

**The Makings of a Life of Gratitude
Part Five: Recognizing All as Gift
Grateful in our Difficulties that He is Drawing Us Closer to Himself**

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As you are probably aware, in seventeen days, people all across East and Southeast Asia will celebrate the new lunar year. People from China, Taiwan, Korea, Singapore, Philippines, Thailand will all be celebrating the beginning of the Year of the Horse. An early Happy New Year to all of you who are from that region!

In anticipation of the new year, as you might imagine, there are a whole host of horse-related products hitting the market. Including this little guy . . .



. . . the Smiling Horse, a stuffed animal made in a factory in Yiwu, China.

But a few months ago, in the factory where Smiling Horses are made, one of the workers, a man named Bao, accidentally began to sew the muzzles on upside down and, unnoticed, the misfit toys began to ship out with the others.

And soon they began to show up on display racks in stores all across China.



But when the improperly assembled toys began to hit the shelves, customers *loved* them, and stores began to sell out of them. Now they are the hottest toy in China.

The factory where they're made now has ten assembly lines dedicated to producing them, and rather than losing his job, Bao was just given a *twelve-year* bonus for his fortuitous mistake.

Instead of calling them Smiling Horses, they are called Cry-Cry Horses, and they have become something of a mascot for the new year.

And you can see why. They resonate with the uncertainty and the trepidation we're all feeling as we look ahead at 2026.

A professor in China said their popularity taps into a broader wave of social fatigue. "Everyone feels exhausted," he said, "and [we all face] many uncertainties about the future."

Joking aside, there are indeed significant uncertainties and difficulties every direction we look. On the world scene: Unrelenting Russian attacks in Ukraine. Thousands dying in protests in Iran. Attacks on school children in Nigeria. Conflicts continuing in Somalia and Sudan and the Middle East and elsewhere.

And closer to home, there is enormous uncertainty and deep concern: rising consumer costs and an uncertain economy, trade structures and foreign alliances being completely rewritten, ice storms that hit a wide swath of the Midwest, ICE storms of a different sort that hit Minneapolis, and the resulting tragic loss of life there, the sense that the branches of our government are in a time of great upheaval, and that normal for us as a nation is quickly receding in the rear view mirror.

And closer to home still, which of us doesn't face weighty challenges just walking through life each day? Academic pressures, friendship challenges, getting the bills paid, decisions about career direction, unresolved conflicts, performance pressure at work, infertility, illness, caring for a needy family member, the challenges of being single, the challenges of being married, the difficulties that come with aging, the loss of a loved one.

It doesn't matter where we live on this globe, or what our political affiliations are, or what our nationality or ethnicity is, or what our station in life is. There is uncertainty and trepidation for all of us.

And that's true for each new generation. That crying horse might be a fitting mascot for life, not just for life in 2026.

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Which makes our series on gratitude both timely and challenging.

Gratitude is easy when life is easy. It's simple to give God thanks when we have a smile on our face.

But what happens when the smile turns into a frown – a frown of uncertainty or fear or anger or sadness?

Surely God doesn't expect us to give thanks when things are hard, does he?

He does. Scripture says not just once but a number of times that we are to give thanks in all circumstances, and not just in the good ones.

Give Thanks Always

II Corinthians 1.3-4: All praise to God in all our troubles.

Romans 5.3: We can rejoice when we run into problems.

James 1.2: Consider it pure joy whenever you face trials.

I Thessalonians 5.18: Give thanks in all circumstances.

How can that be? How does that even make sense?

It's one of the biggest conundrums there is for many Christians, and I think it is a unique challenge for those of us who were born here in the relative wealth and comfort and peace and stability of the US. How can we thank God when our world and our smile suddenly gets turned upside down by an argument or a biopsy report or a bad grade or a pink slip or a social media post or a stock market update or a news flash?

Are we really expected to thank God in difficult circumstances?



Some of you may be familiar with Corrie ten Boom, a follower of Christ from Amsterdam who, together with her sister and her father, helped shelter hundreds of Jews from the occupying Nazis during World War II.

