



# Gratitude as a Spiritual Discipline

*Prayers of thankfulness help us notice God's abundant gifts. Thankfulness is a wonderful companion to other forms of prayer, and it brings balance to our prayers. In thanking God, we grow closer in intimacy with God.*

## Introduction

About a dozen years ago my husband and I decided to make a change in the way we prayed together. At that point, we had been married about fifteen years, and we had fallen into a pattern of praying together once or twice a week.

When we prayed together, our prayers focused mostly on the stresses of our lives. Our two sons were entering their teenage years, and the transition to adolescence was sometimes quite painful and bewildering. My husband was experiencing increasing frustration and isolation at his job. I was trying to figure out what to do with my life; I was a seminary graduate but did not feel ready to serve as a pastor.

We knew it was good to turn to God with our needs, but often after praying together, we felt more depressed than we had when we started. Just focusing on all those needs, even in prayer, was overwhelming. We felt stuck in a rut of discouragement, negativity, and powerlessness.

We decided to try to make a small change. We began each prayer time with a few prayers of thankfulness. At first, the most we could come up with was prayers like, "Thanks for helping us make it through this day" or "Thanks for helping us survive that argument with our son." But week after week, as we consciously looked for things for which to thank God, we began to notice more blessings. We began to thank God for the food on our table, our home, the love we had (almost!) always had for each other, good moments with our sons, our church, our friends, the flowers of the spring, the blue skies of the summer, the joy of exercise. As the years went by, we



began to notice even smaller things we were thankful for: a hug, a touch, a delicious meal, the wind in the trees, a break of sunshine after a long rainy spell.

After a few years of those prayers with my husband, I found that my own personal prayers were changing. I was much more likely to thank God for blessings in my life. In fact, I was much more likely to notice them. In group settings, I began to suggest that we begin our prayer times with thankfulness.

## Thankfulness as Transformation

In recent years, both with my husband and in my prayer support group, I have experienced extended prayer times—sometimes lasting a half hour or longer—that have focused entirely on thankfulness. It is truly amazing how many blessings we can notice if we take the time to pay attention. It changes our heart over time if we try to notice all the ways God is already working, rather than focusing on the ways we want God to act.

For example, imagine that a beloved friend or relative has cancer. Yes, we definitely need to pray for God's

healing in that person's life. But we also need to notice the ways God is already acting. Perhaps we can thank God for good medical care, for relief from pain, for friends who are visiting. Perhaps God has answered some prayers related to the person's treatment or health; we can notice those answers and express our thanks.

These prayers transform us because they help us develop habits of noticing God's work in our lives. These prayers teach us to pay attention to the good gifts of God that surround us. We develop habits of gratitude, and these habits make our hearts more open to God's presence in our lives.

David Steindl-Rast, the author of a wonderful book on thankfulness, believes that gratitude nurtures intimacy with God. He writes, "One who says 'Thank you' to another really says, 'We belong together.'"<sup>1</sup> When we thank God, we acknowledge that we love God and that we are grateful for our relationship with God.

Expressing our thanks to God also acknowledges our dependence on God. With our prayers of gratitude, we affirm that "Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights" (Jas. 1:17). Everything good in our lives comes from God's bounty, and we depend on God's generosity for the very air we breathe.

## Thankfulness in the Old Testament

The Bible is full of encouragement to be thankful to God. The words *thanks*, *thankful*, and *thankfulness* occur more than one hundred times, spread throughout the Old and New Testaments. Many biblical characters model thankfulness for us.

In the Old Testament, thankfulness comes from remembering what God has done for the people of Israel. One psalm writer says that we come to God's altar, "singing aloud a song of thanksgiving, and telling all your wondrous deeds" (Ps. 26:7). The "deeds" to remember include God's gift of the law, God's delivery of the people of Israel out of slavery, God's generosity in giving the people a homeland, and God's provision of the harvest each year.

God's deeds also include meeting personal needs: "You have turned my mourning into dancing; you have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy. . . . O LORD



my God, I will give thanks to you forever" (Ps. 30:11, 12). The writers of the Psalms thank God for the big events that involve the whole nation as well as God's faithfulness in meeting our own heartfelt needs.

## Thankfulness and Praise

Thankfulness in the Old Testament is closely linked with praise. When the foundations of the temple were laid after the exile, the priests played trumpets and cymbals, the people sang, "praising and giving thanks to the LORD, 'For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel'" (Ezra 3:11).

Praise focuses on who God is, while thankfulness centers on what God has done. The verse we just saw from Ezra shows how closely related the two are. God is good and full of steadfast love. When we focus on God's goodness and love, we are praising God. God's steadfast love endures forever toward Israel. That merges into thankfulness, because it calls to mind God's faithful acts over so many years toward the people of Israel.

The opening verses of Psalm 92 demonstrate the close relationship among praise, thankfulness, and remembering God's faithfulness.

It is good to give thanks to the LORD,  
to sing praises to your name, O Most High;  
to declare your steadfast love in the morning,  
and your faithfulness by night,  
to the music of the lute and the harp,  
to the melody of the lyre.  
For you, O LORD, have made me glad by your work;  
at the works of your hands I sing for joy.

Psalm 92:1–4

God's steadfast love and faithfulness are characteristics of God, and we praise God for those characteristics. The works of God's hands flow out of God's character, and

we thank God for what we see God doing. And the lute and the harp enable our prayers to flow more readily. In much of the Bible, music is closely connected to praise and thanks.

## Thankfulness in the New Testament

Jesus modeled thankfulness to God in his public prayers (Matt. 11:25; 15:36). At the Last Supper, Jesus thanked God for the bread and the cup (Luke 22:17–19). When Jesus healed ten lepers, he commended the faith of the one who came back to thank him (Luke 17:11–19). Jesus lived out a profound intimacy with God, and thankfulness was a part of that intimacy.

