

The Makings of a Life of Gratitude
Part Three: Recounting All as Gift
Psalm 92.1-2

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Let me begin by reading the opening lines of Psalm 103.2-5

I say to myself, 'Praise the Lord!'
Never forget all the good things that he has done for you!

The outpouring of God's love on each of our lives is more certain than the light that reaches us from the sun, more abundant than the water that pours over Niagara Falls, and more personal than the love of a mother for her newborn child.

The challenge, of course, is that we can miss it. We can walk right past the outpourings of God's love for us and never see them, never receive them as gift.

The psalmist tells himself: "Never forget all that God does for you!"

He tells himself that because he does, all the time, and so do we.

We look right past all that God does for us.

That's why the psalmist doesn't just admonish himself to be grateful, but he jumps right into making a list of reasons for to give thanks.

Never forget the things God has done for you! Things like this!

He forgives all my sins.
He makes me well again when I am ill.
He saves me from the deep hole of death's power.
He always loves me and he is kind to me.
He blesses me so much!
He gives me so many good things for my life here.
So I become strong with the strength of an eagle.

Forgiving me, loving me, caring for me, protecting me, providing for me, refreshing me.

I say to myself: Don't forget!

We are a couple of weeks into our new series on gratitude. This morning we are focusing on the why and how of gratitude: why giving thanks is so important, and how to make gratitude a more consistent part of your daily life.

Why practice gratitude

So to begin with:

If I were to ask you – why is gratitude important – what would you say?

Here are some of the reasons I think the writers of the scriptures might want us to understand that a life of gratitude is pretty important

1. Gratitude fosters clarity

When I go through life failing to pause to notice and give thanks for the ways God provides for me, I can quickly lose sight of the fact that my whole life and every part of it is a gift.

Instead, I can begin to have an inflated view of myself, and fall into thinking that somehow all of this is of my own doing.

Listen to this caution from Deuteronomy 8.10-14:

When you have eaten and are satisfied, praise the Lord your God... Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, then your heart will become proud and you will forget the Lord your God.

As Brently said last Sunday, we all have spiritual amnesia. We are all like leaky buckets when it comes to spiritual things. We forget what's true about God so quickly.

Gratitude helps us remember.

Oh yeah, God *is* good. He *does* provide for my every need. He *is* worthy of my worship and my trust.

And I am *not* self-sufficient and self-reliant. I'm not the maker and sustainer of my own life.

When we forget, we become large and self-important in our own eyes, and pride begins to rule in us, and pride is a profoundly dangerous posture in which to find ourselves spiritually.

Pride leaves God out of the picture, slides us over and puts us at the center, and leaves us thinking that somehow we are the ones making our life happen. That sort of view of ourselves is as dangerous as it is wrong.

But when we are grateful we remember, and when we remember we see things clearly, and we don't have any confusion when it comes to answering the question Paul asks in I Corinthians 4:7:

What do you have that you did not receive as gift?

Not a thing! Every day in myriad ways I am on the receiving end of God's kindnesses.

Gratitude fosters clarity. Here's a second reason gratitude is so important.

2. Gratitude produces contentment

Researchers at universities such as Florida International and UCLA have discovered that the benefits of gratitude are significant: reduced stress, reduced anxiety, reduced depression, increased resilience, and improved sleep.

And they haven't identified a single negative side effect.

So why is that?

For two reasons, I think.

First, gratitude takes our eyes off of what we are lacking and puts them on what we have been given. It helps us see God's provisions that we would otherwise overlook.

We live in a world that is a giant Petrie dish, breeding discontentment through advertising and through social media, leaving us feeling as though we don't have, and we will never have, enough.

When we give thanks to God, our focus shifts and contentment grows.

As the writer of Hebrews puts it:

I can be content with whatever I have, because God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." Hebrews 13.5

This is the shift that gratitude brings about: The key to contentment is not having what you want, but wanting what you have. And the key to wanting what you have is giving thanks for what you have.

Here's the second reason gratitude grows contentment.

Our world is also a breeding ground for anxiety and fear and depression and despair, because the world feels out of control, and we either feel we have to get control of it, which leads to stress and anxiety, or we realize we can't, and we never will, get control of it, which leads to depression and despair.

Only God is sufficient to see us through this life, and gratitude helps us to see not only God's gifts but God himself and his loving presence and involvement in our lives.

You may remember a long time ago I used the example of life being like being in a box that holds me and whatever it is that life has for me. If I keep the lid on the box, I conclude that it's all up to me to deal with whatever life hands me.

