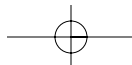
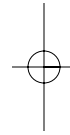
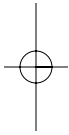


Thankfulness

Even When It Hurts



Resources for Changing Lives

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There's something odd about thankfulness. It seldom seems to fit the situation. In our 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 the examples of people who do. The book of Psalms overflows with expressions and encouragements to praise God.

- “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)
- “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)

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:

- 2 Corinthians 9:15: “Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!”
- Philippians 4:6: “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.”
- Colossians 2:6–7: “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.”

- 1 Thessalonians 5:16–18: “Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”

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 of 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 didn’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 we human beings do not. It is much more in tune with heaven, where spiritual truth and reality are experienced without distortion. Every picture 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!'" (vv. 11–12). 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!'" (v. 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” (vv. 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 that we didn’t have before. 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 God also calls us to be thankful because he knows we’re *not* in heaven