

BEING THANKFUL PEOPLE

By Pastor Glenn Pease

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1. THANK GOD FOR HIMSELF Based on Psalm 30

BY PASTOR GLENN PEASE

A chaplain of some prison trustees once came to his group and announced that he was going on a six week trip to Europe. He had been a faithful servant to them for years, and they appreciated him a great deal. They began to slap him on the back as they expressed their congratulations, and they gave him big hugs. When the service of that day was over the leader came to the chaplain with a big box. He said, "We can't give you much, but we want you to have this, and asked that you not open it until you get home."

He was so touched, he could not wait to get home and share with his wife what had happened. It was an exciting moment as he pulled the top of that box back, and there he saw his own billfold, his own tie clasp, his own pen, and his own watch. In embracing him they had stripped him of every loose possession he had, and this is what they gave him back. They had nothing to give him that was not already his. So it is with us and God. The poet was right who said,

We give thee but thine own dear Lord,
Whatever the gift may be.
All that we have is thine alone,
A trust O Lord from Thee.

If all we are and all we have is a gift from God, then the best we can do is to give back to God what is already his. But this leads to a problem. The problem is, it seems like much ado about nothing. Our giving to God is like giving a thimble of water to the ocean, or like giving a candle to the Sun. It seems so insignificant that we tend to lose the thrill of Thanksgiving.

Sir Michael Costa, a famous composer and conductor from Naples, was once rehearsing with a vast array of instruments and hundreds of voices. With the thunder of the organ, the roll of the drums, the sounding of the horns, and the clashing of the cymbals, the mighty chorus rang out. You can understand the mood that came over the piccolo player who said within himself, "In all this din it matters not what I do!" So he ceased to play. Suddenly, Costa stopped and flung up his arms, and all was still. He shouted out, "Where is the piccolo?" His sensitive ear missed it, and its absence made a difference to him.

God has a sensitive ear as well, and he misses any voice that is not lifted in Thanksgiving to Him. Besides the angelic host of heaven, millions on earth join the chorus with all sorts of spectacular things to thank God for, and it is easy for us to feel like that piccolo player and say, "How can it matter what I do? In the colossal symphony of voices, what does it matter if I remain silent? God's blessings are more than I can count, but my ability to express my thanks is so inadequate."

Simon Greenberg expresses the frustration of the thankful heart as he deals with the gifts of God just in nature alone:

Five thousand breathless dawns all new;
Five thousand flowers fresh in dew;
Five thousand sunsets wrapped in gold;
One million snowflakes served ice cold;
Five quiet friends, one baby's love;
One white mad sea with clouds above;
One hundred music--haunted dreams,
Of moon--drenched roads and hurrying streams,
Of prophesying winds, and trees,
Of silent stars and browsing bees;
One June night in a fragrant wood;
One heart that loved and understood.
I wondered when I waked that day,
How--how in God's name--I could pay!

He never even got into the greatest gifts--the gifts of love and salvation and eternal life in Jesus Christ. We can't even pay for the gifts of natural life let alone for the gifts of eternal life. So let's face up to the reality that Thanksgiving is not a way to pay God back. All we can give is what is already His, and we can only give a fraction in return for the fullness He has given us. So forget the idea that thanks is to pay. It is not to pay, it is to pray, and to say to God, this is how I look at life, history, nature, and all that is, because I acknowledge you as my God. Thanksgiving is the expression of an attitude, or a philosophy of life.

The thankful person is a person who looks at life from a unique perspective, and, therefore, sees what the ungrateful do not see. At best we see only a part, a mere fraction of God's grace. We see through a glass darkly Paul says, and so none of us can be as thankful as we ought to be, for we are all ignorant of so much that God has spared us from, and even of

what He has given us.

We can get tiresome and superficial when we try to enumerate all the things for which we are thankful. One author describes the boredom of going through and endless litany of thanks:

For sun and moon and stars,
We thank Thee, O Lord.
For food and fun and fellowship,
We thank Thee, O Lord.
For fish and frogs and fruit flies,
We thank Thee, O Lord.

By the time you are finished, what you are most thankful for is that the list is over.

David here in Psalm 30 does not give us a long list, but focuses on just a few ways of looking at life that expresses the grateful heart. I hear him saying here, thank God for the past; thank God for the present, and thank God for the permanent.

I. THANK GOD FOR THE PAST.

David looks back and recognizes that had God not loved him, led him, and lifted him, he would have been long gone, and a part of the population of the pit. The only reason any of us are sitting here, and not lying in a cemetery is because of the grace and providence of God. There have been millions of people just our age who have gone into the grave because of war, accidents, or disease, but we are alive, and not because we are more worthy, but because we have been spared.

David knew he was alive for that same reason, and he says in verse 3, "O Lord, you brought me up from the grave; you spared me from going down into the pit." Life has its burdens and sorrows, and sometimes we even get depressed enough to want to chuck the whole thing. David knew these dark depths as well, but most of the time we feel like David does here, and like the modern poet who wrote,

Thank God I'm alive!
That the skies are blue,
That a new day dawns
For me and you.
The sun light glistens
On field and on tree,
And the house wren sings
To his mate and to me.
The whole world glows
With a heavenly glee!
I know there are heart--aches,
A world full of strife,
But thank God, O thank God,
Thank God just for life.

We could not say that or feel that unless we could look back to the past and see how God has spared us and protected us to this point.

David saw many a good man go down in battle. Israel was a winner, but even the winners lose men, and often a great many men. Some of you have no doubt survived wars. Some of us could have been killed in the wars of our

nation, as many thousands were. We were spared, and we got the chance to live, to marry, to raise children, and to have grandchildren. We have been granted the gift to be a part of history, and not because we are more worthy, but because of the grace of God.

It is good for us to reflect on this, for it can help us to develop a more thankful perspective. So often we forget the enormous privilege it is just to be alive, that we become resentful and even bitter because we are only among the riches people of the world, and not literally the richest people around. The curse of comparative thinking takes its toll on all of us at some point in life. We compare ourselves to others who have been more materially blest, and who have acquired more things, and we envy them, and this envy quenches the spirit of thankfulness.

Many of the most blest people alive are not happy to be alive because they are caught in this curse of comparison. There is no level of life you can arrive at where you can escape this curse. Millionaires compare themselves with multi-millionaires, and they grieve. The multi-millionaires compare themselves with billionaires, and they grieve, for they have been deprived of the highest place. Art Linkletter actually has a friend who has eight million dollars, but he is always depressed because all of his friends have at least 10 million dollars.

The only cure for this curse is to change your perspective and look at life like David is doing in this Psalm. He is not comparing himself to the Pharaoh of Egypt, or to the kings of the world. He is comparing himself to those in the grave, and he likes his place better. If you have to compare, don't look up, for by this foolish logic everybody is nobody except the man at the very top. The only one who can win the comparison game is the one that has nobody he can look up to because he is on top of everyone else. In other words, only one can win this game, for anyone else is below him and thus, by comparison are failures.

But if you look the other way, and compare yourself to those who are in the grave, you are the very essence of success and superiority. How do you measure the degree of value between you and those not alive? Are you fifty percent, seventy five percent, or one hundred percent better off? Keep in mind, we are not talking about eternal life, but temporal life. The dead in Christ are with him, and are blest beyond our knowledge, but they have zero potential to enjoy the gifts of God in this earthly life. Compared to them we are infinitely blest. Therefore, let us look back, and thank God for the past and for all the ways by which He preserved us so we could be alive this day.

In our pride we often think we are who we are because of our labor and wisdom. There is some truth to this, but if it hinders our sense of thankfulness to God, we need to see life from a new perspective. Did you choose to not be raised by the Mafia, and learn to live by crime? Did you choose not to be born in Ethiopia, and be starving? Did you choose not to live in Mexico City and be killed by an earthquake? Did you choose not to be a farmer in Columbia and be killed by a volcano? The list could go on for hours of all the evils you have escaped, not by your own choice and wisdom, but by the grace of God.

Henry Ward Beecher said, "A proud man is seldom a grateful man for he never thinks he gets as much as he deserves." David is a grateful man for he knows he has received so much more than he deserves. Let us join in the spirit of David, and thank God for all His deliverance's of the past that

bring us to the present, alive and full of potential. Thank God for the past.

II. THANK GOD FOR THE PRESENT.

David calls upon us to join him in song in verse 4. "Sing to the Lord you saints of His, praise His holy name." Do it now, even if it is a tough time, and you feel like you are under God's anger. The good news David says in verse 5 is, God's anger only lasts a moment, but His favor lasts a lifetime. Weeping may remain for a night, but rejoicing comes in the morning. David is thankful for the present because he is an optimist. No matter how heavy the present is, the burden will soon become light, and joy will replace sorrow. We see here that weeping is no sign of weakness, but is merely an honest expression of emotion, which even a strong man like David could show. Being an optimist does not mean you do not feel the sorrow of present suffering.

How many times have we been there? The cloud cover is oppressive and living is a chore, and so many things are discouraging. But those days pass by, and the sun shines again, and we are delighted to be alive. Not everything in the present is pleasant, but the thankful heart can and will see values that are missed by the complaining heart. Listen for example to the insight of this poem--

Thank God for dirty dishes,
They have a tale to tell:
While others may go hungry,
We still are eating well;
With home and health and happiness
We have no right to fuss;
This stack is ample evidence
That God's been good to us.

The challenge of life is to find a reason to be thankful in what seems on the surface to be a reason to complain.

There are volumes of testimonies by people who have come to actually thank God for problems and trials, and even diseases and accidents because these so-called misfortunes opened their eyes to the fact that they were going away from God, and they were motivated by their need for God to get back on the right road. Their burden became their greatest blessing.

Charles Colson in his book *Loving God* said all of his proud and sophisticated labor in Government was not used of God--it was his shame, humiliation, and fall, in the Watergate scandal that God used for His glory, for when he was down he prayed as David did in verse 10. "Hear O Lord, and be merciful to me, O Lord, be my help." God listens to such a prayer, and most of the thankful people in the world are so, because they know God listens to the cry for mercy and help, and will work with them even in the worst situations to bring forth good.

Chuck Colson is thanking God for the present ministry he has in the prisons of our nation where many are coming to Christ because God is merciful and turns wailing into dancing. The worst can be used for the best, and that is why the thankful heart can always be thankful for the present, for no matter what it is, it has potential for good. The very trial you now endure can be laying the foundation for a triumph tomorrow, and so be thankful for the present. The thankful heart is ever searching for that diamond that is hidden in life's dirt.

Matthew Henry, the famous Bible scholar, was once accosted by thieves and robbed of his money. He wrote these words in his diary. "Let me be thankful.....

First, because I was never robbed before,
Second, although they took my purse they didn't take my life,
Third, because, although they took my all, it wasn't much,
Fourth, because it was I who was robbed, not I who robbed."

Could you be thankful for the present if it was as unpleasant as being robbed? You could if you choose to count as someone has written-

Count your blessings instead of your crosses,
Count your gains instead of your loses,
Count your joys instead of your woes
Count your friends instead of your foes
Count your courage instead of your fears,
Count your health instead of your wealth,
Count on God instead of yourself.

One of the quickest ways there is of quenching the spirit, and thereby withering the fruit of the spirit in our lives, is by an attitude of ingratitude which focuses on what we do not have rather than on the abundance which we do have. The quickest way to cure any negative mood is by the therapy of Thanksgiving. There is healing power in praise. David said his sack cloth was removed and he was clothed with joy, and that is what can happen to anyone who will chance their tune from the blues to the song of Thanksgiving.

A surprising conclusion that many have come to is that Thanksgiving is to the Christian what swearing is to the non-Christian. It is a release, and a therapeutic expression of emotion. The one takes the low road of the negative, and the other takes the high road of the positive. Pastor Chase, a Presbyterian minister, was visiting a hospital ward late at night where two elderly women were in great pain. Both were terminal patients. One of them was cursing God and swearing at life. The other was thanking God for the precious memories of that life and love had given her. She was saying with the Psalmist, "Blest the Lord O my soul and forget not all His benefits."

The present was unpleasant for both of these ladies, but one was building on a broader foundation than the moment. She had a reservoir of memories she could thank God for, and that made her thankful for the present, for her now was not empty, but was packed with grateful memories of the past. The past influences the present, and, therefore, every one of us has an obligation to our future self to start being grateful for the present, so we can have a positive past to influence our future.

This makes more sense than it sounds like, for what it means is, everyday we are laying up a treasure of Thanksgiving that will bring healing in some future circumstance. If we neglect being thankful for the present, we will someday go to the medicine chest, and find it empty. If you want to enjoy the therapeutic power of Thanksgiving do not wait until someday, start now, and thank God for the present.

III. THANK GOD FOR THE PERMANENT.

David begins this song of Thanksgiving by saying, "I will exalt you O Lord," and he ends with, "O Lord my God, I will give you thanks forever." God is the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. In between these two

peaks of permanence, David has a whole range of verbal mountains, as he lifts up the Lord, over and over again. David has discovered the essence of Thanksgiving. It is not in his past or his present, but in God's permanence. It is his foreverness that is the basis for all Thanksgiving.

David was preserved from death many times, but this deliverance did not last forever. His deliverance from all kinds of trials filled his heart with gratitude, but they did not go on forever. We can be so thankful for God's providence in our lives, but there is no guarantee that they will be permanent. That is why Thanksgiving has to be more than a feeling. It has to be a faith. It is a conviction that regardless of what happens in life, God will have the final word, and because of that we will, like David, give thanks to the Lord forever.

The story goes that a preacher, a boy scout, and a scholar were all up in a small plane. The pilot turned and said that he had bad news. The plane was not operating properly and they would likely crash. He also compounded the crisis by telling them they only had three parachutes. He added that he was a family man and his family needed him, and with that he grabbed one of the chutes and jumped.

The scholar said, "I want you to know I am one of the smartest men in the world. My loss would be profoundly felt in the intellectual world." He grabbed another chute and jumped. The preacher looked at the scout and said, "Son, I've lived my life and I am ready to die. You take the last chute." The scout said, "Cool it Rev. there's no problem. That smartest guy in the world just jumped with my knapsack."

Smart people can make some big mistakes, and David is a great example. His sin and the foolish blunders to cover it up led to great sorrow for him the rest of his life. But through it all David had a grateful heart, for he knew the negatives of life were passing, but the positive were permanent. God is merciful, and as long as a man will call upon God, there is no mistake that can rob him of eternal love.

In essence, the whole of David's Thanksgiving, and the whole of all Thanksgiving that really matters, is summed up in the phrase, "Thank God for God." If God was not who He is, and did not have an eternal plan for man, all the rest of theology would be a fly by night operation. It's here today and gone tomorrow. If the basis of my thanks is my health, that can be gone tomorrow. If the basis is my wealth, or my possessions, or my relationships, or anything else you can think of, those are all subject to change, and I can be robbed of them at any time. For Thanksgiving to have a stability that can ride out the changes of time it has to be based on the nature of God, which is untouched by the ravages of time. An unknown poet, who was a wise one wrote,

My God
Today I kneel to say
"I thank you for You."
For once my prayer holds no request,
No names of friends for you to bless.
Because I think even You,
Might sometimes like a prayer that's new.
Might like to hear somebody pray,
Who has no words but thanks to say.
Somebody satisfied and glad
For all the joys that he has had,
And so I say again,

"I THANK YOU, LORD FOR YOU."

May God help us to be thankful for our past; thankful for our present, but most of all thankful for the permanent, which means, thanking God for Himself.

2. THANKSGIVING POWER Based on I Chron. 16:1-36

Almost everyone has heard of Leo Tolstoy the author of War and Peace, but few have ever heard of his grandfather Prince Nicholas Volkauskys. This old man took 8 of his slaves on his country estate and formed them into an orchestra. He taught them how to play the finest classical music in the world. Every morning at 7 o'clock this slave symphony was set to go off like a modern clock alarm. They assembled under the master's window, and when the signal came that he was awaking they began to play this beautiful music. Their hands were rough like sandpaper, but they produced an atmosphere of loveliness. Then they went off to slop the hogs, spade the garden, and fix the fence.

They were just 8 men of humble origin, but because the master chose them and gave them instruction they had this great privilege of creating beauty. They pleased their master and then went to their labor with a spirit of joy because they were partakers in the beautiful. This is the picture we have in the Old Testament of God and His people. He called them to develop the gifts of praise and thanksgiving. The best music in the world to God's ear is the voices of thanksgiving. God's taste has never changed in this regard, and we read in Heb. 13:15, "Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise-the fruit of lips that confess His name."

The sound of praise and thanksgiving is the best offering you can give to God. Not only does such music please God, it sends us into life with thanksgiving power. When David brought the Ark of the Covenant back to Jerusalem, the first thing he did was to appoint Levites to make petition, to give thanks and to praise the Lord. To give momentum to this goal he wrote a Psalm of Thanksgiving himself, and he gave it to his worship leader Asaph. There are not many songs that are repeated in the Bible, but this one is repeated in Ps. 96. It teaches us many things, but there is just two important truths about thanksgiving that I want to focus on.

I. THANKSGIVING IS VITAL.

Vital means essential to the existence of something. It is so basic to the life of the spirit that to remove it is equivalent to removing the heart from the body. A spirit without thankfulness is a dead spirit. If you feel down and spiritually lifeless, there is a good chance that you are low on thankfulness. Your body can get lifeless if you lack potassium, and your spirit can get lifeless if you lack gratitude. Jesus said, "Without me you can do nothing." And so when we feel like we can do nothing it is because we have pulled the plug that links us to Christ, and we are trying to operate on our own power. When we are plugged in and we are worshipping our Lord we are capable of saying with Paul, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." That is thanksgiving power.

The degree of our optimism and thankfulness is easily seen. The fruit of the spirit is not hidden. It hangs on the tree where it can be seen. If we are gripping and complaining, it is rather obvious that we have quenched the Holy Spirit and have decided to govern our own life. If we are letting the Holy Spirit guide us the fruit will be conspicuous, for love, joy, peace, and all the others are positive things that can be easily seen in a person's life. Thanksgiving then is a vital ingredient in the Christian life. It is the means by which we measure our obedience to God's will. If you find yourself being less and less thankful, then you are going to the wrong direction. If you are seeing more and more for which you are thankful, then you can know you are walking with God in the right direction.

When people are thankful and praise God they look on life with a perspective that lifts them up and enables them to see all of life from a heavenly viewpoint. One of the purposes of worship is to get our eyes off self and the world, and get them focused on God. He is the one who can give us a hopeful perspective whatever the circumstances we face on earth. You will observe that this Psalm of thanksgiving is God focus from beginning to end. It is His works and wonders for which we are to be persistently thankful. Verse 34 says we are to give thanks to the Lord because He is good and His love endures forever. The things we will never cease to give thanks for are permanent, but the things for which we gripe and grieve are often merely passing and trivial things in comparison. If our lives revolve around the passing we will have a pessimistic perspective that robs us of the spirit God wants us to have.

The spies who went into the Promised Land saw giants and odds they felt they could never overcome. They took their eyes off from the God who brought them out of Egypt, and they looked at their own puny resources. The result was they became thankless pessimists, and they paid for it by 40 years of plodding through the desert going nowhere until they died. But Joshua and Caleb had a different perspective, and they went into the land and gained a great victory. The difference was that they looked up to God and were grateful for what they had done for them. Their optimism pleased God and they became the leaders God used to lead His people into the Promised Land.

When we cease to look up to God and remember what He has done we lose a thankful spirit, and that is the beginning of the end. That is why the Bible is so full of songs of thanksgiving. We need to be constantly pulled back from a self-centered view of life to a God-centered view, and there is no more powerful agent for doing this than thanksgiving. Even thanksgiving can be perverted if it becomes purely self-centered. The Pharisee stood in the temple saying, "I thank God that I am not as other men." He had an I problem. I thank God that I-he had two I's where he put himself in the first place and last place. This Psalm has just the opposite view point. It is all about who God is and what He has done for us. If you look to self you soon lose your optimism but if we look to God we see one who offers assurance that we can be optimists.

C. S. Lewis in The Chronicles of Narnia has the majestic lion Aslan representing Christ. In the second book the children return to the enchanted land where everything has so changed they become disoriented and lost. After a dreadful series of events Lucy finally finds Aslan in a forest clearing, and her heart is filled with joy. She ran and threw her arms about his neck and buried her face in the beautiful rich silkiness of his mane. Aslan said, "Welcome child." Lucy responded, "You are bigger." Aslan replied, "That is because you

are older little one." She said, "Is it because you are?" Aslan, who represents Christ who is the same yesterday, today and forever said, "I am not, but every year you grow, you will find me bigger." The point of Lewis is that Jesus can't get any bigger than He is, but He can grow in all ways in our experience as we mature. God gets greater and greater as we get more thankful. That is why thankfulness is so vital to the Christian life.

If you find you are not thankful for life, you are living a wilderness life and just marching in circles until you die. This is not God's will for any Christian. We are to recognize that thanksgiving is vital and begin to use tools like this thanksgiving song, and get our eyes on God and His wonders. David says by his actions here in our text that thanksgiving is not a secondary issue, or a fringe item in the agenda of God's people. This is a starting point, and if you do not start here, wherever you go is not worth being, for you have gone without a thankful heart, and without that you just as well have not gone at all. God cannot be pleased without this vital ingredient. Without faith it is impossible to please God. Faith is the ability to see the unseen, and then have a thankful spirit even when the visible is not encouraging. Faith is thanksgiving power.

II. THANKSGIVING IS VERBAL.

Thanks is a word, and words need to be verbalized to give them life and power. Thanks is to be a word that we make a part of our vocabulary on a frequent basis. Thankful people say it to God, mates, to others. It is word that does not hide in the deep inner caverns of their minds, but it is on the tip of their tongue and ready to fly instantly to bless others. It is a sin of omission not to verbalize thanks when it is in order. That leaves most of us guilty. There are Christians who are thankful but seldom say it. We are all too much this way. This is a defect. You cannot be over thankful, for Paul says, "In everything give thanks." We tend to get weak in this area and begin to take our blessings for granted.

We need to get a thanksgiving recharge. David's song of thanks was designed to do just that for God's people. There is a constant reference to the need to verbalize our thanks. "Let the redeemed of the Lord say so," is the point. Tell the world what you are grateful for says David. Tell the nations about the nature and work of God in the world that makes you thankful. How often do you tell somebody that you are so thankful for the universe and the way God made it? Sure it is a fallen world with more problems than we can measure. That is all the more reason why the world needs to hear people who can verbalize thankfulness for the positive side of reality. In verse 8 he says, "Make known among the nations what He has done." Verse 9 says, "Tell of all His wondrous acts." God is a God of history and He has done so many wonders. There is always good news when we focus on the works of God.

In verse 12 we read, "Remember the wonders He has done-His miracles and His judgments." Tell your own testimony of what has done, and of your gratitude. Tell of what He has done for others. The world is filled with the wonders of His grace that we are to verbalize. Verse 27 says, "Proclaim His salvation day after day." The news is never so bad that there is no good news of God's salvation. God never ceases to work for good with those who love Him. Most of us think of Mr. Roger's Neighborhood as kid's stuff, but there is more to it than that. He is an ordained Presbyterian minister with the special charge to minister to children and their friends through the media. His calling is to verbalize the love

of God for people, and to help them realize they have self worth.

Back in the mid-eighties Lauren Tewes, who was the cruise director on Love Boat was making a million dollars a year. She was on top of the world, but she was a loser, for she had no sense of self-esteem. She tried to escape her insecurity through drugs. She lost her job and her fortune for her drug idol. One morning she flipped on the TV in a state of despair. She was feeling worthless and hopeless, and there on the screen was Mr. Roger's in his red cardigan sweater singing, "I'll be your friend. Will you be mine?" This young actress broke down in tears and pathetically answered him out loud, "Yes!" That verbalization of friendship caught her at a turning point where she could choose life or death, and it gave her the strength she needed to choose life. She conquered her cocaine habit and got her life back together. She said, "Mr. Rogers saved my life." By the power of positive verbalization of love and good news people can be saved for time and eternity.