Eventually the three of them were betrayed by a neighbor and sent to concentration camps. She tells the story in her amazing book *The Hiding Place*. If you haven't read it, I would certainly encourage you to pick it up.



Corrie and her sister eventually ended up in a concentration camp called Ravensbrück, where they were assigned to a barracks that was already jammed with other women

As soon as they arrived they realized the overcrowded building was also swarming with fleas.

Corrie wondered how they could ever live in such a place, but her older sister, Betsie, said

God had already given them the answer. She told Corrie to reread the passage they'd read that morning from the Bible.

Corrie flipped to First Thessalonians chapter five and started reading. When she came to verses sixteen through eighteen, "Rejoice always, pray constantly, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus--", Betsie exclaimed, "That's it, Corrie! That's His answer! 'Give thanks in all circumstances!' We can start right now to thank God for every single thing about this new barracks!"

"Such as?" Corrie asked.

"Such as being assigned here together," Betsie said. Corrie agreed with that.

They went on to thank God that they had been able to keep their Bible. And that with so many people crammed into such a small space there would be more people they could share their hope with.

Then Betsie gave thanks for the fleas.

The fleas! Corrie thought. "Betsie," she said, "there's no way even God can make me grateful for a flea."

"Give thanks in all circumstances," Betsie quoted, "It doesn't say 'in pleasant circumstances.' Fleas are part of this place where God has put us."

So they gave thanks for the fleas. But Corrie felt sure that this time Betsie was wrong.

They quickly joined into the painful rhythms of life in the camp, where they were subjected not just to crowded barracks but also to hard manual labor and starvation rations and cruel guards and harsh weather.

But every evening the women came back to their barracks, and after their meager dinner they would gather around and listen as Corrie and Betsy read from their Bible. The girls were curious why the guards didn't stop them, but they were deeply grateful to be able to share their hope with the other women.

Then, one day, Betsie learned why. She found out the guards refused to enter their barracks because they knew it was infested with fleas.

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Today and the next two Sundays we'll be exploring why we can give thanks to God not only *in* but even *for* the difficulties we face.

There are almost a dozen places in the Scriptures where God is really clear about what he is up to when we find ourselves in the midst of difficult circumstances.

Those center around three themes, which we'll be exploring over the next three weeks.

This morning we'll be looking at passages that remind us that God uses difficult circumstances to draw us closer to himself.

Next Sunday we'll consider how God uses trials and struggles to form the likeness of Jesus in us.

And then two Sundays from now we'll look at passages that remind us that God often uses our struggles as a way of bringing hope and encouragement to others who he has brought into our lives – to help *them* draw closer to him.

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Before we zero in on the first of those, let me pause here.

What I hope that you notice about those three things is that this is not just some random list of outcomes.

Those three things – bringing us closer to him, making us more like him, and revealing to others what is true about him – those three things line up with God's highest priorities in all of his dealings with us.

When we see that, there isn't any confusion about what God is up to in the difficult circumstances of our lives. Because it is the same things he is up to in every part of our lives.

Here's what that means. The more God's concerns become our concerns – the more that the things that matter to God come to matter to us – the less difficulty we will have seeing what God is doing in our trials and hardships, and the easier it will be to give him thanks in them and even for them. Does that makes sense?

Let me say that again. The more God's concerns become our concerns, the less difficulty we will have seeing what God is doing in our trials – not only seeing what God is doing but welcoming what God is doing – making it easier to give him thanks in and for those very difficulties.

The opposite is also true. When God is not at the center of things in our lives, our greatest concern is not with him but with us. I want things to go well for me. I want things to go easily for me. I want life on my terms.

And suffering and difficulty is definitely *not* life on my terms. So I will resent my difficulties as disruptions to my personal pursuit of life, liberty, and happiness on my terms, and I will mistrust God because he has allowed those difficulties to disrupt my life.

So gratitude in difficulty is directly connected to understanding the concerns that God has for us, and not just understanding them but having them be the concerns on our hearts as well.

