Chapter 8
Living a Grateful Life

Thankfulness is a secret passageway into
a room you can't find any other way.[1]
—Mark Buchanan

The following words are from Brother Yun, a courageous evangelist from a poor village in the Henan Province of China.

> The five of us were placed in a prison cell inside the police station. The temperature was well below freezing. There was no heating at all, and they had taken my coat and thrown it in the snow. We shivered and our limbs turned blue. We almost fell unconscious. Our frozen handcuffs cut like knives into our swollen wrists.
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> I used the handcuffs to knock on the door and the iron windows. As I looked around I saw a broken wooden box in the corner of the cell. Inside it was an old drum. I beat the drum with my handcuffs and made a loud noise. At the top of my voice I sang Psalm 150… the more I sang the more I was filled with joy. I stood up and praised the Lord. Gradually my frozen hands and feet regained feeling and I wasn't cold anymore. The four brothers knelt down on the floor and earnestly prayed for China. The piercing wind whistled loudly outside, but inside our cell, weeping and the groans of intercessory prayers were heard.[2]

In his youth, Yun became one of China's house church leaders and experienced horrific opposition as he preached the gospel. His story of devotion to Jesus is amazing and inspiring. Worshiping the Lord was his lifeline as he suffered persecution and imprisonment—just like the apostle Paul. He learned to be thankful regardless of his circumstances.

Brother Yun's prison ordeal is a miraculous story of what happens when a person chooses to give thanks in a horrible situation. How can you become warm in below freezing temperatures when you've been tortured and have no coat? That's a miracle.

Any trials I have are puny by comparison. Compared to the monumental obstacles that Brother Yun and the apostle Paul faced, like beatings, hunger, shipwreck, and sleepless nights—my problems don't really seem like problems at all. Nevertheless, my troubles can defeat and depress me unless I persevere with an attitude of thankfulness.

Most of my trials are just minor aches, pains and frustrations. Yet I can so easily fall into a pessimistic attitude. It doesn't take a major calamity to get me down; a minor predicament will do the job. While working on writing this chapter, the hard drive on my six-month old computer died. Six month-old computers aren't supposed to die, but mine did, taking my back-up copies with it. Losing computer data isn't a life-threatening problem, like the amazing story of brother Yun. Nevertheless, it's hard to "rejoice in the

Lord always" when your computer freaks out on you. What did I *feel* like doing in that situation? Throwing my #@%*! computer out the window and smashing it into a million pieces!

The challenge of being grateful in a time like this requires me to surrender control and look at things from God's perspective. I have to humble myself to a sovereign God who would allow the inconvenience of lost computer data. To come through with a winning attitude, I have to take a few steps back from my situation and think about how God sees it. Having done that, it really is possible to live a joyful, thankful life.

If I can trust God for the things I can't understand instead of ranting and raving, I can actually have peace. And I'm a lot easier to live with. Gratefulness, and the humility it requires, is a pleasing offering to God.

No end to problems

Life is full of problems. If we wait for them to go away before we choose to be thankful, we might be waiting our whole life. In his book "The Road Less Traveled," Scott Peck begins with this statement:

> Life is difficult. This is a great truth, one of the greatest truths. It is a great truth because once we truly see this truth, we transcend it. Once we truly know that life is difficult—once we truly understand and accept it—then life is no longer difficult … Life is a series of problems. Do we want to moan about them or solve them?[3]

Sometimes we can solve our problems and sometimes we can't, but moaning isn't a good option. Some people suffer great difficulty yet possess great joy, while others who have easy lives are always complaining. What a tragedy when we live joylessly no matter how good we have it.

This brings to mind the story of Fanny Crosby. Fanny (1820–1915) was a famous hymn writer who penned great songs like "Blessed Assurance". When Fanny was an infant with an eye infection, a quack doctor treated her with a hot poultice. From that moment on, she was blind. For most people, such a tragedy would be the end of a happy life. But Fanny saw it as a blessing; something that God used for his glory. She said that unless she had gone blind, she probably never would have written hymns. Her blindness limited her participation in many activities of life. This forced her into developing the spiritual side of her life.

As a result, she wrote thousands of hymns, some of which endure as favorites in churches today. Ms. Crosby was also a vigorous preacher and tirelessly cared for the poor. Because of Fanny's stubborn persistence to rejoice in the midst of difficulty, she enjoyed a fruitful, fulfilling life. A horrible medical tragedy wasn't the end of her happiness. Fanny's life shows us that you don't have to be miserable while you suffer.

