November 19, 2023

Rick Myatt

EVEN IF I GET PULLED OVER?

Psalm 100

This has been a challenging year for our family. Michael and Carissa have had a tough time. Early in the year Michael had some health issues with that resulted in two surgeries. He’s fine now. However, the consequence of those issues is that though all those issues were resolved quite some time ago Michael has spent much of the past 6 months working through the bureaucratic jungle to get certified to fly again. He has not flown since January, and has just recently finally gotten clearance to go back to work. In case you were wondering, no, he doesn’t get paid when he’s not flying.

Toby and Anna went through a frightening health crisis with their 2 year old daughter Bria. The doctors’ best guesses were either leukemia or possibly a brain tumor, diagnoses that no one wants to hear. Fortunately it turned out it wasn’t that terrible. However, they found she has celiac disease. There are many people these days who say they are gluten intolerant. Celiac disease is in a different league altogether. For Bria over time it is a matter of life and death. Her body reacts so violently to gluten that it completely destroys her ability to absorb nutrition from food. So before her diagnosis she was literally starving to death. A couple of weeks ago Bria found a Hawaiian roll and ate it. Shortly after that she began throwing up, and continued for the rest of the day. So that has been a challenge to deal with. Then they’ve had issues with their dog Banjo. They’ve had what seems to us like dozens of dogs since they got married. Really it is only 4. It just seems like more. Of all of them, Banjo has been the best. He has been a great dog. Laurie and I have loved him. He has had repeated trips to the vet this year. That all culminated yesterday when it was learned he had terminal cancer and was in considerable pain. They had to put him to sleep for the last time yesterday.

Then there’s me. Tuesday I had appointments with 2 different doctors. One was a routine scan by the dermatologist, who didn’t find anything alarming, but did find a number of spots to treat in uncomfortable ways. I also got to see the urologist that day. Yeah, any time you see a urologist you are not going to have fun. Have you ever seen pictures of that big globe at Disney’s Epcot park in Florida? Apparently that’s about the size of my prostate gland. This after I had a surgical procedure 2 years ago to fix that problem. The procedure is effective more than 90% of the time. Guess who is in the 10%. My visit with the doctor included a physical check of that particular part of my anatomy. Talk about an invasion of your personal space. Every time I have that exam it seems to me that it should be illegal. Isn’t this the kind of thing the Constitution referred to as cruel and unusual punishment? At the end of that day I felt discouraged. I had a sort of, “Oh come on. This is just getting to be too much” kind of feeling.

Almost exactly a year ago, as you know, I began going through treatments for metastatic melanoma. At this time last year Laurie and I were dealing with fears that my life could be ending far sooner than we hoped. We didn’t know if I would be able to tolerate the treatments, and even if I was we had no idea if the treatments would work. Early on that was pretty rough. Fortunately, it got better and I was able to tolerate the treatments pretty well. As far as we know the treatments have been effective. However, my reality this year has been dominated by doctor visits, scans, treatments and effects. Before I started the treatments I read some of the literature about them and the company that produces those meds said you should expect to not feel very good while taking them. They were right. I’ve mostly been all right, but I’ve been tired all year and have had a few annoying minor effects off and on. There have been days I just didn’t feel very good.

I’ve made it through those treatments. It’s been a couple of months since I had my last one. I had to have thyroid surgery a week after my last treatment, and I am mostly recovered from that. So we were excited about our plan to go celebrate being done with treatments by going to Hawaii. And that was a train wreck, as both of us got covid and were sick the entire time we were there. It was not exactly the joyful celebration we had planned on it being.

For our family 2023 has not been a banner year. But Rick Warren claimed that the nature of life is that you are either in a crisis, you have just come through a crisis, or you’re about to go through a crisis. If that’s true, this year is not all that unusual. If he’s correct, crisis isn’t some anomaly, some unexpected interruption of the normal, placid flow of life. It is the norm. It is what we ought to expect. Given that, we ought to expect that life is going to have plenty of bumpy stretches of road. How are we supposed to respond to times like this? That’s an important question because we will all have them. Today we’re going to look at a critical component of how we can live joyfully no matter what our circumstances.

GOD TELLS US TO GIVE THANKS

Psalm 100 says, “Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth. Worship the Lord with gladness; come before him with joyful songs. Know that the Lord is God. It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, the sheep of his pasture. Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name. For the Lord is good and his love endures forever; his faithfulness continues through all generations.”

That Psalm calls on us to live joyfully. It doesn’t merely tell us to not worry and be happy. Shout for joy, worship with gladness, sing with joyful songs. How often are you so full of joy that you shout? At one point in my exam by the urologist I wanted to shout, but it wasn’t for joy. This Psalm calls on us to do what we looked at last week, be filled with joy to the point that we shout and sing. In a life full of crises how are we supposed to do that?

It starts with recognizing that the Lord, Yahweh, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, is God. He rules. He is the creator. He made us, and that means we are his people. We belong to him. We are not here for ourselves. We don’t control how life goes. God controls all that, and we belong to him.

