

Title: Thanksgiving
Text: Various
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An abundant life, a life lived to the full, is a life marked by gratitude expressed in thanksgiving. The great German pastor the theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer said this:

It is only with gratitude that life becomes rich.
(Dietrich Bonhoeffer)

A rich life is one that expresses thanksgiving in all circumstances and for all things.

But the truth is, there are times we don't feel particularly grateful or thankful. If we do express gratitude, it comes with caveats. I am thankful, but...

I am thankful for my family, but I wish my kids would ring me more often.

I am grateful for my job, but I wish I earned more.

I am thankful for my wife or husband, but I wish they appreciated me more.

I am grateful for my church, but I wish the services suited me more.

There is a story told of a woman who was leaving church one day when she said to the minister in the courtyard, 'I enjoyed the sermon today.'

The minister was pleased to receive the compliment, but also wanted to appear humble and so said with a pious voice, 'Don't thank me. Thank the Lord.'

The lady replied, 'It wasn't that good.'

If Bonhoeffer is right, and I think he is, if it is only by expressing gratitude will we experience a rich life, why is this so?

John Henry Jowett was a British preacher. He said that gratitude or thanksgiving was a vaccine, an antitoxin and an antiseptic.

Gratitude is a vaccine: It prevents the invasion of a disgruntled, discouraged spirit.

Gratitude is an antitoxin: It fights the poisons of cynicism, criticalness, and grumbling.

Gratitude is an antiseptic: It soothes and heals the most trouble of spirits.

When we feel gratitude, but fail to express it, we miss out on untold blessings. William Ward says this:

Feeling gratitude and not expressing it is like wrapping a present and not giving it.
(William Arthur Ward)

The Bible is very clear; we are called and commanded to live lives of gratitude and thanksgiving for who God is – His character - and for what God has done – His actions.

When King David paraded the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem he wrote a Psalm of Thanks which is recorded in the first book of Chronicles. One phrase of this Psalm became part of the language of Israel. It is repeated in other Psalms and by other prophets right through the rest of the Old Testament. It is a phrase most of us are familiar with:

Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever.
(1 Chronicles 16:34)

Give thanks to God for who God is – His character. God is good.

Give thanks to God for what God's action. God's loving action endures forever.

Giving thanks to God is a call and a command. If this is so, how do we do it? What is the language and means of expressing our thanks to God?

I want to suggest four primary means by which we can express our gratitude to God. It is not an exhaustive list, but it is an important list.

Sing for God

The Psalmist says:

Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth. Worship the LORD with gladness; come before him with joyful songs.
(Psalm 100:1-2)

Christianity is a singing faith. The early church built on the Jewish roots of their faith as they thanked God with joyful singing. Paul encouraged the Ephesians this way:

Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.
(Ephesians 5:19-20)

In the times and places where the Christian church has existed there has always been singing and music.

When I say that we thank God with singing, some of you are thinking, 'I can't sing!' Some of us are what Rick Warren calls 'Prison Singers' – when we sing we are always behind a few bars and we have lost the key. Some of us have voices that should never be cultivated; they should just be ploughed under.

But even if you are the world's worst singer, that is OK. The Bible says we should shout for joy to the Lord. The King James Version translates the same verse, 'Make a joyful noise!' Even the most out of tune singer like me can make a joyful noise.

Another reason that some of us don't like to sing is because we don't feel particularly joyful or thankful. Life is tough, so why sing?

Paul tells the church at Thessalonica, who were experiencing persecution:

Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.
(1 Thessalonians 5:18)

We are called and commanded to thank God in all circumstances, when the storms clouds are rolling in and the thunder is rumbling as well as when the sun is shining and the skies are blue. When we learn to thank God in the midst of even

the most trying of circumstances, profound change in us is possible. We can easily fall for the trap in believing we have to wait for the feeling of joy and gratitude before we express our praise and thanks to God. Brennan Manning says this:

We're not joyful and then become grateful—we're grateful, and that makes us joyful.
(Brennan Manning)

Is there an absence of joy in your life at the moment? Perhaps you need to make a sacrifice of praise and thanks to God.