The more his concerns become our concerns, the more we will find ourselves praising God even in the middle of our suffering. And, in a strange sense, the more we will be able to say that our suffering, difficult though it is, makes sense. If these are the things that matter so much to God, and they have come to matter so much to me, it makes sense that God would be willing to do whatever it takes to bring those three things about in and through my life.

The story about Corrie and Betsie sounds almost Pollyannish ... until you realize just how fully God's purposes had become their own.

They had come to understand that, in love, our sovereign creator seeks our best, and his best for us is not our happiness dependent on our circumstances, but a life in the shape of his loving purposes, a life centered on drawing near to him, becoming like him, and helping other come to know him.

So they walked into that horrible situation confident that, because of who God was and because of what his heart was like, those were the very ways they could anticipate seeing God at work.

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So this morning we'll be looking at the first of those themes – that **we can give God thanks in our trials because of the way God uses our trials and our struggles to draw us closer to himself.**

There are three dimensions to this in the teachings of Scripture that I think are worth our exploring.

The first has to do with how God first begins to awaken us to himself. **God uses difficulties to open our eyes to our need for God, and in that way to begin to draw us to himself.**

There are a number of different examples of this in Scripture. One of the most moving is found in Psalm 107, which is the story of four different kinds of people, all of whom were blind to their need for God. So God allowed difficult circumstances to come upon them so they could begin to be made aware of their need for him, and then turn to him, and find him, and experience his loving presence and care for them.

For example, in Psalm 107.10-13 the psalmist describes

Some ... [who] had been sitting in darkness and deep gloom;
 they were prisoners suffering in chains.
 So God humbled them . . .
 They stumbled, and there was no one to help them.
 So they cried out to the LORD in their distress,
 and God saved them from their desperate circumstances.

In verses Psalm 107.8-9 the psalmist captures the gratitude each of these four groups feel for the way God uses their difficulties to draw them to himself.

Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love, for his wondrous works to the children of man! For he satisfies the longing soul, and the hungry soul he fills with good things.

Hosea chapter two is another great example of this, when God says he will lead those who are chasing after other gods out into the desert, and there he will woo them, they will experience his faithfulness, his love and his compassion, and they will turn to him, and come to know him and love him, and they will commit themselves to him (Hosea 2.5-20).

A number of you know exactly what this is talking about because this is part of your experience.

Let me share with you my own experience of how this played out when I was a twenty-year old atheist and both of my parents died in a plane crash.

Their death is the most difficult thing I've ever faced, and in the months immediately following their death, I was in no place to have anyone suggest that anything good could ever come of it.

But gradually, over time, I began to realize that my experience of losing my parents gave me a sense of my own mortality for the very first time, which is so important.

Augustine says the spiritual life begins when you realize for the first time that you live between two negations. There was a time when you were not, and there will be a time when you will no longer be, and both are completely out of your control. So what are we to make of these few days that we've been given? Why are we here? What gives our lives meaning?

For the first time in my life I began to ask questions about my purpose in life, Coming up empty trying to *create* something that would serve as a meaningful purpose for my life, I began to ask if there was some purpose for me that already existed that I was meant to discover, some purpose for which I was made.

That obviously introduced the question of whether or not there was a God, and if so, how I would know, which led me on a two-year odyssey that ultimately led me to him,

and to my becoming a follower of Christ, and to my finding my life's purpose and my soul's satisfaction in him.

Augustine says God created us for himself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in him. Without my parents' death, I really don't know if I ever would have discovered, as the psalmist put it in Psalm 107, that he and he alone satisfies the longing soul.

We tend to think of our difficulties as nothing more than that. They are just hard things to be endured with gritted teeth.



But in the hands of God, our struggles, our trials, our hardships, our losses are like sheepdogs that drive us back toward our loving shepherd.

God uses difficulties to open our eyes to our need for God, and in that way to begin to draw us to himself.

That leads to the second dimension of how God uses difficulties to draw us closer.

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God uses difficult circumstances to fold us into his loving arms, to help us know the depths of his love for us, and to deepen our trust in him.