Getting God's Perspective

Let's take a look at what scripture says about living a life of thankfulness, the hindrances to gratefulness, the keys to being grateful and the fruit of continual praise.

Over and over again, God tells us to always be thankful. To the Thessalonians, who were undergoing all kinds of persecution and trials, Paul writes: "*Always be joyful*. Never stop praying. *Be thankful in all circumstances*, for this is God's will for you who belong to Christ Jesus" (1 Thess 5:16-18 NLT, emphasis added).

The psalmist says, "I will always have hope" (Ps 71:14) and "My mouth will tell of your righteousness, of your salvation all day long." (Ps 71:15. But, hold on a minute, isn't it a little unreasonable that we should *always* give thanks, *always* have hope, and *always* rejoice, no matter what is happening. Yet the stories of Paul and brother Yun and many others show us that it is possible. God knows what we can handle; He wouldn't burden us with commandments that are impossible to keep.

While in prison in Rome, Paul writes to his beloved Philippians, encouraging them to "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: rejoice!" (Phil 4:4). Faced with all kinds of obstacles, Paul was determined to keep rejoicing no matter what happened.

For Paul, it was all about perspective. He saw himself as a servant of Christ, one who belonged to God and lived to glorify him. In many of his letters, Paul introduces himself as a "servant of Jesus Christ." A servant's job is to please his master. Praise, and the simple trust that underlies it, is pleasing to God. Paul's view of life transformed his prison into a sanctuary of praise. Paul was single-minded in his determination to trust that God is sovereign in every situation.

On his trip to Asia, Paul and his team " … faced conflict from every direction, with battles on the outside and *fear on the inside*" (2 Cor 7:5 NLT, emphasis added). Paul was afraid. He struggled just as we do. But he kept the right perspective. Take a look at Paul's grasp of God's purposes in allowing suffering:

"We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. [WHY, GOD?] But *this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God*, who raises the dead" (2 Cor 1:8-9, emphasis added).

Paul saw the ultimate purpose for his suffering; God wanted his faith to grow. To depend on God is to worship Him. To rely on Him, when we can't understand why He is allowing tough circumstances, is to worship Him.

In those incredibly trying moments a lesser man than Paul would have had a sour attitude, questioning just what kind of God would expect so much suffering to be heaped upon one person. Indeed, God could have prevented Paul's shipwreck, the nights without sleep and the days without food, but he didn't. He could have taken out the Judaizers who

undermined Paul's teaching and led astray his converts with legalistic teaching, but he didn't.

Though Paul suffered days of despair, he could see everything through the lens of God's sovereignty. As Mark Buchanan says: "You cannot practice thankfulness on a biblical scale without its altering the way you see. And the more you do of it, the more you find cause for doing it."[4] For Paul, it didn't matter that he was in jail. God used that for good by spreading the Good News to the prison guards and others who came to hear Paul preach.

But God chose to allow Paul's house arrest to continue, and Paul saw it as an *opportunity* to preach to his visitors rather than a hindrance or defeat. Ultimately Paul was sent to the gallows, but even that was okay with this servant-apostle! Paul saw God as being in control. That's huge. You can't rejoice or be content if you question God's choices for your life and his ability to make the right things happen.

Rejoicing While House-Cleaning

When we resist God's plan for our life by complaining instead of rejoicing, we push away his blessings. My wife, Linda, shares a personal story that illustrates this:

> After several hours of cleaning my big house I was feeling resentful that I had didn't have any help. And the Lord told me that it was the exact kind of resentment that I used to feel living in the house of my step-mother. Because her love wasn't enough, I wanted my real mom's love. So, not only did I miss out on my real mom's love, I couldn't get my step-mom's love either because I was so resentful. So then, while cleaning my house, I was delivered from a complaining attitude and not being able to receive God's blessing in my big house. God showed me that I'm not able to receive blessing when I'm resentful. He delivered me of resentment.

She explains the connection between the past incident and the present:

> The root of the resentment over house-cleaning was my childish response to the step-mother situation. If you have childhood pain, you tend to make decisions based on that pain. When God reveals that issue, you can be freed from your bondage to the past pain issues.

Just a few weeks ago there was another house-cleaning incident that gave evidence of Linda's changed attitude. I was playing a round of golf with two of my sons. I called Linda to say "I love you." She was in the middle of cleaning the bathroom as I was enjoying the beautiful out of doors. She said, "It's okay, it's a *nice* bathroom. And forty percent of the people in the world don't even have a toilet." How's that for clear perspective? (Not to mention her unselfishness in blessing me to play golf while she's cleaning).