People need to hear the good news, and it is only people who are charged up with thanksgiving power who will verbalize this good news. If we do not tell people the good news of God's love, and of how it is manifested in His Word it is because we are ourselves have forgotten it. We have come to the point where we take all the wonders of God's salvation for granted, and we just don't even think of sharing it with a grateful heart. Lack of thanksgiving is the primary cause for Christians being poor witnesses of the grace and glory of God. When we are truly thankful we are full of enthusiasm to tell of what He has done. But when we forget and take it for granted we can no more generate the fire of enthusiasm.

If your fire has gone out you can generally assume that you have lost your spirit of thanksgiving. There is no more fuel to keep the furnace burning. When this happens we become negative thinkers and do a lot of complaining. This is a valley that all of us travel through from time to time, but it is folly to settle down there. We have an obligation to get out of that valley, and one of the key ways of doing so is to verbalize the positive. One of the best examples I have ever read of verbalizing thanksgiving is the letter of a 28 year old woman dying of leukemia. She wrote this letter to Ron Davis, who was the leader of the Bible study for Minnesota Vikings. I will share just a portion of it.

"Many people have asked me if I feel any bitterness about my long illness and imminent death at a young age. No, I feel no bitterness or anger. Many people would demand to know, "Why me?" But I can't help but ask, "Why not me?"
My life has been permeated by a faith in the resurrected Christ. He has been my purpose in life. He has been my peace in death. So mourn for those I leave behind, but don't mourn for me. I'm not afraid to die because the resurrection of Jesus Christ is not just some doctrine to me; it's my reality. I've settled the matter of my own death, and that sets me free to truly live."

Here is the thanksgiving verbalized. She has a grateful heart rejoicing in God's goodness even though she is dying with a dreaded disease. It is folly when we become depressed over so many matters that will soon pass away. We do so because we have stopped looking up to God and giving Him thanks. When you stop giving thanks you deprive yourself of the very

oxygen of life. If you cannot see much to be thankful for, it is because you have let the fog of forgetfulness blind you. If you begin to verbalize your thankfulness, that fog will lift, and you will see that you are blessed with many riches. It is sure to be dark if you close your eyes to God's goodness, but it is sure to be light if you open your eyes and look at what God has done.

It is by verbalizing thanks that we come to feel the joy in what we have. The more we express it the more we possess it. Thanksgiving is a paradox, for the more we give it the more we have of it. By verbalizing it we possess what we already have to a greater degree. Paul and Silas were in prison, and this is not a typical setting for celebration, but they began to verbalize their gratitude to God in song. The other prisoners listened to their praise, and God responded with an earthquake. The jailer and his family were won to Christ because of it. That is a lot of good things coming out of a very bad situation. Had Paul and Silas not verbalized their thankful spirit that whole victorious story may never have happened.

Thanksgiving moves God, motivates men, and changes history. Paul was not just filling in space when he told Christians to rejoice always and in everything to give thanks. He meant it, and he practiced it, and the result is he saw the worst of settings become the best opportunities for God to gain victory in this dark world. The Old and New Testaments are in complete agreement, for David's song and Paul's song teach us the same lesson. Pessimism leads to powerlessness, but praise leads to thanksgiving power.

Does your heavenly Father give you
Many blessings here below?
Then on bended knee before Him
Frankly, gladly, tell Him so.

3. A THANKFUL PERSPECTIVE Based on Psa. 138

G. K. Chesterton has written a delightful account of a student's encounter with his professor at Oxford. The professor, or tutor as they called them, was a bright young man, but he was a follower of the pessimistic views of Schopenhauer. He was disgusted with the weary worthless lives around him, and with the trash they treasured, and which he had to look at from his second floor apartment. Especially offensive was that unattractive stucco house with a silly duck pond complete with ducks.

At the end of one of his frequent observations on the foolishness of people, the low estate of most human minds, and the futility of life in general, he concluded that the only intelligent course of action for a man of sense and sensibility would be to remove himself from the scene permanently. This is where the student comes in. He felt the time had come to test his professor's theory. He returned to the professor's quarters later waving a wicked looking revolver. He declared that he had come to put his tutor out of his misery. The professor was reduced at once to un-philosophical entreaties. As he begged for his life he backed out of his window and perched on the flagpole hoping to attract the attention of

someone passing by.

The student standing at the window with the revolver called upon the pessimist to recant. He made him give thanks for his miserable life, for the sky, the earth, and the trees. He was also given the opportunity to bless his neighbor and express satisfaction with the ducks on the pond. All of this he gladly did, and thereby showed that his theory on life was not very attractive in practice.

There are many pouting pessimists who would change their tune on a flagpole with a revolver in their back. This would not prove that they were truly thankful people, but it would demonstrate that they were more grateful for life than they were willing to admit. Facing death gives one a new perspective on life, and it makes it look even good to the pessimist. Most pessimists and most un-believers do not need a revolver in their back to admit they have much for which to be grateful. All it takes is the pressure of tradition and a family get together on Thanksgiving to compel them to recognize their good fortune.

Almost all non-Christians will be thankful for their material blessings, and for the fact that they are not freezing with the homeless, or starving with the hungry poor. Christians cannot claim a monopoly on the attitude of gratitude. What distinguishes the Christians' thankfulness from the natural thankfulness of all people? The distinction consists basically in the fact that the Christian has someone to thank. The essence of his thanksgiving is a relationship to a person, and a supreme person who has a plan and purpose for his life. The unbeliever's thanks is a sense of well being about his good luck, but there is no ultimate meaning behind it, for he has no concept of an ultimate purpose. This means he loses the essence of thanksgiving, which is gratitude to God for his personal concern and purpose for us as individuals. This is a key to happiness, for only people with a purpose can be truly happy on a permanent basis.

Paul tells us that the cause of much of the misery and darkness of the pagan world is due to the fact that they were not thankful. This led to all kinds of perversions in religion and sex in a futile effort to find happiness without God. Many are seeking to do the same thing today, but they are failing as men always have. Man's only hope for happiness is in a thankful relationship to God, and in a finding of His purpose through Christ. William Law asked, "Who was the greatest saint in the world?" Then he answers, "It is not he who prays most or fasts most; it is not he who gives most alms, or is most eminent for temperance, chastity, or justice; but it is he who is always thankful to God, who receives everything as an instance of God's goodness and has a heart always ready to praise God for it.

David was far from a perfect man. He was, in fact, notorious for his failures, and yet he is called the man after God's own heart. It is hard to avoid the conclusion as we read the Psalms that the redeeming factor in his life that lifted him so close to God was his grateful heart. Praise flows unceasingly from his lips and heart. He competes with the angels of heaven who praise God night and day. David had more than his share of trials, but he never ceased to praise God. From youth to old age his theme was praise. Whichever way he looked on the path of time he saw the providence of God at work. He would agree with the poem prayer of Will Carlton:

**We thank thee, O Father, for all that is bright,
The gleam of the day and the stars of the night,
The flowers of our youth and the fruits of our prime,
And the blessings that march down the pathway of time.**

We want to follow David on one of his thankful journey's along the pathway of time, for he establishes a pattern of thankfulness that ought to be a characteristic of our lives as Christians. In whatever direction he looks he has a thankful perspective. Let's go with him first into yesterday and his thankfulness for the past.

I. YESTERDAY.

In verse 3 David looks back to a time of crisis when he cried out to God for help and mercy. His heart is filled with praise to God because God heard him and gave him the strength he needed to cope with the trial. There is not a Christian alive who cannot look back to yesterday and praise God for what He has done in their past. If you forget all else, you cannot forget the cross and the fact that God has received you as His child because of your trust in Christ. If yesterday was empty of all but the cross the Christian heart would still look back and be filled to overflowing with thankfulness. But God did not stop with the gift of His Son. When God gives He pours. Showers of blessing have been ours already. The reality of the trials does not diminish the reality of the blessings. They are no less real because they have not been all of the real.

Above a bed in an English hospital is a bronze tablet with these words: "This bed has been endowed by the savings of a poor man who is grateful for an unexpected recovery." Most all of us can look back and recognize that God has spared us from some illness or accident that would have taken us from the stage of history. None of us would be here to praise God today had he not delivered us in some yesterday.

When Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper to keep us ever looking back to the cross, He knew the human tendency to forget and neglect the blessings of the past. That is why he urged us to do this in remembrance of Him. Benjamin Franklin had the same idea in mind when he moved at the Constitutional Convention in 1787: "That henceforth prayers, imploring thee the assistance of Heaven and it's blessings on our deliberations, beheld in the assembly every morning before we proceed to business." In his speech in support of this motion he said the following:

"In this situation of this Assembly, groping as it were, in the dark to find political truth, and scarce able to distinguish when presented to us, how has it happened, sir, that we have not hitherto once thought of humbly applying to the Father of Lights to illuminate our understandings? In the beginning of the contest with Britain, when we were sensible of danger, we had daily prayers in this room for the Divine protection. Our prayers, sir, were heard; and they were graciously answered. To that kind Providence we owe this happy

opportunity of consulting in peace on the means of establishing our future national felicity. And have we now forgotten that powerful Friend? I have lived, sir, a long time; and the longer I live, the more convincing proofs I see of this truth, that God governs in the affairs of men!"

This illustrates the tendency of American people to be like the people of Israel, and to forget God's great blessings of the past. It also illustrates how a man who believes in a God of purpose and providence is filled with thankfulness. Therefore, let us like David look back on yesterday and be grateful. Look back, not like Lot's wife to mourn over what was forsaken to obey God. Look back, not like the Israelites longing for the garlic and onions of Egypt. He who puts his hand to the plow and looks back like this is not fit for the kingdom Jesus said. But let us look back like David to review the blessings of yesterday stored in the attic of our memory, and let us praise God for His providence in guiding us as individuals and as a nation. David was not one to live in the past, however, and think that all the good days are the good old days. He is grateful for God's continuous providence, and so in verse 7 he expresses his thanks for the present.

II. TODAY.

His today is not all filled with sunshine and roses, but he is assured of God's presence and protection. Today is always the most variable part of our lives. The present is in a constant state of change. In just a few moments everything can be altered, but the Christian knows that God never ceases to work toward His purpose, even in the troubles of today to prepare for a better tomorrow. Consider the experience of the Pilgrims. The story is well known of their suffering, and of the many who died the first winter, but less is known of how God was providently working in their troubled today to prepare for a bright tomorrow.

Squanto was an Indian boy who had been carried away to England in 1605 by the exploring party of Captain George Weymouth. Squanto returned to Plymouth in 1614, but he was kidnapped along with 20 others from his tribe and was sold as a slave in Spain. He came under the care of monks who instructed him in the Christian faith. He eventually made his way to England and then back to Plymouth just 6 months before the Pilgrims arrived. He found that his whole tribe has perished in a plague of smallpox, and he was the only survivor. When the Pilgrims came he joined them and never left them, and his presence was a blessing beyond calculation.

Squanto knew the Indians and the ways of this country. He taught the Pilgrims how to build fish traps, snare animals, and how to plant and fertilize corn. He served as their interpreter and adviser in all their relations with the Indians. By his help peace was maintained for over 50 years. God was working every day in their lives, even in the midst of all their trials. Jesus said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." He never promised escape from trials, but He promised His presence and power to endure and conquer. A pastor in East Germany under the communists said, "The pressure is always on. We never know what to expect, but we thank God for His presence in every situation." This is true for every child of God, for we can thank God for yesterday, and also for today, and then go on to

the next step as well.

III. TOMORROW. v. 8

David ends on a high note of blessed assurance. He says, "The Lord will fulfill His purpose for me." God's faithfulness and steadfast love endures forever. What He has begun He will complete. This assurance of God's fulfilling His ultimate purpose for us is the greatest cause for thanksgiving. The highest happiness we can experience is in the knowledge that our lives have ultimate and eternal meaning. Christian thankfulness breaks the time barrier and reaches out into tomorrow to praise God for what is yet to come. It is the hope of tomorrow that gives meaning to the blessings of the past and present. If these were ends in themselves there would be no ultimate purpose to life.

In William Saroyan's play *The Time Of Your Life*, Joe is a bored but rich young loafer who was asked why he likes to lay around and drink. This was his reply: "Everyday has 24 hours...out of the 24 hours at least 23 and a half are, my God, I don't know why-dull, dead, boring, empty, and murderous. Minutes on the clock, not time of living, but spent in waiting, and the more you wait, the less there is to wait for. That goes on for days and days and weeks and months and years, and years, and the first thing you know all the years are dead. All the minutes are dead. You yourself are dead."

This is the purposeless, meaningless tomorrow that drives so many into a foolish and wasteful use of life today. But the Christian has no part in this pessimism. Thank God for tomorrow echoes through the pages of Scripture. God has a purpose for each of us, and He will accomplish it if we put Christ first, and make Him the center of our lives.

The work which His goodness began,
The arm of His strength will complete;
His promise is yea and amen,
And never was forfeited yet.

As Pilgrims with a purpose we march forward with praise on our lips and a song in our hearts, for our Lord is the unchanging Christ who is the same yesterday, today and forever. His promise, His presence, His providence, and His protection and provision will be as sure tomorrow as they were yesterday and are today. It seems almost too good to be true, and so it was even for David, for he ends with the prayer, "Forsake not the work of Thine own hands." This is an admission of his unworthiness to be the object of such steadfast love. I summed up David's whole attitude in this poem:

Thank God for yesterday when in need I cried,
And he heard my prayer, and gave me strength inside.
Thank God for today whether skies be dark or clear,
For I am confident that Christ my Lord is near.
Thank God for tomorrow however rough and steep the hill.
I'll climb in full assurance the Lord his purpose will fulfill.
Thank God for all these days
When we can in grateful praise

**Say thank you Lord in joy your sorrow,
For yesterday, today, tomorrow.**

May God grant each of us the blessing of having such a thankful perspective.

4. NEGATIVE THANKSGIVING Based on Psa. 30:1-12

Sometimes we get so wrapped up in being occupied with what happens that we forget that there is so much to be thankful for because of what doesn't happen. For example: Peter Marshall died of a heart attack as a middle aged man with great potential ahead of him as Chaplain of the Senate and popular Washington pastor. It was a tragedy, and Catherine Marshall has written much about the horrible grief and agony of adjustment, but she has also written about the marvelous blessing of what did not happen to Peter Marshall. This puts even the tragedy into a new light.

As a young man he was taking a short cut one dark night through unfamiliar territory. He did not realize how dark it was. He suddenly heard someone call his name. He stopped and took a few more steps, and then he heard it again. He stopped completely still and tried to peer into the darkness. It was so scary, for he could not see anything. He fell to his knees and began to feel around him, and to his shock he discovered that he was right on the brink of an abandoned stone quarry. One more step and he would have plummeted to his death. There was never a doubt in his mind that God had spoken and spared his life. By grace all that he did for the rest of his life was made possible. Later a car killed a friend he was walking with, but it missed him. He was spared again. Another time a plane crashed that he had missed, and a boat caught on fire 10 miles out to sea, and he was again spared.

The point is that though he died so young, he didn't die so much younger, which he easily could have done. He lived long enough by the grace of God so that his early death was a shock and a loss to the whole Christian world. His life has had one of the greatest impacts on America than that of any preacher in this century. And it was all because of what did not happen. It makes me think again of the book of Ruth where, if Elimelech would have died sooner, Naomi would never have been in Moab to meet Ruth. If her sons would have died sooner she never would have been Ruth's mother-in-law, and all of the influence of Naomi and Ruth on history would never have been.

It was what did not happen that made possible all that did happen. We need to balance out life and its problems by looking at what did not happen as well as what did. It is the non-events that help us see the happenings from a broader perspective. They add light to the darkness, and give meaning to what otherwise may seem senseless. In almost every negative event of life you can find something that did not happen that enables you to have a basis for thanksgiving.

Your life and mine only have meaning right now because of what did not happen. It is not likely any of us would be alive today had certain things happened in the past that did not.

One of our members told of an event in his younger years where he was working and a man pulled a large knife on him and threatened him. The adrenaline poured into his body and he was so angry that he grabbed a cleaver and so frightened the man that he fled at such a pace that he didn't even open the screen door but went right through it. That story could have had a different ending with him on the floor stabbed to death. But that did not happen, and that non-happening is the basis for his great thanksgiving.

We all have stories that could, with just slight changes in the timing, have led us to an early grave. We are only here because of many things that never happened. That is what David is thanking God for in verse 3 of Psa. 30. "O Lord, you brought me up from the grave; you spared me from going down into the pit." David was alive and well, and he was praising God because of what did not happen. This theme of negative thankfulness runs all through this Psalm. In verse 1 David exalts God for what God did not let happen. One of David's great fears never materialized. He dreaded to have his enemies gloat over him, but he thanks God that it never happened. He not only didn't die physically, but he didn't die psychologically or emotionally. I can just imagine David saying, "If that ever happened to me I would just die." But it didn't happen, and he is grateful for that which never was.

Count your blessings we say, and rightly so, but when you are done with this list you have not scratched the surface of all you have for which to be thankful. The list of things that are blessings because they never happened is near infinite. Paul gives us a couple of examples of negative thanksgiving. In Rom. 14:6 he describes to Christians who are thankful for opposite things. He says, "He who eats meat, eats to the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who abstains, does so to the Lord and gives thanks." One is thankful he eats meat, and the other is thankful he does not. Both are thankful they are not like the other one.

Have you ever said that I am thankful I am not like so and so? That is legitimate, but it is also legitimate if they are thankful they are not like you. There are endless numbers of things that make people different, and we can be grateful for these differences we do not possess. I can be thankful I am not as tall as Wilt Chamberlain, or as short as Micky Rooney. But the can be equally grateful they are not as commonplace as I am. This life has endless non-realities and non-events for which we can be thankful.

Paul looked at the mess in the Corinthian church and all of the division that had come over personality clashes within the church, and he writes in I Cor. 1:14-15, "I am thankful that I did not baptize any of you except Crispus and Gaius, so no one can say that you are baptized into my name." Imagine that! Paul is being thankful for what never happened, even though it would seem to be a positive thing if it had happened. What if he had baptized a hundred members of that church? It sounds like something he could have been proud of, but instead he is grateful that it never happened, for this non-happening prevented his success being used for the negative purpose of raising up a competitive cult in his name.

This opens endless doors of potential gratitude. How many wonderful things have never happened to you for which you ought to be grateful? What if my father was a millionaire and I would have inherited it and became a rich playboy with no thought of God, but totally devoted to self-pleasure? I would have missed the love of Christ and service for His

kingdom, and the precious hope of eternal life in the family of God. Not only is life filled with endless negatives that never happened, but it is filled with endless positives and successes that never happened that could have led us to miss God's best. Thank God for all the burdens and all the blessings that never happened that could have been enemies of my best self. If we only knew, we could even thank God for prayers that were never answered.

Paul could look back and say that had I been more successful I could have baptized many more people, but thank God that never happened, for in the long run less was better, and failure was my success. If Christians were successful in everything they did, they would never move on to other challenges God wants them to tackle. That is why even non-success and non-happening of good things can be a reason for thanksgiving. What didn't happen was even a basis for the thanksgiving of Christ. He prayed in Luke 10:21, "I thank you Father, Lord of heaven and earth because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children."

Jesus was grateful that God did not operate on the same level as the world. He did not give priority to those with power and learning, but rather to the innocent and helpless. In other words, thank God that the Christmas story was not given to the king or high priest, but to the lowly shepherds. What God does not do in history is almost as marvelous as what He does do. This means that there is no end of things that never happen for which we can be thankful. Jesus was not born in a palace. He never joined the ranks of the official religious leaders of Israel. He never became a legalist like the Pharisees. He never fell for the lures of Lucifer. He never gave up on His disciples. He never took the easy way out when He faced the cross. The things that never happened in the life of Jesus are the foundation for all our thanksgiving.

Life is not only full of things for which to give thanks, but it is also empty of things for which to give thanks. Everyone has their problems, but if you add up all the problems, trials, and diseases, and then count how many of them you don't have you will be overwhelmed by the multitude of non-happenings for which you ought to be grateful. Richard Armor gives a trivial example that illustrates just how near infinite the realm of negative thanksgiving can be.

"Make yourself at home," I'm urged
By hosts when I'm a guest,
But I am very careful not
To do as they suggest.

For if I did, I'd take off coat
And tie and also shoes,
And put my feet up on a chair
And take a little nooze.

And then I'd turn the TV on
To something they'd find hateful....
No, I won't make myself at home-
For which they should be grateful."

Author Unknown

Thank God for all the people who do not take you literally and follow through on your offer to make themselves at home. The point is, from the trivial to the tremendous we have an endless resource of thanksgiving in the realm of the negative, which are the things that are not, were not, and never will be. These negatives of life are not all absolutely non-events, however. Sometimes they are only relatively so, and so we want to look at the 2 categories of non-happenings that David deals with in Psa. 30.

I. NEGATIVES THAT ARE PREVENTED.

President McKinley developed a custom of always wearing a pink carnation in his buttonhole. His wife raised them at the White House. Wherever he traveled he always gave his carnation to the engineer of the train. He would walk up to the engineer and lift the pink flower into the grimy hands of the engineer and say, "I sincerely thank you for your skill and my safety." He was being thankful for what was prevented. Every time we take a trip and get back safely we can be thankful for what was prevented. This of course is a major part of David's thanksgiving. He was spared from disgrace and humiliation, and from fatal disease. These evils never happened because they were prevented.

This always has been, and always will be, the best kind of negative non-event. The next best is the second category we will be looking at, which is negatives that do happen but do not last. For example, the getting sick but then being healed. It is better to prevent the sickness, for you can't beat staying well, but it is also a great second best to be healed and restored to health when you do get sick. Prevention is total non-happening of the negative, and this is the best source for gratitude. We can learn from suffering, even as Jesus did, but thank God we do not have to learn everything by the negative of suffering. God prevented Jesus from having to learn by being born with handicaps. He was prevented from having to endure diseases of all kinds. He was prevented from being made a slave, or of having to grow up as an orphan. Jesus missed a multitude of negatives, and so it is with all of us.

Preventative medicine alone has blest most of our lives. Many of us escaped the diseases that killed children by the thousands because we were given shots. Thank God for the evils and sufferings that never happened because they are prevented. Prevention does not make the headlines, for non-events do not make news, but the fact is, the non-events of life are some of the best news. It would be a marvelous headline that would say, "Fifteen million babies do not have polio this year." We need to be reminded of all the evils that have been prevented to have a totally thankful perspective. The prevention of one evil can lead to the prevention of other evils, and so one non-event can lead to another non-event.

For example: "In 1874 a young Texas doctor named John Burke treated a patient suffering from typhoid fever. The patient recovered and, upon leaving, promised the doctor that he would some day repay him. After a few years the doctor moved to another town. One day when walking to his office, he noticed a group of horsemen heading towards the bank. He realized that they were robbers and that the leader was his former patient. After a few minutes of pleading by the doctor that he and the entire town would suffer if the men carried out their plan. The band of men rode out of town on their leader's orders. With this, the patient had repaid his long-overdue debt. The bandit leader was none other than Frank James, brother of the notorious outlaw Jesse James." Because Frank James didn't

die a bank robbery didn't happen. The prevention of his death led to gratitude that prevented the robbery. Every evil prevented leads to, who knows, how many other evils that never happen?

There is no way to calculate how many things are not happening every day in our lives, and in our world, because they are prevented. You can focus on the problems that were not prevented and get discouraged, or you can begin to count that innumerable list of burdens you did not have to carry, and see that negative thanksgiving becomes a basis for rejoicing even when all is not well. We must be constantly aware of just how little we really know about the future. We jump to conclusions all the time because we assume that we know that certain non-events will be destructive to our future.

Naomi had a plan. She was going to get Ruth to go back to Moab, and she would be free of all responsibility. She failed to achieve her goal, however, and Ruth refused to go back. What she longed for did not happen, but this non-event, the thing she sought for, was the best thing that never happened to Naomi. Had it happened she and Ruth would have separated and gone into oblivion and played no roll in God's plan. It was this non-event that led to her greatest success. Thank God for things that do not happen. Naomi and Ruth had a future filled with thankfulness because God prevented Naomi from doing things in her grief that would have defeated His best for them both.

