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THAT'S JUST AWESOME!
Psalm 27:1-4

About 10 years ago Toby and I were given tickets to go to the BCS National Championship Game at the Rose Bowl. The game was set to begin at about 5:30 on that January evening. We got there a couple of hours early and waited for the game to begin. You could feel the excitement build in that crowd of more than 90,000 people as the pre-game activities began. The sun had gone down and the last light of twilight faded away as the time came for the national anthem. LeeAnn Rimes sang the song and as she finished we saw one of the coolest things I've ever experienced. Off in the darkness beyond one end of the stadium we saw two long blue white flames stab out into the night sky. A B-1 bomber was doing a flyover and they had just hit the afterburners. That jet, coming in ridiculously low, roared in over the stadium. The pilot suddenly jerked the nose up and practically stood that plane on its tail. The noise was beyond ear-splitting. It was a continuous, thunderous roar that almost assaulted our bodies. We could feel it as much as hear it, and then that jet rocketed straight up into the sky like a missile. We along with every other person in the crowd just screamed in amazement. Like I said, it was one of the coolest things I have ever experienced. Recently we were talking about it and we both said "that was just awesome!" The brilliance of those afterburner flames, the thundering roar of the jet engines, and the sight of that plane shooting straight up until out of sight was nothing short of thrilling. It was thrilling right down to our bones.

I have never forgotten and will never forget the awe of that moment. I can still feel the thrill of that experience. How close would you say that amazing moment was to what you experience in your daily life? I think we would all agree that it has almost nothing in common with the routine of our lives. That's why an experience like that is so memorable. Yet I will submit to you that the original design for human beings was for us to live in a state that is much closer to that experience than it is to the boredom of the mundane and the routine. Let me explain why.

WE ARE COMMANDED TO GIVE THANKS

We've just celebrated our nation's Thanksgiving holiday. I hope you actually did give thanks. I want to continue that theme today. There is a command that we see quite often in the Scriptures. It is most succinctly put in 1 Thessalonians 5:18 which says, "give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in

Christ Jesus.” We see a similar statement in Ephesians 5:20 which says we are to be “always giving thanks to God the Father for everything.”

What does God want me to be and to do? That is a profound question, maybe the most important question one will ever ask. If God is our creator then surely it is incumbent upon us to understand what he wants us to do. Many years ago the shower in our master bathroom began leaking. It was just before Christmas so I ignored it, thinking I would deal with it after the big holiday. A leaky faucet is a problem. I am the owner, the master of the shower, and its reason for existing is to do what I want it to do. When it decided to start letting water out when I did not want it to do so it was rebelling against me. It was unhealthy, broken. In that instance my “see no evil” plan did not work out very well. The leak got worse dramatically quickly. Unfortunately it was Christmas Eve and that afternoon it had worsened from a drop to a constant stream. I had to fix it. Yeah, you can see where this is going to go. By the time I was finished trying to repair it the leak was no longer a stream, it was a jet of water gushing out of the pipe. The only way we could cut it off was to turn the water off to the house. This was full on mutiny on the part of the shower. We couldn't go all the way through Christmas with no water in the house and I had to go to church to prepare for the Christmas Eve service. Fortunately a friend with plumbing skills came to our rescue and fixed the problem. The point here is when a thing does not do what it is designed to do and exists to do then it is worthless.

The verses we have just read tell us what God wants us to do. He wants us to give thanks in every circumstance. If we do not do that we are like that shower head. He's the owner, the master. We belong to him. If we don't do what he says he created us to do and wills for us to do then we are rebelling. Like that shower there is something wrong with us. We are broken, unhealthy.

Often in the Psalms you'll see the refrain, “give thanks to the Lord.” When we see something repeated that often and then see the New Testament tell us this same command is God's will we should consider this to be a matter of huge importance. New Testament scholar Andrew Lincoln wrote that one ancient biblical scholar said, “Thanksgiving is a preeminent virtue which could encapsulate the whole of a person's religious obligation.” Biblical scholar P.T. O'Brien in an essay on Thanksgiving said that for Paul “Thanksgiving was almost a synonym for the Christian life.” You could sum up the whole Christian life in giving thanks.

Giving thanks is crucial for experiencing joy in life and having a hopeful outlook. William Farley has a book out entitled *The Secret of Spiritual Joy* that says the

secret of joy is having a heart of gratitude and giving thanks. However, the biggest reason that we should always give thanks is that it is right. God deserves our gratitude every moment of every day because every good thing we have comes from him. Giving thanks puts us in line with reality. It requires that we admit our need and our humble position, and that's a good thing. But today I want to talk about yet another reason why continually giving thanks is so important for us.