That is a crucial truth for us to remember. The more we try to control the world, force things to go the way we want, the more we make life about ourselves and our will, the more frustration and bitterness we will introduce into our lives. Laurie and I saw an example of this just a couple of days ago. We had a great joy of going to Disneyland with all of our kids and grandkids. We looked forward to this with great anticipation, and it turned out to be as fun as we hoped. However, it wouldn’t be the Happiest Place On Earth if there weren’t some episodes of children weeping and wailing. This was particularly true for us given that of the 6 grandchildren involved, 3 were under the age of 3. What could possibly go wrong? We did have a couple of cosmic meltdowns from that set. However, the most educational incident involved 6 year old Cara. We had hoped to stay at the park until the fireworks show in the evening around 9:30, but we all came to realize that was a bridge too far. We had pushed the youngest kids to the breaking point. So we all agreed it was time to call it a night and head home. One problem. Cara wanted to go on her favorite ride. Our plan had been to do it next, but we realized it just wasn’t going to be possible. Cara had seen how desperately tired the younger children were and had seen an epic meltdown. She knew it was just getting too late for the kids. However, in her mind the bottom line was she wasn’t getting what she wanted. Being tired herself, though unwilling to admit it, this led to a scene of abject misery, of inconsolable sobbing because she was not being allowed to go on her favorite ride. Even at her young age it should have been no problem for her to accept that to try to make everyone stay for one more ride would have been about as fun as repeatedly slamming a hammer down on your thumb. But none of that mattered. All that mattered was, she wasn’t getting what she wanted. When all that matters to us is we aren’t getting what we want, misery is sure to follow. The idea that we are God’s people, that we are made by him and for him, is a radical idea. It is very different from the way our human nature thinks. But it is crucial to being able to live joyfully in all circumstances.

One of the things I learned on our Disney trip is that Disneyland has changed. It has become much more complicated than it used to be. Everything now is done with technology. There is a Disneyland app for your phone, something called Genie Plus and something else called Lightning Lines. These things control how you get into the park, how you access the rides, how you buy food, pretty much everything except using the restrooms. I found out I’m now an anachronism, an old dude who is a bit bewildered by it all. Fortunately Toby is all over this stuff. He saved the day. He had the tickets all taken care of on our phones. He set up what rides we should go on, ordered food for us, and all we had to do was trust him and follow where he led. It occurred to me that this is what this Psalm tells us to do. We are the sheep of God’s pasture. We don’t understand the technology of how life works. We just trust God and follow where he leads.

The Psalm then tells us to enter God’s gates with thanksgiving. In my lifetime the way to enter the gates of Disneyland have changed. In my early years you bought a ticket book that included tickets for the various level of rides from A, rides that were about as exciting as sitting on a chair, all the way up to E, which were the big time thrill rides, although back then they weren’t that thrilling. Then the system changed and you just bought one ticket that covered all the rides. Now you don’t do that. You get your ticket on your phone, and they scan the phone for you to enter. How do you enter God’s gates? In contrast to Disneyland’s ever changing systems, God’s has not changed at all. The way to come into God’s presence is to give thanks to him. That’s how he wants us to come near to him. Give thanks. That is how we truly get to know him. That is how we experience his peace and joy.

This Psalm tells us we have good reason to give thanks to God. It is that he is good and his love endures forever. We are not to give thanks to God because life goes the way we want it to, because our circumstances are always happy. We give thanks because God is good and he loves us at all times, even if we don’t see it in our immediate situation. He knows the technology, controls us and leads us where we need to go.

This is not the only place in the Bible that tells us giving thanks is important, that we should always come into God’s presence giving thanks to him. Ephesians 5:20 says we should sing to the Lord, “always giving thanks to God the Father for everything.” Notice two particular words in that verse. Always and everything. We should always give thanks. We should give thanks for everything. Always? Really?

There we were in Hawaii, spending a lot of money to stay in a very nice hotel, and we had covid. It was the middle of the night and I couldn’t sleep because I was miserable. My body ached all over, I had the sore throat to end all sore throats, and a nerve in the back of my head was lit up, sending bolts of pain that were excruciating. It was bad enough that the vacation had been utterly ruined by being sick. At that point all I wanted was that I be able to sleep so I wouldn’t be conscious of how bad I felt. But no, I had to be fully awake to feel the full effect of my sickness. In that situation am I really supposed to give thanks? I wasn’t thankful for feeling that way. I wasn’t grateful that I couldn’t sleep. How did giving thanks make any sense, given that I didn’t want any part of what I had at that moment? But I have to ask, were those moments a part of always? Well, always is inclusive, and it certainly included those unhappy moments, which means I should give thanks even during those moments.

Philippians 4:6 tells us, “Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.” There it is again. Don’t be anxious about anything, but in every situation present your requests to God. But notice we should do this “with thanksgiving.” Again, give thanks in every situation.