The point is, you do not know which is best for you. Is it failure or success? So when the dream you have does not happen, and the goal you set does not materialize, do not give up hope, for the non-happening may yet be the basis for your thanksgiving. Give God time to show you how even the negatives of life can prevent you from missing the positives that He has waiting for you. Both good things and bad things that do not happen can be the best things that never happened to you.

Lavonne and I have thanked God so many times for one of the best things that never happened to me. Had we gotten the service we wanted at a drive in one summer night my friends and I might never have gotten impatient and gone to another town down the road, and I never would have met Lavonne. It was a negative situation that caused it to happen. What we wanted to happen was not happening, but because of that non-happening one of the best things that ever happened to me happened. It was a non-event that prevented me from missing a major event. Thank God for those things which never happened. Next we look at-

II. NEGATIVES THAT ARE PASSING.

David avoided many of the sorrows of life, and much evil was prevented in his life for which he was deeply thankful. But the fact is, it is only in paradise that all evil is prevented, and so David had his share of life's sorrows. He experienced sickness of body and sickness of mind. He had fear and depression, and many tears over life's problems. He experienced sickness of soul because of sin and separation from God. He acknowledges all of these in Psa. 30. Yet none of these negatives stops this from being a Psalm of thanksgiving. It is because all of these negatives are merely temporary, and they all pass away, and they leave only the positives as permanent.

In other words, what does not happen is the negatives of life stay and hang on forever. They come and they go. They are no nomads that pack up and move on. That they visit us at all is a pain, but that they don't stay is our great pleasure. They happen, but they do not happen permanently, and their non-endurance is ground for gratitude. They passed into the realm of non-being. For the Christian all negatives will eventually pass into this realm.

I have a slight crack in one of my fillings, and every once in awhile I chew something hard and I put pressure on that crack and end up with a toothache. It hurts bad enough so that I feel like I'm in for some trouble, but then it ceases to hurt and I rejoice that it was only a passing pain. It is easy to endure that which is only temporary. It is so wonderful when it goes away that I am motivated to thank God for that which does not happen, which is the continued and persistent pain.

I've read of an ocean steamer which decades ago was dashed against the rocks of Newfoundland. Most all of the passengers lost their lives. A telegram came to a home in Detroit announcing the drowning of a young man of that household. It was a sad day, and loved ones entered the darkness of grief. A few hours later another telegram came explaining that the young man had been found. He had survived after all, and that family framed and hung that second telegram on their wall as a reminder of the glorious good news of what had not happened. Their sorrow was quickly over, for the negative was merely passing. In this case the bad news was not real, but even when it is real it can be a merely passing negative.

Look at the cross. Jesus really did die, and the disciples were plunged to the depths of the pit of sorrow. Nevertheless, in only a few days they were rejoicing in the risen Christ, for the worst that Satan and all the powers of hell could do was only temporary. It was real, but evil is only a passing reality. That which is forever is the good, the true, and the beautiful. That is why David ends this Psalm on the high note of perpetual praise. "O Lord my God I will give you thanks forever." Thank God that thanksgiving will never end. Here is something that will never happen, and that is the cessation of thanksgiving, and for this eternal non-event we will be eternally grateful.

Forever and forever he will thank God that none of his sorrows and sufferings follow him into the presence of God. All evil will cease to happen, and that eternal non-happening of evil will be added to the eternal happenings of God's love and grace so that David and all God's children will have an infinite supply of reasons for eternal thankfulness. All the former things will pass away says the New Testament, and for all eternity we will enjoy the non-happening of sin and sorrow, and all the other consequences of man's fall. Thank God that the worst that evil can throw at us is passing. Weeping may remain for a night, but joy comes in the morning.

Abraham Lincoln had more than his fare share of life's trials. At age 7 he and his family were evicted and suffered humiliation. At 9 his mother died. At age 26 his partner in business died leaving him saddled with great debt. At 28 he was rejected by the girl he proposed to. When he did marry he lost his 4 year old son in death. He lost numerous elections and came near a mental breakdown in battles with depression. Yet he became the 16th president of the United States, and one of history's most thankful leaders, and one for

whom much thanks is given. Thank God for what didn't happen in this great man's life. He didn't give up and stop the onward fight for what was just and right. That never happened, and the result is we forget all of the passing problems he had to endure. We remember him for the good that endures because of him.

David had to endure the judgment of God on his sin, but even this was passing, but God's mercies on him were new every morning. Mercy is what God does not do to us that we deserve. We deserve judgement, but God does not deal with us as we deserve, or reward us according to our iniquities. In mercy He provides a way of escape that we might experience His grace forever. Because of God's mercy there is no end to the things that never happen that if they did it would be a curse. But they do not happen because of God's mercy. Count your many blessings, but also count your many non-cursing that you deserve but never get because of God's mercy.

"When all thy mercies, O my God,
My rising soul surveys,
Transported with the view,
I'm lost in wonder, love and praise."

This was David's song, and if we see life whole and see the infinite realm of the non-existent and non-happenings of life, we too will have a song of praise and a heart of gratitude regardless of life's troubles and trials. We will be getting a glimpse into that infinite treasure of negative thanksgiving.

5. THANKSGIVING FOCUS Based on Psa. 103:1-14

You will, no doubt, think me strange for saying it, but I am thankful for my ignorance. It gives me so much to be thankful for. My vast ocean of ignorance is my playground where I can fish for new insights, and I can dive for the sunken treasure of golden truths that lay hidden in God's Word. Paul said, "Now I know in part and I see through a glass darkly." That is why even when he was in prison he wrote, "Bring me the books and the parchments for I must be to my dying day growing in my knowing of what God has revealed." Paul was ever pressing on, for there is never an end to discovery in God's Word.

The continents have all been discovered. The oceans and seas have all been discovered. Even the planets have all been discovered. But there will never come a day in history when it will ever be said that the exploration of God's Word has ceased, for all truth and wisdom have been discovered. Because God is infinite, discovery is eternal, and that is one of things I am most grateful for, for I desire to make discoveries forever. This is not to say that this should also be your desire. The palmist David says in verse 5, "He satisfies my desires with good things." Your desires may be altogether different. It may be torture for you to do research and seek to discover new insights. That is okay, for God gave the body many members with a variety of gifts and interests. What satisfies my desires may not do so for you. It is whatever renews our youth like the eagles that satisfies our particular desires.

In other words, you are most thankful to God for those things that make you feel young and alive again. Those things that fill you with energy and enthusiasm are the real high of thankfulness, and they are the things that renew your spirit. What do you anticipate doing when you are free to make the choice of how you use your time? That is a life renewing activity, and when you want to be filled with the spirit of thanksgiving think of that desire that is satisfied.

This will vary because all of us have many things in common, but we thank God for those specific desires that make you soar with the eagles. These are the ones you need to focus on to be filled with gratitude. This Psalm is loaded with examples that fit all of us at various times in our lives. In verse 2 he says to his soul, "Forget not all his benefits." We are not likely to forget those things that give us an eagle high, but there are many other things that we can forget if we do not give effort to remember them. The poet mixes in the trivial and the tremendous to recall to our memory that we have endless reasons to be thankful.

**Thank you, God, for a hundred things-
For the flower that blooms, for the bird that sings,
For the sun that shines,
And the rain that drops,
For ice cream and raisins and lollipops.**

**Thank you God for the gift of time-
For the clocks that tick, and the bells that chime,
For days gone by,
And future cheers,
For seasons, and moments, for hours and years.**

**Thanks for the people who give life pizzazz-
For folks who play sports, those who act and play jazz,
For friends and for families,
For folks of all races,
For hands that give help and for bright smiling faces.**

**Thanks for the planet you give as our home-
For the sky with its clouds, for the oceans' white foam,
For the creatures and critters,
The lakes, falls and fountains,
For hills and for valleys, for canyons and mountains.**

**Thank you, God, for the gift of your Son-
For the love Jesus shared, for the battle He won
Over death, for the promise,
That He would be near
To lead and to guide and to hold us so dear.**

**Thank you, God, for a hundred things-
For autumn and pumpkins, for dragonfly wings,**

**For Thanksgiving dinners,
For seashores and shore,
For a hundred things, and a thousand things more.**

Author unknown

The poet has captured the idea of this Psalm by ranging all the way from the God centered level of grace, forgiveness and salvation to the more self-centered level of personal desires. The point is, the reasons for thanksgiving is endless. Variety is the spice of life because God is the God of variety, and He has given so many benefits that there is no way to become overly thankful. Whoever heard of someone say of another, "He is just too thankful, or she is a fanatic for being so grateful?"

When President George Washington proclaimed the first Thanksgiving in 1789 he stressed this very issue of the variety of God's blessing. This is what he proclaimed: "Whereas it is the duty of all nations to acknowledge the providence of Almighty God, to obey His will, to be grateful for His benefits, and humbly implore His protection, aid and favors....Now, therefore, I do recommend assign Thursday, the 26th day of November next, to be devoted by the people of these states to the service of that great and glorious Being, who is the Beneficent Author of all the good that was, that is, or that will be; that we may then all unite in rendering unto Him our sincere and humble thanks for His kind care and protection of the people of this country, and for all the great and various favors which He has been pleased to confer upon us."

David begins this great praise Psalm by talking to himself. He is giving his inner man a pep talk on praising the Lord. It can be a good thing to talk to yourself, for the fact of life is that you are more likely to listen to what you tell yourself than to what others tell you. The most effective form of communication is that which goes from your mind to your body. Tell yourself to praise the Lord and you will do it. Tell yourself not to forget the Lord's benefits and you won't. You listen to yourself, and so we need to tell ourselves often to be thankful. If you quit telling yourself, you will become less and less thankful.

David starts this Psalm by telling himself to praise the Lord, and he ends it by telling himself to do it again. If we would tell ourselves as we begin the day to praise the Lord and not forget all His benefits, and if we would end the day by doing the same, we would be different people. We would be grateful people, and grateful people are the happiest people.

David deals with major negative issues in this song of praise. He stresses the forgiveness of all his sins, and the healing of all his diseases. Everyone of us is here only because God did not judge us for our sins. We have all sinned, but we are not dead because God has forgiven us in Christ. There is not one of us who is alive who could not have died with some disease we have had. If we had the time to compile the list, we would be able to reveal an amazing example of the providence of God right in this room. There are many disease that some of us have had that have killed others, but we are still alive. We have been redeemed from the pit of death by the grace of God. Everyday we live we can thank God for the gift of life.

Spiritual and physical healing are the two major themes of David's gratitude. In the midst of these gigantic reasons for being thankful he slips in a sort of generic reason in verse

5. He says, "He satisfies my desires with good things." The terms here-desires and good things-are very general. They cover all the varied things that each of us may be thankful for that mean little or nothing to others. Each of our unique and trivial reasons to be grateful are covered by the Hebrew word used here. The word is *adi*, and it refers to any desirable thing. It is most often used in the Bible to refer to ornaments. For example, in Jer. 2:32 we read, "Does a maiden forget her jewelry, a bride her wedding ornaments?" Ornaments is the same word David uses here for desires. A bride loves her accessories that beautify her and make her feel good about herself. They are the basis for a thankful heart, even though they may seem trivial to us.

This word refers 11 times to the ornaments of both men and women. My tie is an ornament. If I am a person that is growing in my awareness of things to be thankful for, I will be thankful for my tie. I confess I do not ever remember thanking God for any of my ties. I thank Lavonne for she is the one who buys most of them for me. But I do enjoy an attractive tie, and it does satisfy a desire. It is one of the positive good things in my life, but I have never done what David does here and include gratitude for my tie in the same prayer where I thank God for forgiveness, healing, and redemption.

David links the trivial with the tremendous, and he teaches us a lesson on thanksgiving that most of us have not yet learned very well. The lesson is this: The major things of life cannot sustain a spirit of thanksgiving without the aid of the minor things of life for which we are to be grateful. If all you can be thankful for is forgiveness, healing and salvation, you will grow cold in your thanksgiving because the emotions become weaker and weaker. You are not healed everyday, so your gratitude for your recovery of last year is weakened by time. Even your thanks for being saved grows weaker, and becomes a mere habit after thousands of times.

That is why we need the trivial to keep our thanksgiving fresh. What good thing in your life is currently making you grateful? Is it a new watch, a new video game, a new book, a different responsibility at work, or a new recipe? You can go on endlessly looking at all kinds of things and experiences that are adding some excitement to your emotions. Use these relatively trivial aspects of life as a basis for your daily songs of praise. God loves to be thanked for the little things. The poet put it this way:

Thank you God, for the little things
That often come our way,
The things we take for granted
But don't mention when we pray.
The unexpected courtesy, the thoughtful kindly deed.
A hand reached out to help us
In time of sudden need. Oh, make us more aware, dear God,
Of little daily graces
That come to us with "Sweet surprise"
From never-dreamed of places.

Burbank Gardens Newsletter.

The value of this focus on the little things of life is twofold. It enables us to do what David

urges his soul to do in verse 2. It enables us to forget not all his benefits, which includes the trivial as well as the tremendous. This will make us more grateful people, and the little things will open our hearts anew to the major things of forgiveness, healing, and salvation.

The second thing it will do is open us to the awareness that God uses little things to accomplish big things. Little acts of kindness that are a trivial part of life can lead people into the kingdom of God. Get a person to be grateful for some trivial act like washing their windshield and this can lead them to one day praising God for forgiveness, healing and salvation. The road to heaven for many starts with the first step motivated by a trivial act of kindness.

Steve Sjogren in Conspiracy of Kindness tells of some of his youth group who volunteered to shine shoes free in downtown Cincinnati. A young man named Paul who was a scary looking guy with his black leather clothes and black boots was amazed that Christians would polish his black boots free just to demonstrate the love of God. He was a tough guy and a criminal, but this act of kindness touched the gratitude button in his mind, and he came to the church. Several months later he asked Jesus to enter his life and he became a Christian. He only got to the major league of thanking God for salvation because someone got him started in the minor league of thanking God for a free shoeshine.

The major mistake Christians have made in evangelism is thinking that people leap to the level of salvation in one huge effort. Studies show that most people get to the decision to trust Christ as Savior by a series of small steps that prepare them for the final step. The trivial becomes the foundation for the tremendous, and the more we are aware of this the more we will be thankful for the trivial, and the more we will practice trivial kindness.

Many years ago a skid row bum found a dollar bill, and he was excited about going to the bar and treating some friends to a drink. But on the way he passed a sporting goods store and saw a bat in the window. It brought back memories of his youth when he longed to play ball but had no bat. Seeing the price for the bat was just a dollar, he went in and bought it. He took it to the local orphanage. He put it by the door, rang the bell, and ran away. The keeper of the orphanage found the bat and decided to make it a Christmas present to an awkward gangly boy who loved to play ball but had no bat. That boy who benefited by the trivial act of kindness from a bum was none other than Babe Ruth.

The point is, you never know how big an impact will be made in another person's life by some little act of kindness. The key to getting any person to move in the direction of seeking God's forgiveness and redemption is by awakening in them some degree of thankfulness. When people are unthankful they are in a state of sinful darkness where they cannot even see their need for God's grace and forgiveness. The unthankful heart is among the most deadly of sins. In Rom. 1:21 Paul says that the whole world of lost men is under the wrath of God because, "For although they knew God, they neither glorified Him as God nor gave thanks to Him." In II Tim. 3:2 he describes the terrible times of the last days, and he says that people will be unthankful.

The deadly characteristic of lost people from the beginning of history to the end of it is an unthankful heart. The best way to get such people to move in God's direction is to give

them something to be thankful for that somehow connected with the love of God. The whole idea behind the conspiracy of kindness is to do acts of kindness that compel people to recognize that God is love, and that they ought to be thankful to Him.

Pastor Sjogren tells of one Friday evening before Labor Day when the rush hour traffic was backed up for a mile, and the temperature was 95 degrees. He got ten people to quickly ice down 400 soft drinks and set up a sign. The sign said free drinks ahead. People were amazed when they came to that spot, and they said we are giving away free soft drinks to show people God's love in a practical way. People would ask why, and they would reply, "Just because God loves you." All 400 drinks were gone, and they had talked with 600 people. Soft drinks do not save anybody, but they can give people a spark of thankfulness for this trivial act of kindness, and this spark can lead them to seek for more evidence that God loves them. They can become open to hear the good news of the tremendous kindness of God in giving them a Savior.

The point is, if you can get people to be thankful for trifles, there is hope that they will move on in the direction that leads to the tremendous. Any act of kindness can lead to people becoming thankful for what God has given them in Christ. This same principle operates within the kingdom of God with God's own people. Get Christians to be thankful for all sorts of trivial benefits and they will be in a praise mood making them grateful for all the wonders of God's grace. John R. Rice, one of the greatest evangelists of the 20th century, wrote, "Our first five-room house didn't have carpet on the floor. We had linoleum. But when Gerri and I bought our second home it was carpeted. I had never lived in a home with carpet. So I would take off my shoes and walk barefoot. I thought, 'That's the most wonderful thing in the world: I don't deserve this.' I would lie down on that carpet, pull the loops up, run my finger down the loop and thank God for each loop in the carpet. I really felt gratitude in my heart for such luxury."

He illustrates that when the trivial leads you to praise God it is no longer trivial. The good things of life may not be the main things, but they are more like the fringe benefits, but being grateful for them will make you more grateful for the major gifts of God in Christ. A major cause for Christians losing their spirit of gratitude is their focus on big things they don't have rather than little things they do have. Check your focus and ask, are you feeling bad because of the bigger house you don't have rather than being grateful for the smaller one you do have? Are you down because of the bigger car you don't have than up about the one you do have? Apply this all areas of life and you discover that the primary cause for every thankless thought in your head is due to a focus on what is not rather than what is.

You need to talk to your soul like David does, and tell it not to forget all God's benefits. Tell it to focus on desires that are being met with good things. Dr. Criswell, who was pastor of the First Baptist Church of Dallas for several decades, tells of a family who had a very strange thing happen to them. Oil was found on the property of people all around them, but none was found on their land. Everyone was becoming rich but them. It was a trial, but they focused on what they had and not on what they didn't have. Years later they were still reaping the benefits of this focus.

All of their neighbors moved into the city and bought big homes, new cars, and sent their

kids to the finest schools. They joined country clubs and changed their life style completely. One by one their marriages failed, their kids rebelled, and none of them kept going to church on a regular basis. They were able to turn a blessing into a curse. The father of the family that didn't get rich said to Dr. Criswell, "Pastor, God did us a big favor by not putting oil on our land. We are all still together and love each other like never before. We thank Him everyday for giving us what is important and protecting us from the things that aren't." Here was a grateful Christian family that could have become bitter and out of fellowship with God had they focused on the big things that didn't happen rather than the precious little things that did.

When you find yourself being down and not being grateful for life, talk to yourself like David does in this Psalm. Remind your soul not to forget what already is, for all of us have much to praise God for if we have this biblical thanksgiving focus.

6. TOP LEVEL THANKSGIVING Based on Psa. 118:1-5

Leslie Weatherhead tells the story of the 5 year old boy use to listen to the radio even though he could not understand anything but the children's programs. He observed that his parents listened every day to what was called the news. He could make nothing of that. One Sunday morning he went into his mother's bedroom where the radio had been turned low so as not to disturb the baby. Assuming it was the news, he listened and heard a word he recognized. The speaker kept using the word God. He took off down the stairs to the kitchen where his grandmother was preparing a meal, and he said, "Granny, you had better turn on the radio. It's the news, but today it's about God." If ever the world needed to hear news about God, it is today. God news is good news, for God is good and the source of all that leads to thanksgiving.

If we live in a world of diminishing gratitude, it is because we live in a world retreating from God. Gamaliel Bradford expressed the minds of millions of modern materialists who suspect that they have been short changed in their trading of God for gold. He wrote,

Of old our father's God was real,
Something they almost saw,
Which kept them to a stern ideal,
And scourged them into awe.
I sometimes wish that God were back
In this dark world and wide;
For though some virtues He might lack,
He had His pleasant side.

Had the poet taken some time to study the nature of God he would find that the only reason God had an unpleasant side, and must be a God of judgment, is because of men like himself who push God out onto the fringes of life, and put idols in the center. The modern American is in danger of forgetting his heritage, and like the pagans of old, worshipping the

creature rather than the creator. Years ago a Chinese delegate to a summer conference in America told of how an Indian, Chinese and American would react to seeing Niagara Falls for the first time. The Indian would become deeply meditative, his mystic soul being stirred to commune with the infinite spirit. The Chinese with his ingrained sense of family solidarity would wish his family could be there to enjoy it with him. The American, however, would begin immediately to figure out how much horsepower was going to waste per minute.

This is an exaggeration, but one based on the obvious fact that we as a people are becoming so obsessed with the means of living that we are losing sight of the meaning of living. G. K. Chesterton said that future generations will discover how miserable we were by our daily reminder to each other that we ought to be happy. If we were a people basically happy we would not need constant exhortations to be happy. The fact that every Thanksgiving we sigh and say we really should be more grateful for all we have reveals how ungrateful we are. This does not mean that most people do not appreciate having the good things they have. It is just that it is hard to get excited about it. Turkey and all the trimmings might turn you on temporarily, but it doesn't last. That is the problem with materialism and thankfulness on the level of getting good things and pleasure.

Thanksgiving in the Bible is on the level where it has lasting meaning. In Psa. 118 the author expresses thanks for many things, but notice how he begins and ends this song of gratitude. He begins and ends with God. Only when God is the alpha and omega of our thanks do we experience thanksgiving on the biblical level, which is the top level. We tend to center our thanksgiving around our blessings rather than around the Blessor, and so we lose much of the emotion and joy of a heart filled with lasting gratitude. We need to lift our eyes to God and His goodness, and not glue them on the gifts. We must, with the Psalmist, gaze on God's being first, and then on His blessings.

The fire of gratitude can only be kept burning bright by feeding it with the fuel that comes directly from God's own nature. Those who rely on the fuel they can produce are from their own nature soon become cold and ungrateful. Give thanks to God for He is good, says the Psalmist. God is good; that is the basis for everlasting praise, and not the fact that you have got everything you need and much beside. Start with God. "Give thanks and praise to God above, For everlasting is His love, Praise Him ye saints, your Savior praise, Forever good in all His ways." The first thing this great hymn of gratitude makes clear is-

I. THE BASIS OF THANKSGIVING.

It is the goodness of God. Thanksgiving based on anything less is inadequate and sub-Christian. If you start out by saying I am thankful because I am healthy, tomorrow you may be sick, and you have lost the basis for your thankfulness. If you say I am thankful because I am well off financially, a tragedy could change that, and your basis for gratitude would be gone. Everything you build on short of the goodness of God is sinking sand. It alone is the solid unchanging constant, and the stable rock, which endures forever when all else passes away. The man without God, and the man who has not put his trust in the goodness of God can never know the joy of absolute thankfulness. The gratitude of the unbeliever is always relative and shaky because the basis for it can crumble at any time. Here, however, we have a basis for thanksgiving that never changes, and that is God's

goodness. Whittier wrote,

Yet in the maddening maze of things,
And tossed by storm and flood,
To one fixed trust my spirit clings,
I know that God is good.

It was faith in the unchanging goodness of God that caused martyrs to sing this psalm as they faced death. The Mediaeval Church ordained that this Psalm be read at the bedside of those who were dying. Death for man does not change the goodness of God. It is highly probable that this Psalm was the song sung by Jesus and His disciples just before He went to Gethsemane. It is the last of the songs called the Hallel, which the Jews sang at the Passover. Things in this Psalm refer to Jesus that are very appropriate. Whether He sang it or not, He faced the cross with the assurance that God is good and His steadfast love endures forever.

This hymn of thanks has been precious to the saints all through the ages, but none loved it more than Luther. In his dedication of his translation of this Psalm to the Abbot Frederick of Nuremberg he wrote, "This is my Psalm, my chosen Psalm. I love them all, I love all holy Scriptures, which is my consolation and my life. But this Psalm is nearest my heart, and I have a peculiar right to call it mine. It has saved me from many a pressing danger, from which nor emperor, nor kings, nor sages, nor saints, could have saved me. It is my friend; dearer to me than all the honors and power of the earth..." Luther lived in the realm of top-level thanksgiving, for his trust was not in man, but in the goodness of God.