GIVING THANKS CAN BE HARD

Before we consider the reason that I mentioned let's admit that giving thanks is not always easy. Though we are to give thanks for everything that happens in every circumstance we all encounter things that we are far from grateful for. In fact we wish they had never happened. How can we give thanks for those kinds of things?

Several years ago right after our daughter Carissa married her husband Michael he was deployed by the Marines to Afghanistan. Obviously it was hard on Carissa and Michael to be separated so quickly after they got married. But what made it even worse was that he was sent into a combat zone. Having him in combat was bad enough, but it was also frustrating because there was absolutely zero reason for him to be there. I'm not talking about whether our involvement in Afghanistan made any sense. I'm talking about the reason for him personally to be there. He was sent there without any real job to do. Honestly Carissa's contribution to the war effort in Afghanistan amounted to just about the same as Michael's. Neither one of them really did anything. Poor Michael did little more than serve as a potential target over there. What difficult days those were. I had a hard time giving thanks for him being there. I gave thanks every day that he was safe. But how in the world are we supposed to give thanks for him being there?

Just recently Carissa visited us for several weeks here. The day she was to leave she had a morning flight back to Mississippi. Fortunately her flight time was late enough in the morning that we figured we wouldn't hit heavy traffic because rush-hour was over. We got up and had breakfast, loaded her stuff in the car and headed for the airport. But when we got on the freeway we ran into very heavy stop and go traffic. There were three accidents between Encinitas and Solana Beach. That morning I sat there in my car frustrated, a bit concerned that we were going to get her to the airport on time which would've been a disaster because it's difficult to get flights into Meridian, Mississippi. Honestly the first thing on my mind was not to thank the Lord for that situation.

How would we have given thanks if Michael's combat deployment hadn't been as benign as it was? What if something awful had happened? Were we supposed to

give thanks then? You would not have to think more than a few seconds to come up with numerous occasions when giving thanks was not your first reaction. In fact you can think of many occasions when giving thanks seemed nonsensical. Today I want to give you something to give thanks for even in those seemingly unwelcome situations.

WE MUST BEHOLD THE BEAUTY

Psalm 27:4 says, “one thing I ask from the Lord, this only do I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze on the beauty of the Lord and to seek him in his temple.” David said the one thing he wanted most in life was to gaze at the beauty of the Lord. That statement makes me a little uncomfortable. I have a bit of a mental block over the idea of the beauty of the Lord. Do you think of God as beautiful? What exactly does that mean? And why is it such a big deal to gaze on God’s beauty?

Let’s start with a definition of beauty. The dictionary defines beauty as “the quality present in a thing or person that gives intense pleasure or deep satisfaction.” So what do you consider beautiful I will share a few things that I consider beautiful. One of those is Laurie. Even after 36 years of marriage I often find myself looking at her and just marveling at how beautiful she is. I get great pleasure out of her beauty and great satisfaction as well. Several weeks ago I got up early one Sunday morning to prepare for church and I looked out the windows in the back of our house and saw a spectacular sunrise. There were a number of clouds all around the sky and they were lit up in brilliant, vibrant oranges, reds and pinks. My job dropped open and I just stood there and looked at it. It was astoundingly beautiful.

What is beautiful to you? It’s not a bad idea to take a little time and write down all of the beautiful things that you see in this world. There is an infinite variety of beautiful things. There are spectacular flowers, there is the ocean on a summer day, there’s the brilliant blue sky overhead, there are butterflies and birds and animals of all kinds that are gorgeous. All of these things speak to our senses. We can see them or hear them. I can neither see nor hear God. So in what sense is he beautiful? Go back to our definition of beauty. Beauty is a quality in a person that gives intense pleasure or deep satisfaction. Is there anything in God that gives us intense pleasure or deep satisfaction?

Yes there is. Nine times in the Bible you will read the sentence, “Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good and his love endures forever.” Consider those two statements about God. He is good and his love endures forever. How do those statements make you feel?

What if God were not good? Have you ever had to deal with a bad person? My first year after I graduated from college I was living in an apartment in Long Beach with 3 other guys. We were asked to help a guy who was new in the area and needed a place to crash for a few nights. We welcomed him into our apartment, fed him and gave him a place to sleep. And the next day while we were all out he and an accomplice stole everything in our apartment that had any possible value. He had talked with us the night before and baldly lied to us. His whole story was an act. He didn't care one bit for people who were trying to help him. He only wanted to steal from us. We found out he had gotten out of prison 3 weeks earlier after he had served several years for doing the exact same thing to some other people. The guy was just plain bad. A bad person intends evil for others. What if God was like that? What if his goal in life was to harm you? How awful life would be. There would never be any peace at all.

