

Grateful: 4. The Power of Gratitude
1 Chronicles 16:34; 1 Thessalonians 5:18
November 22, 2020
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What is it that motivates us? Four weeks ago, I shared this quote from Brother David Stendl-Rost: **It is not happiness that makes us grateful. It is gratefulness that makes us happy.** We all want happiness, don't we? If I could just have certain things or more money or a certain kind of relationship or an end to this coronavirus. But it's always a little more, isn't it? And even then the happiness doesn't last. When our daughters were 8 and 10 years old, I noticed a conference I wanted to attend was taking place in Orlando. I'd never been to Disney World, and this seemed the perfect opportunity to take our children. So we took them out of school for a week, and we were all excited. We read up on the attractions and which ones would be our favorites and top of the list was Cinderella's castle. As we took the ferry from the parking lot to the Magic Kingdom, I don't know who was more excited – two little girls or me. And when we came to Main Street in the Magic Kingdom, there it was! But as many of you who have been to Disney World know, it is so enticing on the outside, but on the inside it's empty. We didn't even see Cinderella. All the excitement and anticipation and it didn't measure up to our expectations. So let me ask again – what is it that motivates us?

In the book of Genesis, God placed Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Eden is the Hebrew word for pleasure or delight. God wants us to have pleasure - and Adam and Eve had it – paradise! But they were satisfied. In the book of Ecclesiastes, the writer, who some scholars suggest was Solomon, was trying to find meaning and happiness and in chapter 2, he writes: **I said to myself, Come, I will make you experience pleasure; enjoy what is good! But this too was pointless! ...I took on great projects: I built houses for myself, planted vineyards for myself. I made gardens and parks for myself, planting every kind of fruit tree in them. ...I acquired male servants and female servants; ...I amassed silver and gold for myself, the treasures of kings and provinces. ...I refrained from nothing that my eyes desired. I refused my heart no pleasure. ...But when I surveyed all that my hands had done, and what I had worked so hard to achieve, I realized that it was pointless—a chasing after wind.** His quest is for maximum pleasure and minimum pain, only to discover that was not the answer to happiness.

This month, we've focused on the answer that we find in scripture – GRATITUDE. *“Rejoice always. Pray continually. Give thanks in every situation for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.”* Elie Wiesel, a survivor of the concentration camps in Nazi Germany: **When a person doesn't have gratitude, something is missing in his or her humanity. A person can almost be defined by his or her attitude toward gratitude.** Does gratitude define you? Is it a daily part of your life? This is day 22 in our 28-day gratitude challenge. I've been hearing from people who are finding a daily practice of giving thanks is changing their perspective. There is so much that we cannot control or cannot do to make life better, but a daily reminder to take a few moments and write a letter of thanks to God shifts our thinking from what is not right to what is – and there is so much more that is right. So this is day 22 in 28 days. What will you do on day 29? My hope is that this is the beginning of a practice and the end. The journal ends with day 28. What I use is a notebook – one of these moleskin books. Maybe the gratitude journal seemed like a good idea but you never got around to it or you kept forgetting and missed most days. Keep trying.

Let me remind you of a study by the University of California, San Diego in which heart patients kept a gratitude journal, each day writing 3 things they were grateful for. Dr. Paul Mills, the

author of the study found there were real physical benefits. *“A more grateful heart is a healthier heart. It is an easy way to support cardiac health.”* Studies have also shown the benefit to mental health. Gratitude has even been shown to improve productivity in the workplace. But we don’t need studies to know that. You know what it feels like when someone notices and says thank you. I made dinner for Amanda on Friday night and when she saw what I had made, she said thank you. That’s not why I made dinner but the thank you more than made up for the time and effort that went into making it. Is gratitude what defines you?

From start to finish, the Bible indicates the appropriate response of creature to Creator is thanksgiving. How did we get today? We didn’t make it or do anything to deserve it. Our lives are a gift – and so we say thanks. In 1 Chronicles, chapter 16, King David has brought the arch of the covenant to Jerusalem. This is the wooden box that is gold plated with angels at either end, and inside the box are the Ten Commandments. It is 300 years old at this point and represents the presence of God. The arch had been captured by the Philistines, but now David is returning it to Jerusalem. David calls the Levites – like the staff of the church – to express thanks to God on behalf of the people all day, every day. And David writes a psalm for this and here’s one verse from the psalm. **Give thanks to the LORD because he is good, because his faithful love endures forever.** The Hebrew word for thanks is *toda* which means “to throw or to cast something.” Scholars think that when people were giving thanks to God, they were raising their arms or throwing themselves at God. “Thank you, God, for everything!” Most translations put the word LORD in capital letters as a way of indicating the Hebrew word is YAHWEH, which means “I am who I am.” In other words, the source of everything. “Thank you, God, the Source of everything.” Why? Because God is good and God’s faithful love endures forever.