O praise the Lord, for He is good;
Let all and heaven above,
And all His saints on earth proclaim
His everlasting love.

The Psalmist is so aware that the basis and foundation of all his gratitude is in the goodness and steadfast love of God that he calls upon all to join him in praise. Spurgeon says, "Grateful hearts are greedy of men's tongues, and would monopolize them all for God's glory." First he calls on Israel to join him. Who was ever more vacillating than Israel, and yet time and time again God forgave and restored her to favor because of His steadfast love.

Let Israel now devoutly say that all His ways are pure,
And that the mercy of their God forever does endure.

He calls on the house of Aaron to join him, for as priests they had to enter the presence of God for the people, and they knew it was only by God's goodness and mercy that they were not consumed. Then he calls upon those who fear the Lord, those Gentile proselytes to join the song. They were in darkness, and yet they received the light because God is good and His steadfast love endures forever. All believers have one thing in common, and that is that they are saved solely by the goodness and mercy of God. That is why God's nature must become the basis for all our thanksgiving.

We tend to take the goodness of God too lightly. When a man called Jesus good master,

Jesus said, "Why call me good. God only is good." Jesus was saying that nothing and no one less than God is worthy of the term good. If you wish to call me good, then recognize me as God. Good is a word, which belongs solely to God. Man is only good to the degree that he partakes of the nature of God. We use the term loosely, and so it does not convey the reverence with us, which it had on the lips of Jesus or the Psalmist. In order to be thankful on the top level, and in order to live on the highest level, we must give more thought to the goodness of God. Let me share with you one of the greatest paragraphs ever written on the goodness of God. It is from the pen of that great saint William Law.

"The goodness of God breaking forth into a desire to communicate good was the cause and the beginning of the creation. Hence it follows that to all eternity God can have no thought or intent towards the creature but to communicate good; because He made the creature for this sole end, to receive good. The first motive towards the creature is unchangeable; it takes its rise from God's desire to communicate good, and it is an eternal impossibility that anything can ever come from God as His will and purpose towards the creature but that same love and goodness which first created it; He must always will that to it which He willed at the creation of it. This is the amiable nature of God. He is the Good, the unchangeable, overflowing fountain of good that sends forth nothing but good to all eternity. He is the Love itself, the unmixed, un-measurable Love, doing nothing but from love, giving nothing but gifts of love to everything that He has made; requiring nothing of all His creatures but the spirit and fruits of that love which brought them into being. Oh, how sweet is this contemplation of the height and depth of the riches of Devine Love! With what attraction must it draw every thoughtful man to return love for love to this overflowing fountain of boundless good!"

This is a theme worthy of all the time that can be given to it, but we want to lay one block at least on this foundation before we finish. Let us never forget that we can only climb to the heights of top-level thanksgiving by first of all laying this solid foundation. The basis for true and lasting gratitude is the goodness of God. Only after the Psalmist makes this clear does he go on to write-

II. THE BLESSINGS FOR WHICH HE GIVES THANKS. v. 5

This verse reveals his gratitude for deliverance from distress. The language indicates that he was in a tight spot, but that God heard his prayer and led him into a wide place. He is caught in a crevice and is about to be crushed by the rocks of oppression, but God leads him out into a wide open plain. He is grateful first for God, and secondly for the highest gift God

gives to man, which is the gift of liberty. Freedom is the blessing he is so grateful for. Salvation is another term for freedom. If the Son shall make you free you shall be free indeed. What was salvation for Israel but to be delivered from the bondage of Egypt? All through the Bible salvation is pictured as release from bondage, and escape from the chains of sin and evil. Every time we break away from the pressures of sin we can sing a new song of salvation.

**In my distress I called on God;
In grace He answered me;
Remove my bonds, enlarge my place,
From trouble set me free.**

The greatest liberty comes when we call on the Lord as a sinner in need of forgiveness. This is our exodus and our coming out of the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light. This is when we experience God's goodness at its best. Those who have never put their faith in Christ and followed Him into the promise land of salvation are still in the Egypt of bondage, and they cannot sing the song of thankful deliverance. Top-level thanksgiving depends on deep awareness of the goodness of God, and none can have this awareness until they have the assurance of salvation in Christ. You must experience God's goodness and mercy in being forgiven and set free from sin to have the thankful heart of the Psalmist. Alan Paton in Cry, The Beloved Country writes, "The tragedy is not that things are broken. The tragedy is that they are not mended again." This is the greatest tragedy of life. It is not that men are broken and are in bondage to sin, but that they are not mended, made whole and set free, when God in His goodness has made provision for such healing and liberty.

Even those of us who have been set free from bondage have many trials, and often find ourselves being pushed into a narrow pit. The kind of liberty that keeps us perpetually grateful comes only through constant prayer and victory over the forces of evil.

**In bondage of distress and grief
To God I cried and sought relief.
In wondrous love He heard my plea,
And set my soul at liberty.**

Every day we need to call on the Lord to set us free and keep us on the wide plain of liberty. The facts of life and history reveal that Christians do not always escape from the trials and dangers of life. But the facts also reveal that when believers have their roots grounded in the goodness of God they are always free people. Hugh MacKail, a Scottish preacher who sought to propagate the faith when it was forbidden, was captured in 1666, and was given 4 days to live. As he was led to prison the people wept, but his face was happy, and he cried out, "Good news, good news. I am within 4 days of enjoying the face of Jesus Christ." Here was a man set at liberty, for he knew the good news of God's eternal goodness.

Juliana Hernandez brought the New Testament into Spain where it was forbidden. He was arrested, tried and burned. The stern judge said, "I fear you are throwing yourself into the fire, and for what?" Today school children in Spain read with a thrill the martyr's answer. "For the joy he cried of bringing food to the perishing, water to the thirsty, light to

those who sit in darkness, rest to the weary and heavy laden. Sir, I have counted the cost and I will pay the price willingly." Here was a man who could repeat verse 6 of this Psalm and mean it sincerely. "With the Lord on my side I do not fear. What can man do to me?" You can never rob a man of his liberty who has made the goodness and mercy of God the foundation of his life. Let us be grateful for all the gifts of God, but above all for the gift of freedom. All else is minor in comparison to the liberty he has given us in Christ.

There are many more blocks to be laid on the foundation of God's goodness, but we need to close with a recognition that this song of praise begins and ends with God's goodness. Only those who are most thankful for God Himself are among the most thankful of people. Let us live on the highest plain and let the attitude of this Psalm and the poem of Georgia B. Adams characterize our Thanksgiving.

I am thankful, Lord, for many things,
But this Thanksgiving Day
I am dedicating to the praise
Of only Thee, I pray!
Aside from blessing temporal,
Apart from gifts so kind,
I'm thankful for the Giver more
Than all the gifts combined!
I'm thankful, Lord, for who Thou art,
For Thy great love divine
That stooped one day at Calvary's cross
And saved a soul like mine!
I'm grateful for the years gone by
In which with guiding Hand
Thou hast with utmost wisdom led
All by a perfect plan!
I'm thankful, Lord, for many things,
Apart from gifts so kind,
I'm thankful for the Giver more
Than all the gifts combined.

7. A GRATEFUL HEART Based on Luke 17:11-19

Thanksgiving is unconditional for the believer. We are not to be thankful only because of blessings, but even in spite of burdens, for life at its worst does not change the most precious truth for which we are to be thankful, and that is salvation through Jesus. There have been Christian people who have nothing of great value materially, and they have known nothing of a Thanksgiving Day, since this is uniquely American, but who never the less have had a grateful heart.

We need to remember that Thanksgiving grew out of a tragic situation because of people

of God who put their trust in Him in spite of tragedy. Half of the Pilgrims died the first winter in America. Their crop was so poor they had to ration out 5 grains of corn at a time. At one point there were only 7 of them who were not sick to help the rest of them. And yet these are the people who gave us Thanksgiving. Their faith did not waver with the winds of fortune. They labored 7 years to pay back loans to London bankers where they got the money to come to America.

Elder Brewster in the early days of Plymouth could set down to a meal of clams and a cup of cold water, and look up to heaven and return thanks, "For the abundance of the sea and for the treasures hid in the sand." God prospered the Pilgrims because they had grateful hearts even in the midst of great difficulties. Gratitude can even grow in the garden of grief when watered with the showers of trust in God. Robert Louis Stevenson spent most of life in bed with much pain, and he died at 44, but he saw more to be thankful for than most healthy people. He wrote, "The world is so full of a number of things, I'm sure we should all be as happy as kings." Sometimes those who are most blest are most blind. They spend their days in complaining and lose the greatest blessings because they lack a grateful heart. We want to look at a biblical example of this as found in the account of the healing of the 10 lepers. We see here 3 aspects of gratitude.

I. THE RARENESS OF GRATITUDE. v. 17-18

Here were 10 men in awful misery who experienced the blessing of almighty mercy, and yet 9 of them never came back to say thanks. If Jesus had only 10 per cent express their gratitude for a miracle, how much less must he have received for common mercies? How little does he receive from us for every day blessings? Does he receive more than puddles of praise for the ocean waves of mercy he causes to splash against the shore of our lives? Spurgeon said, "If you search the world around among all choice spices you shall scarcely meet with the frankincense of gratitude." Why is this? Here are a number of reasons:

A. SELFISHNESS. From the minute a person is born he is self-centered. All of life revolves around a child, and what makes him happy is good, and what does not is bad. You can have fun with a child doing everything he wants for hours, but then refuse him one thing his heart desires and he becomes angry and charges you with meanness. It is tragic when adults exhibit this same ungrateful attitude. Albert Schweitzer tells of how difficult it was to teach the natives that they had to help keep up the hospital by giving a chicken, a few eggs, or some bananas. Some of the more savage people came to him after they were cured and demanded a gift of him. Paul in Rom. 1:21 tells us that one of the causes for the darkness of the pagan mind and heart was that they were not thankful.

This natural selfishness is a part of the civilized world as well. People with great abundance are constantly more concerned about what they don't have than thankful for what they do have. When Andrew Carnegie left a million dollars to a relative that relative cursed him saying, "Old Andy left 365 million to public charities and cut me off with one measly million." Such ingratitude seems incredible, but it reveals that the ungrateful heart loses even the blessings that it does have. I can just imagine that those 9 who did not return were discouraged within a couple of days. They would be complaining that their leprosy put them so far behind in their work. They would complain that its hard now to get their crop in

on time, or fill that pottery order they had before they got sick. Even a dog will wag its tail at a kindness shown, but these selfish 9 did not even take the time to say thank you. Shakespeare was right when he said, "Blow, blow thou winter wind! Thou art not so unkind as man's ingratitude."

B. THOUGHTLESSNESS. It may not be that they purposely did not return. Maybe they stopped to think of the giver, but then got their minds focused on other things. This is another form of selfishness because it leads us to forget the source of our blessings. These 9 had some real faith, for they took Jesus at His Word and went to the priests. They wanted help and they believed Jesus could help. They called on Him for mercy and He heard them, and when the crisis was over they no longer thought about their need for Him.

Think and thank come from the same root word, and thoughtlessness leads to thanklessness. So many cry out to God in emergency situations, and then they forget Him when the emergency is over. But even the righteous are in danger of being thoughtless. The Psalmist says to himself, "O bless the Lord O my soul and forget not all his benefits." Jesus gave us the Lord's Supper to keep us reminded that His sacrifice for us is the center of our Christian faith. Physical amnesia is seldom heard of, but spiritual amnesia is as common as the cold, and we need to pray that we can escape being infected with this germ. The poet put it,

Forget him not whose meekness
Forgiveth all thy sin:
Who healeth all thy weakness
Renews thy life within.

II. THE RESPONSE OF GRATITUDE. v. 15-16

Let us be thankful that one did respond to the grace of Christ and return to thank Him and praise God. Jesus was doubtless disappointed in the other 9, but how it must have delighted His heart to see this one return. Jesus does not bless because He wants to be thanked. He blesses because He cares. Even if none had responded Jesus would have healed them. He healed them out of compassion for their need. God's grace is poured out on millions who never thank Him. He makes the sun to shine and the rain to fall on the unjust as well as the just. Jesus died for the ungodly, even though masses of them will never accept His sacrifice. God must love an express that love whether man responds or not, but it is this one responding that delights the heart of God and makes it all worth while.

At age 72 industrialist Charles Schwab was taken to court on a petty lawsuit by a young man he had tried to help. The young man was only out to get some easy money and notoriety. After Mr. Schwab finished his testimony he asked if he could speak a few words. Permission was granted, and he said, "I am an old man and I to say that 90 percent of my troubles have been due to being good to other people. If you younger folk want to avoid trouble be hard-boiled and say no to everybody. You will then walk through life unmolested-but" and a smile came across his face, "You will have to do without friends and you won't have much fun."

The Christian is to show love and mercy because it is being like Christ and not because he looks for gratitude. Luther said, "He who would be a Christian must learn to remember that with all his benevolence, faithfulness, and service he will not always reap gratitude, but must also suffer ingratitude. But this should not move us to withhold help and service to others." We can be thankful if we even get a 10 percent response, for that is all Jesus got.

If we examine the response of this one who returned we see that it was basically praise. Praise is voluntary, and it comes from the heart because the heart cannot hold it back. It reveals the true nature of the person. Jesus never asked them to come back and praise Him, but here was a man who did not live by the letter but by the spirit. The other 9 obeyed the letter of the law, but they did not have a heart of gratitude. Spurgeon felt that Christians ought to have praise meetings as well as prayer meetings. All 10 of them prayed but only one was most blest because he also praised. Spurgeon said, "I chide myself sometimes that I have wrestled with God in prayer, like Elijah upon Carmel, but I have not magnified the name of the Lord, like Mary of Nazareth." Only one came back, and every believer should be among that minority that always comes back with a grateful response. It is easy to request, but hard to return in thanks.

Charles E. Jefferson said, "If Christians would praise God more the world would doubt Him less." Let us admit it that we seldom make it known how grateful we are to be Christians by our praise of God and thanksgiving before the world. His praise should be continuous. We tend to think we need only to praise when something spectacular happens, but this reveals our thoughtlessness again, for we have an abundance of things to be grateful for every day. Heaven help the man who only has thanksgiving once a year. Dr. Malbie Babcock said that the ideal would be to set one day a year aside to do all our complaining and griping, and leave the rest for thanksgiving. That is the way it ought to be.

Meet and right it is to sing,
In every time and place;
Glory to our heavenly King,
The God of truth and grace.

Join we then with sweet accord,
All in one thanksgiving join!
Holy, holy, holy Lord,
Eternal praise be thine.

May this be our response of gratitude for the grace of God that is ours in Christ.

III. THE REWARD OF GRATITUDE. v. 19

There is great reward just in the possessing of a grateful heart. It makes one glad if he appreciates life and its blessings. Those 9 may have come to their senses at some time in their life and have regretted that they did not go back. When they heard Jesus was crucified they certainly would remember the mercy He showed to them, but then it was too late to thank Him. The world is filled with those who, like Albert Schweitzer, stood over graves of

loved ones and deeply regretted their failure to let them know how much they were appreciated.

Schweitzer wrote in his *Memoirs Of Childhood And Youth*, "When I look back upon my early days I am stirred by the thought of the number of people whom I have to thank for what they gave me or what they were to me. At the same time I am haunted by an oppressive consciousness of the little gratitude I really showed them while I was young. How many of them have said farewell to life without my having made clear to them what it meant to me to receive from them so much kindness or so much care!"

On the other hand, a few reaped the rewards of gratitude shown. William L. Stidger was thinking of people who had helped him in life, and he remembered a teacher he had who went out of her way for him. He wrote her a letter of thanks, and here is the reply he received.

"My dear Willie,

I cannot tell you how much your note meant to me. I am in my eighties, living alone in a small room, cooking my own meals, lonely and, like the last leaf of autumn, lingering behind. You will be interested to know that I taught in school for 50 years and yours is the first note of appreciation I ever received. It came on a blue cold morning and it cheered me as nothing has in many years."

A friend of his reported that Stidger was not a sentimental man, but he wept when he read that. We could all receive so much more if we would express more gratitude. But as Spurgeon said, "We receive a continent of mercies, and return an island of praise." Great are the rewards of gratitude even on the level of person to person, but greater yet are they between God and man. Jesus said to the man who returned in verse 19, "Your faith has made you whole." There was more here for this man than healing, for all the others were healed too, but this man received not only bodily benefits, but his soul's salvation. His grateful heart brought him into the kingdom of God. But Jesus also felt the pain of those who did not receive all that He wanted to give them. The poet has written,

Were not the ten made clean? Yet only one
Returned to lay his homage at Christ's feet
In thankfulness for what the Lord has done;
The other nine were hurrying to meet
The friends of other days that they might find
A hearty welcome and a bed and food;
Their utter selfishness had made them blind
To the supernal law of gratitude.

Do not these lepers typify the race
Who crave God's many blessings day by day?
And when He lavishes His healing grace
Upon them, one by one they go away;
And once again we hear the Lord repine:

**Were not the ten made whole?
Where are the nine?**

Gratitude is not a secondary subject, but it is of primary importance. Not only is faith without works dead, but faith plus works without gratitude is also inadequate. A saving faith includes gratitude. We cannot really believe Christ has died for our sin and forgiven us if we are indifferent and ungrateful for it. True faith will fall at the feet of Jesus and praise Him with joy and thanksgiving.

Let our prayer be that of the 17th century poet George Herbert who wrote, "O Lord, thou has given us much, give us one thing more, a grateful heart."

8. A THANKFUL SPIRIT Based on Acts 27:27-37

The more I study the history of man and the sea, the more grateful I become that I am a landlubber. Tens of thousands of lives have been lost in ship wrecks in my lifetime. But some sailors have much to be thankful for in spite of ship wrecks. John O'Brian, for example, was off the coast of India when his ship was wrecked, and all hands were lost, but he and four other sailors. The next ship he was on floundered off the Cape of Good Hope, and he alone of all the crew got to shore safely. Then in July of 1747 he was on the Dartmouth, a ship of 50 guns, which was engaged in battle with a Spanish Man Of War with 70 guns. His ships magazine blew up, and he was blown off the ship. Only 14 of the 300 man crew were rescued. He was one of them. He was found floating on top of a gun carriage that had been blown off the ship with him.

There are few men in history who have as much to be thankful for, for protection on the sea. There is one in the Bible however who beats this amazing record. The Apostle Paul says in II Cor. 11:25, "Three times I was ship wrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea." Paul not only ties John O'Brian in ship wrecks he survived, but he spent more time in the water, and above all, Paul is the only man we know of who was the key to the survival of every man on board a ship that was totally lost. 276 men survived this terrible ship wreck. Charles Hocking in his Dictionary Of Disasters At Sea, reveals that many ships have gone down in storms, and some had survivors, but more were lost than saved. Just a few examples gives you the picture.

In 1857 in the gulf of Finland-826 lost, none saved.

In 1863 off Japan-584 lost, only 69 saved.

In 1854 Australian ship-459 lost, only 39 saved.

In 1914 off Brazil-445 lost, only 143 saved.

In our text we are looking at one of the greatest ship wreck stories of history, for not only was it a spectacular ordeal for all involved, it stands alone as a story where the ship and all its contents were lost, but where every life on board was saved. We would expect to see a Thanksgiving service after such a dramatic story. We would not expect to see it during the ordeal itself, and before anyone has yet made it to safety on land, but that is what we see in

our text. Paul has a mini-Thanksgiving service while all of their lives were still hanging by a thread. It would seem that the only value of this scene for us is to make us grateful that we were not a part of it. It was a horrible experience, but nevertheless, it is loaded with food for thought as we approach another Thanksgiving. Paul's thankful spirit here is of value for all of us for three reasons. First because of-

II. THE CONTEXT OF HIS THANKFULNESS.

We have already referred to the fact that these 276 men were riding out a hurricane. Some of us know how frightening it can be out on a lake for even a few minutes when the wind and waves are high and threatening. These men had been helpless for 14 days as they were driven across the Adriatic Sea. 14 days of hanging on for life. It was not exactly party time. Bill Robinson in *A Sailor's Tales* tells of a 24 hour storm he had to ride out in the Gulf Stream in 1976. He said all of your energy is concentrated on just staying on board the ship. He said that nobody eats, for the same reason you don't see people eating while running from a charging bull, or while escaping from a burning house. Your life depends on not being distracted by anything but the need to hold on for dear life.

This contemporary testing confirms the account of this ancient story of riding out a hurricane. Paul said that for 14 days they lived in constant suspense, and did not eat any food. Here were over 270 men in extremely weakened condition, with minds as worn out as their bodies, with fear and despair, and their ship ready to be dashed against the rocks at any moment, and yet, in this context, Paul does not curse the darkness, but lights a candle. He gives a little pep talk; says a prayer of thanks to God, and they all eat some bread. It was the first positive thing they had done in 2 weeks, and it gave them the shot in the arm they needed to press on.

The context of Paul's thankfulness is a key lesson for all of us. Anybody can be thankful lying on a beach in the sun while sipping cool drinks. But Paul was thankful in the worst storm we have on record, next to the one Noah had to ride out. Thankfulness is only a real virtue when it functions in the context of stress, strain, and storm. It is still pleasant in the sunshine, but there it is a mere natural virtue of which all men are capable. The reason we honor the Pilgrims for their role in giving us Thanksgiving is because they were thankful in a context of great suffering. 47 of them died their first winter in this land. They braved the stormy sea, and risked their all to be free. Mrs. Felicia Hermons wrote of them-

The breaking waves dashed high
On a stern and rock-bound coast,
And the woods, against a stormy sky
Their giant branches toss'd;

And the heavy night hung dark
The hills and waters o'er,
When a band of exiles moor'd their bark
On the wild New England shore.

Not as the conqueror comes,

They, the true-hearted, came,
Not with the role of the stirring drums,
And the trumpet that sings of fame;

Not at the flying come,
In silence and in fear,--
They shook the depths of the desert's gloom
With their hymns of lofty cheer.

Amidst the storm they sang,
And the stars heard and the sea!
And the sounding aisles of the dim woods rang
To the anthem of the free!

America was not a paradise then. It has become what it is for us, because of thankful people who did not give up because of misery and hardship. Like Paul, they paused in the struggle for survival, and said, thank you Lord, and then pressed on. All though history the truly great stories of thankfulness are those that come out of a context that none would choose, but which have to be endured with either bitterness or thankfulness.

Many Christians get themselves into messes, like Paul was in, by no mistakes of their own, but due to circumstances they cannot control. If Paul would have had control, they would be safely harbored through this whole storm. He warned them not to go, but the decision was not his. He was at the mercy of other people's choices. All Paul could do was to be faithful and thankful for each day he was alive, and to make some difference in the world for Christ.

Henry Muhlenberg was a young German pastor who set sail for England to minister in America in 1742. Pirates threatened the seas, and so there was a 3 week delay. When the ship did get going, the water on board was foul, and the sailors were a quarrelsome and drunken crew. The rats were so numerous he counted several thousand, and on top of all this, he was dreadfully seasick. It was a 75 day journey of misery. When he landed the trip to Philadelphia was just as miserable, with rainy weather, mud, and washed out roads. He finally made it, and for years was a faithful pastor, even though, when the Revolutionary War broke out, he was constantly being sought by British officers to be arrested. People urged him to flee with his wife, but year after year he avoided them, and kept preaching until the peace treaty was signed. His was a life of suffering and service under fire, yet, he was a man of faithfulness because he was a man of thankfulness. A thankful spirit will keep you going when no other fuel can. It is one of life's greatest life-savers, and career savers. People who are thankful do not give up, but, like Paul, keep pressing on, for they are able in all settings to see something for which to be grateful.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in prison for resistance to Hitler, wrote this letter to his parents just before his execution. "Dear mother, I want you to know that I am constantly thinking of your and father everyday, and I thank God for all that you are to me.....Thank you for all the love that come to me in my cell from you during the past year, and has made everyday easier for me. I think these hard years has brought us closer together." Great thanksgivers are not Pollyanas who pretend nothing bad every happens. They are people who suffer the bad

to the depth, and yet they never lose their optimistic thankful spirit, because they believe that above every storm the sun shines, and that light will overcome all darkness in Christ's good time.

