

THANKFULNESS: Even When It Hurts



BY SUE LUTZ

There's something odd about thankfulness. It seldom seems to fit the situation. In a society of high expectations and instant gratification, people who are thankful for the good things in life seem rather quaint—naïve, sweet, and sentimental. Thankfulness seems like a mindset for people whose lives revolve around politeness and thank you notes.

It's an even tougher sell when we think about being thankful in the midst of painful circumstances. Then, the encouragement to be thankful seems insensitive, even cruel.

Thankfulness Is God's Idea

That's what happens when we take a biblical idea and recast it in terms of our own experiences. But God doesn't seem to see thankfulness in either of these ways. The Bible is packed with commands, encouragements, and invitations to give thanks to the Lord, and with examples of people who do. The book of Psalms overflows with expressions and encouragements to praise God.

- You are my God, and I will give you thanks; you are my God, and I will exalt you. Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever. (118:28, 29)

- You turned my wailing into dancing; you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, that my heart may sing to you and not be silent. O LORD my God, I will give you thanks forever. (30:11,12)
- Save us, O LORD our God, and gather us from the nations, that we may give thanks to your holy name and glory in your praise. (106:47)

The New Testament follows the same pattern. Most of Paul's letters begin with thanks to God for his work in the people to whom Paul is writing. He models thankfulness and encourages his readers to do the same with verses like these:

- So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness. (Col. 2:6, 7)
- Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. (Phil. 4:6)
- Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift! (2 Cor. 9:15)
- Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. (1 Thess. 5:16-18)

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The list goes on and on, especially when you realize that, in the original Greek and Hebrew, the words that our Bible translates as *thankful* are related to words translated as *bless*, *praise*, *to declare blessed*, *to give glory to*. All the words of praise, blessing, glorifying, rejoicing, and exalting the Lord overlap with thankfulness. It is a huge part of the Bible's message to us.

Why Give Thanks?

Why is all this so important? Is God insecure and dependent on us to boost his self-esteem? No. Is God vain and egotistical? Will he only respond to those who flatter him? No. Is it because he is temperamental and unstable, and he could fly off the handle and do serious damage if we don't keep him happy? Nothing could be farther from the truth. God isn't like the gods of Greek mythology. He isn't like our four-year-olds. The Bible is full of commands to give thanks to God because it is *not* our human instinct, and in that way, we are out of sync with the rest of the universe. Jesus once said that if human beings didn't praise and thank God, the stones of the earth would cry out in our place (Luke 19:40). That's how motivated the rest of the created world is to give thanks.

But the created world knows something that human beings do not. It is much more in tune with heaven, where spiritual truth and reality are experienced without distortion. Every picture that the Bible gives of heaven includes scenes in which a variety of creatures stand before God and erupt in praise, thanks, and worship. In Revelation 5 we read about "the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled God's throne and...in a loud voice they sang, 'Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!'" Then, the writer says, "I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, singing: 'To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power for ever and ever!'" (5:11-13).

Praise and thanks to God seem to be the

natural, authentic, and spontaneous response of the rest of the created world. Human beings are the notable exception. Basically, we're not normal! If we saw things as they truly are, praise and thanks are apparently what we would do all the time.

Why is thankfulness so unnatural to us? Most of us can come up with at least part of the answer. We would say that we live in a world where there is too much suffering and evil to be thankful all the time. And the Bible would agree that we live on a planet that has been corrupted by sin, and where things are not as they should be.

But the Bible would go deeper than that. The Bible teaches that sin not only spoils our environment and the external order of our world, but it has also affected each of us internally, spiritually. Every one of us begins life separated from God. We don't know him, we don't have a relationship with him, and we don't trust him—we don't even *like* him. This to us feels normal, but to the rest of the universe, it's the most unnatural and tragic state imaginable. It leaves us blind to a lot of spiritual reality, even when we are searching for it.

Not surprisingly, this has had a direct effect on our ability and inclination to be thankful. Romans 1 describes the human condition this way: "For although they knew God, they neither glorified God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools" (1:21, 22).

This is a dark picture and a desperate situation. But this is the problem that Jesus came to earth to solve. He removed the barrier of sin with his death on our behalf, and he brings anyone who trusts him into a relationship with God as our heavenly Father. When this happens, we start living a whole new reality—the one the rest of the universe has known all along.