Which makes responses like stress and anxiety and depression and despair very reasonable responses. Because life and all it holds is too big for any of us.

But gratitude lifts the lid off the box. It reminds me that I'm not alone. There is a good and loving God who is in the picture, a God I can trust in and rest in, who is over all and in all that I face.

So instead of anxiety and stress and depression and despair, when I am grateful, I can go through life in a posture of rest and peace.

That what Paul is getting at when he writes this in Philippians 4.6-7:

Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Lots of other passages express the same idea.

Psalm 4.8

I will lie down in peace and sleep for you O Lord are with me

Psalm 16.9

I have set the Lord always before me; because he is at my right hand I will not be shaken.

Isaiah 26.3

You will keep in perfect peace the one whose mind is stayed on You, because he trusts in You.

Gratitude fosters clarity. Gratitude produces contentment. Here's a third reason gratitude is so important.

3. Gratitude deepens connection

We can forget. Gratitude is not a task in our relationship with God. It's not a thing on our spiritual to-do list.

Gratitude is relational and connective. It's central to what makes and keeps a relationship healthy. Gratitude, like oil in an engine, is what keeps a relationship running smoothly.

In their wonderful little book *The Four Habits of a Joy-Filled Marriage*, Marcus Warner and Chris Coursey talk about how crucial it is in a healthy relationship to express appreciation regularly. They write:

"Appreciation is often the hidden ingredient that determines if a [relationship] is strong or weak. The brain that is trained on appreciation will scan the environment for good things while the untrained brain becomes critical and all too quick to find fault in other people. Practice feeling and sharing appreciation as often as you can." (92)

They advocate ending the day with an intentional practice of telling each other three qualities you appreciate about each other, and how you saw those things in action.

For whatever reason, Sharon and I have been in a season for the past several weeks of both of us taking the time to be really intentional about the things we are appreciating about each other, and the result of that is a really sweet sense of connection.

It's one of the surest signs of a healthy relationship, and the more present it is, the closer you become:

I really appreciate this about you.
 I'm really appreciated you doing this for me.
 I felt very thought of when you served me in this way.
 Thank you for the way you consistently do this.
 I love this about you.
 My life is better because you are in it.

There's a direct connection. The more grateful you are to God, the closer to God you will be.

So we pray again the prayer printed on our bookmarks.

You have given so much to me,
 Give one thing more, a grateful heart.

George Herbert, "Gratefulnesse"

Those are some thoughts on why it's important for us to practice gratitude. Now let's focus for the remainder of our time on

How to Practice Gratitude

For this I want to invite you to pull out the handout you received as you came in this morning. I'll just walk through that.

It's titled "Practices to Form a Life of Gratitude."

I like that word "Practice" because it has a double meaning.

Practice means a regular routine, like making a practice of working out at the end of the day. These suggestions are intended to help us do just that – to build gratitude in as a routine part of our lives.

But practice also means something you work at so you can get better at it. Braden Smith and Fletcher Loyer have been practicing multiple times a week for years to improve their skills, and they just keep getting better and better.

The same thing happens with gratitude. When you practice gratitude, the more you say it, the more you see it. The more gratitude marks your life, the more your life will be marked by an awareness of things to be grateful for. Grateful habits breed a grateful outlook.

I am really challenged by this line from Tish Warren.

As busy, practical, hurried, and distracted people, we develop habits of inattention, and we miss these tiny theophanies in our day. [You may know that a theophany is a moment when God steps into our human experience and reveals himself in some way.] But if we were fully alive and whole, no pleasure would be too ordinary or common to stir up adoration.

Liturgy of the Ordinary, Tish Warren

There is a child-like quality to gratitude, as again and again we run back to our father with hearts full of thanks because of the myriad he has strewn across our day, gifts that we keep stumbling across and putting in our pockets like beautiful rocks we find on our path.

We can think of open gratitude as a childish thing. But it is actually the cynical sophistication of adulthood that is childish. Our Father's provision warrants a child's delight.

The more we express gratitude like children, the more we will find ourselves agreeing with the Florid Sword in the Wingfeather Sage, who says with the exuberance of a child,

Gleeful are the delights a new day bringeth.

The Wingfeather Saga by Andrew Peterson

Rhythms of Gratitude

Part of what forms an attitude of gratitude is when we weave it into the regular rhythms of our lives. We build it right into our schedules.

- One familiar way to do that, an ancient one that goes all the way back to biblical times, is giving thanks at daily meals

The New Testament records examples of Jesus giving thanks for a meal in Luke 24.30 and Paul in Acts 27.35.

