

The Makings of a Life of Gratitude  
Part Seven: Recognizing All as Gift  
Grateful in Our Difficulties that He is Revealing Himself to Others  
II Corinthians 4:15  
2/15/26

### **Prayer**

Today is the final message in our series on gratitude and we are in a section that explores how we can give thanks to God not only in but also for the difficulties we face.

Expressing gratitude is easy when life is good, the pantry is full and loved ones are healthy. But how is it that gratitude can be experienced and expressed during the hard and tragic moments of life too? What is it that God is doing in those moments that could make gratitude even possible?

Two weeks ago David shared how God uses difficult circumstances to draw us closer to Himself. Last week Brently unpacked how God uses difficulties to form us into His image. Today we will ponder how God often uses our response to struggles to reveal His presence and bring hope and encouragement to others.<sup>i</sup>

Before we get into some of the details, we need to lay a foundation upon which gratitude rests. Or you can think of it as the headwaters from which gratitude flows.

Being grateful in the midst of difficulty is not about denying or ignoring it. Far from it. As Christians we know that suffering is a very real and serious reality. Our Lord suffered. We suffer. Our Lord grieved. We grieve. Our Lord expressed thanks to His Heavenly Father. We express thanks to our Heavenly Father. Why is that?

Gratitude comes from the knowledge of the many things God has given us. Our every breath is His gift as is every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ. Of the many things God has given us, His promises are the things that influence us in both our present moment and our future reality. These promises put all of life into a new perspective.

Regarding the present, we know that God is with us and is at work in this very moment, no matter what that moment might hold. Regarding the future, we know that God has a purpose for us and creation and that He will one day accomplish that purpose. The work God does today is leading us to the goal He has for tomorrow. Today impacts tomorrow.

Psalm 126:5 says, "Those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy." Christians have the unique opportunity to invest their tears. We can sow them. We can plant them, so that they will bring a joyful harvest. Today impacts tomorrow.

In 2 Corinthians 4:17 Paul declares that "our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all." Paul's troubles were significant, but he didn't see them that way. In God's hands, our struggles are not meaningless. God uses temporary troubles to achieve something that is eternally glorious.

If this one idea alone takes root in our hearts it will change the way we view all of life, especially our trials. Though we still weep and feel the pain deeply, we also begin to experience a growing gratitude to God.

This is a certain but mysterious truth. In the Christian life suffering and joy are interdependent. Our light and temporary troubles are *achieving* for us a weighty and eternal glory. It is within this tension that gratitude can be found.

How can we best describe how this tension plays out in our lives? I think Ignatius of Loyola's First Principle and Foundation gets us started.

Ignatius was a Catholic Priest who founded the Jesuits in the mid 1500's. He was a deeply devout man who developed meditations, practices, and reflections he called the Spiritual Exercises. At the very start of his Spiritual Exercises, we find his First Principle and Foundation. This principle and foundation is true for everyone who has a saving faith in Jesus Christ.

The First Principle and Foundation (Ignatius of Loyola, 1524)

- **The goal of our lives** [the end result, the ultimate destination] **is to live with God forever.** (Rev 21:3-4; John 14:1-4, 23; John 17)
- **God, who loves us, gave us life.** [The life we have is His gift to us and the life He has given us in Christ is fully ours, but not yet fully experienced. It is currently "hidden," (Col 3:1-4) and something we put on over time (Eph 4:21-24; Col 3:12-17) as the Spirit transforms us (2 Cor 3:18).]
- **Our own response of love, allows God's life to flow into us without limit.** [Our response of love to the love we have received opens the way for us to experience more of Christ's life in us! (Jn 13:1-17; 14:21, 23; Rom 6:1-14)]
- **Everything in life**—whether success or failure, health or illness, long life or short, ease or struggle—everything in life **carries the potential of calling forth in us a deeper response to our life in God.**
- **Therefore, I want and I choose what better leads to God deepening His life in me.**

Scripture teaches that life is not about securing the easy path or finding happiness in our circumstances. God has given us His life. It is an abundant, full and indestructible life—and God wants us to experience it in its fullness.

God loves us and it is our response of love that opens the way for God's life to flow into us without limit.

I spent many years thinking it was my response of self-disciplined obedience that mattered. But when my self-disciplined will is at the center, then the focus becomes what I can do by my own strength. While this may work for a season, it will eventually wear you out and it may leave you wondering where God is.

Out of love for us, God gave us life. When we respond with willful obedience our effort runs out of energy. But when we respond to God's love in willingly surrender to His love, our heart becomes captured by His. We are changed from the inside out and our determination to obey Him flows from our loving devotion to Him. The focus shifts from me and what I can do and moves to God and what He has done. Amazed, we fall to our knees in humble gratitude and willing surrender.

God gave us life and now everything we encounter—whether we see it as good or bad—everything we encounter in this life holds the potential of calling forth in us a deeper response to our life in God and so a deeper experience of our life in Christ.