Do you ever feel like your life is at least mildly cursed? I do. I am under the red light curse. It's uncanny. When I'm driving lights that are green around turn red as I approach. It's not just that I feel this way. Everyone in my family has seen it. We were driving late one night and there were zero other cars on the road. Up ahead there was a major intersection with a green light. But sure enough as I drew near it turned red. Laurie said, "Rick, that could only happen to you." A similar thing happens to me at the grocery store. No matter which checkout stand I go to that line moves slower than any others. I go to fill up my car at the gas station and find that every human being in the state got there just before me. I have to wait for someone to finish. Inevitably I end up behind a person with a huge truck that has a 2000 gallon tank. Finally my turn comes. When I am done pumping gas there is literally not another car in the gas station. What if God were not good? What if he was mean, devious and a bit evil? What if he got glee out of making my life miserable and literally did everything he could to cause me problems? Life would be unbearable.

But God is good. He is pure, unadulterated good. Every moment of the day he has one thing in mind, and that is to produce good for others. He is generous, kind, passionate about blessing his creatures. The goodness of God is everywhere around us. We see his goodness in the abundance of his creation. We see it in the fact that there is beauty around us. He could've made the whole world look like Barstow. Think of the variety and flowers and birds, the tremendous variety of foods. The goodness of God can be seen in his work to make it possible for us to have a relationship with him by sending his son, Jesus Christ, into this world to save us and restore us to himself. He could easily have just said, "enough with these yahoos. I'm just going to wipe them out and maybe start over."

Then think about that statement that his love endures forever. What a phenomenal truth that is. Most human beings have a limit on their love. They will love up to a point. But if you treat them badly enough, if you are horrible enough, they will not love you anymore. Think about how human relationships usually work. They are reciprocal. If you love me then I will love you. But if you don't treat me the way I want I'm done with you. I found it interesting that there was talk this week that Les Miles, the football coach at LSU, might get fired. He has the highest winning percentage of any coach in the school's history. This year his team could easily end up winning 10 and losing 3, an excellent record. He has the top recruiting class in the nation. Why would you fire him? Well because he hasn't won a league championship and had his team in the national championship game in 4 years. Plus last year they lost 5 games and this year they've already lost 3 whole games! A few years ago he was the king of Louisiana. Now they're talking about paying him \$15 million to go away. That's human nature. I love you, but if you don't meet my absurdly high expectations then you're gone. As it turned out they are going to keep him, but that tells you all you need to know about how we humans relate.

God isn't like that. His love endures forever. Nothing can stop God from loving us. In fact in the New Testament in Romans 8:38-39 Paul says that nothing can ever separate us from God's perfect love. I remember those moments when our kids were young and they were bickering in the back seat of the car and I snapped. I harshly trotted out the "don't make me stop this car" line. I didn't do that because I loved them. I did it because they were annoying me. I was serving myself. There is never a moment when God does that. Love is motive behind every thought he has and every action he takes.

How important is it to you to be loved? That may well be the most important thing in all of life. And when you gaze at God here is what you will see, you will see love, a love that endures forever. It brings us great satisfaction and pleasure when God is good and he loves us. In other words, we see his beauty.

Paul David Tripp has written a book titled simply *Awe*. In the book he makes an interesting assertion. He says that human beings are hardwired for awe. We must have awe of something. At the bottom of every desire, every thought, every emotion and every action is an awe of something. There is no such thing as a human who is not in search of awe. In fact we find our meaning, our identity, our sense of well-being from whatever it is that we live in awe of.

God has created an awesome world. One night a few months ago I stood in our backyard on a warm night and looked up at the sky. The moon was full and the sky was splattered with stars. It was so spectacular it almost made me tingle. It was awesome. In September we were on vacation with all our kids on Maui. There were a couple of hurricanes in the area. The weather was fine but the storms caused some big time swells. Last one afternoon we were all at the beach and Michael, Toby and I went into the water. The beach was really steep so there was just a shore break. We went in and played in the shore break, which was rather large. Having lived all my adult life in Southern California I know how to survive waves. You can always just dive underneath them. We were body surfing these waves, but one caught me inside, so I dove underneath it. The wave was having none of it. It just picked me up and threw me toward the beach. I was like a rag doll, helpless against it. I was rolled over a couple of times until I found myself on the sand. What a trip! The power of that wave, really not an enormous one, was just awesome. There is awesomeness everywhere in our world. But all those awesome things were never intended to be the stopping point.