Meals are a natural time to acknowledge God's faithfulness in meeting our needs. Giving thanks for the food on our table is a wonderful right hand gesture that matches the left hand gesture of asking God to provide our daily bread.

- Another way to be consistent in giving thanks is to build it in at the beginning, the end, and even in the middle of the day.

Psalm 92.1-2 says

It is good to praise the Lord
and make music to your name, O Most High,
proclaiming your love in the morning
and your faithfulness at night.

And Daniel 6.10 describes Daniel living out his daily rhythm of praise and thanks.

He got down on his knees three times a day and prayed and gave thanks before his God.

There are many ways that technology conspires against the spiritual life, pulling us away from a focus on the things of God, but this is one of the ways technology can serve the spiritual life.

I know one person who sets an alarm on his watch to go off several times each day to remind him to stop and express thanks to God.

There are also a couple of great apps that encourage pauses for gratitude at the beginning and end of the day.

Sharon and I love to end the day by listening to the prayer of examen on the Lectio 365 app, and there are other good ones available as well.

- Scripture also models the importance not just of regular moments to pause throughout the day but also regular days to pause throughout the year to give God thanks.

Exodus 23 describes three annual days of celebration that are set aside to remember and give thanks: Passover, first fruits in late spring, and the fall harvest, celebrating God's redemption and provision (Exodus 23.13-17)

Obviously Thanksgiving Day is a perfect day for that.

In our family we also love to use birthdays as an excuse to give God thanks for the ways we see God at work in and through the lives of those we love. We feel like that is by far the most valuable gift we can give them as we celebrate their lives – and a gift we can give to the God who took such great delight in creating them and who is so clearly at work in who they are and who they are becoming.

Some people I know also make a point to remember and celebrate on the anniversary of their baptism or dedication.

Patterns of Gratitude

So what might a regular practice of gratitude look like?

Here are some patterns of gratitude that might prompt something for you.

- The first one is a Fill in the Blank:
"What a day of joy, Lord, because ____."

I've shared with you that one night, about a year ago, just as I was falling asleep, the Lord put this phrase in my head:

It had been a full day and in some ways a challenging day. And when this phrase popped into my head, I wasn't really in a grateful state of mind.

But I took God up on what he was prompting me to do. I said, "Okay, Lord . . . what a day of joy because . . . because . . . I had to think about it awhile . . . well, because I experienced you in this conversation with this person, and in this part of our meeting this afternoon I clearly felt you leading us, and in this decision we wrestled through it was obvious that you were the one who led us to the best path and in this connection I had with my neighbor when I got home I definitely experienced you."

I ended up letting that pattern shape my conversation with the Lord each night, and also each morning, for the next several weeks.

- Another Pattern of Gratitude is what I call Wanting What You Have:
"Wouldn't it be great if _____. Can you imagine? But what are the chances of that?!"

This is a very Dad-like, David-like way of expressing gratitude that Sharon and my kids have heard me say a hundred times.

Let me give you an example. By the extraordinary grace of God, this fall I was blessed to go on a study trip with our dear friend Doru from Romania, retracing the footsteps of Paul through Greece.

On our first day Doru and I were hiking along the Egnatian Way, a paved road built by the Romans, walking exactly where Paul, Luke, Timothy and Silas had walked as they left Neapolis, the harbor where they first landed in Europe, and headed for Philippi, where they led the first European to Christ..

I turned to Doru and said, "Doru, wouldn't it be incredible if, right this very moment, you and I were walking along the very road that Paul and his companions walked on? Could you imagine what that would be like?! But what are the chances of that?"

I think that's a great way to foster gratitude with kids. It helps them see the gift that they otherwise might take for granted.

Here's another one that's great with kids.

- Acrostic gratitude:
"Thank you, Lord, for a____, for b____, for c____, etc."

You may be aware that a number of psalms in the scriptures are laid out according to the Hebrew alphabet, each line or each section starting with a the next letter: Psalm 9 and 10, 25, 34, 37, 111 and 112, 119, and 145, are all acrostics.

This is a great one to do with kids, but it's great for adults as well. I find it's a great gratitude prompt when I want to be grateful but nothing specific comes to mind.

- The next Pattern of Gratitude is one Sharon and I learned about when we went to bible lands with Ray VanderLaan.

He told us about *Berakah* prayer, or blessing prayer
"I bless you, O Lord our God, King of the Universe, ____."