In the New Testament letters, just as in the Old Testament, thankfulness focuses on what God has done. Now the deeds of God that take center place in thankfulness are the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus and the way the work of Jesus continues in believers through the Holy Spirit.

Paul expresses thanks to God over and over for the faith he sees in the churches to which he writes. He writes to the Christians at Rome, “I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed throughout the world” (Rom. 1:8). To the Christians in Ephesus: “I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers” (Eph. 1:16). To the Colossians: “In our prayers for you we always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, for we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints” (Col. 1:3–4). In at least six other places, Paul thanks God for the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of Christians.

In his letters, Paul not only models thankfulness but also encourages it: “Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with thanksgiving” (Col. 4:2). One of Paul’s statements requires a special explanation: “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances” (1 Thess. 5:16–18). God cannot possibly want us to give thanks for evil; therefore, we are not commanded to give thanks *for* everything. When a loved one has cancer, we are not supposed to thank God for the cancer. However, in the midst of the cancer, we can notice the ways God is answering prayer, the ways God is caring for the family and the sick person, and the ways God is giving comfort. In every circumstance, God is at work, and we can notice God’s loving work and express our thanks for it.

## Thankfulness in the Scriptures

Sing to the LORD with thanksgiving;  
make melody to our God on the lyre.

*Psalm 147:7*

As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

*Colossians 2:6–7*

For the LORD will comfort Zion;  
. . . joy and gladness will be found in her,  
thanksgiving and the voice of song.

*Isaiah 51:3*

I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers.

*Ephesians 1:16*

Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.

*Philippians 4:6*

And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

*Colossians 3:17*

## Thankfulness versus Optimism

True Christian thankfulness is not the same as having a positive outlook or looking on the bright side of things. Christian thankfulness draws us closer in intimacy with the God who cares about every human need and closer to Jesus, who wept over the needs of the people of Jerusalem. Prayers of gratitude are usually expressed side by side with prayers of deep intercession for the needs of the world. God calls us to pray our praise and thankfulness, as well as our prayers of confession of sin and our prayers of intercession.

A problem develops when we are out of balance. The Bible never encourages us to focus only on a positive outlook or the bright side of things. While Paul encourages thankfulness, that attitude of gratitude is embedded in a life that involves many kinds of prayers: “I urge that

supplications, prayers, intercessions and thanksgivings be made for everyone" (1 Tim. 2:1).

In fact, the word *optimism* does not occur in the Bible. Instead, the Bible focuses on hope—the hope of eternal life, the hope that Jesus will restore all things and make all things whole and good. The pictures of heaven in the book of Revelation are full of thankfulness and praise of God: "The living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to the one who is seated on the throne" (Rev. 4:9). The praise and thanks that flow so abundantly in heaven come from human response to God's goodness, not from optimism or seeing only the bright side of things.

## Thankfulness Today

Perhaps you would like to move toward greater thankfulness in your prayers. Here are some suggestions:

- *Try music.* Whether you like classical music, hymns, or praise songs, there is no shortage of material to aid prayers of thankfulness. If you play an instrument, buy yourself some Christian music to play. If you listen to music in the car, at home, or while you exercise, find some music that fits your taste and that draws you into thanks and praise.
- *In your own prayers.* When do you typically pray? At night? Spend some time looking back over the day, noticing the good things you experienced. Thank God for them. Do you normally pray in the morning? Look back over the previous day and express your thanks. Do you pray in the car? Pay some attention to the trees or flowers you pass (while also paying attention to the road and traffic!) or notice the clouds or sky. Thank God for what you see. Do you pray before meals? Each time you say grace, try to thank God for one thing in addition to the food.
- *With others.* Do you pray with a spouse or prayer partner? Do you pray in church committee meetings or in a Bible study group or prayer support group? Suggest an experiment. Propose that you begin all prayer times with thankfulness for a period of time, a month if you pray together often, six months if you pray together once a month. At the end of the period, discuss your experiences with thankfulness. Watch to see how it feels.

- *Noticing.* During the day, make an effort to pay attention to what you see, hear, smell, taste, and touch. Our Creator made such a beautiful world, and we so seldom take the time to pay attention to the beauty around us. Have you ever seen the flower paintings by Georgia O'Keeffe? She painted the inside of petunias and other common garden flowers. She began to paint those flowers when she moved to New York City after many years in the wide-open spaces of Texas and New Mexico. She believed beauty can be found anywhere if we look for it, and she looked at the interior of flowers growing on dirty pavements and found beauty there. Our Creator is waiting for us to notice the beauty of creation.

## Why Thankfulness? Why Now?

We need to nurture habits of thankfulness more today than ever before. Our media-saturated culture tells us over and over that we don't have enough. Advertisements blare at us continually, telling us we need more things and more recreational activities. "More! More! More!" is the message we encounter day after day.

God has generously given us so much, but we need to be very intentional to notice God's gifts in the midst of all the encouragement to notice what we don't have. When we are longing for a new car or a kitchen remodel or a beauty makeover, the choice to stop and notice that we have food on the table and loved ones to hug can help restore peace and joy in our lives. Choosing to notice God's abundant blessings can help us remember that our relationship with God has greater value than any possession or any amount of money.

"It is good to give thanks to the LORD," says the psalmist (Ps. 92:1). Yes, indeed, it is very good to nurture habits of thankfulness to God.

## About the Writer

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## Endnote

1. David Steindl-Rast, *Gratefulness, the Heart of Prayer: An Approach to Life in Fullness* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), 17.