The classic command about this is 1 Thessalonians 5:18. “Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.” Again, in all circumstances give thanks. This, Paul tells us, is God’s will. This is what God wants us to do. Why would we give thanks in those moments? Because of what Psalm 100 says. The Lord is still God. He is good. He loves us. We are still his people and he is still leading us.

Why is giving thanks such a big deal? Why is this God’s will for us in every situation, particularly when many of the situations we encounter are not welcome and we aren’t happy about them?

GIVING THANKS HAS TO DO WITH THE CORE OF THE GOSPEL

Ann Voskamp wrote a book titled *A Thousand Gifts* that is about how crucial giving thanks is. At one point in the book she made a startling statement. “Ingratitude was the fall, humanity’s discontent with all that God freely gives.” She asserted that all of the problems of the human race, all of our fallenness and all the brokenness of this world, which all traces back to the disastrous fall in the Garden of Eden, began with ingratitude, with not giving thanks.

Is this really true? Yes, it is. When Satan suggested to Eve that God was keeping something good from her and that he was not to be trusted, had she given thanks to God for all the good he had given the first two humans, she would not have been tempted to question his goodness. You’ve heard it from me so often. What God supplies is enough. That’s the basic principle of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. What God has given us in Christ is sufficient. Had Eve believed that truth, that what God supplies is enough, she would have never fallen for Satan’s lie. Theologian Thomas Merton said, “Those who are not grateful soon begin to complain of everything.” In other words, if we are not giving thanks to God for what he gives us, we will eventually start finding what’s wrong with what he has given. We will complain about it. That is what happened to Eve, and the result was cataclysmic.

In Romans 1 at one point Paul described the fallen state of humans. In verse 21 he said, “Although they knew God, they neither glorified him nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.” Our problems begin when we don’t glorify God and give thanks to him.

Voskamp said that she was a believer in Jesus and had done all the things a good Christian is supposed to do. But her life was not the fullest possible life that Jesus said he came to give. Rather, she was dominated by fear and anxiety and often found that she was discontent and full of complaint. Especially, she said, “I longed for more life, for more holy joy.” She wanted the life of joy and peace, and didn’t have it.

There is a familiar story in Luke 17:11-19. Jesus encountered 10 men with leprosy who appealed to him for help. He told them to go show themselves to the priest, and on their way there they were all healed. One of them, a Samaritan, turned back to thank Jesus. When he fell at Jesus’ feet, thanking him, Jesus said to him in verses 17-18, “Were not all 10 cleansed. Where are the other 9? Has no one returned to give praise to God except this foreigner?” The answer was obvious. Only that one man came back to thank Jesus. Then Jesus said to the man in verse 19, “Rise and go; your faith has made you well.”

That’s a little strange, isn’t it? Jesus made a point of this man giving thanks for his healing, then said his faith had made him well. Wasn’t that also true of the other 9, since they were healed as well? Yet Jesus seemed to be saying there was something different about this man. He had given thanks while the others did not, but they were all healed. So why did Jesus say this man’s faith made him well and that differentiated him from the others who were healed?

The answer to that question lies in the fact that Jesus was saying something more than that the man had been healed. There are a couple of translations that have Jesus say something different. Young’s Literal Translation and the Christian Standard Bible both have Jesus say to the man, “Your faith has saved you.” In his paraphrase of the Bible called *The Message* Eugene Peterson translated this, “Your faith has healed and saved you.

I believe those translations are on to something. The Greek word Luke used in that verse that is translated healed was *sozo*. Its most common meaning is to save. It is the root of the word soteriology, which means the doctrine of salvation. The man had already been healed before he came back to Jesus. Jesus didn’t need to say his faith had healed him, because he already knew that. He and the others were healed when they exhibited faith by appealing to Jesus for help, then doing what he said when he told them to go see the priest. Jesus said something more significant than the man’s physical healing had taken place. He had been saved, restored to true life, the life God wants us to have, and that happened because in faith he had come back to give thanks. Giving thanks was crucial. Faith is evidenced by giving thanks. And giving thanks in faith is what saves us in the sense of restoring to us the life of joy and peace and wholeness.

Giving thanks is about the state of our heart and about our faith. Do we really believe what God supplies is enough? Maybe more to the point, are we willing to ***accept*** that what God gives us is enough? Are we willing to submit to God’s will, especially when we don’t understand it, and trust in God’s goodness and faithfulness? When we give thanks to God we are saying we do believe in his love and goodness, we trust in him and accept whatever he chooses for us. Giving thanks is an act of submission to God, an act absolutely rooted in faith. This is why one scholar has said you could sum up the Christian life in giving thanks.

Giving thanks to God is so crucial because it is about our relationship to God and our ability to trust him. It also ends up determining how much of the life God wants us to have we actually experience. Voskamp went on to say that the height of our joy is dependent on the depths of our thanks. We will experience joy to the degree that we live with gratitude to God. She says this also means joy is always possible, because we can always give thanks. In her life this proved true. She was utterly changed by committing to a life characterized by giving thanks in all things.