Linda says, “Two things that have brought death to me are self-pity and complaining.” So she avoids them like the plague. Jackie Pullinger said it like this: “Self-pity is a very unattractive missionary quality.”

Brother Lawrence

In the 17th century a lay brother named Brother Lawrence joined the Carmelite Monastic order. Previously a soldier for several years, in the monastery he became famous for practicing the presence of God. His work included washing dishes and preparing food for his brothers. In an expression of absolute trust in his Father for his future job assignments, he said: "I do not know what God wishes to do with me; I am always very happy."[5]

Wow, that’s amazing! For most people, not knowing God's plans is a source of anxiety. For Brother Lawrence, it didn’t matter. He was happy no matter how the Lord might lead. Brother Lawrence was happily surrendered to work at whatever task might be given to him.

I struggle to stay in that place of absolute trust. I get uptight about not knowing what’s going to happen next month and next year. I like to make plans and work towards goals. I become frustrated if my plans are waylaid. But when I realize that my main job is to love God and love people, I can relax and be happy. Gratitude flows naturally.

Grumbling or Praise

Think about the tragic result of a generation of grumblers who followed Moses into the desert. They forgot what God had done for them, and became ungrateful. Though God delivered them from hunger with supernatural provision of manna and quail, though he opened the Red Sea and cut off their attackers, though he brought water from a rock to quench their thirst, still they hardened their hearts.

In Psalm 95, God describes this generation: “ … your fathers tested and tried me, though they had seen what I did” (Ps 95:9). This is the latter part of the psalm, and the first part shows us how to counteract that hard heartedness. We sing for joy to the Lord, shouting out loud to him, and coming with: thanksgiving, music and song. Grumbling flees as we approach God’s throne with gratitude.

God made himself easily visible to Moses and the Hebrews, in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. It didn’t require a special time of meditation and the Hebrews could see, with their own eyes, a physical representation of God’s presence. Time after time, God came through with supernatural provision. When they needed water, God turned bitter water into sweet.

Yet despite all these miracles, the people quickly forgot about these demonstrations God's amazing love. When faced with a new problem the people had the gall to ask Moses questions such as, "Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children and livestock die of thirst?" (Ex 17:3). When they came to a place where the water wasn't drinkable, they asked, "Is the Lord among us or not?" (Ex 17:7). Instead of gazing on God they focused on the problem.

There's no substitute for simple trust in God. When that's out of whack—when we fail to remember our place in the scheme of things—our foundation for peace crumbles. To worship God is to acknowledge every day that he gives us life and breath and the ability to work. He gives us our daily bread. To worship God is to attempt to please him at all times. "Without faith it is impossible to please God … " (Heb 11:6). Our simple trust, that he will provide, is pleasing to Him.

Isn't it interesting that God provided manna (bread) for the Hebrews in the desert only one day at a time? They couldn't store it overnight or it would rot. I guess God wanted them to learn to trust him literally for their *daily* bread. In the grip of unbelief, we want our "yearly bread" all prepared and stored up in advance. But that would remove the need for faith.

While it would feel more comfortable to have a year's salary in the bank, that's not the kind of comfort God promises to all of us. He promises a divine peace *despite* our circumstances. The apostle Paul chose to be content with food and clothing (1 Tim 6:8). What are we adding to the "must have" list before we'll be content?

So many times I've let myself become rattled by the storms of life. It's because I still fail to remember that God knows my every need. He is tenderly leading me like a shepherd. I forget that "he is our God and we are the people of his pasture, the flock under his care" (Ps 95:7). My gaze still slips away from the One who has the power to create and destroy. Though he has helped me countless times in unpredictable ways, I haven't mastered the art of always fixing my thoughts on Him.

Peace on the Foreign Mission Field and in Child-Raising

Jesus said, "In the world you will have trouble … " then he said, " … but take heart I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). Remembering and choosing to think about God's unstoppable love will soften our hearts and remind us that he is indeed with us. This is the pathway to the place of rest.

Finding the place of rest requires humbling ourselves: " … let us kneel before the Lord our Maker" (Ps 95:6). It takes effort and discipline to keep our minds on Him. In trying times I pray, "I repent from unbelief and I choose to remember your faithfulness." Sometimes I do this ten times a day when things get tough. I can't wait for a time of solitude to refocus on him.