That ultimately is the reason why the Bible tells us we can give thanks even when we're here on earth. We have a reason for that that we didn't have before. And being thankful allows us to be a part of what's going on in heaven even before we get there.

A Taste of Our Inheritance

Giving thanks gives us a taste of our future inheritance as God's children. That in itself would be enough, but I also think God calls us to be thankful because he knows we're *not* in heaven yet. He understands the world we live in. I believe that he calls us to be thankful as a concrete and practical protection against the spiritual hazards of life here on earth.

What do I mean by that? In every circumstance and relationship of life, we are faced with a choice. How are we going to respond to it? Are we going to move toward God or away from him? Satan wants every situation to be a

what happened in the past. You can't look to one side and think about what is actually happening now. You can't look on the other side, either, to think about what could have been—and *should* have been—happening now. You can't look in front of you to think about what lies ahead. It is all too overwhelming without God. You can't see how anything in your situation connects to the "big picture" promises that God makes in his Word. You feel as if all you can do is concentrate on the very next, small step in front of you.

But stop for a minute. In that small space of the next step you need to take, find

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temptation to doubt God and turn away from him. But God wants it to be something that refines our faith and causes us to move toward God and to trust him.

Being thankful is one of the responses that strengthen our relationship with God. As you are thankful, it can help you in at least six ways.

1. **As soon as you are thankful, you enter the presence of God.** You instantly are reminded that you are not alone in your situation, isolated, feeling as if you've been left to fight your battles on your own. When you are thankful, you remember that you are living your life in God's presence. Being thankful is not just a technique in which you talk yourself into a positive frame of mind. Thankfulness reminds you that you have a relationship with the living God. He is listening and involved. He is there with you. You are thinking like heaven, even if your circumstances seem more like something else.
2. **As soon as you are thankful, you start to see your life differently, through God's eyes.** You are no longer problem-centered, but God-centered. That in itself is an incredible relief.

Some situations are so difficult and painful that it seems as if you can't look anywhere. You can't look "behind" you to think about

something for which you can be thankful. Find something that reminds you that God is with you. There *will* be something—a verse, a phone call from a friend that reminds you that God has not forgotten, a specific answer to prayer. Thank God specifically for that reminder of his presence. Let it shape the way you take that next small step. God wants you to see that nothing happens in your life that he cannot use redemptively, which means that he can use it for good, to bless you and help you to grow in your understanding of him. That's saying a lot, but it is God who is saying it! Romans 8:28 says, "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." God is on the throne, and the events of your life—even the bad things—are not beyond his reach. We don't need to give thanks for evil, but we *are* meant to give thanks for God's ability to overrule evil and use it for good.

In the Old Testament, Joseph realized this when he confronted his brothers, who had betrayed him, sold him into slavery, and set in motion all kinds of evil in his life. "You intended to harm me," he tells them, "but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives" (Gen. 50:20).

When you are thankful, it helps you to realize that you are not defined by your prob-

lems or your circumstances. God has preceded them and he can overrule them. If you belong to Jesus, you are not defined by your failures, your sins, your weaknesses, or your enemies. They will not have the last word. God will.

3. **As soon as you are thankful, you defeat Satan's efforts to control your interpretation of reality.** Satan always wants us to doubt God and turn away from him. This has been going on since the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3:1). And without the Lord's help, our own hearts are predisposed to this kind of thinking. Because of sin, doubting God is our "default mode." It's our natural assumption.

I once spoke to a woman whose fears had completely taken over her life. I said to her, "It's like your fears are on speed-dial. They are right there, fully developed, with the push of one emotional button. You don't even have to go to the trouble of thinking about them." And because she had thought them so often, they felt very real, very natural, very authentically "her." She trusted them because they were familiar and they came to her so easily. But they were lies that were destroying her life.

Being thankful breaks that cycle. It is one of God's ways to reset our default mode, to renew our minds and put us in touch with our new heart, which knows that God is good. Romans 8:32 says, "He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?" This needs to be our default mode.

Many people have a descending staircase of negativity that has operated in their heads for years. Once they have thought the first negative thought, they know *exactly* where they are going to end up—all the way at the bottom. They know ahead of time what each and every thought is going to be. And again, because the thoughts are so familiar, they seem powerful and irrefutable. If that's true of you, remember: Being thankful is a way to step back from those thoughts and turn to the Lord, to trust what he has to say about your life. Over time, this will become what feels real and natural to you.