What could be better than receiving a deeper experience of our life in Christ? This is where gratitude fits in. God is doing an amazing work, and He is doing it in ways we never expected.<sup>ii</sup>

Admittedly, this is not easy to do. Loss and pain are real. They stir up many powerful emotions and seemingly unanswerable questions. Getting to Ignatius' conclusion ("Therefore I want and I choose...") requires time for us to grow a deepening trust in God through all of life's ups and downs. Even so, this is a starting point for thanking God in and even for all things. Once that seed takes root it changes the way we live and it changes the impact our lives have on others.

Now that the foundation has been laid and the headwaters have been identified, let's look at how God reveals Himself to others through our own difficulties. 2 Corinthians 1:3-7 puts it clearly.

<sup>3</sup>All praise to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is our merciful Father and the source of all comfort. <sup>4</sup>He comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort others. When they are troubled, we will be able to give them the same comfort God has given us. <sup>5</sup>For the more we suffer for Christ, the more God will shower us with his comfort through Christ. <sup>6</sup>Even when we are weighed down with troubles, it is for your comfort and salvation! For when we ourselves are comforted, we will certainly comfort you. Then you can patiently endure the same things we suffer. <sup>7</sup>We are confident that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in the comfort God gives us.

I can experience God's presence, strength and comfort through you because you have become a conduit of God's grace to me. But this only happened because you planted in tears during your hard times. You kept your heart and mind fixed on the Lord and received from Him the comfort and strength you needed and so you now have that to pass along to others.<sup>iii</sup>

Notice how this comfort has a divine source, it is not generated within us. It comes to us from God and is also passed through us to others. The English word comfort carries this idea as well. "Com" means with. "Fort" means strength. To comfort someone is to come alongside and give them the strength to endure.<sup>iv</sup>

This is exactly what Jesus does for us. Through His Holy Spirit Jesus enters our experience with us, meets us there, and gives us strength to press on. When we sow in tears, He brings us a harvest of joy. The knowledge of this certainty leads us to deeper gratitude.

God reveals Himself to others through you and me. He does this in any circumstance including in the way we respond to various trials. But we can block God's comfort from reaching us and we can block that comfort from going to others through us. It all depends on our response to the trouble we face. Will we invest our tears or keep them to ourselves?

Those who know me know I am a planner. I set the goal and map out the steps I think will help me reach the goal. This practice is so deeply ingrained in me that the only way I can be spontaneous is if I plan space for spontaneity.

When the motive is right there is nothing wrong with this character trait. It is just one of the many expressions of what it means to be made in God's image. But there was a long season in my life when my planning was motivated by pride, and that motive was blocking me from experiencing God's life in greater fullness. How could this deeply ingrained barrier be challenged? What event might hold the potential of calling forth in me a deeper response to my life in God?

Life was moving along according to plan. Anne and I were going to have four children. The first two would be close in age. We would wait a few years and have two more who were also close in age. We thought of it as our "split pack."

As most of you know God shook up my plan through the birth of our third child. He was born right on time in 1993 but with a set of needs that exceeded anything I had expected or planned for.

I set out to adjust my plan and so I went along with my life as if nothing had changed, even though everything had. My world was rocked. Weeping was part of every day as tsunamis of grief washed over me. The pain was real. The questions were raw. And yet I never tried to plant my tears in God's soil of love. Instead, I sought a solution through my own planning and my prayers were all about cajoling God to join me in my plan.

I was not going to let this change me. I was back to work in three days (which was the typical paternity leave) and nothing in my schedule slowed down.

I didn't need anyone coming alongside. Since I didn't think I needed the help, I didn't share the struggle with others. In my willful obedience I thought I was doing the work God had given me to do...and I was quickly running out of steam.

My friend and colleague, Tom Saxon, saw what was happening. He came to me, literally backed me against the wall and said, "Rob Eyman you let the church be the church for you!" This phrase set me on a new path.

My pride was blocking me from letting others into our lives. By not letting others in, I was keeping myself from receiving God's comforting presence through them and keeping them from one day receiving God's comforting grace through me.

When we plant our tears in the soil of God's love—when we cry out to Him in our pain and allow others into that pain—God uses others to reveal His comforting presence to us and prepares us to do the same.

Yes, God also does that through the happy times and the ways we can be generous and gracious through the good seasons of life. But there is something about the way we live grateful lives even in the midst of suffering that makes God's presence and grace shine all the more brightly through us.

That's what Paul said to the Philippians in 2:14-15.<sup>14</sup> Do everything without complaining or arguing, <sup>15</sup> so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe...

Think of this. The darkness of the world around us is so thick that the simple act of not complaining causes you to shine like a star in the night sky. I wonder what kind of brightness comes when we express authentic gratitude instead of complaint?

Expressing gratitude while suffering requires a profound change of heart and that change can only come over time. When the heart changes, it changes the way we view time and struggle. Suddenly there is a larger more profound reality playing out. Yes, we still cry and grieve and lament and express our complaint to God, but we do all this knowing that God is preparing a harvest. We do this believing that our suffering and joy are interdependent and that our temporary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that is far greater than the difficulty we face.