Psychologist Rick Hanson says humanity has a universal penchant for concentrating on the negative. Other researchers and experts have discovered the same thing. This means we have a tendency to see what is wrong and to complain. Our complaining does not enrich our lives. It actually lessens joy and peace. Giving thanks is the remedy for this failing of human nature. It is the thing that can lift us out of the disappointment, resentment and sadness of life into the sunlight of God’s joy.

Theologian David Steindl Rast said, “It is not happiness that makes us grateful. It is gratefulness that makes us happy.” His life message is that gratefulness is the source of enduring happiness. An article in the *Wall Street Journal* adds confirmation to this message. It said that research shows that those who live expressing thanks have more energy, more optimism, more friendships and more happiness than others. They are less likely to be depressed. They earn more money, sleep more soundly and have stronger immune systems.

APPLICATION

GIVING THANKS IS A CHOICE OF FAITH

Laurie and I have been frustrated by the fact that so many things in our world are still not functioning very well. It seems to me that more than 3 years after the pandemic things should have returned to something resembling normal, but that doesn’t seem to be the case. The latest example of this is Laurie’s attempts to get a prescription refilled. First she asked her doctor to send in a request for the prescription, but he failed to do that until she called and asked again a couple of weeks later. He finally did it, but then she got a notification from the pharmacy that they didn’t have the medicine in stock. They said they were attempting to obtain it, and would get back to her in a couple of days. Then she heard nothing from them. After several days she went to the pharmacy to ask about it. They didn’t have it and didn’t think they could get it. But they said another of their stores nearby had it and Laurie could go there to get it. Thus began her quest to somehow obtain this medicine. I realized that I didn’t believe the pharmacy company would come through for her. That’s because there were two things I’d need to believe to actually trust them to come through. The first is that they actually care enough about her to commit to solving the problem. The second is that if they commit to helping her they actually have the ability to do it. My problem was I didn’t think either one of those things was true. I didn’t have faith that they actually care about her or that they have the systems and ability to solve the problem if they try.

We have the same issues with God and the issues in our lives. We have to believe first that he cares enough about us to deal with the issues of our lives. Second we have to believe that he has the ability to handle what happens in our lives. Giving thanks to God begins with trusting in those two ways. When we give thanks to him we are saying we know he loves us, he cares about us, and second that he is able to do what is necessary to bring about our good.

The opposite is also true. When we don’t give thanks to God in all circumstances we are saying that either God doesn’t care about us, or that he is unable to help us though he might want to do so. Or maybe even both are true. This is why we must give thanks in all things, even in the things that we don’t like or understand.

What are we supposed to give thanks for when we have things in our lives we absolutely don’t want and we aren’t thankful for? Many years ago before I was married, the ministry I was involved in took a group of staff and students, me included, out to the Colorado River at Easter to minister to people there. On the way home I was driving a car pulling a trailer as part of a caravan of our group. I was surprised when I saw those dreaded flashing lights in my mirror. I was pulled over by a highway patrolman. This seemed odd because I was doing what the other 4 cars in the caravan were doing, so why was I the only one pulled over? I asked the CHP guy that very question. He told me he was citing me because I was towing a trailer in the wrong lane of the freeway. I said, “Uh, is that a problem?” He told me that yes it was, and he gave me a ticket. I did not thank him for his kind and gracious act. I took it because he had the power and I didn’t. But it grated on me then and has often ever since, because I constantly see people on the freeway doing exactly what I did and I’ve never heard of anyone getting cited for it. Except for me. My point is, I wasn’t happy with what he gave me, so I was definitely not grateful for it.

Why are we supposed to be grateful and give thanks when God gives us things we don’t want and don’t like? Why are we supposed to give thanks when our granddaughter is seriously ill? It goes back to what we believe about God. Is what he supplies enough? Do we believe he loves us and do we believe he is powerful enough to bring about our good? If we do, then we thank him that he does love us, and we thank him that he does have some good plan for us, that he will bring good out of everything that happens, that what he supplies is sufficient.

GIVING THANKS IS A DISCIPLINE

Ann Voskamp was challenged by a friend to make a list of 1000 things she loves, things she is thankful for. She set out to do that, and began noting even small things that she might typically ignore, that she was thankful for. She gave thanks for the song of birds chirping, for jam piled high on toast, for the aroma of a florist shop, for wool sweaters with turtle neck collars in the winter. She found that her heart needed to be trained to see blessings and to respond with gratitude.

Chris Winfield is an author who did the same thing. He committed to writing a gratitude list every day. He’s kept it for more than 3 years now. What he discovered was that it was hard at first, but that as you keep at it you find that there is always something to be thankful for. He found that gratitude grows as you practice it. And he found that the habit of giving thanks consistently and constantly changes you. You become more positive, less complaining, more hopeful.