In II Corinthians 1.3-5 Paul writes:

All praise to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is our merciful Father and the source of all comfort. He comforts us in all our troubles. For the more we suffer for Christ, the more God will shower us with his comfort through Christ.

When we suffer, we experience God's care. And he uses the comfort we experience from him to grow our trust in him. As Peter writes: I Peter 1.6-9

In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These troubles test your faith [that is, your trust in God, your confidence in him] and prove that it is pure. When your faith is proven to be pure, the result will be praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ comes, for you are receiving the end result of your faith.

I think the reason many of us feel we can trust God less instead of more when we go through trials is because of the wrong way we conceive of God's relationship to our difficulties.

Let me pause here for a moment and step back and think about this with you. When we talk about God and our suffering, we are stepping into territory that is really complex.

That's because, as finite human beings with a limited capacity to understand, it is so hard for us to make sense how all of the aspects of God's nature and character come together and find expression without contradiction.

And that's especially challenging as we try to make sense of God's role in our trials.

It's important to remember that all heresy – all wrong belief – is the result of eliminating one of two truths that need to be held in tension. Let me show you what I mean.

There are two heresies about God and our suffering that regularly surface, two ways human beings have been tempted to ease the problem of explaining God's part in our struggles.

One wrong conclusion is to affirm that because God is sovereign, and either allows or causes all that happens, including our suffering, well then, we can't really trust him. That's the approach that the atheist Richard Dawkins takes in his book *The God Delusion*.

The other wrong conclusion is to say that because God is loving, we must not be able to affirm that he is sovereign over all things that come to us, because much of what we experience is so painful. So some things are just out of his control. That's Rabbi Harold Kushner's approach in the book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*.

But when it comes to God and our suffering, the Bible affirms two seemingly contradictory things. Think of Psalm 23, which says:

He guides me along right paths.
And even when those right paths lead me
straight through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil,
for you are with me;

Is God sovereign over all circumstances? Yes. Does he cause or allow these things to come upon me? Yes. God is in control, and sometimes God will lead me straight into the valley of the shadow of death.

And, God is good, and whenever my path takes me into the valley of the shadow of death, God walks right beside me. He is with me in it.

And this is what I want us to see as we hold these two truths in tension. The primary place the Bible directs our gaze when we suffer, the primary place it tells us to look for God when we face difficulties, is not *behind* them but *in* them.

So let me make this really practical.

I can't tell you how many times I've heard people say, when they're in difficulties, "God must be trying to teach me something."

Difficulties are things God throws at me because I'm messing up, and he'll keep making things difficult for me until I figure out what he is trying to teach me and get my act together.



That would be a very faithful way of understanding the relationship between God and the difficulties we face if you were a worshipper of Zeus, the Greek God who stood up on top of Mt Olympus flinging lightning bolts at anybody who made him upset.

That's looking at our trials as though God is *behind* them. Trace the arrow that hits you back to the bow from which it was shot and you'll find it in God's hands. He is the author of your pain and suffering. Of course you can't trust him.

But the Scriptures encourage us to look at our trials with the expectation that God will meet us *in* them. Walk through any difficulty and, if you look, you will discover God, there in the midst of them, right beside you, loving you, caring for you, carrying you.

Even when I walk through the darkest valley, *you are with me*;

Where is God when I suffer? With me in my suffering. That's the perspective the Scriptures encourage us to adopt when we think about God and his relationship to our difficulties.

We should think of God not like Zeus on the mountain top but like Jim Craig on the mountain top.



If you haven't seen *The Man from Snowy River*, I highly commend it. It's such a great wholesome movie.

At the crisis moment in the movie, the woman he is fond of, Jessica, gets in an argument with her father and, filled with anger, she rides out into the Australian Alps and straight into a terrible storm. She gets lost, her horse stumbles, she falls off and tumbles down a mountain side, landing on a narrow ledge, utterly helpless.