When we do this, over time, God's dazzling, radiant, immortal life of energy, joy, wisdom and love begins to pulsate more and more inside of us.

C.S. Lewis put it this way in his book, *Mere Christianity*.

If we let Him—for we can prevent Him, if we choose—He will make the feeblest and filthiest of us into a god or goddess, a dazzling, radiant, immortal creature, pulsating all through with such energy and joy and wisdom and love as we cannot now imagine, a bright stainless mirror which reflects back to God perfectly (though, of course, on a smaller scale) His own boundless power and delight and goodness. The process will be long and in parts very painful, but that is what we are in for. Nothing less. He meant what He said.<sup>v</sup>

God's life flowing into us without limit. This is what God has planned for those who love Him, and He can use any experience to move us in this direction. It is no wonder that Ignatius concluded, "Therefore, I want and I choose that which better leads to God deepening His life in me."

You and I are like stainless mirrors. If we turn our focus to the darkness of our circumstances, that is what others will see reflected in us. But if we plant our tears by turning our focus to the light of Christ, that is what others will see reflected in us.

When we turn our face toward Jesus, He gives us comfort and the strength to endure by His Spirit and through His people. He also equips us to become a conduit of His comforting, strengthening presence to others. These things become one of the starting points for our gratitude.

This is a pretty high bar. I wasn't there in 1993 and there are things happening today that I have a hard time expressing gratitude for. I have a hunch that everyone in this room can share an area of their life where gratitude is a struggle. And that is okay. God is growing the gratitude in me and God is growing it in you too. It is a process.

I want to close with a thought that I think is worthy of more consideration.

Scripture teaches that Jesus identifies with us through our temptations. He has been tempted in every way just as we are yet was without sin (Heb 4:15). Scripture teaches that we identify with Jesus through His sufferings. Paul said "I want to know Christ in the fellowship of sharing in His sufferings" (Phil 3:10).

Rather than focus on the reasons God has allowed a specific difficulty or what He may be doing through it, begin with your focus on Jesus. Give Him your tears. Draw near the man of sorrows who is acquainted with grief. He knows your pain.

Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane shows us that He did not want to drink the cup that was for Him. He did not want to experience what was about to happen and so Scripture records that He was "overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death" (Mt 26:38).

Overwhelmed with sorrow. Maybe you are there today. If you are not there today you have been there before. So have I. Jesus has too and He meets us there.

Jesus did not want to drink the cup. So what was it that caused Jesus in the Garden to willingly surrender to the Father and say "Not my will but yours be done"? We could write a book in response but Hebrews 12 gives us one succinct answer. "For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame" (12:2).

"Joy" and "cross" in the same sentence. Joy and suffering certainly and mysteriously interdependent. Jesus knew that His Father was at work in this moment and that this moment would contribute to fulfilling the Father's ultimate purpose. He knew that a glory was coming that would far outweigh this moment of suffering. For the joy set before him, he endured the cross.

For some, today's message is a simple thought experiment. For others this is a painful journey into an experience that seems to have no end or to questions that seem to have no

answer. Yet for all of us, it is a reminder that God is at work in each of our lives. He knows our pain. He meets with us, weeps with us, walks with us, and guides us through the dark valley. He provides what we need so we can become a conduit of His comfort to others and this becomes one source of gratitude we have in and even for the difficulties we face.

## **Prayer**

Lord, at some level we can begin to see how gratitude can be expressed and even experienced during the hard and tragic moments of life. Seeing it is one thing; experiencing it is something totally different. This is not easy to do.

Please deepen our trust and open the eyes of our hearts so that we might see how you are with us and know that you are for us and so respond in gratitude. Meet us wherever we may be. Help us turn our mirror toward you and plant our tears in your soil so that we might become a conduit of your comfort and presence to others.

We close this series with the prayer from the first message. For all that has been—THANKS! For all that will be—YES!

I invite you to use the lyrics and message of this closing song as part of your prayer (Holy Spirit, Living Breath of God).

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<sup>i</sup> Drawing us closer to Himself, forming us into His image, and revealing His presence and love to others are three statements that summarize the ways God works in any circumstance, including those harder moments of life.

<sup>ii</sup> Paul said the same thing in Romans 8. He said that God works through all things for our good by using all things to conform us to the likeness of Jesus. Let's just carry this out a little more. The central part of Christ's image is to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. It is to love God more than we do our sin.

<sup>iii</sup> The word Paul used for comfort is *Parakaleo*. It has to do with coming alongside someone to help, encourage and comfort.

<sup>iv</sup> James Miller was an influential pastor at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century who taught that we comfort others best when we make them stronger to endure. When we put courage into their hearts. When we enable them to pass through their sorrow victoriously.

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<sup>v</sup> Lewis, C. S. (2001). *Mere Christianity* (pp. 205–206). HarperOne.