You and I were made by God with both the capacity and the inescapable need to have an awe of God. Remember that awe of him is the starting point for our identity, our meaning, our satisfaction, our sense of well-being. All of the awesomeness of this world is intended to be signs pointing us to the awesomeness of God. When we don't live in awe of him we seek that awe in other things.

We want and need to experience awe. We sense an emptiness and even a boredom with life because we are made to thrive on that exciting awe that thrills us and fills even mundane moments with life and zest and meaning. Lacking awe of God we try to fill it with awesome things in this world that give us a brief taste of the awe. We get the zing from that awesome thing and we know that's what we want, it is what we are made for.

The problem is the brief taste isn't the real thing, and all it does is leave us hungry, even starving for the real thing. The brief jolt of awe causes us to know it is possible and we want it. But as quickly as it was there it is gone. Imagine that you go to New York. You want to see the Empire State Building. So you follow directions in the guide book and as you are going down a street you encounter a sign that depicts the classic building and has an arrow pointing you in the right direction. Would you be happy stopping there, taking a picture of that sign, maybe having someone take a picture of you standing next to it, and then leaving? How absurd that would be. You don't want to experience a sign of the Empire State Building, you want to experience the building itself. If all you ever get is the sign,

you will be forever disappointed. And if all we ever get are the awesome signs that point us to God, we are going to be forever disappointed with life. It's not enough! Paul Tripp says, "if awe of God is not blowing you away, you will shop for awe in creation and it will ruin your life."

AWE GIVES COURAGE

Look at the opening verses of Psalm 27. The Lord is the strength of my life and my salvation—whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life—of whom shall I be afraid? David's great desire in life was to behold the beauty of the Lord. In other words, he wanted to live continually in awe of him. He did that, and you see the effect in these verses. The Lord is the awe of my life, of whom shall I be afraid.

It was being in awe of God that enabled him to not be afraid. David had lived that truth out in probably the most famous story of his life. In 1 Samuel 17 a teenaged David confronted a gigantic, fierce warrior named Goliath in battle. Goliath scoffed at him and began trash talking. He said, "Come here and I'll give your flesh to the birds and wild animals." What you need to remember is that every soldier in Israel, all of their most courageous, battle-hardened fighters, even their special forces guys, ran in fear from this guy. He intimidated them all. But David said in 1 Samuel 17:45-46, "You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel whose armies you have defied. This day the Lord will deliver you into my hand and I will strike you down and cut off your head." Whoa, that is some prime, grade A trash talk. What did David have confidence in? Was it in his unconventional strategy? Was it his finely honed combat skills? Was it his strength or his quickness? No, his confidence was in the name of the Lord Almighty. He didn't think it was his own ability that would put an end to Goliath. "The Lord will deliver you into my hand." Not, "I'm smarter than you, younger than you, quicker than you, stronger than you or just better than you, so I'm able to beat you." No, the Lord is better than you. He lived in awe of God, and so he was not afraid when everyone else was.

How does this work in our lives? Recently we were told that SFC in whose chapel we meet may have a major building project in the near future that might mean no chapel for us to meet in. I felt an instant jolt of a little concern. Now is the time to ask the question what are you in awe of? What do you think will fill that need you have for wonder, meaning and well-being? Inside somewhere I want to put our church continuing so we can stay together and I can keep ministering. That's what will fill me with awe, with a sense of meaning and well-being. So somehow I have

to find an answer for this threat. That's the initial jolt. But then I can choose to live in awe of God. God is wise, good, powerful, and his resources are without limit. He loves us. He loves me. My meaning and my well-being and my security are founded in his greatness and nothing else. My life is about living in awe of him and glorifying him. So is any of that threatened by a possible building project? Not even a little. The awe of God is the strength of my life, of what shall I be afraid?

CONCLUSION

So here's what it all comes down to. We are to give thanks in everything. Not everything that happens will be joyful or naturally gratitude producing. Some of it will be as far from being enjoyable as I am from being a hip hop artist. But in the midst of whatever that is we can live in awe of God. As we give thanks to God for his goodness and his unconditional love we get a taste of awe at who he is and what he does. And that produces peace and strength. Among the many things it will accomplish, it can help you overcome the fear that exists in so much of life. So in everything give thanks, for this is the will of God for you!