Again, some of you might be thinking, what have I got to be thankful for? You don't know my life! It's full of drama and disappointment.

Martin Luther King Junior's grandmother was a saintly woman who endured much hardship. She told her grandson that when it seemed life was stealing all that was good from him, he could always thank God for what was left.

She went on to say that if you've got enough breath left to complain, you have something left and so therefore something to be thankful for. So if you have breath to complain this morning, you can thank God for that breath and use it to thank Him with singing.

Corrie Ten Boon and her sister Betsy harboured Jews fleeing the Holocaust in their home. Eventually they were caught and imprisoned in Ravensbruck concentration camp.

The barracks in the camp was extremely crowded and infested with fleas. One morning Corrie and Betsy read in their tattered Bible from 1 Thessalonians the reminder to rejoice in all things.

Betsy said, "Corrie, we've got to give thanks for this barracks and even for these fleas."

Corrie replied, "No way am I going to thank God for fleas." But Betsy was persuasive, and they did thank God even for the fleas.

During the months that followed, they found that their barracks was left relatively free, and they could do Bible study, talk openly, and even pray without interruption. It was their only place of refuge.

It was months later they learned that the reason the guards never entered their barracks was because of the fleas.

There are so many things that we can express gratitude to God with in song. Let me remind you of the inheritance we have as sons and daughters of God. When we surrender our lives to Jesus as our Lord and Saviour we stand on these promises:

(Ask people to stand)

For the weary, God has given rest in the completed work in of Jesus.

For the guilty, God has given his full and free pardon.

For the confused, God has given full access to His wisdom.

For those overwhelmed by shame, God has given his restoring mercy and forgiveness.

For the aimless, God has given meaning and purpose.

For the lonely, God has given the privilege of being called His friend.

For the prisoner, God has given liberty.

For the poor, God has given his Good News.

We have the privilege of being called and known as the sons and daughters of the Most High King!

When we surrendered our life to God we received the gift of the Holy Spirit, the one and the same power that raised Jesus from the dead!

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If we need a reason to express our gratitude to God, we need look no further than the cross and reflect on Christ's sacrifice for us and the whole world.

There's a place in story of Lord of the Rings where the hobbit Pippin is standing at the gates of the city, and in comes the great witch king, the demon king.

This demon king is about to destroy the city, when off in the distance Pippin hears the horns of the riders of Rohan. They have come to the rescue. Even though the King of Rohan rides to his death that day, the city is saved.

From that day forward, for the rest of his life, Pippin could never hear a horn off in the distance without bursting into tears. Why? Because every time he heard a horn in the distance, it reawakened the memory of his salvation and the memory of the one who died for him and for the whole city.

Every time we gather in this place we remember with hearts full of gratitude and thanksgiving the one who died for us and the whole world.

Phillip Yancey has said:

It is a terrible thing to be grateful and have no one to thank, to be awed and have no one to worship.
(Phillip Yancey)

We have someone to thank – his name is Jesus!

We have someone to worship – His name is Adonai, Yahweh, Jehovah, The Great I Am, The Lord.

Let's worship him now! Let's make a joy-filled noise!

(Songs of Praise)

Pray to Him

The third way we can express our thanksgiving to God is through prayer.

Vance Havner has said that the Christian life is one big, 'Thank you!' And prayer, along with singing is a primary way we express our thanks to God.

Sometimes we think the content of prayer should be holy things, sacred things - religious things.

