

4. Exploring Prayer: 'Prayer of Gratitude'



Gratitude (which comes from the Latin *gratus*) has the same root as *grace* – the free, boundless gift of God. So it speaks of gratefulness, thankfulness, thanksgiving, especially for what God has given us.

The Scriptures abound with expressions of gratitude and thanksgiving. The Psalms are a good starting point:

Praise the Lord!

O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;
for his steadfast love endures for ever. (Psalm 106:1)

I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart;
I will tell of all your wonderful deeds. (Psalm 9:1)

O Lord my God, I will give thanks to you for ever. (Psalm 30:12)

And the litany goes on and on – thanksgiving on top of thanksgiving. Jesus was the ultimate grateful person. The signature written across his life was the prayer “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth” (Luke 10:21). Paul also knew about gratitude: “First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you” (Romans 1:8). The Scriptures speak with a united voice, urging us to give “thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Ephesians 5:20). In 1 Thessalonians (5:16-18) Paul says, “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” It’s like the old song, “Count your blessings / Name them one by one / Count your blessings / See what God has done”.

Sometimes this can be rather hard, especially if our circumstances aren’t pleasant; if life is difficult; if we’re facing tough stuff. We don’t have to thank God ‘for’ a broken leg (or even that we have only one broken leg and not two). But consider this:

Though the fig tree does not blossom,
and no fruit is on the vines;
though the produce of the olive fails
and the fields yield no food;
though the flock is cut off from the fold
and there is no herd in the stalls,
yet I will rejoice in the Lord;
I will exult in the God of my salvation. (Habakkuk 3:17-18)

Like us, Habakkuk had a choice. Do we look at a situation and focus on what is wrong, on what there is not to be grateful for. Do we focus on what we can give thanks for or what we can complain about? The choice is ours. Do we make each day one marked by gratitude or ingratitude – gratefulness or ungratefulness? It's up to us. What kind of day do we choose to make it?

It's been said that gratitude is the thread that can bind together all the patchwork squares of our lives. Difficult times, happy times, seasons of sickness, hours of bliss – all can be sown together into something beautiful with the thread of gratitude. On one occasion Jesus was faced with a crowd of hungry people. All he had was five loaves and two fish. He could have complained to God about the lack of provisions. But no – instead he gave thanks to God (Mark 8:6). And in these less than perfect circumstances, God supplied what was needed. We, like Jesus, have choices about how to respond to what life dishes up. We each have to the power to interpret the facts of life. We make the choices that turn us into either bitter or grateful people. Gratitude is a discipline. As Henri Nouwen said:

I can choose to be grateful even when my emotions and feelings are still steeped in hurt and resentment. It is amazing how many occasions present themselves in which I can choose gratitude instead of a complaint. I can choose to be grateful when I am criticised, even when my heart still responds in bitterness. I can choose to speak about goodness and beauty, even when my inner eye still looks for someone to accuse or something to call ugly. I can choose to listen to the voices that forgive and to look at the faces that smile, even while I still hear words of revenge and see grimaces of hatred.

There is always the choice between resentment and gratitude because God has appeared in my darkness, urged me to come home, and declared in a voice filled with affection: "You are with Me always, and all I have is yours." Indeed, I can choose to dwell in the darkness in which I stand, point to those who are seemingly better off than I, lament about the many misfortunes that have plagued me in the past, and thereby wrap myself up in my resentment. But I don't have to do this. There is the option to look into the eyes of the One who came out to search for me and see therein that all I am and all I have is pure gift calling for gratitude.

Gratitude and thanksgiving is possible not because everything is rosy in the garden, but because God is present and that all I have and am, is a gift from God – a gift to be received and celebrated. A life of gratitude is one that acknowledges our dependence upon God: that all we have comes from God as a gift of grace.

If the only prayer you ever say in your entire life is thank you,
it will be enough. *Meister Eckhart* (C1260-1327/8)

Ponder:

How has a grateful person affected you?

How has someone who lives out of bitterness affected you?

Act:

Take some time now to list God's blessings – how God has gifted you

- through your relationships (friends and family)
- through your life in the church
- through your possessions
- through your finances
- through the trials and tough times of your life.

How did this feel? Was it easier or harder than you expected? Any surprises?

At the end of each day spend a few minutes reflecting on what has been – call to mind at least three things you want to thank God for (it may be something very simple, like a smile received) – and stay with them. Share them with God and tell God what they mean to you.

Write a letter of thanks to someone who has touched your life in the past week, month or year.

Thank people for what they do.

Notice your tendency to make comparisons that result in feelings of dissatisfaction and ingratitude. Practice abstaining from them, and instead, give thanks for what you have / for what you have been gifted with.

A General Thanksgiving

Eternal God, compassionate and merciful,
we your unworthy servants give you humble thanks
for all your goodness and loving kindness
to us and to all people.

We bless you for our creation, preservation,
and all the blessings of this life;
but above all for your boundless love
in the redemption of the world by our Saviour Jesus Christ;
for the means of grace, and for the hope of glory.
And, we pray, give us that due sense of all your mercies,
that our hearts may be truly thankful,
and that we praise you, not only with our lips but in our lives,
by giving ourselves to your service
and by walking before you in holiness and righteousness all our days;
through Jesus Christ our Redeemer,
to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit,
be all honour and glory, now and for ever.
Amen. (*ANZPB* p. 182)

God our life,
be with us through this day,
whether or not it brings us joy.
Help us when evening comes
to recall one benefit,
for which to give you thanks.
Amen. (*ANZPB*, p. 116)

Alister Hendery
alisterhendery@clear.net.nz