J. Hudson Taylor was a pioneer of missions in China. He faced tremendous opposition, including death threats from his persecutors. He had so much responsibility and so little help from co-workers. You would expect him to struggle to be at peace. Yet a coworker said of him: "He was an object lesson in quietness. He knew nothing of hurrying. He knew there was a peace that surpasses understanding. He answered every letter (piles of them) with faith that was simple and continuous."[6]

This kind of peace isn't reserved for famous missionaries. It is the fruit of developing a habit of taking time to draw near to God and think about his goodness. In the car, surrounded by toddlers, or at the kitchen sink, we can receive from him.

My wife has found Jesus in the crucible of child-raising:

> Twenty years of interrupted sleep and breast-feeding babies through the night is the crucible to create silver and gold in my character. It's a refining fire. I find that God speaks in times of crisis. He speaks to me when I'm in pain or even when I'm panicking. I believe it's true that I can burst into the throne room of God at any moment, even with all my baggage, my garbage, and my un-prettiness in tow. I find that God speaks in the midst of the grind. I grow in character as I do hard things. It's here that I learn about faith—the faith of Abraham, who believed that he was the father of many nations even when he was without any children, and just about dead.[7]
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> Trusting God is about contentment versus fantasy. You fantasize about being somewhere else but God wants you here. This is a discipline of the mind. We say, "If only I could have more worship time, or have this or that, then everything would fall into place." As with the Israelites, so it is for us; whining is a sin. You're missing out because God is already with you.

She realized:

> There's no mother in law to help, and Andy is gone on a ministry trip. There is no "plan B." There wasn't going to be days off or vacations from taking care of the kids. I had to live at a pace at which my life restored itself. It was all about being flexible, not having long lists of agendas, looking for God in the middle of exhaustion, pain and discouragement and *finding him* in those places instead of avoiding those places by entertaining myself.

Linda says:

> Just by turning to God, and meditating, there is transformation. A lot of religions use meditation and repetitive sayings but there's no power to transform. But we are invoking the power of the Holy Spirit, which is the spirit of transformation when we yield our heart and mind to Him.

> The whole idea is that pain, suffering, and injustices are not only stopped, they are transformed into something that gives God glory.

Linda shares another episode of parenting in which she let go of her right to a distraction-free worship time at church:

> I had a child in my backpack, one at the breast, and one on my lap, while we were resting and singing, moving and clapping in the presence of God all together. I would have people come up to me and comment about how patient I was. I thought, "Worship has become a very me-centered event." It's not right that people feel they can only worship God when they're undistracted. When does that ever happen for a mother of eight? It must be true that you can worship in spite of distractions."

Linda wasn't waiting for the perfect opportunity to worship. She grabbed for God every chance she got.

Don't be anxious

It is never God's will for me to worry. *Never!* "Do not be anxious about *anything*, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus" (Phil 4:6-7, emphasis added).

I'm a naturally worrisome person, but that's the "old me" talking. To worry is to resist God's will. To worry is to take matters into my own hands. To worry is to refuse to trust God. So I must intentionally resist and repent from anxiety. " … Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid" (John 14:27). That means we can actually have power over feeling troubled, with God's help. With dogged determination, we can hang onto God's truth with a spirit of thanks. We may have to "struggle with all his energy" as Paul did, but we can do it.

Paul says to Timothy that he should "endure hardship with us like a good soldier of Jesus Christ" (2 Tim 2:3). Soldiers endure lots of discomfort in the battlefield. They don't give into their feelings of pain, but choose to do what's right. To worship God continually requires acting the opposite of how we feel much of the time.

Eugene Peterson describes it like this:

> Feelings are great liars. If Christians only worshiped when they felt like it, there would be precious little worship that went on. Feelings are important in many areas, but completely unreliable in matters of faith.[8]
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> Peterson quotes Paul Scherer, who writes: "The Bible wastes very little time on the way we feel."[9]

He continues:

> We think that if we don't feel something there can be no authenticity in doing it. But the wisdom of God says something different, namely, that we can act ourselves into a new way of feeling much quicker than we can feel ourselves into a new way of acting. Worship is an act that develops feelings for God, not a feeling for God that is expressed in an act of worship.[10]

When Brother Yun and his friends were in a freezing prison cell, they probably didn't *feel* like praising God. But they knew it was the right thing to do, and God met them powerfully as they chose to give thanks.