Now we should always thank God in prayer for things like his forgiveness and mercy and for Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. But we should thank God not just for these things, but for everything. As Christians we understand that everything we enjoy – the oxygen we breathe, the relationships we enjoy, the cars we drive, the clothes we wear – has the fingerprints of our Creator God in them. When we thank God for even the most mundane of earthly things, we elevate them as sacred. Centuries ago William Romaine said this:

Gratitude to God makes even a temporal blessing a taste of heaven.
(William Romaine)

An obvious way most of us thank God for temporal blessing is when we say grace before a meal, which is a great and holy habit to have. But saying grace should not just be limited to meal times. GK Chesterton was a very large man who loved his food and who loved God. He said this:

You say grace before meals. All right. But I say grace before the concert and the opera, and grace before the play and pantomime, and grace before I open a book, and grace before sketching, painting, swimming, fencing, boxing, walking, playing, dancing, and grace before I dip the pen in the ink.
(GK Chesterton)

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I want us to do a short exercise. In our house growing up, the standard grace at meal time went like this, 'For what we are about to receive, Lord, we are truly thankful. In Jesus name. Amen.'

Today is a 'what we are about to receive' day. What blessing are you anticipating today that you can express thanks to God for? It might be meal with friends, it might be the time to wash the car, a good book you will read, some soothing music you will listen to, the beach you will walk on. Be specific. Sue loves it when I tell you I love her. She loves it even more when I tell her why I love her. Why are you thankful to God? In the stillness, express your thanks to God.

(Silent Prayer)

Don't you love this chair? This week our wonderful volunteers transferred the hundreds of names on our prayer wall on to post-it-notes, and then pinned them to this chair. This chair is the symbol of our Time to Build season. It represents those who are to come and hear and respond to the Good News of Jesus. These names are those that we would long to see come. We are going to pray for the people represented by these names and this chair now.

The Apostle Paul says in Philippians:

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.
(Philippians 4:6)

We are going to present our request to God with thanksgiving; that is with faith-filled anticipation that God will hear and respond to our prayer.

(Pray for names)

Testify About Him

The third way we can express our gratitude to God is through testimony. The vision of our church is summarized in the statement, 'Changing Lives, Transforming the World.' God transforms our world one changed life at a time. The prophet Isaiah says this:

Give thanks to the Lord, call on his name; make known among the nations what he has done, and proclaim that his name is exalted.
(Isaiah 12:4)

God has done amazing things in and through the lives of people who call this church home. One of the reasons we can pray with confidence 'for those to come' is because we have seen and witness what God can do. And what God has done before, God can do again!

I hope and pray that you have watched the video testimonies that are on the Time to Build DVD. I dare you to watch them and not feel thankful. Paul wrote to the church in Rome, to people he had never, ever met, but who he knew by reputation. This is what he said:

I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is being reported all over the world.
(Romans 1:8)

The testimony of the church in Rome spilled over into gratitude to God of people who did not even know them!

We are a little behind in recording more video testimonies, so we thought this morning we should offer you the opportunity to hear one 'live' so to speak.

(Melissa interviewing David and Vicki)

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We express our thanks to God by testifying, or bearing witness to what He has done in our lives and the lives of others.

Give to Him

Today's theme is thanksgiving. 'Thanks' and 'giving' go together. To thank someone is to give or offer then our gratitude. Along with prayer and singing, giving to God out of our financial resources is one of the primary ways we offer God our gratitude in thanksgiving. The Psalmist says this:

Sacrifice thank offerings to God.
(Psalm 50:14)

Around 3000 years ago David lead the people of Israel in doing exactly that – through their leaders, every man, woman and child sacrificed a thank offering to God to be used in building a temple in Jerusalem. The total of that offering was staggering; in today's terms in the billions of dollars.

After the offering was taken up, David prayed a prayer that summarized the people's thanksgiving to God:

Now our God we give you thanks, and praise your glorious name. Who am I, and who are my people, that we should be able to give as generously as this? Everything comes from you, and we have given you only what comes from your hand.
(1 Chronicles 29:13-14)

Everything comes from God. We are the objects of God's grace – his underserved and unmerited favour.

We are the objects of God's grace; let him be the object of our gratitude.

Eight weeks ago we began the Time to Build journey. Today we bring our pledges – we bring God our thanksgiving offering.

(Invite in the children)

(Prayer and Song)