.

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The Philippians supported Apostle Paul's ministry in both difficult and happy conditions and they would continue to do so (Philippians 1: 6).

Providing support/participation for the advancement of the gospel is good work (ergon = business). So supporting the preaching of the gospel is a good business → good business to do. Generally, when business people get together, they discuss what business is best to be done. It is impossible for them to come up with the idea of supporting the spreading of the gospel. They sometimes even consider that supporting church activities means being prepared to lose. Note, the concept of God is in contradiction with the concept of man; He never owes. In other words, people who support God's work will never be harmed by Him. Example: Lydia, seller of purple cloth (Acts 16: 14,40); Joanna the wife of Chuza, Herod's steward (Luke 8: 3; 24:10); Priscilla and Aquila who held Paul in Rome (Acts 18: 2) → they were never harmed by God, their business and household were blessed by Him.

The Philippians continued to support the preaching of the Gospel until at last the day of Christ Jesus - they did not stop at just one activity but continued until the end of their lives or until Christ came to pick them up.

What blessings will be obtained by the congregations who support God's work well? They will receive the same blessing of grace that was given to Paul - God's servant (Philippians 1: 7b). Take heed, a servant of God is identical to someone who is **strong in faith** and **wise**. Example: Paul was blessed with strength to face adversity, the proof is that he still rejoiced in prison (Philippians 1: 7c). Do not assume that God's blessing is only in the form of money or business profits, but the strength in facing difficulties is also an extraordinary blessing. In addition to the blessing of strength, Paul also received the blessing of wisdom/prudence so that he could provide answers to defense and affirm the gospel message.

Application: The congregation who like to participate in supporting God's work also have the potential to have parts in the blessings received by the servants of God, so that they are strong in facing problems and wise in finding solutions to problems. Aren't there countless smart people in the world but only a few wise people?

Let's always give thanks to God and do good work - *good business* - for the development of the preaching of the gospel done with joy. Remember, God never wants to owe, if we give thanks to Him with a sincere heart and like to support the ministry of preaching the gospel, we will get the blessing of the power of faith in dealing with problems and wisdom in finding a way out of problems of

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marriage, work, health, etc. Indeed, we will gain the advantage behind all the difficulties because God is with us. Amen.