Basic gratitude is produced passively by positive external events. Several years ago when Laurie and I were in a local restaurant and we were finishing our meal, our server asked if we needed anything else. I said we didn’t, that we were ready to pay our bill. She said it had already been paid. I was confused and said, “Uh, what?” She told us there was a family that had been in the restaurant, had recognized us and had paid our bill for us before they left. We didn’t even know who it was. We were humbled and grateful. That’s natural.

But there is also a discipline of gratitude. That involves intentionally choosing to give thanks, especially when there is no positive blessing apparent. It involves deliberately training ourselves to exercise giving thanks in all circumstances. This is not dependent on changing situations, but on our mindset and our heart. November 19, 2023

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INTRODUCTION

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EXPOSITION

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2. That Psalm calls on us to live joyfully. It doesn’t merely tell us to not worry and be happy. Shout for joy, worship with gladness, sing with joyful songs. How often are you so full of joy that you shout? At one point in my exam by the urologist I wanted to shout, but it wasn’t for joy. This Psalm calls on us to do what we looked at last week, be filled with joy to the point that we shout and sing. In a life full of crises how are we supposed to do that?
3. It starts with recognizing that the Lord, Yahweh, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, is God. He rules. He is the creator. He made us, and that means we are his people. We belong to him. We are not here for ourselves. We don’t control how life goes. God controls all that, and we belong to him.
4. That is a crucial truth for us to remember. The more we try to control the world, force things to go the way we want, the more we make life about ourselves and our will, the more frustration and bitterness we will introduce into our lives. Laurie and I saw an example of this just a couple of days ago. We had a great joy of going to Disneyland with all of our kids and grandkids. We looked forward to this with great anticipation, and it turned out to be as fun as we hoped. However, it wouldn’t be the Happiest Place On Earth if there weren’t some episodes of children weeping and wailing. This was particularly true for us given that of the 6 grandchildren involved, 3 were under the age of 3. What could possibly go wrong? We did have a couple of cosmic meltdowns from that set. However, the most educational incident involved 6 year old Cara. We had hoped to stay at the park until the fireworks show in the evening around 9:30, but we all came to realize that was a bridge too far. We had pushed the youngest kids to the breaking point. So we all agreed it was time to call it a night and head home. One problem. Cara wanted to go on her favorite ride. Our plan had been to do it next, but we realized it just wasn’t going to be possible. Cara had seen how desperately tired the younger children were and had seen an epic meltdown. She knew it was just getting too late for the kids. However, in her mind the bottom line was she wasn’t getting what she wanted. Being tired herself, though unwilling to admit it, this led to a scene of abject misery, of inconsolable sobbing because she was not being allowed to go on her favorite ride. Even at her young age it should have been no problem for her to accept that to try to make everyone stay for one more ride would have been about as fun as repeatedly slamming a hammer down on your thumb. But none of that mattered. All that mattered was, she wasn’t getting what she wanted. When all that matters to us is we aren’t getting what we want, misery is sure to follow. The idea that we are God’s people, that we are made by him and for him, is a radical idea. It is very different from the way our human nature thinks. But it is crucial to being able to live joyfully in all circumstances.
5. One of the things I learned on our Disney trip is that Disneyland has changed. It has become much more complicated than it used to be. Everything now is done with technology. There is a Disneyland app for your phone, something called Genie Plus and something else called Lightning Lines. These things control how you get into the park, how you access the rides, how you buy food, pretty much everything except using the restrooms. I found out I’m now an anachronism, an old dude who is a bit bewildered by it all. Fortunately Toby is all over this stuff. He saved the day. He had the tickets all taken care of on our phones. He set up what rides we should go on, ordered food for us, and all we had to do was trust him and follow where he led. It occurred to me that this is what this Psalm tells us to do. We are the sheep of God’s pasture. We don’t understand the technology of how life works. We just trust God and follow where he leads.
6. The Psalm then tells us to enter God’s gates with thanksgiving. In my lifetime the way to enter the gates of Disneyland have changed. In my early years you bought a ticket book that included tickets for the various level of rides from A, rides that were about as exciting as sitting on a chair, all the way up to E, which were the big time thrill rides, although back then they weren’t that thrilling. Then the system changed and you just bought one ticket that covered all the rides. Now you don’t do that. You get your ticket on your phone, and they scan the phone for you to enter. How do you enter God’s gates? In contrast to Disneyland’s ever changing systems, God’s has not changed at all. The way to come into God’s presence is to give thanks to him. That’s how he wants us to come near to him. Give thanks. That is how we truly get to know him. That is how we experience his peace and joy.
7. This Psalm tells us we have good reason to give thanks to God. It is that he is good and his love endures forever. We are not to give thanks to God because life goes the way we want it to, because our circumstances are always happy. We give thanks because God is good and he loves us at all times, even if we don’t see it in our immediate situation. He knows the technology, controls us and leads us where we need to go.
8. This is not the only place in the Bible that tells us giving thanks is important, that we should always come into God’s presence giving thanks to him.
9. Ephesians 5:20 says we should sing to the Lord, “always giving thanks to God the Father for everything.” Notice two particular words in that verse. Always and everything. We should always give thanks. We should give thanks for everything. Always? Really?
10. There we were in Hawaii, spending a lot of money to stay in a very nice hotel, and we had covid. It was the middle of the night and I couldn’t sleep because I was miserable. My body ached all over, I had the sore throat to end all sore throats, and a nerve in the back of my head was lit up, sending bolts of pain that were excruciating. It was bad enough that the vacation had been utterly ruined by being sick. At that point all I wanted was that I be able to sleep so I wouldn’t be conscious of how bad I felt. But no, I had to be fully awake to feel the full effect of my sickness. In that situation am I really supposed to give thanks? I wasn’t thankful for feeling that way. I wasn’t grateful that I couldn’t sleep. How did giving thanks make any sense, given that I didn’t want any part of what I had at that moment?
11. But I have to ask, were those moments a part of always? Well, always is inclusive, and it certainly included those unhappy moments, which means I should give thanks even during those moments.
12. Philippians 4:6 tells us, “Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.” There it is again. Don’t be anxious about anything, but in every situation present your requests to God. But notice we should do this “with thanksgiving.” Again, give thanks in every situation.
13. The classic command about this is 1 Thessalonians 5:18. “Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.” Again, in all circumstances give thanks. This, Paul tells us, is God’s will. This is what God wants us to do.
14. Why would we give thanks in those moments? Because of what Psalm 100 says. The Lord is still God. He is good. He loves us. We are still his people and he is still leading us.
15. Why is giving thanks such a big deal? Why is this God’s will for us in every situation, particularly when many of the situations we encounter are not welcome and we aren’t happy about them?