In his wonderful book "Champagne for the Soul," Mike Mason talks about the discipline of choosing to rejoice. "One must choose joy, and keep on choosing it under all conditions until gradually it becomes a habit, a self-sustaining reality." Mike writes:

> We must resolve deep within, "nothing will stop me. I'm fixing my eyes on Jesus and not letting anything interrupt my joy in him" … Happiness is not happenstance, but rather it involves a profound spiritual discipline. If I want to be strong, I don't sit around waiting until I'm strong enough to lift weights; rather, I lift weights in order to become strong.[11]

Mason goes on to say that a message about always rejoicing is necessarily about spiritual warfare. Maintaining a positive attitude requires a feisty, fighting spirit. To live in constant gratefulness, we must "put on the whole armor of God" and "take our stand against the devil's schemes" (Eph 6:11).

Forget the Past and Move On

To live a thankful life, we must forget the failures of the past. " … Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God is called me heavenward in Christ Jesus" (Phil 3:13-14).

Think of all of the famous Bible characters who made *big mistakes* and were then blessed big-time by God. Moses—a murderer, Abraham—a liar, David—an adulterer and murderer. All of these men were forgiven by God and then had to forgive themselves, forget the past and press on with praise.

Paul made some big mistakes prior to knowing Jesus. His mission was to track down Christians and keep them from worshiping Jesus. He stood by as Christians were killed. This looming memory could have haunted and condemned him, crippling his effectiveness. Instead of being bogged down by regret, he turned it into a praise opportunity.

I've made so many big mistakes in life, and I make little mistakes every day—ministry mistakes, financial mistakes, relational mistakes; I've messed up in all kinds of ways. But stressing out over my bad decisions is not going to fix anything. To rejoice in the present

I have to forget what's behind. " … Each day has enough trouble of its own." (Matt 6:34)—agonizing over yesterday's blunders will only drag me down.

Conclusion

God has blessed me in so many ways. I have a wonderful family and a good income to support them. He has enabled me to enjoy my work. And when I take time to remember God's blessings to my wife, kids and me over the past twenty-nine years of married life, I am amazed, overwhelmed and humbled.

Yet I can find so many things to complain about. Things like broken computers, and my gradually decaying body. The only way I can overcome a complaining spirit is to continually make the choice to rejoice in the Lord. It's up to me to think about the things that are excellent and worthy of praise. That's the path to joy and peace.

Is there something that's stifling your heart of thanks? Maybe you've had heartbreaking setbacks in life, so I don't want to minimize your problems. Maybe you've lost a child, lost a job, or lost a spouse. I'm not offering pat answers that lead to instant joy, but we can all learn from the saints of the past who chose the path of humility and gratitude, even in the face of overwhelming odds. We can find inspiration from Brother Yun, Fanny Crosby and the apostle Paul. They all suffered but found a way to be thankful instead of miserable.

We all have to decide: "What are we going to think about?" You can fret about your physical pain, the strained relationships in your extended family, the unpaid bills, or the question marks about your future career. Or you can think about God's ability to take care of you in the midst of those tensions. You can think about God's gift of life and his sustaining power that enables you to breathe another breath.

May God grant you the gift of gratefulness so you can peacefully live in the tension of unanswered questions and an uncertain future. May you experience the peace that passes understanding as you bring your requests to God with thankfulness.

Take five or ten minutes and think about what God has done for you through your lifetime; let the litany of God's wondrous works in your life lift your spirit and launch you into praise. The habit of rejoicing, learned through prolonged hour-by-hour practice, is the antidote to many ills. It's the cure for anxiety and for dwelling on past mistakes. It empowers us to see the future with eyes of faith.

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1. Mark Buchanan, *The Rest of God* (Nashville, TN: W Publishing Group, 2006), 67.
2. Brother Yun and Paul Hattaway, *The Heavenly Man* (London: Monarch Books, 2002), 84-85
3. M.Scott Peck, *The Road Less Traveled* (New York, NY: Touchstone, 1978), 15.
4. Ibid., 67.

5. Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2010), 76.
6. Andy Comiskey, *"Sermon,"* (Anaheim Vineyard, 1998).
7. Andy Park, "An Interview with Linda Park." (Surrey, BC, Canada, 2010).
8. Eugene Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction* (Downers Grove, Il: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 50.
9. Paul Scherer, *The Word of God Sent* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1965), 166.
10. Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, 50.
11. Mike Mason, *Champagne for the Soul* (Colorado Springs, CO: Waterbrook Press, 2003), 12.