This is a spontaneous form of prayer that was developed by Jewish rabbis around the time of Jesus, that was sparked by prayers in Scripture such as Daniel 2.20.

It's a prayer of gratitude that expresses thanks for a specific thing for which you're grateful.

There's a whole book in the Mishnah about Berakah prayers, suggesting all kinds of things these prayers can be offered for. It encourages offering prayers of gratitude

For good news
 For rescue from danger
 For your health and your physical abilities,
 And for clothing that covers your body and the shelter that protects it
 For physical enjoyment
 like smelling a sweet fragrance
 or eating something delicious
 fruits, vegetables, or grains and wine
 or for seeing a beautiful sight that reveals the majesty of God in creation:
 such as lightning, the ocean, mountains, and rainbows

According to the Mishnah, believers were encouraged to offer these spontaneous blessing prayers 100 times a day

- One other Pattern of Gratitude to consider is the

Dayenu prayer:

"If He had ____ but had not ____, even that would have been enough."

"Dayenu" is a Hebrew expression that means "It would have been enough."

Over time the Jewish people developed a script for celebrating the Passover, and it includes a prayer that gives thanks for each of the miracles that God enacted as he led his people out of slavery in Egypt and into the promised land.

It is a creative way to express the lavish layering of grace upon grace as God cared for his people. Here are a few lines as an example:

If He had split the Sea for us but had not taken us through it on dry land; [it would have been] enough for us.
 If He had taken us through it on dry land but had not brought an end to our enemies in [the Sea]; [it would have been] enough for us.
 If He had brought an end to our enemies in [the Sea] but had not supplied our needs in the wilderness for forty years; [it would have been] enough for us.
 And so on ..

If you haven't seen it recently, go back and watch the episode of *The Chosen* – actually, if you haven't watched *The Chosen*, I really encourage you to. But go back to the episode called "The Same Coin," which was episode four in season 5, which begins with the traditional Dayenu prayer during the Passover, and then ends with a modified version written by Jesus' followers that has to do with what they were experiencing right

then. It's very powerful, and a great example of how the prayer can be adapted to our experience of God's gracious work in our lives.

How do we capture our gratitude as it wells up in our daily practices?

Expressions of Gratitude

- Respond to it (praise in the moment)

Certainly the easiest and in some ways the most meaningful way is simply to stop in the moment and express your praise to God. That is an intimate and direct way to delight in God in the moment.

- Record it (daily journal or gratitude jar)

But our life of gratitude definitely deepens when we make it a point to write down our gratitude. And that gives us the added benefit of having a written record that we can go back to and look over in the future.

If you didn't pick one up last Sunday or the Sunday before, and you don't have one of your own you want to use, we have journals available for you to use as gratitude journals during this year. We encourage you to jot down a word, a phrase, a sentence, or a paragraph each day in which you express something for which you are thankful.

Several of you have mentioned how much you have appreciated this being part of your regular daily routine as we come into the new year. One person told me that he and his wife are doing one together, and how much they are enjoying this being part of their dinner conversation each evening.

- Commemorate it (standing stones)

Another practice the Scriptures model is making a more permanent expression of our thanks. In the Old Testament, there were a number of times when stacks or circles of stones were set up as a way of marking significant encounters with God, such as when Jacob wrestled with the angel in Genesis 28, and when the Israelites crossed the Jordan in Joshua 4. Those arrangements of stones were called standing stones, and they served not only as a reminder for those who set them up but also for future generations of what God did there.

More contemporary expressions of the same idea that I know some of you have done include planting a tree or buying a piece of jewelry or writing a poem or throwing a party or giving a special gift to the church as a way of expressing in a unique way your gratitude to God.

- Recount it (sharing our thanks with others)

One final way the Scriptures encourage us to give voice to our gratitude is to turn to one another, to our brothers and sisters in Christ, and to share with each other why we are grateful to God, and to ask them what they are grateful as well.

That shared aspect of gratitude is going to be the focus of next Sunday's message.

In Psalm 103.2-5 the psalmist prods himself:

I say to myself, 'Praise the Lord!'
 Never forget all the good things that he has done for you!
He forgives all my sins.
 He makes me well again when I am ill.
He saves me from the deep hole of death's power.
 He always loves me and he is kind to me.
 He blesses me so much!
He gives me so many good things for my life here.
 So I become strong with the strength of an eagle.

In recounting the blessings of God, the psalmist has the same challenge we do. How could we ever express all our gratitude?

We can't. We can't begin to . . . but we can sure try.