GIVING THANKS HAS TO DO WITH THE CORE OF THE GOSPEL

1. Ann Voskamp wrote a book titled *A Thousand Gifts* that is about how crucial giving thanks is. At one point in the book she made a startling statement. “Ingratitude was the fall, humanity’s discontent with all that God freely gives.” She asserted that all of the problems of the human race, all of our fallenness and all the brokenness of this world, which all traces back to the disastrous fall in the Garden of Eden, began with ingratitude, with not giving thanks.
2. Is this really true? Yes, it is. When Satan suggested to Eve that God was keeping something good from her and that he was not to be trusted, had she given thanks to God for all the good he had given the first two humans, she would not have been tempted to question his goodness. You’ve heard it from me so often. What God supplies is enough. That’s the basic principle of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. What God has given us in Christ is sufficient. Had Eve believed that truth, that what God supplies is enough, she would have never fallen for Satan’s lie. Theologian Thomas Merton said, “Those who are not grateful soon begin to complain of everything.” In other words, if we are not giving thanks to God for what he gives us, we will eventually start finding what’s wrong with what he has given. We will complain about it. That is what happened to Eve, and the result was cataclysmic.
3. In Romans 1 at one point Paul described the fallen state of humans. In verse 21 he said, “Although they knew God, they neither glorified him nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.” Our problems begin when we don’t glorify God and give thanks to him.
4. Voskamp said that she was a believer in Jesus and had done all the things a good Christian is supposed to do. But her life was not the fullest possible life that Jesus said he came to give. Rather, she was dominated by fear and anxiety and often found that she was discontent and full of complaint. Especially, she said, “I longed for more life, for more holy joy.” She wanted the life of joy and peace, and didn’t have it.
5. There is a familiar story in Luke 17:11-19. Jesus encountered 10 men with leprosy who appealed to him for help. He told them to go show themselves to the priest, and on their way there they were all healed. One of them, a Samaritan, turned back to thank Jesus. When he fell at Jesus’ feet, thanking him, Jesus said to him in verses 17-18, “Were not all 10 cleansed. Where are the other 9? Has no one returned to give praise to God except this foreigner?” The answer was obvious. Only that one man came back to thank Jesus. Then Jesus said to the man in verse 19, “Rise and go; your faith has made you well.”
6. That’s a little strange, isn’t it? Jesus made a point of this man giving thanks for his healing, then said his faith had made him well. Wasn’t that also true of the other 9, since they were healed as well? Yet Jesus seemed to be saying there was something different about this man. He had given thanks while the others did not, but they were all healed. So why did Jesus say this man’s faith made him well and that differentiated him from the others who were healed?
7. The answer to that question lies in the fact that Jesus was saying something more than that the man had been healed. There are a couple of translations that have Jesus say something different. Young’s Literal Translation and the Christian Standard Bible both have Jesus say to the man, “Your faith has saved you.” In his paraphrase of the Bible called *The Message* Eugene Peterson translated this, “Your faith has healed and saved you.”
8. I believe those translations are on to something. The Greek word Luke used in that verse that is translated healed was *sozo*. Its most common meaning is to save. It is the root of the word soteriology, which means the doctrine of salvation. The man had already been healed before he came back to Jesus. Jesus didn’t need to say his faith had healed him, because he already knew that. He and the others were healed when they exhibited faith by appealing to Jesus for help, then doing what he said when he told them to go see the priest. Jesus said something more significant than the man’s physical healing had taken place. He had been saved, restored to true life, the life God wants us to have, and that happened because in faith he had come back to give thanks. Giving thanks was crucial. Faith is evidenced by giving thanks. And giving thanks in faith is what saves us in the sense of restoring to us the life of joy and peace and wholeness.
9. Giving thanks is about the state of our heart and about our faith. Do we really believe what God supplies is enough? Maybe more to the point, are we willing to ***accept*** that what God gives us is enough? Are we willing to submit to God’s will, especially when we don’t understand it, and trust in God’s goodness and faithfulness? When we give thanks to God we are saying we do believe in his love and goodness, we trust in him and accept whatever he chooses for us. Giving thanks is an act of submission to God, an act absolutely rooted in faith. This is why one scholar has said you could sum up the Christian life in giving thanks.
10. Giving thanks to God is so crucial because it is about our relationship to God and our ability to trust him. It also ends up determining how much of the life God wants us to have we actually experience.
11. Voskamp went on to say that the height of our joy is dependent on the depths of our thanks. We will experience joy to the degree that we live with gratitude to God. She says this also means joy is always possible, because we can always give thanks.
12. In her life this proved true. She was utterly changed by committing to a life characterized by giving thanks in all things.
13. Psychologist Rick Hanson says humanity has a universal penchant for concentrating on the negative. Other researchers and experts have discovered the same thing. This means we have a tendency to see what is wrong and to complain. Our complaining does not enrich our lives. It actually lessens joy and peace. Giving thanks is the remedy for this failing of human nature. It is the thing that can lift us out of the disappointment, resentment and sadness of life into the sunlight of God’s joy.
14. Theologian David Steindl Rast said, “It is not happiness that makes us grateful. It is gratefulness that makes us happy.” His life message is that gratefulness is the source of enduring happiness.
15. An article in the *Wall Street Journal* adds confirmation to this message. It said that research shows that those who live expressing thanks have more energy, more optimism, more friendships and more happiness than others. They are less likely to be depressed. They earn more money, sleep more soundly and have stronger immune systems.