4. **As soon as you are thankful, you begin to link your life to God's promises.** You learn how to see your circumstances

through the lens of God's Word, instead of interpreting God's Word through the lens of your experiences, which always dilutes, devalues, and diminishes God. It's like looking through the wrong end of a telescope.

This is what happened when the nation of Israel was on the outskirts of the Promised Land (Num. 14). Moses sent twelve men to scout it out before they went in to conquer it. They all agreed that it was a wonderful land, just as God had promised. Yet ten out of twelve concentrated on the dangers they would face if they tried to conquer it. They instilled such fear in the people that they wanted to turn around and go back to Egypt!

The Lord responded, "How long will these people treat me with contempt? How long will they refuse to believe in me, in spite of all the miraculous signs I have performed among them? ...Not one of the men who saw my glory and the miraculous signs I performed...will ever see the land I promised on oath to their forefathers. No one who has treated me with contempt will ever see it" (14:11, 22, 23).

God made promises to Israel that he was committed to keep, and he kept them. In Christ, he has made many more promises to us, and he intends to keep them as well. He wants us to believe him! He is a person—and when we trash our relationship with him in unbelief, it matters! Being thankful helps us to interpret our lives in the light of his faithfulness.

5. **As soon as you are thankful, you start to see not only your situation but yourself—your own heart—through God's eyes.** For the Christian, this means that you learn how to apply what Jesus has done to the specifics of your life.

For example, 1 Peter 1:3-5 says, "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil, or fade—kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time." That is the big truth; next comes God's personal understanding of your needs and his plans for your growth. "In this you greatly

rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed” (1:6-7).

When you have a thankful heart, you affirm that, because of Jesus, God is up to something good in your life. When you do that, have you ever noticed that you can admit you are weak, but still feel safe? That you can confess your sin, and be confident of God’s forgiveness? You are humbled, but not shamed. You are more willing to be taught and corrected because you can see God’s loving intent behind it (James 1:2-4).

6. As soon as you are thankful, your human relationships get healthier because they are shaped by faith. You become more dependent on God and less demanding of others.

Often we are demanding and judgmental with others, fearful and easily hurt because we are controlled by our relationships with people, instead of focusing first on our relationship with God. We *always* have to start with the Lord and his redemptive purposes before we think about the people in a particular situation. If you can understand God’s good purposes for you, what you expect of people and what you fear about them both diminish. As you rest in the Lord, your heart is softened and strengthened at the same time. This gives you a greater strength to work through hard things, and a greater desire and ability to love and serve others.

A Spiritual Preventative

Those are some of the ways that being thankful promotes positive spiritual growth in your life. Being thankful also serves as a *preventative* against many problems and sins. If you make the choice to be thankful, there are a lot of battles you probably won’t have to fight. It’s as if you chose the road with fewer potholes.

That’s why God not only encourages us to be thankful for the good things he *gives* us, he also calls us to be thankful for *who he is* as our starting point—as a presupposition, as our baseline, as something we do *first* as a way of life. For lack of a better term, we should “front-

load” thankfulness because of what we know about him. This helps prevent all kinds of other problems.

For example, if you are thankful, it’s much harder to be fearful of circumstances or people. You know God is in control.

It’s less likely that you will be devastated by criticism, because you know God has loved and accepted you.

If you are thankful, it’s much harder to be cynical and sarcastic about life. You know God has a good purpose.

It’s much harder to be proud.

It’s much harder to be self-righteously angry.

It’s much harder to be bitter and unforgiving. You just don’t feel the need.

If you are thankful, it’s just about impossible to be hopeless.

It’s much harder to be demanding and fixated on your problems.

It’s much harder to be greedy or envious.

If you are thankful, you’re much less likely to be overwhelmed when you are wronged.

All the way through, thankfulness promotes God’s loving purpose to draw us close to him, to make us more like him, and to help us live out the life he has planned for us.

Thankfulness Amid Evil

Yet we all know how easy it is to struggle with thankfulness because of the evil we see and experience in this world, and because of all the things we do not understand.

Christianity’s response to this is unique among world religions. The God we serve does not stand at a distance, detached from human suffering. Instead, he sent his own Son to experience that suffering—and the agonies of hell itself—to secure our salvation. God permits evil, but he also committed himself to endure it with us so that we might be delivered from it.