Note how Paul not only gave thanks to God in the context of the roughest ride of his life, but in verse 35 it says he gave thanks to God in front of them all. In other words, in a context where he was a minority, with a couple of Christian friends, and all the rest were pagans. Paul was bold and unashamed of his faith in God. He thanked God openly before all these men who had probably been cursing their gods for what they were enduring. Paul was a fanatic for seeking every opportunity to witness.

In a cartoon sequence from Peanuts, Linus says to Charlie Brown, "When I get big, I'm going to be a real fanatic." Charlie asked, "What are you going to be fanatical about Linus?" With a quizzical look on his face Linus reflects, "Oh, I don't know, it doesn't really matter, I'll be sort of a wishy-washy fanatic." Paul may have felt wishy-washy as he had just spent 14 days being splashed and soaked like a load of clothes in a washer, but he was a fanatic who knew what he was a fanatic about. He was a fanatic for being thankful in all situations. Paul did not just write the words, "In everything give thanks," for he lived it, because he really believed there is no context of life you can be in that does not have something for which to give thanks.

Mark Twain was just the opposite of Paul. He wrote to a friend once, "I've been reading the morning paper. I do it every morning, well knowing that I shall find in it the usual depravities and baseness and hypocrisies and cruelties that make up civilization and cause me to put in the rest of the day pleading for the damnation of the human race." Paul knew everything Mark Twain did, and then some. Paul knew the depth of human depravity. He was a part of it himself, as he imprisoned and killed innocent and righteous people. Nevertheless, with all his knowledge of the darkness, Paul loves life, and he loves people, even those scummy pagan sailors, and Paul is thankful.

The real test of a thankful heart is how it responds to a context of crisis. Dr. Arthur Caliendo tells of the 25 year old woman who was flying in a small plane with her boss when they had to make an emergency landing in Texas. The pilot was killed instantly, and she was knocked unconscious. When she regained consciousness, she saw her boss was dead. She was in great pain, and she cried out, but of course, there was no response. It looked hopeless, but five hours later she was discovered and rescued. It was a wonder she was still alive, for she had severe internal injuries, but she was taken to a hospital and her life was spared. When Dr. Caliendo heard her story he expected to visit a woman who would be grateful to be alive, but he found just the opposite. She did nothing but complain and gripe about her cruel fate. She remained in the hospital for two months, and none of the staff ever heard a positive word out of her. She was totally restored to health, but she was the unhappiest woman he had ever met, for her philosophy was, this is the devil has made, let us complain and be miserable in it.

In contrast was the philosophy of Helen Baker, a woman who had a nerve disorder that affected her body, neck, and speech. She was never healed though she prayed for it often. Yet, with her handicap she was faithful in worship and in her service to others. She was such

an encouragement to others in their suffering that she came to a point where she could say, "I can honestly thank God that I am infirm." When you can come to the point where you can be thankful in a negative context, then you have arrived at the level of Christ-like, and Paul-like thankfulness. It is like the man who lost his leg in a train accident who said, "I am just thankful it was the leg with the rheumatism."

If you are only thankful when all is right and wonderful, you are on the level of mere humanistic gratitude. This is universal, and there is nothing uniquely Christian about it. Atheists feel it as well as saints. But when the context is negative, and the emotions are down and pessimistic, that is when the light of Christian thankfulness has a chance to shine. 14 days of sea water soaking could not put out Paul's flame of thankfulness. The thankful spirit may not change the context, but it can radically change the person whatever the context. The most dramatic example of this is seen in Thomas Gaddis' book, *The Birdman Of Alcatraz*. Robert Stroud, a two time murderer, had spent most of his 70 years in prison. For the first 20 years he was hard and bitter and withdrawn. But then Stroud found a sparrow that had fallen from its nest in a storm. He took it from the prison courtyard to his cell and nursed it back to life. His interest in birds was aroused, and he read everything he could on birds.

Other prisoners began to bring their sick canaries to him, and he would often cure them. He had not spoken to a guard for 20 years, but he wanted an orange crate to make a bird cage. When he gave it to Stroud, for the first time in 20 years he mumbled, "Thank you." That thank you was his beginning to be restored to the human race to become a normal man again, who would relate to others. A simple thank you did not change his context, but it changed completely how he functioned in a negative context. A thankful spirit will do it every time. What it did for Paul it will do for all. Secondly, look at-

II. THE CONTENT OF HIS THANKFULNESS.

The fact is, we do not have Paul's prayer here. Dr. Luke, who recorded this, had been hanging on for 14 days too, and probably was in no position to take notes on this prayer. Luke just tells us that after he had shared with the men that one man would lose a single hair from his head, he then took bread and gave thanks to God. This means he obviously gave thanks for the bread, but possibly, and even probably, he thanked God for the promises to spare the lives of all these pagan sailors.

My point here is, Paul did not likely have a long prayer, but one that was short and to the point. It was a thanksgiving for life, and bread for one last meal to give them the strength they needed for survival. Paul makes a point of this in verse 34. You need food he said to them. This bread was no luxury, it was a necessity for their lives. Without this meal many of them could have died. God promised to save them all, but God's promises still involve man doing his part. There is no record of anyone ever surviving continuous non-eating. Food is essential for life, even if you are in the hands of God. That is why food is the most universal cause for thanksgiving.

By our standards, or even theirs, it was a lousy meal, for it was apparently merely bread. It was the kind of insignificant snack that we would consider unworthy of grace before eating

it, but for them it was a gift of life. A little can mean a lot in the context like this, and Paul was thankful for that little. He was not griping and complaining, even though he had good reason. The whole ghastly nightmare could have been avoided had they listened to Paul, and stayed safely in port. Paul had plenty to be frustrated and angry about, but these emotions were not allowed to run his life. He demonstrates for all the world to see, it doesn't take much to make a truly thankful man thankful.

Paul was grateful for bread with a sincerity and intensity that only a smorgasboard could stimulate in most people. Paul did not need a long list of blessings to get his spirit of thanksgiving revved up. He really meant what he wrote to Timothy in II Tim. 6:3-8, "For we brought nothing into this world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that." People who live close to the edge of life, like Paul, tend to be able to be content with far less. Eddie Rickenbacker, famous for his survival after 21 days of drifting on the Pacific, was asked what lesson he learned. He said, "The biggest lesson I learned from that experience was that if you have all the fresh water you can drink and all the food you care to eat, you ought never to complain about anything."

The problem is, most people don't spend 21 days on the Pacific starving and dying of thirst. Most also do not spend 14 days being blown across the Mediterranean by a hurricane starving. One suspects that even God would find it a challenge to arrange for all people to have these types of experience. The rest of us need to learn from their experience how to have a thankful spirit in spite of a small content of things to be thankful for. A good question we need to consider is, how much does it take to make us thankful? If there needs to be a large content to our bag of blessings before we can be grateful to God, then we are not truly thankful people. Thankful people can be thankful even if the table of contents in their book of blessings has only two chapters, says Paul, and they are food and clothing.

We sing, Count Your Many Blessings, and we can do it, for our list is longer than our arm of the things for which we have to be grateful, but Paul says, even if your list consists of just two, and who can't count at least two, that is sufficient content for the truly thankful heart.

So count your blessings one by one.
If two is all you find under the sun,
Then like an incense to the skies,
Let your prayer of thankfulness arise.

As we look at this Thanksgiving in a hurricane, on the high seas, we can first of all be grateful that we do not have such a little to be grateful for, as they did. But we can also be grateful that by God's grace a Christian can be grateful when there is so little to be grateful for. The question is not, just how much do you have to be grateful for, but how little can you have left, and still be grateful? Can you suffer the loss of all things, and yet thank God for life, and the food you need to sustain life? How much content do you need on your Thanksgiving list to be content?

An old time evangelist past the hat for an offering, and when it came back it was embarrassingly empty. He shook the hat to make clear it was empty, and then lifted his eyes to heaven and said, "I thank thee Lord that I got my hat back from this congregation." One has reason to doubt the sincerity of this expression of thanks for so little, but there is no

doubt about the sincerity of Paul's spirit of thanks. When you truly have a thankful spirit, it does not take a lot to make you thankful. It is good for us to measure the content of our thankfulness, and find out if we need plenty to be grateful, or if we can, like Paul, have a thankful spirit even with very little. Thirdly look at-

III. THE CONTAGION OF HIS THANKFULNESS.

Verse 36 says they were all encouraged and ate some food. One positive optimistic thankful person can change the whole atmosphere in a terrible situation. Thankfulness is a contagious spirit. If everybody is complaining and gripping, and one person shares their spirit of thankfulness, the others feel embarrassed to go on complaining, and they too begin to look at something for which they are grateful. But as long as all join in complaining, the negative will prevail. It takes one to go against the mood flow and interject a word of thanks to reverse that flow.

Paul did it here, and 275 other men were encouraged in moments after 14 days of fear and discouragement. Like a virile but virtuous virus, Paul's spirit of thankfulness infected the entire ship, and you get a picture of 276 men enjoying the taste of food together, and then laboring in unity to empty the ship of its final cargo, with a sense of hope that their miserable story might have a happy ending after all. Paul was a thankful person, and thankful people are contagious people. They generate hope in desperate situations. Arthur Rubinstein wrote of his own life, "I'm passionately involved in life: I love its changes, its colors, its movement. To be alive, to be able to see, to walk, to have houses, music, paintings....its all a miracle. I have adopted the technique of living life from miracle to miracle....What people get out of me is this outlook on life which comes out in my music." Such enthusiasm and gratitude for life is contagious, and by means of his music he spreads that spirit.

A thankful spirit encourages others to see the positive in their own lives, and so being thankful is a ministry in a world where the bad news is thrown at us so often we tend to forget the good news. We need people with a thankful spirit to remind us that light is as real as the dark. One 12 year old girl even sought to encourage God. She prayed, "Thank you Lord for all you've done, and keep the good work." God does good work through His faithful servants, like Paul, who, by giving God thanks gave all the frightened and despairing men hope. His spirit was contagious, and they began to feel encouraged about the future. The beauty of thankfulness is that it is not only a fire that warms you, it warms others as well. There is just no question about it, one of the best ways we can make a positive difference in this storm-tossed world is to exhibit and express everyday in some positive way a thankful spirit.

9. THANK GOD FOR MAN Based on Acts 28:11-16

Edward R. Morrow once told of the commencement speaker who was a Yale graduate. He used the 4 letters of YALE for his speech outline. Y was for youth; A was for ambition; L

was for loyalty, and E was for energy. After his tedious trip through these four points one of the board graduates turned to another and said, "I am so thankful he went to Yale." "What do you care where he went?" replied the equally unenthused victim. "Because," he responded, "Imagine what we would have had to endure had he gone to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology."

You have to give him credit for seeing the brighter side and finding the silver lining in the dark clouds. It is always there somewhere, or how else can be expected to obey Paul's command in I Thess. 5:18, "In everything give thanks." In every situation there is something in which to be thankful. But let's be honest as Paul was. There are days and circumstances when it is mighty hard to find. We find Paul in just such a tough time in his life in Acts 28. Most all commentators agree that Paul was in a state of depression. There was good reason for it. He was a prisoner on his way to Rome. He had more freedom than most prisoners, but he was still a captive heading for a very uncertain future, and it brought him down.

He was not thankful that he was down, but you and I can be thankful that he was, for that is more than likely where we would be if we were in his shoes. Paul's idealistic advice would be a burden rather than a blessing if we did not see that he too had to struggle to make it real. It is good for us to see the best of people at the bottom, and see that even heaven's heroes are not always on the mountain top. Thank God for biblical reality where we see the best of God's servants in their weakness, for this gives us hope, even as their strengths give us motivation to press on. Peter's many blunders make us realize we need not despair for our follies and mistakes, for like him we can be forgiven and welcomed back into the Savior's love. Thank God for Peter's multiple blunders, for they reveal that God's grace is sufficient for any of us.

Thank God also for Paul's depression for it reveals his sensitive human spirit that makes him easier to identify with than does his perfectionist sounding theology. Here is the man who says to give thanks in everything and to rejoice always, but now he is dragging. He is no robot, but a real man just like us. But notice what happens in verse 15. Christians in Rome heard that Paul was coming and so they sent out a delegation to meet him. It was 40 miles from Rome, but they traveled this distance to encourage this brother they had never met. The text says, "When Paul saw these men he thanked God and was encouraged."

Notice that Paul was thankful to God, but it was for these men that he was thankful. This does not seem like a very startling revelation until you begin to examine Paul's thinking all through the New Testament. You discover that man is the primary means by which Paul is made thankful. He is constantly thanking God, not for angels, or theology, or for high and exalted ideals, or for things. Paul's thanksgiving focus is on people. Look at the evidence:

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

I Cor. 1:4, "I always thank God for you..." Then he goes on to describe how they have been enriched by the grace of God.

Eph. 1:15-16, "For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, I have not stopped giving thanks for you.."

Phil. 1:3-5, "I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the Gospel.."

Col. 1:3-4, "We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saint."

I Thess. 1:2, "We always thank God for all of you.."

II. Thess. 1:3, "We ought always to thank God for you, brothers, and rightly so, because your faith is growing more and more, and the love everyone of you has for each other is increasing."

Paul is constantly giving thanks to God for man. He is thankful to God, for God is the source of the grace that makes man capable of exercising all of his virtues. He is thankful for man, for man can choose to be open or closed to God's grace. They can choose to grow in grace and in knowledge and be channels of God's love. Paul is so thankful for people who are saying yes to God and being instruments of His love. Paul could be content in any state because he did not need a home, chariot, fine clothes, or more money. All he needed was to know that other people cared. Paul was tough, but he still needed others.

We all need to recognize that God gives us most of what we need through others. His entire revelation came to us through people. We can thank God for the many authors of Scripture whom He inspired. We can thank God for the Apostles, early church fathers, reformers, pilgrims, pioneers, missionaries, founders and leaders of the many schools, books, and other resources that help us grow in Christ. We have such a rich heritage that has come to us through people.

Martin Luther stressed a doctrine that changed the history of the church. It was the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. Every Christian can minister to every other Christian. In our text laymen were ministering to one of the greatest of the Apostles, and Paul was saying thank God for these people. Blessings flow from the bottom up as well as from the top down.

Paul had found the key to perpetual thanksgiving. Just focus on what God has given you through people and you will never lack for things to be grateful for. This does not mean Paul never got discouraged and frustrated. He had his bad days, but at some point in that day the sun would shine and Paul would be lifted by his spirit of thanksgiving because he had so many people for which to be thankful. Paul could say with the little girl who was asked what she was thankful for and she replied, "I am thankful that I am thankful." It is one of life's greatest blessings to be a thankful person for other persons.

In Yuma, Arizona there was a motel that advertised, "Free board everyday the sun doesn't shine." Travelers coming into town on a rainy day would see this as a good gamble

and check in. The owner never seemed worried, however, for he had been making this offer for many years and never lost money. At some point in the day the clouds would disappear and the sun would shine. That is the way it was with Paul. There would be depressing times as he reviewed the problems of the churches and the bitterness of his enemies, as well as the failures of his friends, but then he would focus on people and the sun would come out filling him with thanksgiving.

It was an unusually dark day for Paul in our text, but then the brother's from Rome came and Paul was encouraged, and he gave thanks to God for men. We are dealing with such an obvious truth here that we often become blind to it and miss out on the thanksgiving spirit of Paul. Not a day goes by in any of our lives that we are not blest by other people. Even if you never leave the house or talk on the phone you are blest by others. The food you eat was planted, raised, harvested, transported, and sold to you by other people. There is no telling how many people made it possible for you to enjoy your meals today. The same is true for all of your pleasures of life. Your clothing, home, car, and all the things you enjoy are yours because of the labor, skill, and creativity of other people. The freedom you have to worship was also one by other people.

We enjoy the holiday of Thanksgiving. It is a uniquely American holiday. There are billions of people who will not have such a day of thanksgiving and family feasting. We owe it to the determined efforts of Sarah Hale. She wrote an endless flow of articles and letters to get a day set apart for thanks to God. She pleaded with Presidents Fillmore, Pierce, and Buchanan, and finally she won the ear of Abraham Lincoln. He made a national proclamation in 1863. He only lived to enjoy two Thanksgiving holidays, but Sarah lived into her 90's and enjoyed many of them. This is not a biblical holiday, but came to us through the love and labor of another person.

If you start to get specific and focus on people in your life the ground for thanksgiving becomes an expanding universe. People gave you life and brought you into this world. People gave you an education so you could enjoy the world. People provided you with resources to become what you are. People have encouraged, loved, and supported you through life.

The point I am getting at is that everyone of us would be more thankful everyday if we focused on people for whom we could give thanks. Paul was thanking people constantly, but to often most of us can better identify with Albert Schweitzer in his *Memoirs of Childhood and Youth*. He writes, "When I look back upon my early days I am stirred by the number of people whom I have to thank for what they gave me or what they were to me. At the same time I am haunted by an oppressive consciousness of the little gratitude I really showed them while I was young. How many of them have said farewell to life without my having made clear to them what it meant to me to receive from them so much kindness or so much care!"

I have always been grateful that I wrote to my Grandmother and an uncle I had, and shared with them before they died how much they meant to me. But I never did write to a high school teacher I had who changed my life and gave me a love for literature. William L. Stidger of the School of Theology in Boston was over 50 when he remembered a teacher that blest him. He wrote her a letter thanking her and her reply has been published around the

world and used in many Thanksgiving messages. It never gets old because it speaks so clearly to the need of being thankful for people. Stidger was a 50 year old scholar, but to her he was still Willie. She wrote:

My dear Willie,

"I cannot tell you how much your note meant to me. I am in my 80's, living alone in a small room, cooking my own meals, lonely and, like the last leaf of autumn, lingering behind. You will be interested to know that I taught in school for 50 years and yours is the first note of appreciation I ever received. It came on a blue-cold morning and it cheered me as nothing has in many years."

For a few pennies of praise Willie's investment brought forth a fortune in gratitude. Thank God for people who are thankful to God for people. Paul's life was lifted to a higher level and he was cheered because he knew somebody cared about him. If Paul needed this, who does not need it? David MacLennan tells of the employer who was so proud of his efficient staff, but one day his assistant took his own life and left this note: "In 30 years I have never had an word of encouragement. I'm fed up."

How many people could be saved from despair if the people in their lives could be conscious of the need to give them encouragement. William Barkley, who has been a blessing to millions by his Bible Commentaries, made this powerful statement: "One of the highest of human duties is the duty of encouragement. It is easy to laugh at men's ideals; it is easy to pour cold water on their enthusiasm; it is easy to discourage others. The world is full of discouragers. We have a Christian duty to encourage one another. Many a time a word of praise or thanks or appreciation or cheer has kept a man on his feet. Blessed is the man who speaks such a word."

There is nothing more practical than being an encourager by expressing your thanks to other people. How often have you said to someone, "I thank God for you?" Paul was doing it all the time and that is why he was able to rise above the storms of life. Thankful people have sunlight every day no matter how cloudy the sky, and they lift others above the gloom as well. People who are grateful for what they have, have more to be grateful for.

James Irwin, the Christian astronaut who walked on the moon, tells of the awesome experience of watching the earth shrink as the spacecraft sped away from it. He wrote, "From the size of a basketball to the size of a baseball, to the size of a golf ball, to the size of a marble...you look back and realized that everything that you ever cared about and loved was out there. That does something to you inside. It brings a man back profoundly changed, with a deep appreciation for the earth and everything we have on it."

He came back from the moon more thankful for the earth, but thank God we don't have to go to the moon to develop a more thankful spirit. We just need to open our eyes to all that is around us. Some years back Christianity Today gave a list of things to be thankful for in everyday life that illustrates just how endless our list could be if we would look. Here are five things listed:

1. Arn't you thankful that grass does not grow up through the snow making winter mowing as well as shoveling a responsibility?
2. Arn't you thankful that teenagers will eventually have children who become teenagers?
3. Arn't you thankful that the space for messages on tee shirts is limited?
4. Arn't you thankful that women whose husbands take them for granted don't all scream at the same time?
5. Arn't you thankful that hugs and kisses don't cause cancer or even add weight?

Thankfulness does not cause cancer or add weight either. In fact, it make us lighter. It lifted Paul out of his pit and it can do the same for us. Say a word, write a note, or do something that will make you someone that others will thank God for. Let us heed the Word of God and be thankful people, and especially be thankful to God for other people.

10. THANK GOD FOR RIGHTS Based on Acts 22:22-29

On Sept. 17, 1787 the leaders of our nation signed a document, which is to our freedom as Americans what the New Testament is to our freedom in Christ. They signed the Constitution Of The United States, and that is now the longest lasting Constitution every drawn up by leaders of a major nation. It is not perfect, and it has been changed considerably. Some of it is outdated and as obsolete as the musket, but it is still the solid foundation for most all of the values we treasure as citizens of the this great land.

Abraham Lincoln said of this valued document, "Let it be taught in the schools, in the seminaries, and in colleges, let it be written in primers, in spelling books, and in almanacs, let it be preached from the pulpits, proclaimed in legislative halls and enforced in courts of justice. And, in short, let it become the political religion of the nation." In other words, if you are truly an American, you will base your legal and political convictions on this document, just as you base your theological convictions on the Bible. There is much truth to this, but the analogy does break down, for the Constitution is manmade, and as good as it is, it is not God's Word, and so it can be, and has been changed. Nevertheless, it is one of the wonders of the world in its impact on man's freedom under government. Constitutions all over the world have been developed by using it for a guide.

The Apostle Paul was fortunate to have lived at a time when he had the blessing of a form of government that was based on law and not men. Roman law was concerned about justice and fairness. Paul appealed to Caesar because of his reputation for justice and fairness. Augustus Caesar, whom God used to make the decree that brought Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem, was known for his zeal in justice. He stayed in court until nightfall, and when he was ill he would have himself carried to court, or sometimes have the cases brought to his sick bed in the palace. He fought hard to make and enforce laws that encouraged and protected the family. He was strongly anti-divorce, and he was strict on limiting the obscene in the theatre.

Tiberius Caesar followed in his footsteps and spoke often to the Senate about the sanctity

of the law and their duty to uphold it. The point is not that pagan Rome and its rulers were perfect or ideal. The evil and folly are abundantly evident, but the point is, they had an empire that was the most powerful and longest lasting in history because they had law and order, and because justice was highly prized. This was a life-saver for Paul because he was often in serious trouble with the Jews who wanted him legally eliminated. There are ten occasions in the book of Acts where they plotted to kill Paul.

On this occasion of our texts he was under arrest because the Jews were furious over his preaching that God loved the Gentiles equally with the Jews. When they heard this, their hatred was so aroused that they shouted, "Rid the earth of him! He is not fit to live." The Roman guards saved Paul's life, for they were in the process of inflicting their judgment of capital punishment upon Paul. We see this clearly stated in 21:31 where we read, "While they were trying to kill him, news reached the commander of the Roman troops that the whole city of Jerusalem was in an uproar." These government agents saved Paul from the religious mob, but they could not grasp what the riot was all about, and why the Jews were so angry at Paul.

They decided to get at the truth by beating it out of Paul. Paul did not see a lot of value in being rescued from one beating to take another, and so he said to the Roman who was preparing him for a flogging, "Is it legal for you to flog a Roman citizen who has not been found guilty?" Paul is not doing research on the law at this point. He already knows the answer. He is asking this to reveal his rights as a Roman citizen. His question set off an immediate alarm. The Centurion went to his commander, and he came and talked to Paul about his citizenship. This put a definite damper on the inquisition, and all those connected with the incident made themselves scarce. They were hoping Paul would never recognize them, for they had already violated his rights by putting him in chains.