APPLICATION

GIVING THANKS IS A CHOICE OF FAITH

1. Laurie and I have been frustrated by the fact that so many things in our world are still not functioning very well. It seems to me that more than 3 years after the pandemic things should have returned to something resembling normal, but that doesn’t seem to be the case. The latest example of this is Laurie’s attempts to get a prescription refilled. First she asked her doctor to send in a request for the prescription, but he failed to do that until she called and asked again a couple of weeks later. He finally did it, but then she got a notification from the pharmacy that they didn’t have the medicine in stock. They said they were attempting to obtain it, and would get back to her in a couple of days. Then she heard nothing from them. After several days she went to the pharmacy to ask about it. They didn’t have it and didn’t think they could get it. But they said another of their stores nearby had it and Laurie could go there to get it. Thus began her quest to somehow obtain this medicine. I realized that I didn’t believe the pharmacy company would come through for her. That’s because there were two things I’d need to believe to actually trust them to come through. The first is that they actually care enough about her to commit to solving the problem. The second is that if they commit to helping her they actually have the ability to do it. My problem was I didn’t think either one of those things was true. I didn’t have faith that they actually care about her or that they have the systems and ability to solve the problem if they try.
2. We have the same issues with God and the issues in our lives. We have to believe first that he cares enough about us to deal with the issues of our lives. Second we have to believe that he has the ability to handle what happens in our lives. Giving thanks to God begins with trusting in those two ways. When we give thanks to him we are saying we know he loves us, he cares about us, and second that he is able to do what is necessary to bring about our good.
3. The opposite is also true. When we don’t give thanks to God in all circumstances we are saying that either God doesn’t care about us, or that he is unable to help us though he might want to do so. Or maybe even both are true. This is why we must give thanks in all things, even in the things that we don’t like or understand.
4. What are we supposed to give thanks for when we have things in our lives we absolutely don’t want and we aren’t thankful for? Many years ago before I was married, the ministry I was involved in took a group of staff and students, me included, out to the Colorado River at Easter to minister to people there. On the way home I was driving a car pulling a trailer as part of a caravan of our group. I was surprised when I saw those dreaded flashing lights in my mirror. I was pulled over by a highway patrolman. This seemed odd because I was doing what the other 4 cars in the caravan were doing, so why was I the only one pulled over? I asked the CHP guy that very question. He told me he was citing me because I was towing a trailer in the wrong lane of the freeway. I said, “Uh, is that a problem?” He told me that yes it was, and he gave me a ticket. I did not thank him for his kind and gracious act. I took it because he had the power and I didn’t. But it grated on me then and has often ever since, because I constantly see people on the freeway doing exactly what I did and I’ve never heard of anyone getting cited for it. Except for me. My point is, I wasn’t happy with what he gave me, so I was definitely not grateful for it.
5. Why are we supposed to be grateful and give thanks when God gives us things we don’t want and don’t like? Why are we supposed to give thanks when our granddaughter is seriously ill? It goes back to what we believe about God. Is what he supplies enough? Do we believe he loves us and do we believe he is powerful enough to bring about our good? If we do, then we thank him that he does love us, and we thank him that he does have some good plan for us, that he will bring good out of everything that happens, that what he supplies is sufficient.