But the moment he hears she may be in trouble, the Man from Snowy River leaps onto his horse and rides straight off into the storm, riding at full gallop into the pouring rain, oblivious to his own discomfort, thinking of nothing but her, following her tracks, pursuing her, calling her name again and again, ignoring completely the cost to himself.

When he finally finds her, he climbs down to the ledge where she is trapped and wraps her in his arms. Then he rescues her from her predicament, gently leading her back up to the ridge and safety. He lifts her onto his horse, brings her to shelter where she can get warm and dry, and then brings her back home safely.

Peter writes in I Peter 5.9-10

Stand firm in the faith [in the confidence you have in God], because you know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings. In his kindness God called you to share in his eternal glory by means of Christ Jesus. So after you have suffered a little while, he will restore, support, and strengthen you, and he will place you on a firm foundation.

Where is God when my life gets difficult? Is he to be found *behind* my difficulties? Or is he to be found *in* them?

Or perhaps the better question: *who* is God when my life gets difficult? Zeus, or the Good Shepherd who lovingly goes after his lost sheep, even into the valley of the shadow of death, and is with them there, and leads them to green pastures and quiet waters, leads them into his own arms.

God uses difficult circumstances to fold us into his loving arms, to help us know the depths of his love for us, and to deepen our trust in him.

Here's the final dimension. Let me just touch on this one quickly.

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God uses difficult circumstances to show us the limits of our resources, our finite strength and finite wisdom, and to teach us to rely not on ourselves but on Him.

This comes through powerfully in II Corinthians 1.8-9: where Paul writes

We think you ought to know about the trouble we went through in the province of Asia. We were crushed and overwhelmed beyond our ability to endure, and we thought we would never live through it. In fact, we expected to die. But as a result, we stopped relying on ourselves and learned to rely only on God, who raises the dead.

Many who come into a relationship with Christ never get to a place of full relinquishment. But God desires for us not just to look to him for help from time to time, but to live each day in complete dependence upon him. Difficult circumstances help us loosen our grip on our own self-reliance and to learn to rely completely on him.

I remember very well an extremely difficult situation I found myself in shortly after coming here. Someone began calling into question my integrity and my effectiveness as a pastor, and pressed for me to be asked to leave.

It was the most painful thing I had experienced since the death of my parents. But God used that to bring me to the end of myself and to lead me to throw myself onto him completely.

Before that I had sought his help. Now I was desperate for him, and knew I couldn't live without him. It shifted something fundamental in me, from a default posture of self-reliance to a default posture of God-dependence. What a gift! And now I thank God for that painful chapter!

Through that extraordinarily painful time God taught me that he doesn't just want us to know he loves us. He wants us to live our lives in a posture of active dependence on the sufficiency of his love in all things.

He wants to teach us, as Teresa of Avila put it, that the one who has God lacks nothing, that He alone is enough.

When through difficult circumstances I am brought to the end of myself, as I was, when I am brought to see that in myself I lack everything I really need, then I am finally ready to see that in God I lack nothing, and come to a place of relying on God in all things for all things.

God did not make us in order that we might seek his help from time to time in an otherwise independent life. He made us to live our lives in his arms. The more we depend on God, the more we discover how really dependable he is, that in him we really have everything we could ever want or need.

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As our worship team comes up, I want to ask you to bring to mind a part of your life that is especially painful right now.

The Scriptures teach that we can give God thanks in our difficulties because of the way God uses our trials and our struggles to draw us closer to himself.

What would it mean to let God use those difficulties to open your eyes to your need for God, and in that way to begin to draw you to himself?

What would it mean to let God use those difficult circumstances to fold you into his loving arms, to help you know the depths of his love for you, and to deepen your trust in him?

And what might it mean to let God use those difficult circumstances to show you the limits of your own resources, your finite strength and your finite wisdom, and to teach you to rely not on yourself but on Him?

Each of us face challenges and struggles. In the midst of life's difficulties and uncertainties, how might God be inviting you to let those difficulties lead you to him? His arms are out wide, and his love never fails. Let's bring our hearts and our gratitude to him.