After David’s death, Solomon dedicated the Temple in Jerusalem, saying: **Give thanks to the LORD because he is good, because his faithful love endures forever.** Throughout the Psalms we find these same words: **Give thanks to the LORD because he is good, because his faithful love endures forever.** When Jerusalem was under attack from foreign nations, King Jehoshaphat called for a national fast and as the army of Israel went into battle, the Levites walked before them. They must have been terrified, but do you know what the Levites were singing? **Give thanks to the LORD because his faithful love endures forever.** In 586 BC, the army of Nebuchadnezzar destroyed Jerusalem, killed the King’s children and then gouged out his eyes so the last thing he would see was the death of his children. Then he and the Jews who remained were taken as slaves back to Babylon. It is then that the prophet Jeremiah writes that one day you will come back to Jerusalem and on that day, you will sing: **Give thanks to the LORD because he is good, because his faithful love endures forever.** After Jeremiah, when Ezra returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the Temple, he broke into song: **God is good, because his faithful love endures forever.**

From beginning to end, the Bible calls us to give thanks because it has the power to change us. Part of our purpose is to wake up every morning and give thanks to the Source and Sustainer of life, because God is good, because God’s faithful love endures forever. Some days are not pleasant. We are living through a difficult time and I know that many of you are scared and feeling alone, but even now we give thanks. A week ago, Jim Weil died and a few days before his death, I met with him to give thanks. I anointed his forehead with the sign of the cross and he said, thank you. He was not grateful for cancer or for the end of a life that he loved, but he was grateful for the care he was receiving, for family that came to be with him, and for a church that I said would not forget him. He was grateful that Jesus promised to prepare a place, an eternal place for him. Jesus promises to be with us – no matter what, even when life is not as we want, we remember God is, and we look for the blessings and somehow that changes our heart.

Paul was in Philippi along with Silas. They were arrested, stripped naked in the town square, and then beaten with rods to within an inch of their lives. Then they were thrown in a cave and put in shackles, but at midnight, they began singing – and what were they singing? Songs of thanks to God. Those songs of gratitude transformed them and set them free. It's how Paul could write to the Thessalonians: **Give thanks in every situation for that is God's will in Christ Jesus.** We are not grateful for every situation but we know God is with us in every situation and can redeem it for good.

Once a year, we ask our members to consider what they have and what part of their income they will give back to God. We choose not to spend on ourselves but it becomes our thank you note to God, our way of investing in the lives of people. I want to show you what that has looked like thus far in 2020. [video review of 2020] One of the reasons I am so proud of this church is that 25% of what you give goes to support people beyond our walls. Over and over and over again, you have been changing lives, and I want to invite you to be part of that in 2021. In other years, I would invite you to bring your commitment to the Covenant Box. This year, I hope you will mail it, drop it off during the week, or go online to send it. So, instead of walking forward, let me invite you to stand wherever you are, stand grateful for God and God's goodness and eternal presence. Stand for the lives that you will impact in the coming year. And then, with me, let's open our hearts and hands to God...

Take a few moments to silently name 3 things you are grateful for ...

Then, would you repeat after me:

Lord, I offer my life to you...

I want to be part of what you will do through Messiah Church...

Lord, we thank you for everything... Amen.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of November 22, 2020

Weekly Prayer: God, thank you for these days to consider gratitude, for new insights, and for hope. May I not only feel grateful or occasionally act gratefully, but may I become a truly grateful person. Amen.

Monday, November 23

Scripture: Psalm 103:1-5

Let my whole being bless the LORD! Let everything inside me bless his holy name! Let my whole being bless the LORD and never forget all his good deeds: how God forgives all your sins, heals all your sickness, saves your life from the pit, crowns you with faithful love and compassion, and satisfies you with plenty of good things so that your youth is made fresh like an eagle's.

Observation: Sometimes we speak as though gratitude to God is just automatic—and sometimes it is. But not always. The first verses of Psalm 103 sound more like the psalmist giving himself a pep talk, a reminder of how spiritually important gratitude is. There are times in almost all of our lives when we need that reminder, when God feels distant and our pain, disappointment or suffering may feel unending. At those times, this psalm assumes we sometimes need to argue with ourselves.