Paul could have taken them to court and many heads could have rolled because of this legal blunder. Paul did not press charges, however. After all, they just saved his life, and they assumed that a man being beaten to death by a mob was probably a low life ruffian, and not a citizen of the empire. Paul was just happy to be in their hands where there was an obligation to treat him with dignity and justice. From this experience of Paul we learn two important points about our rights as citizens. Both points can make us treasure our status under the United States Constitution as Paul treasured his status under the Constitution of Rome. The first point is-

I. RIGHTS WILL BE VIOLATED.

Paul was under arrest because the Jews hated his freedom of speech and freedom of religion. They could rid themselves of this man's rights by ridding Paul of his most basic right of all-the right to life. The Romans stopped them from beating him to death in chapter 21, but in chapter 23 we read that 40 men made a vow not to eat or drink until they had killed Paul. Few men in history have been object of such a sinister conspiracy as was Paul. He was saved, and again, it was by the help of the Romans. It is no wonder that Paul loved the Gentiles, for they were God's agents in keeping him alive so that he could take his testimony into all the world. Had he not been under the protection of the laws of Rome, he would have been an early martyr.

Paul lived in a world, just as we do, where everyone wants freedom, but where few want everyone else to have it. People have their prejudices and hatreds, and they want the right to deny rights to those they despise. This means the violation of rights is inevitable in a world where you have any kind of conviction or conduct that is not acceptable to others, and especially if the others are in authority. The Jewish leaders and the masses of Jews all felt Paul was a pain, and that he should be eliminated like a headache. They were the majority, and they had the power, and so they set out to get him killed. Majority rule is only good if the minority are protected from the majority. If one cannot be a minority without being crushed by the majority, the minority has no right to be non-conformists.

Paul was seen as having no rights by the majority, and so they were going to destroy him. He did the same thing to the minority group of Christians when he was in power and had the authority to do so. He rounded them up and put them in prison, and even persecuted them to death. Life is a terror for minorities when the majority has the power to violate their rights. Paul's chances of survival were about as slim as that of an ice cube in Death Valley. It was because the leaders of Israel were determined to violate his rights. Paul was in the same position the 13 Colonies were in when England was in power over them. Their very existence was threatened because the majority power was determined to rob the minority of their rights.

When the Colonies drew up the Declaration of Independence they were doing the same thing Paul was doing when he asked if it was legal to flog a Roman citizen who had not been found guilty. The Declaration says, "We hold these truths to be self evident that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. That, to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just power from the consent of the governed." Governments exist for the sake of promoting people's rights and in preventing the loss of those rights.

Government exists because the violation of basic human rights is inevitable in a fallen world. Paul would have been sunk without government help to protect his rights. God used government to save Paul on the physical level. God choose this period of history for the spread of the Gospel because it was the best time for government protection of human rights. United States has been one of the greatest sources of power for spreading Christianity into all the world. And it is because it has a form of government that promotes and protects basic human rights. It is a never-ending battle to protect these rights, for man is ever drifting toward gaining the power to violate the rights of others.

That is why the Declaration of Independence says, "Whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or abolish it, and to institute a new government." People have a right to a government that protects their rights, and when it doesn't, they have a right to change it. They may do so by peaceful means or by revolution, whichever one it takes to do it. Our Constitution provides for peaceful means of changing the government. The people do not exist for the government, but the government exists for the people, and for the sake of preserving their rights.

One of the reasons we have such a good form of government is because it is based on the

full awareness that the violation of rights is inevitable. Our government is based on the reality of man's sinful nature. Our Constitution assumes that the President will be a sinner and a tyrant if he can get enough power, and so it is designed to prevent that. It assumes that the Congress will be corrupt and rob people of their rights, and that the courts will be likewise. So it is designed with a balance of power to prevent any branch of government from getting so powerful that the other branches cannot control it.

The reason the Bill of Rights was added to the Constitution was because our founding fathers knew that even American leaders would eventually become corrupt and begin to violate the rights of the people. Jefferson said in a letter to Madison, "A bill of rights is what the people are entitled to against every government on earth..." Many great men felt this was not necessary. Alexander Hamilton felt it was a waste of time, but Jefferson argued, "I have a right to nothing which another has a right to take away." He knew the depravity of man would lead to the violation of rights because times would change, and they would not all be united as they were then.

Paul was a part of the Jewish community just a few years before this confrontation. He was one of their leaders who was doing their dirty work in persecuting the Christians. Now is the object of their wrath. Without government protection of his rights he would have been a goner. His former friends were now his foes, and they were out to violate his right to even be alive on the planet. The one lesson that history teaches clearly is that people in power will violate your rights unless they also are under a law that restrains them from that abuse. Even godly people will use their power to violate their rights if they are not restrained by law. The Constitution is that law that limits all powers from such abuse, just as the court of Rome limited what the Jews could do to Paul. Next we see-

II. RIGHTS SHOULD BE VINDICATED

The word vindicate is from the Latin and means to lay claim to and defend. It goes way back to the Roman law where it meant to assert one's legal right. This is what we see Paul doing. He had a right to be treated with dignity and respect until he was proven guilty of some crime and thus subject to punishment. He was innocent until proven guilty. The mob wanted him dead. The Romans were under pressure and considered him a public nuisance. One man could be eliminated and everyone could get back to business as usual. But Paul refused to satisfy the majority and give up. He had his rights as an individual, and he claimed those rights, and by so doing gave us an example of Christian assertiveness.

Paul did not have any rights as a Christian. There were no laws that said Christians have to be respected and treated with dignity, and to be given a fair trial if charged. John the Baptist had no trial at all, but was killed at the whim of Herod. James and Stephen were killed by brute force without a trial. Paul was not spared because he was a Christian. It was because he was a Roman citizen. Had he not been, he would have been beaten by the Romans, and then probably turned over to the Jews to finish the job. It was his citizenship under a government of law that respected human rights that spared him. Blessed are those Christians through history who were citizens of the kingdom of God, and also citizens of a nation where they had a Constitution that protected their basic rights.

The reason we honor the first President of our land is because he not only led our troops to victory in the Revolutionary War, but he led the battle to win a national Constitution for us. He was not knowledgeable about government, but he was a national hero, and he was selected as President of the Constitutional Convention. His partner was Madison, and he was very opposite from him. Washington was 6 feet tall when the average American was just over 5 feet tall. He was like Saul in Israel. Madison was more like Zaccheaus. He was very scrawny and little. But he knew everything to be known about government together they became a potent pair. One became known as the Father of our country, and the other Father of our Constitution. And both became President of our nation.

We need to see that their dream was surrounded with nightmares. Just as we see Paul coming to Jerusalem with high hopes of sharing the Gospel, and instead there is a riot and an attempt to kill him. People do not always respond as we dream, and the origin of our Constitution is not all glorious and glamorous. The delegates who met in 1787 in Philadelphia were not the easiest group to work with. You had men like Charles Pinckney from South Carolina who was a brash young smart aleck who irritated his elders because he happened to be almost as smart as he thought he was. Many were so full of pride. John Mercer of Maryland was so conceited that he only stayed a couple of days. He decided that the rest were a bunch of doddering old fools, and so he left.

Luther Martin was such a drinker that when he took the floor to speak he rambled endlessly and aimlessly, and he was against everything. Along with the truly marvelous there were tragically mediocre men deciding the fate of Americans future. Only about 20 of the 55 men who met had a sense of urgency about their mission. They argued and fought all summer, and by Sept. 17, when it was completed, only 39 delegates were there to sign it. The rest got fed up and left. Some of those who signed it did not like it. Even after it was signed there was an unbelievable battle to get it ratified by the states. Finally, however, this nation became, because of all this hassle, a nation where men do not rule, but law rules.

In nations where men rule you are at the mercy of those men. If they are prejudiced and do not like you or your way of life, or your faith, they can boot you out or kill you. When the rights of men are in the hands of other men, those rights will be violated. But if the rights of men are guaranteed by law, then those rights will be vindicated. Thanks to our Constitution we can do what Paul did. We can protest the decisions of men, and even officials of the government who make decisions that deprive us of the rights guaranteed by our Constitution.

Is it right was the question of Paul, and by his action he said that Christians are to claim their rights under law. They are to demand a government what the government exists to give, and that is protection of their rights. These officers may have hated it that this trouble making little Jew had to be treated with respect, but they had no choice. His rights were not a matter of the subjective feelings of men, but of the objective law. These men were bound by law to grant Paul his rights.

We have the right to criticize the leaders of our land, and they cannot persecute us, for we are guaranteed that right. We can even take the government to court. Some Christians have strange ideas about going to court. They take Paul's rebuke of the Corinthians because

they were going to pagan judges to solve their disputes, and they apply it to our culture where going to court is one of our basic rights. If you want to see the issue from another perspective, look at Paul in the last chapter of Acts. He is in court most of the time defending his right to be a Christian, and to preach the Gospel. He applied to Caesar, which means he went all the way to the Supreme Court to defend his rights. Paul was not anti-court, but he was just anti-foolishness and selfishness, which made Christians look bad before the world.

If Paul was alive today as an American, he would be in love with our system, and he would use it to claim his rights as an American citizen. Would he use the courts? Of course he would. In our system of government the going to court is the only way there is to destroy unjust laws. The legislature has the power to make laws. If they are bad laws that rob people of their constitutional rights, there is no way to get rid of it apart from taking the issue to court. The court alone can rule that it is unconstitutional. So if nobody takes it to court, the unjust law can be enforced against thousands and nobody can stop it.

For a Christian in our culture to say that he will never go to court is to say that he will never fight injustice, and never fight for the rights of the Constitution. He is saying that he will let evil reign and not lift a finger to prevent it, even though God in His providence has given him the power to do so. He who knows to do good and does it not is sinning, said James. Do not use Paul's anti-court experience as an excuse to neglect his pro-court conviction, which made him one of the great freedom fighters of history. Do not hide behind the petty perversions of the Corinthians as an excuse for passiveness in the face of rights violations. Paul never took a Christian to court even though he had a good many reasons to do so, but he did spend a great deal of time in court fighting for his rights and his freedom.

Christians in America have spent an enormous amount of time, energy and money fighting for their rights in court. The Baptists have been in the forefront of the battle, and everyday they are involved in cases where religious freedom is at stake. Only about a third of the world has the kind of rights that we have guaranteed by the Bill of Rights. We would not have them if Christians did not go to court to prevent those rights from being violated. Madison wrote to Jefferson in 1788, "Wherever there is an interest and power to do wrong, wrong will generally be done." The only solution he said is a form of government not governed by men, but by laws. It is the court that determines what is just or unjust. If you never go to court against what is unjust, you undermine the very foundation of our freedom.

The Constitution says there are only two things you can do that make you a traitor to your country. You have to go to war against it, or be a supporter of others who are at war with it. This is the only crime defined by the Constitution. In England the king could declare anything he did not like to be treason, and then have the offender hung. The founding fathers said we will have none of that here. You have to be a real enemy of the government before it can touch you. The result is, Americans have the greatest liberty in criticizing their government. We are not ruled by men, but by law, and it says that men cannot rob us of our rights even if they are powerful and hate what we do with our rights. The leaders of our land are under the law just as much as those who are led.

Jews for Jesus recently won a case in the Supreme Court. The Los Angeles airport refused them the right to pass out their literature and to witness to people of their faith. They asked, "Is it legal to stop an American citizen from sharing his faith with others?" The Constitution says that it is illegal to stop them, and so they won their case. You cannot stop an American citizen from sharing his faith publicly. Even if all the government leaders, and all the rich and powerful people say that they hate what you believe, they cannot stop it. It is because we are not ruled by leaders, but by law, and the law says we have the right.

Because they misunderstand the role of government and their rights, Christians have given up some of their rights. The laws of our land have limited the freedom of government, but not of the people. The law says the government cannot teach and promote religion in public schools. It is the government that cannot do it. The people can do as they please. If a Christian student wants to study the Bible and pray, he is free to do so. The law protects that right. He can pray without ceasing, or use study hall for prayer or Bible study. The Christian is free to pursue any religious subject of his choice, and to share his faith with anyone who will listen, and that includes the teachers. It is the government that is limited. The people have full religious liberty, but they don't take advantage of it and claim their rights.

The right of religious education is supported by our government. The government has no right to teach it, or to make anyone take religious instruction. But all children have a right to receive it, and so the public schools have to release children to get religious instruction if the parents want it. The government is not free to choose. They have to cooperate with those who want to exercise their rights. Because Christians claim this right you have released time classes where thousands of children leave school to get religious instruction. Unfortunately, many Christians do not claim this right. We are privileged people, but no privilege is of much value if it is not used. One of our great privileges is the right to go to court, and we should do so if our rights are being violated.

It can be costly to fight for your rights. It cost Jews for Jesus a quarter of a million to win their case. Jesus paid the ultimate price for the ultimate right, which was the right to become a child of God. As Christians we have a right to confess our sins, be forgiven, and become children of God. As Americans we have a right to share this good news with anyone. Thank God for rights, and thank God for the protection of those rights. We have much to celebrate, and that is why we do celebrate what Jesus did on the cross in communion, and that is why we should join our nation in celebration of the Constitution.

11. THANK GOD Based on Rom. 1:18-21

Ed Spencer was a hero of one of the worst shipwrecks ever on Lake Michigan. He was studying for the ministry at the Methodist Seminary in Evanston, Ill. On the night of Sept. 8, 1860 he was awakened by the shouts of other students in the dormitory. A shipwreck had taken place not far away. And excursion ship had collided with a lumber freighter, and 400 people were out in the cold water struggling for survival. Ed jumped up, dressed, and ran

the 3 miles to the lake. A strong undertow discouraged many who would have become rescuers. But Ed was a strong swimmer, so he plunged into the chilly waters. The waves were high, and debris hit and cut him, but he was able to make 15 trips and save 15 lives.

He was resting by a fire drinking a cup of coffee when the shout came, "There are two more!" In spite of his exhaustion, he plunged into the surf again, and made it to a piece of wreckage where a man and a woman were clinging for life. He brought them in, and then he collapsed. 287 people drowned, and 98 survived, 17 of them because of Ed Spencer. He never became a minister. His body had been so severely weakened, and he became an invalid who lived out his days in California. As an old man he was interviewed in Los Angeles, and he was asked what he most remembered about the great rescue. "Only this," he replied, "Of the 17 people I saved, not one of them even thanked me. You would think people would be forever grateful, and write him notes of thanks, and even send gifts.

Not everyone has a thankful heart. Only one out of 10 that Jesus cured of leprosy bothered to come back and thank Him. People can even take a miracle for granted, and not be thankful. Not being thankful is one of mankind's greatest sins. It shows that man is blind to the grace of God. To go through life and never say thank you to God is to live the ultimate in the cursed life. Paul says this was one of the main causes for the wrath of God to fall on mankind. Why have so many nations been plunged into darkness? Why do many people live like animals and wild beasts? Why must human creatures live like savages? Because they were not thankful. They took all of God's gifts, and enjoyed the wonders of life, and never once said thank you to God. The result is, they lost God's best, and, instead, had to endure His worst.

It is one of the most stupid things you can do, to go through life and never thank God. But you might say, what have I got to be thankful for? I'm not exactly living in the lap of luxury, just killing time waiting for my Rolys Royce to be fixed. I am aware life is not easy for many, but the fact is, there is much to be thankful for, even with all of life's trials. Even on the physical level there is food, shelter, and clothing available, because there are people who care, and why do they care? Because they are aware that Jesus cares about all people and all needs, and that He met the deepest needs of all men.

Thank God for the forgiveness of sin. All are equally guilty before God, but all are equally free to receive pardon, and be cleansed from all sin. Dr. Cook represented Christianity in the world's fair many years ago. All of the religions of the world gathered to share their virtues. Dr. Cook came to the platform when it was his turn, and he told the story of Lady MacBeth. She plotted the murder of Duncan, and was filled with guilt. She walked the floor looking at her hand she felt was blotted with blood. She would cry out, "Damen spot! Out, I say," and then in despair moan that all the perfume of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand. Dr. Cook turned to the representatives of the world's religion and said, "Ladies and gentlemen is there anything in your religion that will take the stains from her hands, and the guilt from her heart?" None responded, and then he said, "I present to you a Savior who can, for the blood of Jesus Christ God's Son cleanses from all sin."

There is a lot of good in the religions of the world, just as there is a lot of good in soap, and the chemical products of men, but nothing can cleanse from sin but the blood of Christ.

Thank God there is such a Savior, and thank God you live in a land where the knowledge of this good news is known. What does this mean for you? It means hope, no matter how foolish or sinful you have been.

There is a psychiatrist in New York City named John Rosen who works with catatonics. He moves right into the ward with them. He sleeps in a bed next to them. He lives with them and shares their daily life. If they don't talk, neither does he. He is just there. He puts his arms around them and hugs them. This M.D. and PHD is a highly skilled and highly paid physician, but he gives up his life of freedom to be limited by their needs. He loves them back into life and reality, and often when they begin again to speak their first words are thank you. If people could understand what Jesus has done for them, they too would say, thank God for Jesus.

We need to thank God that there is no such thing as a hopeless person. If there was such a person, it would have been Mel Trotter. He staggered home drunk one night, and found his wife crying and wringing her hands. She said, "Mel, the baby is dying. The doctor just left and he gave me this prescription." She said, "Here is 60 cents. Take it to a drug store and get it filled. Be careful Mel, it is all we have." Mel Trotter took the money and headed for the drug store, but one the way he passed a saloon and went in, and he spent the money for drink.

That night when he staggered back home his wife was clutching in her arms the lifeless form of a dead baby. The next day when the baby was buried, Mel was in the saloon. He sold some of the babies things, and got money for more drink. This was so low it even hit him, and he realized he was not fit to live. He decided to jump off a bridge in South Chicago. On his way he came to the old Pacific Garden Mission. Some of the guys he knew were standing around the door, and they said, "You seem nervous Mel, come on inside." They pushed him through the door, and Harry Monroe, the man who led Billy Sunday to Christ, went to work on Mel. He shared with him the good news that he could be forgiven, and set free from sin, and become a child of God. Mel Trotter accepted God's offer that night, and came out of darkness into God's marvelous light. He went on to found 63 Gospel Missions across America, and he led thousands of others to Christ.

Thank God there is a rock for every man to stand on, and Jesus is that Rock. There is a foundation for everyone, and nobody needs to go through life without security. Many do, but not because it is necessary, or because God wills it. God wills just the opposite, for it is His will that every man have a solid foundation on which to stand, walk, and to build. There are many who feel like the poet who wrote-

**I wish that my room had a floor.
I don't much care for a door.
But this floating around,
Without touching the ground,
Is getting to be quite a bore.**

It is boring and disturbing to have to float through life and never touch base with what really matters. It is this lack of foundation that leads to all of the unhappiness of life. The

fall of man is really more like the suspension of man. What fell away was the solid foundation of his relationship to God. That fell away and he was left hanging like an astronaut in weightless space. Now you can get used to this in a space ship, and adjust to it, but man can never get used to living without a foundation. The man who floats and does not have a solid foundation, never builds a life. He just drifts through life. He is like a balloon loose in the air. If the air blows West, he goes West. If it blows East, he goes East. Up and down and all around, tossed about by every wind of circumstance, and never really in control of his own life.

I think there is a lot of truth to the idea that people have their hell right here on earth. It think the man who is lost, and who is on his way to hell, certainly gets a taste of its symptoms here. Hell is always pictured as a place with no meaningful activity. It is a lake of fire, and what can you do in a lake of fire but float in meaningless misery. It is a place of utter darkness, and like floating in dark space with nothing visible or meaningful. The man who has no foundation in this life is getting a taste of hell, just as the man who builds on the Rock of Christ, and is established on this foundation, gets a taste of heaven-a place which is always pictured just the opposite of hell. It is solid, with mansions and glorious walls; with gold streets, and full of meaningful activity.

Every life on this planet falls into one of these two categories: The floating life, or the foundational life. The reason all of us can be thankful is because God offers to us all a solid rock on which to stand. He has provided a Savior who will forgive our sin, and who will help us start over with a foundation on which to build. You can choose to float, or choose to stand on the solid Rock of Christ. The Bible says the wise man will build on the Solid Rock.

12. THANKS BE TO GOD Based on II Cor. 2:12-17

The comedian Joe E. Brown lost his son in World War II. Captain Don Brown was a handsome and healthy strong boy with a quick mind and a flair for leadership. He was student president at UCLA, and student Colonel of ROTC. He was an ideal boy, and as far as father was concerned, the sun rose and set on him. An enemy sabotaged his plane and he crashed to his death. When his father received the word he was performing in Detroit. Here he was as a professional funny man who had to make people laugh when his own heart was broken.

He rebelled and doubted, not only God's love, but his very existence. For 20 hours he wondered in a dark cloud. He wondered out to the airport where he saw 10 boys in uniform in the same outfit his boy was with. It started him thinking of their parents who loved them as he loved Don. He saw them as boys far from home, and often lonely, and ill, and his heart went out to them. He felt he should give these boys all of the laughs he could pack into an hour.

He not only went on with the show, but he began to perform at camps all over the world.

His schedule was so furious that he developed a severe case of sciatica. He insisted on keeping his schedule, however, even though he had to be carried from place to place in an ambulance. One night on Christmas Island he gazed out over a sea of faces, and he was just busting to give them more fun than any man could possibly give.

He went into an act that included a crazy dance he use to do in Vaudeville and kept them howling with glee. When it was over and he stood mopping his brow he suddenly realized his pain was gone, and it was gone for good. He had been healed in his zealous act of serving others by cheering their hearts in sorrowful circumstances. He said, "I don't know what faith is or how you get it, but one thing I am sure of, I trust God with my whole life." His heart was grateful for two things: For what God did for him, and for what did through him. This is an experience in the secular world that is a parallel of Paul's experience in the ministry of the Gospel.

In verse 12 Paul says that he came to Troas to preach and the door was wide open. The opportunity was there, and the prospects for success were excellent. But he says in verse 13 that he had no rest in his spirit. He had no peace of mind, but was restless and full of anxiety. In spite of the ideal setting Paul was not in an ideal state of mind to buy up the opportunity. Here is an honest man of God telling it like it is. He had an open door, but he just didn't feel up to entering it.

Titus was suppose to meet him there with a report from Corinth, but he didn't show up. Paul was almost out of his mind with anxiety over the church at Corinth. They had many problems, and Paul had written his first letter to them and try and resolve some of them. He knew that there were critics in the church who were opposed to him. They were trying to get the church to reject his leadership and authority. They said he really didn't care for them, and so Paul is writing this letter to make it clear just how much he does care. He tells of all the suffering he had to endure on their behalf. He tells of such strong anxiety over their state when he did not hear from Titus it was so strong that he could not concentrate on his ministry, and he had to move on until he found Titus.

Paul could not work in a state of mind in which he was uncertain about what was happening in a touchy situation like Corinth. The torture of suspense was too great and it robbed him of his power to work and preach effectively. Many people feel that it is not worthy of a Christian to be so emotionally disturbed and worried about things that they cannot control, but such people are more interested in idealistic fantasies than in real Christian people. No person can claim to be more Christ like, or more committed to Christ than Paul, and he gives his personal testimony to the fact that his mind was so restless that he could not be an effective preacher until he knew how the Corinthian Christians had responded to his letter. Therefore, he left a promising field and went to Macedonia in search of Titus. Paul felt that it was of no value to make new converts if he lost the old ones. Conservation of his fruit was very important to Paul, and that was the motive that produced all of his letters.

Paul does not hide his feelings in this letter. In 1:8 he says he was crushed and in a state of despair. In 2:4 he describes his anguish of heart and the fact that he wept for them. Paul does not hesitate to add himself to the list of great men who shed tears out of concern for

others. He bears his soul and shows his inner most feelings over and over, and yet he also reveals that he had an incurable optimism, and that he was habitually thankful. For suddenly, like lightening flashing across a dark sky, Paul goes from an anxious mind in verse 13 to verse 14 where he burst forth into praise and thanksgiving.

With Paul there is no way of knowing when he will break forth in thanksgiving. The context gives no hint, for he can be on the mount of blessing, or in the valley of affliction - it makes no difference where, or under what condition-Paul's songs of thanks pop up spontaneously. Robert Louis Stevenson said, "The man who has forgotten to be thankful has fallen asleep in life." If this be so, Paul was a man who never slept, for he never forgot to be thankful. Paul's thanksgiving was no mere formality, as it is for many.