GIVING THANKS IS A DISCIPLINE

1. Ann Voskamp was challenged by a friend to make a list of 1000 things she loves, things she is thankful for. She set out to do that, and began noting even small things that she might typically ignore, that she was thankful for. She gave thanks for the song of birds chirping, for jam piled high on toast, for the aroma of a florist shop, for wool sweaters with turtle neck collars in the winter. She found that her heart needed to be trained to see blessings and to respond with gratitude.
2. Chris Winfield is an author who did the same thing. He committed to writing a gratitude list every day. He’s kept it for more than 3 years now. What he discovered was that it was hard at first, but that as you keep at it you find that there is always something to be thankful for. He found that gratitude grows as you practice it. And he found that the habit of giving thanks consistently and constantly changes you. You become more positive, less complaining, more hopeful.
3. Basic gratitude is produced passively by positive external events. Several years ago when Laurie and I were in a local restaurant and we were finishing our meal, our server asked if we needed anything else. I said we didn’t, that we were ready to pay our bill. She said it had already been paid. I was confused and said, “Uh, what?” She told us there was a family that had been in the restaurant, had recognized us and had paid our bill for us before they left. We didn’t even know who it was. We were humbled and grateful. That’s natural.
4. But there is also a discipline of gratitude. That involves intentionally choosing to give thanks, especially when there is no positive blessing apparent. It involves deliberately training ourselves to exercise giving thanks in all circumstances. This is not dependent on changing situations, but on our mindset and our heart.
5. So the choice is to discipline ourselves to go back to the truth. God does love us. God is sovereign. God is good and is always seeking our best. What God supplies is enough, so we make a habit of giving thanks to God continually.
6. We must remember that Philippians 4:6-7 links giving thanks with peace, and 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 links it with joy. If we want a life of peace and joy, we must live a life of giving thanks in all things.

Almost exactly one year ago, as I mentioned, I started the journey of being treated for cancer. Those were difficult days. As of two months ago my cancer treatments are done. I have much I need to give thanks for. I am thankful to God that through this journey I have had a tender, caring, patient, loving wife who has suffered through all of it with me. I have had wonderful family and friends who have supported me. When this odyssey began the first thing that happened was that we were told Medicare had declined my treatment. This came as a shock, and we didn’t know what that meant. I feared I could not get the treatment I needed. I began exploring ways that we might be able to get the treatment. I am thankful that it was discovered that there had been a bureaucratic mistake and that there was no problem. I remember vividly November 16, we were with Toby and Anna, and I was explaining that the treatment, which was supposed to start the next day, had been delayed because of the funding issue. We were thinking and praying about what we could do, when I received a call informing me of the mistake and that it had been straightened out. I was on for the next day.

My first infusion went great for the first week or so, then I began having problems. I felt terrible. As that next week went on it got worse, until the doctor told me I was getting into a dangerous area and we needed to immediately stop what was happening. I was greatly concerned. But they got me some medicine that put a halt to the process within 12 hours. But now I feared that meant my body couldn’t handle the treatment. I am very thankful for doctors that calmly managed the process and got me through those rough early months. I am thankful for these treatments. They did not even exist only a few years ago. I am thankful that there is hope for me, for the doctors believe the treatments have worked. I am thankful that we didn’t have to come up with some way to pay for my treatments. I figured out a couple of weeks ago that my treatment cost was a little over $300, 000. I don’t know what we would have done if we had to pay for that. But most of all, I am thankful that God loves me, that he is with me, that he has a plan for my life, and he has given me the hope of eternal life.

As I mentioned, two days ago we went to Disneyland with our kids and grandkids. I thank God for each and every one of them. I could not help but reflect on what a gift it is to have all of our children and grandchildren living in proximity to us so that we have the chance to be with them. I am thankful that we all love each other. I am thankful to God that they all know him. These are not things to be taken for granted, and I absolutely do not. But I want to express thanks to God today for these gifts, for we are called to not just be grateful, but to express thanks. I have much to be thankful for. So do you.

So today I want to reiterate the challenge to you today to live a life of gratitude, a life characterized by thanking God for all that he is and does. I want to challenge you to not just have a grateful attitude, but to discipline yourself to give thanks, especially when the reasons for thanking may not be obvious. There is so much good in our lives that we don’t take note of or take for granted. Practice noticing the good and giving thanks. Practice giving thanks when you don’t feel thankful because life isn’t especially rosy, for what God supplies is enough. Today I want to challenge you to write down 3 things you are grateful for every day between now and Thanksgiving. Then share some of those things with those you love as part of your holiday celebration.

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