As the Gospels and the book of Hebrews make clear, this was no mere formality. The perfect and holy Son of God spent his time on earth surrounded by sin and temptation. He faced rejection by his Father and complete separation from him at a time when his sinless nature bore all the ugliness and pain of sin. In ways that human beings cannot imagine, his

sufferings from sin greatly exceed our own. "During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him" (Heb. 5:7-9).

In his book, *Step by Step*, James C. Petty offers insights on why God does not reveal to us everything we would want to know. Often, as human beings, we are not willing to be thankful unless we can evaluate God's reason for doing a particular thing. God does not put himself under our judgment, but calls on us to trust in who he is instead. Petty says that the kind of knowledge we often seek is not given to us "for our own good. There are a number of reasons why we would have trouble with such knowledge. First, God's knowledge is exhaustive. It...is way out of our league, both in sophistication and quantity of information."

Second, "the information would damage us. It is too toxic for us to handle....The knowledge of good and evil is restricted to us by God's own love for us. The good is too good and the evil is too evil.

promise man independence from God, Jesus revealed God in a nontoxic, non-lethal, and life-giving form. He told us what we needed to know to be reconciled with God and have a new life in him. His death on the cross changed our fearful and arrogant hearts so that we are able to be joyful creatures and not frustrated gods. We can now trust the God who controls our future and concentrate on living for him in the present.

"...Jesus did not come to give us access to the secret things of God's providence, but to reveal the hidden mystery of how God would redeem the fallen world. He gives us the truth that sets us free. His truth focuses our energy on present obedience and service."¹

A few years ago, a movie called *The Matrix* described a world in which the human race experienced a day-to-day reality that was completely false. They lived in a drug-induced, manipulated dream while, in real life, they were enslaved and literally being used up by an alien race. When I saw that film, I thought, *That is just what sin does! It has us believe lies that seem so real and feel so good! But they are lies that allow evil to control us and eventually destroy us.*

The problem is that the lie is so all-encompassing that we cannot comprehend it

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"...There may be levels of irrationality to the origin of evil that cannot be comprehended by finite creatures or that would be paralyzing if we were exposed to them now....

"The knowledge of good and evil, in the limited way we understand it now, was a result of the rebellion of man against God (Gen. 3:5). Humanity wanted to know and understand the basis for everything God commanded, but since we are not God, this knowledge created life-threatening problems for us. There seems to be an experiential component to knowing evil that is lethal. Even what God does reveal seems to be described in metaphorical language and leaves us with questions perhaps God consciously meant, for our own benefit, not to answer.

"...In contrast to knowledge that would

on our own. And if the Lord were to try to describe it to us, we would be too frightened to move! Instead, he sent his Son to buy our freedom from this kingdom of darkness. Then he sent his Holy Spirit to live within us so that those who trust in him, even while we are still on earth, are nevertheless safe in his presence and guided by truth.

This is why we should not complain when God calls us to be thankful when we are suffering, or when we don't have all the answers! Rather, *we should be thankful!* Being thankful is God's way of giving us a direct line

¹Petty, James C. *Step by Step: Divine Guidance for Ordinary Christians* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1999) pp. 71-75.

to him, an instant and intimate connection to a powerful and loving Heavenly Father despite all the evil that surrounds us. It is a way for us to leapfrog over all the things we do not understand and cannot fix, to put ourselves into God's loving, powerful arms.

Being thankful does not mean living in denial, suppressing our feelings, or ignoring reality. It means being honest, but bringing all those things to a God who has promised to love us and demonstrated it by sending his Son to be our Savior. It brings us nearer to heaven, and helps us to overcome the world.

Jesus said, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (Matt. 11:28, 29).

Where are you? Maybe you are realizing that you need to begin at the beginning, and ask the Lord to bring you into this kind of

relationship with him. I encourage you to take that step.

Maybe you are already a Christian, but you've allowed other voices to control the way you've lived your life. God has been crowded out, and too often you've been left in bondage to your own sins and failings, and to difficult people and circumstances. Listen to the Lord again:

"For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the LORD, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a hope and a future. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you,' declares the LORD, 'and will bring you back from captivity'" (Jer. 29:11-14).

Listen to the Lord, and respond with faith — and thankfulness.