Application: This psalmist had apparently been through a hard time, likely a moral crisis that needed pardon, a severe illness or maybe both. The call to himself to “bless the LORD” (Yahweh) wasn’t a vague summons to act grateful even though he didn’t feel that way inwardly. It focused on God’s healing and forgiving as central reasons for gratitude. How can you, like this psalmist, learn at hard times to refocus your attention on the enduring reasons for gratitude to God?

Prayer: God of all creation, you are the unchanging, dependable source of all the forgiveness and healing that I (and all of us) need. I thank and praise you for that. Amen.

Tuesday, November 24

Scripture: Mark 8:1-8; Luke 22:14-19; John 11:35-42

In those days there was another large crowd with nothing to eat. Jesus called his disciples and told them, “I feel sorry for the crowd because they have been with me for three days and have nothing to eat. If I send them away hungry to their homes, they won’t have enough strength to travel, for some have come a long distance.” His disciples responded, “How can anyone get enough food in this wilderness to satisfy these people?” Jesus asked, “How much bread do you have?” They said, “Seven loaves.” He told the crowd to sit on the ground. He took the seven loaves, gave thanks, broke them apart, and gave them to his disciples to distribute; and they gave the bread to the crowd. They also had a few fish. He said a blessing over them, then gave them to the disciples to hand out also. They ate until they were full. They collected seven baskets full of leftovers.

When the time came, Jesus took his place at the table, and the apostles joined him. He said to them, “I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. I tell you, I won’t eat it until it is fulfilled in God’s kingdom.” After taking a cup and giving thanks, he said, “Take this and share it among yourselves. I tell you that from now on I won’t drink from the fruit of the vine until God’s kingdom has come.” After taking the bread and giving thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.”

Jesus began to cry. The Jews said, “See how much he loved him!” But some of them said, “He healed the eyes of the man born blind. Couldn’t he have kept Lazarus from dying?”

Jesus was deeply disturbed again when he came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone covered the entrance. Jesus said, “Remove the stone.” Martha, the sister of the dead man, said, “Lord, the smell will be awful! He’s been dead four days.” Jesus replied, “Didn’t I tell you that if you believe, you will see God’s glory?” So they removed the stone. Jesus looked up and said, “Father, thank you for hearing me. I know you always hear me. I say this for the benefit of the crowd standing here so that they will believe that you sent me.”

Observation: The creator of the world, the ruler of the universe, chose to become flesh and live on earth as a human being (John 1:14). Would you think such a being might have the ultimate attitude of entitlement, taking anything good for granted as his by right? Well, we know Jesus didn’t do that. As he modeled what it means to be fully, healthily human, the gospels showed that he gave thanks to God in many different settings.

Application: Why do you believe Jesus prayed prayers of gratitude, and didn’t just say, “I’m the son of God—I can handle this on my own?” Do you think Jesus’ reasons for expressing thanks were different from your reasons? If you had been one of the first disciples, what difference, if

any, do you imagine you would have noticed in Jesus after he had been praying and thanking God?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, as you prayed, you said at one point, “Thank you for hearing me. I know you always hear me.” Help me share that confidence and say “thank you” for it more often in my own prayers. Amen.

Wednesday, November 25

Scripture: Mark 14:22-26; Psalm 118:1-6, 28-29

While they were eating, Jesus took bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to them, and said, “Take; this is my body.” He took a cup, gave thanks, and gave it to them, and they all drank from it. He said to them, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. I assure you that I won’t drink wine again until that day when I drink it in a new way in God’s kingdom.” After singing songs of praise, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

Give thanks to the LORD because he is good, because his faithful love lasts forever. Let Israel say it: “God’s faithful love lasts forever!” Let the house of Aaron say it: “God’s faithful love lasts forever!” Let those who honor the LORD say it: “God’s faithful love lasts forever!” In tight circumstances, I cried out to the LORD. The LORD answered me with wide-open spaces. The LORD is for me—I won’t be afraid. What can anyone do to me?

You are my God—I will give thanks to you! You are my God—I will lift you up high! Give thanks to the LORD because he is good, because his faithful love lasts forever.

Observation: Jesus and his disciples sang songs of praise at the end of their Passover supper just before Jesus’ arrest. We know Psalm 118 was the last *hallel* (hymn of praise) Hebrews usually sang at Passover. Jesus, just before his crucifixion, probably sang, “The LORD is for me—I won’t be afraid. What can anyone do to me?” and “Give thanks to the LORD because he is good, because his faithful love lasts forever.” (Note: that line was both the first and last verse of Psalm 118 and also Psalm 136, which ended every verse with a call for thanks due to God’s never-ending love.)