Benjamin Franklin recalled his boyhood experience of thanksgiving. They had an old salt barrel in the corner, and from that the meat was taken for every day's need. Every day his father would pray at the table, "Thank thee, Father, for the meat thou hast laid before us." One day Ben got an idea that seemed like an excellent idea for saving time. He said to his father, "Why not say one prayer over the whole barrel and get the thanking done with, and then we won't have to thank the Lord every meal..." He also remembered the sound rebuking he received for his ingratitude. Many, however, do think of thanks to God as a mere formality, but for Paul it came spontaneously out of a heart that could never adequately express his gratitude for two things: For what God did for him, and for what God did through him. These two categories for thanksgiving ought to be inexhaustible resources for every believer. Let's consider Paul's thanks first-

I. FOR WHAT GOD DID FOR HIM.

The first part of verse 14 in the RSV reads, "But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumph." Moffat has it, "Wherever I go, thank God, He makes my life a constant pageant of triumph in Christ." Paul met Titus in Macedonia, and there he heard the news that the Corinthians were repenting and reforming because of Paul's first letter. The very mention of Macedonia brings forth these precious memories, and it leads Paul to shout, "Thanks be to God!" He was so anxious, but now he is so grateful because God has led him again to victory. Paul cannot thank God enough for the blessings and joys of the victorious Christian life. It is a life where the enemies of the cross are defeated, and the captives of darkness are being led out into the light by Christ the conquering King, as He rides in His triumphal train.

Paul is using imagery common in the Roman world, as the victorious Roman Generals would return from battle with their proud soldiers marching in victory with much booty and many captives. The ground would be strewn with flowers, and the air would be filled with the fragrance of incense, as well as music, so that all the sense might enjoy the beauty of victory. Paul is saying that God in His providence is always leading him to one victory after another, but the paradox is that it is the threat of defeat that makes him so appreciate victory. It is no easy victory that Paul experienced. It was only after much suffering, toil and pain, sweat and blood, and much anxiety that he gained the victory. Even then it was not his victory, but God's. It was God who was leading him in triumph. When God does a great thing for us, however, He does not always lead us in a pleasant path beside still waters, but

often through the valley of the shadow of death.

The average American Christian does not experience the kind of thanksgiving that is uniquely biblical. With stuffed turkey and stuffed selves in a beautiful, warm and comfortable environment, even a pagan can be thankful, and is. There is nothing Christian about being grateful when all is going well. The question is, do we praise God from whom all blessings flow when they cease to flow, and the battle rages, and we taste the bitterness of life instead of the sweetness? Biblical gratitude to God does not depend on circumstances, but on unswerving confidence in God no matter what, because of what he has done gives assurance he will lead again in triumph.

The prophet Habakkuk expresses it in Hab. 3:17-18, "Although the fig tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labor of the olive shall fail and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls: Yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation." Nothing could change the fact of what God had done for him. He was the God of his salvation. Godly thanksgiving almost always grows stronger in the midst of trials. Thanksgiving originated in America out of a setting of much suffering for the Pilgrims. Many died, and the living suffered, but thanks be to God was still their victory cry.

Lincoln's official proclamation in 1863, which made Thanksgiving a national holiday came out of a setting of a nation torn by the Civil War. Lincoln, in spite of the problems of unequal magnitude, was mindful of what God had done for this nation. In his mind he believed, as Paul did, that God was always leading him in triumph. He referred to national blessings as, "The gracious gifts of the Most High God, who, while dealing with us in anger for our sins, hath nevertheless remembered mercy."

Christian Thanksgiving is not a negative matter of being grateful for what is not. Paul was not thankful that he escaped severe beating and imprisonment. He was not grateful for never having been in a shipwreck; for never being stoned or run out of town; for never being criticized by fellow believers. Paul was not joyful because he had no physical problems. He was not thankful that he had never hungered or thirsted, or that he had never been cold and full of anxiety, which gave him sleepless nights. Paul did not escape any of these things, and so he could not be thankful that he had escaped them. He was thankful for what God did, and not just for what God had prevented. God did not prevent hardly anything for Paul, but He did lead him in triumph in spite of all his suffering, and for this Paul was deeply grateful.

Let us keep Paul's experience and perspective in mind when we tend to complain over the pains we must endure. Some poet put it-

Forgive us, Lord, when we complain
Of little pains and small delays;
Help us to carry cheerfully
Our little crosses to thy praise.

It is so easy for us to think on the same level as the non-Christian, and be thankful just

for our fine homes, life of freedom, and security. All of these are a great blessing, but all of them can change without there being a change in what God has done for us in Christ. Paul had none of these things, but he was ever thankful for what God did and continued to do for him in Christ. Of course, if we are not always moving forward in victory, then we cannot imitate Paul. We are forced to be thankful on a pagan level if that is where we live. If this be so, let Paul's experience be a challenge to you to move up to the Christian level where victorious living leads to true Christian Thanksgiving. It is only in Christ that we are led of God in triumph. Paul was not only thankful for what God did for him, but also-

II. FOR WHAT GOD DID THROUGH HIM.

The second half of verse 14 in the RSV reads, "And through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of Him everywhere." What unique and beautiful imagery. Paul pictures the triumphant Christian as a perfume dispenser spreading the fragrance of the knowledge of God. This fits the picture of the Roman triumph march in which the atmosphere would be filled with sweet smelling perfume and incense. Paul says that the knowledge of God is like fragrant perfume, and that he was used of God to spread this blessing. Paul was so thankful that God would use him and through him bless people everywhere.

There is no greater joy than the joy of being useful for a great purpose. Dr. Bonar expressed the longing of every sensitive and sensible Christian in his poem, part of which goes like this:

Make use of me, my God! Let me not be forgot;
A broken vessel cast aside, One whom thou needest not.
Thou usest all Thy works...The weakest things that be;
Each has a service of its own, For all things wait on thee.
Thou usest the high stars, The tiny drops of dew;
The great peak, and little hill, My God, O use me too!

A small boy came home crying one day and his mother asked him what his problem was. He said he had worked hard for his cousin pulling weeds, but he never even said thanks. That night when he went to bed he said to his mother, "I was sorry I pulled those weeds this morning, but now I am not." The mother said, "Why? Did your cousin thank you?" He replied, "No, but I feel good inside, and now I know why. It's God's thank you." He felt the good feeling that comes when you know you have been used by God to do something right. It is the opposite of the bad feeling that you suffer when you know you have done something wrong, and have been a servant of evil.

This is another area of thanksgiving that we often bypass. How often do we get excited about the fact that God uses us to spread the fragrance of the knowledge of Him? If we don't, maybe it is due to the fact that we are stinkers instead of samples of the Rose of Sharon and the Lilly of the Valley. We must be filled with the fragrance of the knowledge of God ourselves if we are to capture the attention of others with this precious aroma. Paul in 5:14 of this letter says that the love of Christ constrains him. Paul cannot help but spread the fragrance of the knowledge of God everywhere, for he is filled to overflowing with it. Someone wrote,

Long ago the lilies faded,
Which to Jesus seemed so fair,
But the love that bade them blossom
Still is working everywhere.

Man lost the beautiful and fragrant atmosphere of Eden, but in Christ that atmosphere can again be experienced. Paul is so thankful that he can be a part of such a glorious ministry as bringing the aroma of God to other people. The Gospel is the great spiritual air refresher. The rotten and polluted atmosphere of man's soul can be made clean and fragrant if he will breathe in the Gospel of God's fragrance. No man deserves to be used for such a high purpose, but that is why Paul is so thankful that God would use him. If God only blest us as we deserve, we could not get along on so little. He makes us partners in the greatest work on earth, and when you realize it, you cannot help but be thankful. Our problem is that we do so little cultivating of the flower of gratitude in our hearts. We neglect consideration of the great facts of life concerning what God does for us, and what He is willing to do through us.

Paul pictures preaching and witnessing as a delightful, charming and powerfully attractive profession. God has a beautiful use for us, and we need to respond with a beautiful spirit. Paul Rees paraphrases the words of Col. 3:15: "Brother Christian, I know you have the flower of gratitude planted in your hearts. But I want you to cultivate it. See to it that it grows." Thanks be to God for the beauty of Christ that can through me please both God and man. We can be fragrant flowers of Christ in a world of weeds.

Beecher said, "As flowers carry dewdrops, trembling on the edges of the petals and ready to fall at the first waft of wind or brush a bird, so the heart should carry its beaded words of thanksgiving, and at the first breath of heavenly flavor, let down the shower, perfumed with the heart's gratitude." Hosea Ballow wrote, "Gratitude is the fairest blossom which springs from the soul, and the heart of man knoweth none more fragrant."

Thanks be to God that through us He can spread the fragrance of the knowledge of Him everywhere, says Paul. What God did for and through Paul He can do for us and through us. Therefore, let us on this Thanksgiving mix with the aroma of turkey and other delightful odors be sweet smelling fragrance of Christ like, Pauline gratitude.

13. THANK GOD FOR AMERICA Based on Gal. 5:1-12

Governments often fear Christians because they have a loyalty to God which they put above their loyalty to government, and this limits their power to control. Jesus started this by His famous response, "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesars and unto God the things that are God's." That was the beginning of the Christian dual loyalty to God and government, with the duty to God taking first priority. And so when the Apostles were told by the authorities that they could not preach the Gospel Peter and John said to them in Acts 4, "We must obey God rather than men." This has become a basic Christian value system.

The freedom to obey God is the number one priority of Christians in relationship to their government.

Whenever a government says that you cannot obey God because it is against our laws, the Christian church has said, "You have just become an idol demanding a loyalty that belongs to God alone, and we must resist." This is the principle behind the history of our nations fight for freedom. It has always been a fight to be free to obey God and be one nation under God. It has been a fight against those who say we are a nation over God, and we demand supreme loyalty. Long before the Declaration of Independence and the Revolutionary War, this was the battle Americans were fighting.

Freedom is the very essence of the Christian life. If you are not free to obey Christ and live in harmony with His teachings, you cannot truly be a Christian. Therefore, the Christian is obligated to resist all attempts to limit that freedom. Paul states it clearly in Gal. 5:1, "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery." Paul was concerned about Christians being limited by the Old Testament law, but the principle applies to any form of limitation to religious liberty.

This is how the early Americans felt about the King of England. They had established a democracy and loved the liberty of self-rule. For them to go back under the bondage of a monarchy would be like the Israelites going back under the bondage to Egypt after being set free. The pastors of the early Americans were preaching freedom, and when Charles II of England heard that he tried to put a stop to it by demanding that only Episcopal clergy be allowed to form churches, and that only those church members be allowed to vote. The King was going to get control of the church so that the state could dominate it and use it for its ends. This is the goal of all governments in lands where the separation of church and state is not guaranteed by the Constitution, as is the case in the U. S. If the state can control the church they can eliminate the risks of religious liberty to their power.

When the Colonists refused to obey the King, he demanded that they give up their charter and submit to the King's authority. The Puritan leader Increase Mather preached that it would be a sin to relinquish their freedom to the King, for it had been won by the sacrifice of faithful men. The people voted not to submit, and the King was determined to force submission by sending troops. He died before he did, but he started a strategy to undermine the colonies fight for freedom. He sent Sir Edmund Andros to work at making the Episcopal Church a dominant force in the colonies, for it was state controlled.

He forced all shipping to be done by British ships, and so all trade had to be with England only. The Americans said that this was an abuse of power, for the King is to serve the people and oppress them. II Sam. 23:3 says, "He that rules over men must be just, ruling in the fear of God." The King of England was not just, but had become a tyrant trying to rob Americans of liberties they had already won. Christians recognized that revolution is a last resort, and so for decades they resisted such action. The King of England got into other wars in Europe and let up the pressure, and so it was sort of a stalemate until George III came to power in 1760.

His ego demanded total submission, and so he took it as his cause to crush the independent spirit of the Colonies. He more than doubled the size of the British army in the Colonies to 7500 men, and then made the Colonies pay for them by increasing taxes. The tax collectors paid themselves such high salaries that there was nothing left for the cost of the troops. All the taxes went to pay for the tax collectors. This was the same problem that made tax collectors a hated breed in the New Testament. New taxes had to be leveled until the people developed a very ugly mood. It was becoming pure robbery.

The clergy preached many sermons on the injustice of it all, but King George, like Pharaoh, had a hardened heart. Americans were being taxed by a government in which they had no voice. They preached that the King had become a tyrant, and they had no more obligation to submit to him than to a pirate or highwayman. He forfeited his right to be obeyed by becoming an enemy of the people. They had the right to resist him as any other invader. It was a matter of self-defense.

A showdown with the King was inevitable. The persistent spirit of liberty had to be rooted out and so King George threatened more, and American preachers found more biblical basis for rejecting his authority. On New Year's Day of 1773 the men of Marlborough made this public declaration: "Death is more eligible than slavery. A free-born people are not required by the religion of Jesus Christ to submit to tyranny, but make use of such power as God has given them to recover and support their laws and liberties. We implore the Ruler above the skies, that He would bare His arm in defense of His church and people..."

Peter Marshall in *The Light And Glory*, dealing with the history of this period, says that even crown-appointed governors, faithful to the King, wrote back to England saying, "If you ask an American, who is his master? He will tell you he has none, nor any governor but Jesus Christ." The cry was going up and down the link of American, "No King but King Jesus." I never realized it before, but the fight for liberty in America was a fight for religious liberty. It was a fight for the freedom to obey God rather than man. This was the key theme that united the Colonies. You might be thinking that this sounds more like a history lesson than a sermon, but I am trying to communicate that the history of our fight for freedom is a sermon. It is a sermon on the providence of God, and a sermon on the priority of obeying God above all other authority. It is also a sermon on the power of people who are united to win a victory for God established values.

History is His-story, and so it is full of sermons. History shows us how injustice cuts its own throat. The British tax laws were forcing many American tea companies into bankruptcy, and so you had the famous Boston Tea Party with Americans tossing tea into the bay. The King demanded that the culprits be prosecuted, but none could be found. So he punished all of Boston by closing her ports to all commerce in 1774. This was to be a warning to all of the colonies that said, "Don't mess with us!" This act of tyranny had the opposite effect. It united the Colonies as nothing before. This act ruined Boston financially, for it was the most prosperous port in America. Out rage swept across the Colonies and every city began to send provisions to Boston. George Washington himself sent 50 pounds, which would be near 5000 dollars in value today.

William Prescott sent a message to Boston along with supplies and he used our text in his message. He wrote, "We heartily sympathize with you, and are always ready to do all in our power for your support, comfort and relief, knowing that Providence has placed you where you must stand the first shock. We consider that we are all embarked in the same boat and must sink or swim together.....Let us all be of one heart, and stand fast in the liberty wherewith Christ has made us free."

This was the sentiment that King George had provoked in the Colonies. Jesus said that a kingdom divided against itself cannot stand, and this was the major problem in the Colonies. They were not united states, but they were divided by endless varieties of opinions. But the Boston Tea Party and its consequences united them and made them realize they had to swim together or sink. Patrick Henry at the dawn of 1775 said in the Virginia House, "There is no longer room for hope. If we wish to be free, we must fight! An appeal to arms and to the God of Hosts is all that is left us.....We shall fight alone. God presides over the destinies of nations, and will raise up friends for us. The battle is not for the strong alone; it is to the vigilant, the active, the brave.....Is life so dear, or peace so sweet, as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery? Forbid it, almighty God! I know not what course others might take, but as for me, give me liberty or give me death!"

The love of God-given liberty united the people, and that alone made them adequate for the battle ahead. If they had lack this unity, they never would have had a chance, for all the odds were against them. King George had a well- trained army of 50 thousand men, and the best navy in the world. The Americans had no navy at all, and they could only muster a little over 10 thousand for the army, and they were poorly trained. It was a David and Goliath conflict, but with a David who was nowhere near as good with a sling as the David of the Bible. The British were disciplined and well organized. The Americans were not, for they often just walked away from the battle and went home when they felt like it.

The war would have been over by lunchtime had the Americans fought by the British rules of war. Had they lined up across from the line of red coats they would have been demolished in no time. But the Americans had learned from the Indians the way to fight a superior force. They would hide behind trees and rocks and fire as individuals at any enemy fool enough to be out in the open, which was just where the British were. Americans owe a lot to the Indians who taught them many lessons in survival.

The British won 17 major battles, and the Americans won 22. But it cost many thousands of lives, and a great deal of money. Freedom is costly and that is why we need to celebrate the 4th of July. It is a parallel to our celebration to communion. We celebrate communion to remember the price paid for our freedom from the bondage to sin and its consequences. We celebrate the 4th of July to remember the cost of our freedom from bondage to tyranny and unjust rule. Freedom is the foundation for most all of our great holidays and celebrations. Christmas is our celebration of freedom from isolation from God. God came into history and made it clear that we are not alone. God is with us in Christ our Emmanuel. Easter is our celebration of freedom from the power of death. Jesus liberated us from this bondage and gave us eternal life.

We do not think of the 4th of July as a Christian holiday and celebration. It is more

secular in nature. That is why it is a blessing that is sometimes falls on Sunday, for then we have the opportunity to point out the Christian impact on the whole history of our fight for freedom. There is danger in patriotism becoming a form of idolatry, but it is also possible to go the other way and fail to see the Christian duty to be patriotic. Christians have played a major role in the patriotism of America, and we need to see it and be grateful for it, and then carry on that balance of love for God and love of country.

My Country Tis Of Thee was written by the Baptist pastor Samuel Francis Smith in 1832. **The Pledge of Alliance** was written by another Baptist pastor, Francis Bellamy in 1892. John Witherspoon, the Presbyterian pastor, was one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence. His Colony of New Jersey had elected him to the Continental Congress just a few days before they voted on the Declaration. Witherspoon represented the churches perspective on this momentous decision. He had been the President of Princeton where many of the leaders of the Colonies were educated, such as James Madison, who joined Thomas Jefferson in making religious freedom a reality in Virginia, and who went on to become the 4th President of the United States.

Witherspoon had an impact on the lives of many of the early leaders of America, and one of them was John Adams the second President of the United States. He was chosen by Congress to draft the proclamation for days of thanksgiving and other special occasions, for he would include in them the belief that divine providence was guiding this nation, and that the preservation of our religious heritage was crucial to success. John Witherspoon wrote the Proclamation that George Washington gave after his great victory at Yorktown. It went like this: "Whereas, it hath pleased Almighty God, Father of mercies, remarkably to assist and support the United States of America in their important struggle for liberty, against the long continued efforts of a powerful nation: It is the duty of all ranks to observe and thankfully acknowledge the interpositions of his Providence in their behalf."

Witherspoon had a great impact on Washington, for they spent a lot of time together, and Washington became a firm believer that our nation could never remain strong and moral without the religious influence of the churches. Witherspoon led other pastors into politics, but he was very strong in his conviction that politics had no place in the pulpit. He never used his sermons to promote political convictions. He felt this would an abuse of his position. Only once did he break his own rule and bring politics into his message, and that was in 1776 when he defended the war for independence.

He preached, "At this season it is not only lawful but necessary, and I willingly embrace the opportunity of declaring my opinion without any hesitation, that the cause in which America is now in arms, is the cause of justice, of liberty and of human nature. So far as we have hitherto proceeded, I am satisfied that the confederacy of the Colonies has not been the effect of pride, resentment or sedition, but of a deep and general conviction that our civil and religious liberties, and consequently in a great measure the temporal and eternal happiness of us and our posterity, depended on the issue."

It was deep religious conviction that united the Americans in their fight. Without this unity there would not have been much chance of their succeeding. Christianity and liberty go hand and hand, and they are an unbeatable pair. The practical lesson for us is to

recognize that unity in Christ and in Christian freedom is still the winning combination that will lead to victory in any battle we face. Get Christians united and you will have a force that the gates of hell cannot hold back. Unity is also the key to the good life when the battles are over. Psalms 133:1 says, "How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity." After the war was over this was a major struggle to achieve. A common enemy had united them, but when that enemy was gone they began to experience division. They were like the church of Corinth where they were saying, "I am of Paul; I am of Apollos; I am of Cephus, or I am of Christ." The Americans were saying, "I am of Virginia; I am of New Jersey, or I am of Rhode Island, etc." Every colony wanted to be independent and not united.

North Carolina and Tennessee declared themselves a separate state and called themselves Frankland, and then Franklin in honor of Benjamin Franklin. The government of North Carolina sent troops to force them to cease this rebellion. Then Ethan Allen and his Green Mountain Boys settled in parts of three states: Vermont, New Hampshire and Massachusetts, and they set themselves up as a separate country, and they did not join the U.S. until 1792.

Virginia and Maryland took steps to divide the whole country into 3 or 4 different countries. But fortunately men like James Madison got that plan derailed, and a national convention was called to deal with forming the United States. James Madison was a scrawny little bookworm and not a leader type, and so he backed Washington to be the President of the Philadelphia Convention of 1787. Washington was one of the biggest men of that time. The average American man was short and fat. He was about 5 feet tall, but Washington was a towering 6-foot. He would not have been impressive today, but then he was a giant of a man. He did not know much about government, but Madison knew almost everything, and so this potent pair of brains and brawn led the fight for unity.

The divisions of states were unbelievable. Everybody thought the best idea was different from everybody else's. Two were even convinced that the best hope for America was to have a king. Five delegates thought the rich people should run the country. It seemed like a hopeless chaotic mess that could not be unraveled. Some delegates just walked out, and others threatened to do so if they did not get their way. To make a long story short, the only way to satisfy everyone enough to get a national government started was to make it extremely complicated. The United States has one of the most complicated governments in the world. The reason it had to be formed with so many checks and balances was so that it could never rob people of the freedom that had been so dearly won.

It had to have a Senate where every state got equal representation to satisfy the little states. It had to have a House of Representatives where every state got represented according to population in order to satisfy the larger states. It had to have a system of electors of equal number to the Senators and Representatives to elect the President. Benjamin Franklin came up with this crazy idea, and because it was terribly complicated the Convention accepted it. We can't look at all the complex issues that had to be solved to form a national government. Even when it was all done most did not like it. It was just the best they could do and they were united in this.

Unity called for complexity so that no group could dominate other groups. The weak

and the minorities had to be protected from the strong and the majorities. Our nation and our Constitution are great because built into them is the basic value that all people are created equal, and all have a right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. This conviction about freedom is the unifying principle that makes an American an American. Any one who feels there are people who do not have an equal right to freedom is un-American. They are also un-Christian in that it was Christian conviction that led to this kind of freedom being guaranteed by our Constitution. Christian leaders made sure the Bill of Rights would forever prevent our government from interference in the religious liberty of its citizens.

Christians can celebrate the 4th of July as a sacred day of thanksgiving, for it was the Declaration of Independence that led to the Constitution and the forming of the United States with all of its freedoms and religious liberty. Every Christian who knows the way God providently led this nation needs to say often, "Thank God for America."

14. THE PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING based on Phil. 1:3-6

My earliest childhood memories of being in church are of the rope that I could ride. The thick rope hung down through the ceiling in the church entry way. I was so little that when the rope was pulled to ring the bell in the belfry, I could hang on to it and get a ride as it would pull me up off the floor, and then set me down again. It is a pleasant memory in my mind, and my earliest thoughts of being in church are memories of church being a fun place to be. This memory was brought back to my mind when I read this statement by Christmas Evans, the great Welsh preacher. He said, "Prayer is the rope up in the belfry; we pull it and it rings the bell up in heaven."

For the first time in my life this image linked prayer and fun. I had never given it a thought that prayer and fun could be compatible partners. After all, prayer is a solemn and serious business, and that is why we tell children to be quiet, and stop having fun and clowning around. Bow your head and close your eyes and knock off anything you are doing that could be construed as having fun. From this childhood lesson we move on to a life time of having it drilled into our brain that prayer is anything but fun. It is a chore; it is a challenge; it is such a burdensome labor that it is one of the hardest aspects of the Christian life to develop.

C. S. Lewis, one of the greatest Christians of the 20th century, describes the feelings of millions of Christians when it comes to prayer.