Application: The Psalmist asked simply and profoundly, “The LORD is for me...What can anyone do to me?” To what extent are you able to trust and be grateful that God is always for you? How much stronger is your level of gratitude on a beautiful, sunny morning when all is going well than on a cold, gray day when something left you sad or disappointed? Gratitude is something we choose. How can you carry the gratitude into the gray days?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, I offer you my gratitude because you are good, because your faithful love lasts forever. Well, honestly, I don’t always do that yet, but it’s my goal. Please keep teaching me. Amen.

Thursday, November 26

Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 5:15-18

Make sure no one repays a wrong with a wrong, but always pursue the good for each other and everyone else. Rejoice always. Pray continually. Give thanks in every situation because this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.

Observation: The apostle Paul did not write these words from some abstract ivory tower, sheltered from all trouble or conflict. He'd won these Thessalonian Christians to faith during a short stay, after which they sent him to another city because of the threat of mob violence (Acts 17:1-10). They had to stay in the city, facing the same type of hostility Paul had faced. When he urged those new Christians to "rejoice always" and "give thanks in every situation," he wasn't being naïvely pious.

Application: Which part(s) of today's passage would you most like to store in your mind, where you won't even need a printed card or Bible in order to recall their wisdom at a time of need? On this national day of Thanksgiving, where do you find joy and how will you give thanks? Take a moment to prayerfully give thanks to God.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, there are quite a few situations that are not what you want for me, for our world. I'm thankful Paul didn't say to give thanks for those. But help me grow in my ability to give thanks in every situation, including those. Amen.

Friday, November 27

Scripture: Ephesians 5:15-21

So be careful to live your life wisely, not foolishly. Take advantage of every opportunity because these are evil times. Because of this, don't be ignorant, but understand the Lord's will. Don't get drunk on wine, which produces depravity. Instead, be filled with the Spirit in the following ways: speak to each other with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs; sing and make music to the Lord in your hearts; always give thanks to God the Father for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ; and submit to each other out of respect for Christ.

Observation: In the Roman Empire, as today, too many people tried to numb themselves against life's hurts with alcohol and other addictions. The letter to the Ephesians said psalms, hymns, spiritual songs, and always giving thanks to God were a much better alternative, with better life results. The church is where we live out the Lord's will, which is that people trapped in destructive behaviors will turn and join communities of goodness and justice.

Application: The Message paraphrased verses 18-19 this way: "Drink the Spirit of God, huge draughts of him. Sing hymns instead of drinking songs!" Can gratitude to God not just numb life's hurts, but move you beyond them? Might gratitude even be habit-forming? Have you ever experienced gratitude's life-enriching power? What are some benefits of replacing destructive behaviors with a "gratitude habit"?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, I choose to live wisely, not foolishly. Help me set aside any hurtful behaviors, and gratefully imbibe "huge draughts" of your Spirit. Amen.

Saturday, November 28

Scripture: Philippians 4:4-7

Be glad in the Lord always! Again I say, be glad! Let your gentleness show in your treatment of all people. The Lord is near. Don't be anxious about anything; rather, bring up all of your requests to God in your prayers and petitions, along with giving thanks. Then the peace of God that exceeds all understanding will keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus.

Observation: The apostle Paul wrote Philippians from prison. He didn't have a Thanksgiving holiday for which to prepare, of course. But it seems likely he would have loved this holiday! "Be glad in the Lord always! Again I say, be glad! ...bring up all of your requests to God in your prayers and petitions, along with giving thanks," he wrote (from a dark Roman cell). This letter from Paul is known for its emphasis on joy. This joy or gladness isn't just happiness of the moment. It's a confidence rooted in hope, knowing that having problems, or even enduring harassment, doesn't mean God had deserted them. They relied on God's love.

Application: Paul learned his approach to life from Israel's psalms and prophets (for example, Psalm 32:11, 35:9, 64:10, 97:12, Isaiah 41:16, 61:10). You might try that same approach to life and build it more fully into your way of life. Although our 28-day Gratitude Challenge concludes today, you could create your own gratitude journal/notebook. See if you don't find greater gratitude and peace.

Prayer: Loving God, build in my heart and mind that confident disposition rooted in hope. Help me to offer you deeply heartfelt thanks this holiday season, rooted not in this broken world but in your unfailing love and goodness. Amen.