"...Prayer is irksome. And excuse to omit it is never unwelcome. When it is over, this casts a feeling of relief and holiday over the rest of the day. We are reluctant to begin.

We are delighted to finish. While we are at prayer but not while we are reading a novel or solving a cross-word puzzle, any trifle is enough to distract us....

The odd thing is that this reluctance to pray is not confined to periods of dryness. When yesterday's prayers are full of comfort and exaltation, today's will still be felt as, in some degree, a burden."

We could quote many others who feel the same, and all the evidence indicates the majority of Christians feel that prayer is a hard part of the Christian life. Seldom to never does anyone relate prayer and fun. I must confess I certainly never did until this past week when I saw, for the first time, that for Paul prayer was fun. It was a time to be joyful, and a time of happy memories, and thanksgiving to God for His abundant goodness and grace.

Let me show you what has been before my eyes for years, but which I never saw until the Holy Spirit opened my eyes to see. Now I want to be the instrument to illumine you on what is clearly revealed in God's Word, but is also hidden because Satan does not want God's people to discover that prayer can be fun. Look at the facts. Paul says in verse 4, "I always pray with joy." Then in chapter 4 Paul goes all out to make it clear that prayer is to be surrounded with positive joyful feelings, and the negative feelings of life are to be eliminated. Listen to 4:4-7, "Rejoice in the Lord always, I will say it again, rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. 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 your minds in Christ Jesus."

Paul is clearly revealing a life of prayer full of joy and thanksgiving. Eliminate the negative and accentuate the positive. Prayer is to be a fun and enjoyable time, and not a time we dread as a duty we have to be dragged into. Paul lived the way he wrote for others to live, and he demonstrated these words in his own life. When he was in the prison there is Philippi, having been attacked, beaten, flogged, and locked in stocks in a cell, we read this of Paul's attitude in Acts 16:25, "About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God..."

It was one of the most miserable days of his life, yet Paul is enjoying his prayer time, and he is singing hymns to God. In the midst of pain he is finding pleasure in prayer. He is singing songs of thanksgiving, and rejoicing in the Lord with the peace that passes understanding. Paul demonstrated the power of a thankful heart to overcome enormous negative circumstances. Prayer is not the dark garment of despair. Prayer is a bright garment of praise that will dress up the soul even on the dreariest of days.

It is not that there is never a time for lament and a pouring out of the poison in our soul to God. This is a legitimate aspect of prayer as well, but the dominant note of Paul in prayer is the high note of joyful thanksgiving. This enabled Paul to look any direction in his life and see reasons for being and optimistic Christian. We want to focus on each of the directions Paul could look: The past, the present, and the future, and see how his thankful spirit made

prayer a fun time. First look at-

I. HIS THANKFULNESS FOR THE PAST. V. 3.

"I thank my God every time I remember you." Paul had fun in prayer because his prayer was full of gratitude for memories of the past. When Paul says later in this letter that he forgets what is behind, he was not referring to his past blessings, but to the burdens he bore. His past was not all good at all. It was loaded with bad things like being falsely arrested, and kept in prison. He was treated like dirt, and humiliated. He had to suffer great injustice, but Paul says I forgot all that of my past, and I press on to the future, and the prize God has for me in Christ.

What Paul does not forget is all the good things and blessings he had in Philippi. We have a choice as to what we bring on to the screen of our mind from the computer-like data bank of our brain. Some Christians chose to remember the hurts, the failures, and the bad stuff of the past. That is why you have Christians who are neurotics of all kinds, and depressive type people. They have legitimate records of life's injustices, and damaging negatives. There is no question they have had some, and even many, raw deals, but they let these bad memories dominate their memory. The result is, they seldom feel joyful and thankful, for you cannot have these positive emotions when your focus is on pain. Imagine how depressed Paul would have felt if he would have written to the Philippians, "I can't help remembering how miserable it was to be in that damp moldy prison. I still wake up in the night remembering the stench of the other prisoners, and the unsanitary conditions of the jail. The injustice of it all still burns me to the core as I languish here in Rome incarcerated for doing good. It truly is a rotten world, and hell is too good for the scum who treat people like this." All of this would be authentic reality, but it was not the reality Paul chose to remember.

Paul was thankful for the past, not because it was free from evil and hurts, but because he forgot that bad stuff, and remembered instead the goodness of the Philippians, and the grace of God in his life. Everyone of us could look back and pick out bad things in our past. People who did us wrong, and events that were unfair are in everyone's past. Everyone has their own personal copy of, when bad things happen to good people. Some feel it is their gift to be able to recall the negatives of life, and remember every terrible detail. Then they wonder why the Christian life is not making them happy, and why prayer is a laborious chore.

We need to see that the only way to be a happy Christian, who can even make prayer time a fun time, is to forget the bad past, and remember those things that fill our minds with a sense of gratitude. Precious memories for which we can thank God are the key to joyful praying. Tom Landry, the Christian coach for the Dallas Cowboys for many years said, "I suffer over a loss like everyone else, but its how soon you forget it and get going again that's important." If your thankometer needle gets stuck on the negatives of the past, it will not work, and you will be locked into a non-thankful mode letting life's burdens, rather than life's blessings, be the dominant influence in your life.

In the book Tiger Of The Snows by Tenzig Norgay, one of the two men, who on May 29, 1953 reached the top of Mt. Everest said, "What I felt was a great closeness to God and that

was enough for me. In my deepest heart I thanked God." All the fears and frustrations, and the pain and struggle, were forgotten. All that mattered was the blessing. Only those who learned this can live like Paul with a perpetual thankful spirit.

Examine your memory bank, and ask yourself which memories do you tend to focus on in the past. If you find you tend to remember the negatives, you need to listen to Paul, and follow his instructions. He practiced what he preached, and that is why he is our guide to a thankful spirit for the past, and a fun time in prayer time. Listen to the focus he gives to the Philippians in 4:8, "...Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable-if anything is excellent or praiseworthy, think about such things." If this is the kind of stuff you bring to the screen of your mind from your memory bank, you too will, like Paul, be a person full of thankfulness for the past. Next look at-

II. HIS THANKFULNESS FOR THE PRESENT.

The same principle applies here as to the past. Which present realities are you going to choose to focus on? The fact that you are in prison unjustly, or the fact that God is using this bad thing for the advancement of the Gospel? The fact that you are separated from your good friends in Philippi, or the fact that in spite of that separation they are still supporting you in prayer, and by means of gifts. In the end of this letter Paul is so grateful for their renewed financial support. He says he has learned to be content in both plenty and want, but he was thankful that they met his need, for even Paul found life easier when he had plenty rather than being in want.

Notice here in verses 4 and 5, the real source of his joy and thanksgiving and prayer was their partnership in the Gospel from the first day until now. Right now in the present moment Paul felt not alone, even though isolated in prison. He felt like a part of a body of people who cared for him. Paul was thankful for the present because of his partnership with people. Thanksgiving is a relational thing. If there are no people in your life adding to your joys and comforts, then you are living a deprived life. You have got to have relationships to be a thankful person. Paul was a million miles away from these people, but they were still partners, and that oneness gave him a joyful and thankful perspective on life.

Paul was thankful for their gifts, but more thankful that he had partners who cared enough to give gifts. In other words, Paul, like all of us, enjoyed physical comforts, and was not opposed to having some cash in his pocket. But the real source of his gratitude was not the gifts, but the giving people. Sometimes we get so excited about good things that we forget they are relatively insignificant compared to good people. Paul had his priority on people, and not their possessions. We often forget that almost all of our blessings in life come to us through other people. If we are thankful for the blessings, but fail to see the value of the people they come through, we will be operating on a lower level of thanksgiving.

The Jews have a story that illustrates this lower level of thanks which ends up being a no thanks spirit. "Rabbi Jacobs, I need \$50.00 to get out of debt," sobbed Gottlieb. "I keep praying to God for help but He doesn't send it!"

"Don't lose faith," said the rabbi. "Keep praying."

After Gottlieb left his house, the rabbi felt sorry for him. "I don't make much money," he thought, "but that poor man needs it." I'll give him twenty-five dollars out of my own pocket."

A week later, the rabbi stopped Gottlieb, "Here, God sent this to you!"

Back in his home, Gottlieb bowed his head. "Thank you, Lord!" he said. "But next time you send money, don't send it through Rabbi Jacobs-that crook kept half of it." Because he did not recognize God works through people to bless him, he had a bitter spirit rather than a thankful spirit. If you don't find yourself thanking God for other people often, you are taking the low road rather than the high road of thanksgiving.

In 4:6 Paul says, "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition with thanksgiving present your requests to God." Paul has a high view of what the Christian is capable of doing. He feels the Christian can choose where to focus his mind. Life is full of things to be anxious about, but he says, you don't have to give them your attention. You can choose instead to focus on things for which to be grateful. Easier said than done, but he did it, and so can we. Chuck Swindoll says, "Worry forces us to focus on the wrong things." If you are anxious, you are focused on the things that are wrong, or could go wrong. But if you are thankful, you are focused on the things that are right, or could go right. We all have a choice as to where we focus our minds, and which choice we make determines whether we are anxious or thankful Christians.

Paul says if we choose to focus on what is right so that we rejoice with thanksgiving, this will lead to a peace that guards our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. In other words, thanksgiving is like a spiritual body guard that protects our emotions and thoughts from being captured by the negative spirit that Satan would love to get us ensnared with. The Christian who is ever focusing on the negative that makes them frustrated and anxious is a Christian with no security system. They are sitting ducks for the devil to rob them of their joy in Jesus. A safe Christian is a thankful Christian. If you want to live dangerously, and risk losing your Christian testimony, just leave thanksgiving out of your life. It is the equivalent of a layoff notice to the Spirit of God. It is like saying, your services are no longer needed. I can take care of myself.

When you hear a Christian locked into the negatives of life, full of bitterness, frustration, and resentment, you know they have laid off the Holy Spirit, or as the Bible puts it, quenched the Spirit. They have lost the attitude of gratitude which enables them to see the present blessings of life in spite of the burdens. Paul looked right past the negatives all around him, and focused on the pleasant blessings of the support and partnership of the Philippians. He was not going to wait for all to turn out okay before he was thankful. He was thankful right now in the present, for the bad things of life cannot rob you of the good things of life, if that is where you focus. Next we see-

III. HIS THANKFULNESS FOR THE FUTURE.

Paul was thankful every direction he looked, because God is same yesterday, today, and forever, and He does not leave any good work unfinished. What He starts He completes, and the result will be a truly Christlike people to enjoy for all eternity. Paul writes in verse 6, "Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion

until the day of Christ Jesus." Paul was joyfully thankful because never stops working in us, and through us. He never said the Philippians were perfect. They had their weaknesses and faults that he had to deal with. He never said he was perfect. In chapter 3 he says he was not complete, but keeps pressing on, for the best is always yet to be.

Nobody knows better than Paul how poorly Christians can reflect the light of Christ. He knew of their sin and follies, and all the ways they fell short of the glory of God. He never wore blinders, or rose colored glasses. He was as fully aware of Christians sins as any human being has ever been, but this was not his primary focus. He had to deal with sin in Christians often, but his confidence and thankful spirit thrived on his vision of the future. This is the perspective of all the Biblical writers. The hope and expectation of the Christian is a future where all in Christ will be what He is-the perfect example of what God had in mind when He made man in His image. When God completes His work in us, we will be like Jesus.

It is true, the vision of heaven that John saw in Revelation was filled with delights for all the senses. The golden streets, the jeweled walls, the glorious light and music that thrill the eyes and ears, plus the fruit for taste, and incense for smell entice all of the senses to anticipate the ultimate in pleasure. But the fact is, all of this would be meaningless without the people out of every tongue, tribe, and nation that praise the Lamb for ever and ever. The bottom line is never things, but always people. Jesus lived for people, and he died for people. They were the treasure he came to seek and to save, and when this focus of God becomes our focus, as it was of Paul, we will be able to praise and thank God for the future.

The future in Christ is loaded with people who are like Jesus. They love and care and share, and make the future a paradise. The first paradise was no big deal without another person to relate to. Perfection, beauty, and abundance do not fill the bill. God made man so he cannot be complete without relationship. People and paradise are linked as necessities. If you could have the New Jerusalem all to yourself, you would be miserable, and soon realize it is nothing but glorified hell without other people. Someone once said that hell is other people, but the fact is hell is the lack of other people. Paul had a thankful spirit about the future because he knew he had a future filled with Christlike people.

Paul was thankful for the past because of these people, and their response to the Gospel. He was thankful for the present because these people were his partners in the Gospel. She was thankful for the future because these people would be with him as perfected saints. Lets face the reality of this. Much, if not most, of what we have to thank God for comes to us through other people. They are the primary tools of God to achieve His purpose in history.

Consider our American heritage from the Pilgrims. Governor Bradford of the Plymouth Colony wrote in his diary of a man he called, "A special instrument sent of God." He was referring to the incredible Indian named Squanto. His story, and how God used him to save the Pilgrims from certain destruction is one of the great providence's of history. Squanto was kidnapped and sold as a slave and taken to Spain. There he was trained in the Christian faith, and then sold to a merchant in England. He sent him with an expedition back to America. He was back in his native land just six months before the Pilgrims arrived. Here was an Indian who knew English. He helped the Pilgrims communicate and form friendly relations with the Indians. He lives with them and taught them how to plant corn, and to fish,

and to use them as fertilizer. It is not likely they could have survived without this gift of God. They thanked God often for this man.

An artist painted a picture of an old church with its time worn steeple. The bell is there and the rope hangs down to the earth. Beside the bell sits an owl suggesting that the bell had not been used for a long time. People are running by it as the street is full of hurrying people, but the motto under the picture says, "Why don't they ring?" Why don't we have fun in prayer by ringing the bell of heaven by thanksgiving to God for people in our past, present, and future? The opportunity to ring the bell of heaven by means of the joyful prayer of thanksgiving is ever available. May God help us to pull the rope, and add to the harmony of heaven, and the mirth on earth, with the prayer of thanksgiving.

15. THANKSGIVING THROUGH THANKS-LIVING

Based on Col. 3:15-17

Sir, Michael Costa, a famous composer and conductor from Naples, was once rehearsing with a vast array of instruments, and hundreds of voices. With the thunder of the organ; the role of the drums; the sounding of the horns, and the clashing of the symbols, the mighty chorus rang out. The piccolo player said himself, "In all this din it matters not what I do!" So he ceased to play. Suddenly Costa stopped and flung up his hands. All was still, and he shouted out, "Where is the piccolo?" His sensitive ear missed it, and its absence made a difference to him.

God, likewise, has a sensitive ear, and misses every voice not lifted in praise and thanksgiving. It makes a difference whether we thank God or not. We may often feel like the piccolo player that it does not matter. With all the angels of heaven singing, and millions of voices on earth joining them with songs of thanksgiving, how can it matter what we do? For us to say thank you Lord seems even more insufficient than the skill of a piccolo player in a colossal symphony. Our benefits and blessings are so great, and our ability to express our gratitude so inadequate, that we sometimes question if we are really thankful at all. The more one counts his blessings, the more inadequate he feels to give thanks. Simon Greenberg expresses this in poetry.

Five thousand breathless dawns all new,
Five thousand flowers fresh in dew;
Five thousand sunsets wrapped in gold,
One million snowflakes served ice cold;
Five quite friends; one baby's love,
One white mad sea with clouds above;
One hundred music-haunted dreams,
Of moon-drenched roads and hurrying streams;
Of prophesying winds, and trees,
Of silent stars and browsing bees,
One June night in a fragrant wood;

**On heart that loved and understood.
I wondered when I waked at day,
How-how in God's name-I could pay!**

We can't even begin to thank God enough for all the blessings of nature and loved ones, let alone for the gift of salvation and eternal life. To think of paying is foolish, for we are indebted to an infinite measure. The question is, how can we thank God? He hears our weak prayer of thanks and counts it essential, but even so, we know that words are cheap and cost us nothing. Certainly there is some way to express our gratitude to God in a more concrete and practical way. Paul here in Col. 3:15-17 gives us, I think, just what we are looking for to make thanksgiving a truly vital aspect of our lives. He gives us in these verses three ways in which we can give thanksgiving through thanksgiving. The first way is connected with-

I. THE PEACE OF CHRIST. v.15.

Paul says let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts. Peace us one of gifts Jesus left with His disciples before He went to the cross. Is not an exclusive gift to them only, however, but is the possession of all believers who are united to Christ by faith. But it is one thing to possess the peace of Christ, and another to let the peace of Christ possess you. It is the latter that Paul is urging upon the Colossian Christians. The degree to which we let the peace of Christ rule in our hearts is the measure of our gratitude for the gift of His peace. Paul connects being thankful directly with letting peace rule in our hearts. The peace of Christ could never rule in the unthankful heart. The two are mutual aids. The more thankful one is, the more the peace of Christ will rule, and the more it rules, the more thankful one is.

Paul is certainly an example of this. He writes this from prison where he could very soon suffer a violent death, and yet he writes of peace and being thankful. Paul was thankful for every state he was in, for the peace of Christ reigned in his heart. His was a life of thanksgiving, for he lived always for the end of pleasing God. He urges all Christians to pursue a like path by letting the peace of Christ rule in their hearts.

**So shall our walk to close to God,
Calm and serene our frame,
So purer light shall mark the road
That leads us to the Lamb.**

What does it mean to let the peace of Christ rule? The Greek word is the term for umpire. In a baseball game, if a dispute breaks out, the umpire must make a decision and settle the dispute. Lightfoot, the Greek scholar, says of this word, "Wherever there is a conflict of motives or impulses or reasons, the peace of Christ must step in and decide which is to prevail." In other words, the peace of Christ is the umpire that is to settle all disputes in our lives, and put down all rebellion. This means that Christians, like everyone else, have conflicts in their lives. They have emotions and wills that are often in a turmoil and do not know which way to turn. It is at this point the Christian has a resource in the peace of Christ. Let Christ make the decision. Commit yourself to do only what is in harmony with Christ, and you will be at peace.

Let the experience of Christ himself be our guide. In Gethsemane His heart was in conflict, and he was deeply troubled. The greatest decision of His life was being made. He gained perfect peace by letting the peace of God rule in His heart. He resolved all conflict by total submission, and said, "Not my will but thine be done." So when we find ourselves in one of those situations where we don't know what to do, resolve the conflict by submitting to Christ. In the context Paul is referring to conflict with other Christians. We are called to be one body, and anything that divides Christians is an agent of Satan. Do not let him have control, but let the peace of Christ rule here as well.

John Chrysostom gives an illustration: "Suppose a man to have been unjustly insulted, two thoughts are born of the insult, the one urging him to vengeance, and the other two patience, and these wrestle with one another. If the peace of God stands as umpire, it bestows the prize on that which calls to endurance, and puts the other to shame." By so doing we are giving God thanks for His grace. That is thanksgiving through thanksgiving.

II. THE WORD OF CHRIST. V.16

The word of Christ is just that, the words of Christ which we have recorded in the Bible. Here we have another very concrete way of expressing our gratitude to God, by seeking to know His will. But note, it is not enough that it dwell in your home on the bookshelf, or on the end table, or in the closet. The measure of our devotion is the degree in which we let the word of Christ dwell in our hearts and minds. Paul says to let it dwell in you richly. We must be filled with its content. Paul does not say let it visit you now and then, but let it dwell in you. Let your heart be its home, and not merely its motel. Let it reside in you and reside there richly, not as a narrow stream, but as a full flowing river. Moderation is no virtue when it comes to gaining a knowledge of God's word.

A letter from a loved one is precious even before you know it's contents. So the Bible is precious to us even when we are ignorant of much of it. But what boy or girl would be content with merely having such a letter when they can open it and gain the precious knowledge of it's contents, and what Christian can be content to own a Bible, but not know the riches of its contents? The truly thankful heart will take full advantage of having God's word, and do all they can to let it dwell in them richly.

When this is a reality, the richness of God's truth always spills over in song and poetry. A large portion of the Bible is poetry. One has written, "Every great spiritual revival in the Christian church has been accompanied by a corresponding outbreak and development of Christian hymnology." In college I did some research on a little known subject-hymns and missions. I discovered that missionaries have used hymns to reach the world. Hymnology has been a major factor in the spread of Christianity around the world. Some of our best hymns were written by missionaries, and even by converts of missionaries in other lands. Where the word of God dwells richly the heart is filled with song. Singing is a part of thanksgiving through thanksgiving.

III. THE NAME OF CHRIST V.17

Like the peace of Christ, and the word of Christ, the name of Christ is a resource and

standard for living that the non-believer does not have. The non-Christian is often like a chameleon which changes with the circumstances. His language and conduct are relative to the environment. He can curse and talk in foul language in one setting, and be very pleasant and respectable in another. Paul gives us a principle here that helps the obedient Christian be consistent in all circumstances, by doing all in word or deed in the name of Christ.

Notice, it is not just what we do and say in church, or in presence of certain persons. There are no qualifications at all, for it is all inclusive. It is a comprehensive principle which applies to all of life and all speech. There is no distinction between sacred and secular. It is not only prayer that is to be in the name of Jesus, but all of our speech. It is not only Bible reading which is to be in His name but all reading.

What does it mean to do all in the name of Jesus? Certainly it does not mean we are to tack on to the end of every sentence we say, in Jesus' name. It does not mean we are to make it a ritual we repeat over every act, such as, I eat this meal in the name of Jesus. I now bowl this line in the name of Jesus. The name of Jesus stands for His total character, authority, power, and glory. To do all in His name means to do all by His authority and approval, and in recognition of it. Our conduct is to be always of such a nature that it is approved of by Christ. To eat a hamburger in the name of Jesus is to do so, knowing it is with His approval, and with the conviction there is nothing in the act out of harmony with the glory of Christ, and in thanksgiving that it can be done.

This principle keeps us from the moral relativism of our age. We do not ask, what is being done, or what is the majority of opinion, but we ask can it be done in the name of Christ, that is, with His approval? This principle earnestly applied would revolutionize many a vocabulary. It is easy to preach and teach in the name of Christ, but the real test comes in the home, at work, at school, and when we are in the company of non-Christian friends. All that is said and done there must also meet the approval of Christ.

This principle affects every aspect of life. Our attitudes on all the issues of our day. If we take a position, it must always be with the conviction that Christ approves of that position. If we fight for a cause, it must be in the persuasion that the cause is for the glory of Christ. All of this opens up the danger of subjectivity, however, and each person will say, Christ approves of His view, even when He may not. This principle can only be properly obeyed by first obeying the exhortation to let the word of Christ dwell in you richly. There must be an objective standard to determine the mind of Christ. When we have the word of Christ as the foundation for our conviction, then we will have the peace of Christ to go ahead in the name of Christ.

Paul says also, that we are to in all we say and do give thanks to God in Christ. We are to thank God not only for all that He has done for us in Christ, but for all we can do for the glory of Christ. Without His grace man can do nothing pleasing in His sight, but by applying the principles of this passage we can do everything pleasing to Him. Every act and every word can be for His glory. Wherever we are now, we are far from where we can and ought to be in obedience and thanksgiving to Christ. Let's begin today in a greater measure than ever before to let the peace of Christ and the word of Christ dwell in us that we might do all in the name of Christ, and thus, give to God thanksgiving through thanksgiving.

16. THANK GOD FOR GRANDPARENTS Based on II Tim. 1:1-7

Professor Gordon Rupp, the British historian, was asked how the church could survive the decades of persecution and communist propaganda in Russia. His answer was, "It's largely due to grandparents." The communists made the big mistake of thinking that because the church was only full of old people it had no future. They failed to realize that grandparents have an impact on their grandchildren. The old Russian grandparents passed their faith on to their grandchildren, and that is why there is a new revival of Christianity in Russia.

We often look at the masses of youth in our schools and colleges and say that they are our future, and it is truly so, but let us not forget that our future is also in the past because the older people pass on their old values and faith to those masses of youth. Paul recognized this in the life of young Timothy. He loves Timothy dearly, but he recognized that his gifted young Christian servant was not merely a product of his own making. He had a heritage that went back to grandma Lois. She was the one who had faith in God, and she passed that faith on to her daughter Eunice, and together they instilled it in Timothy. He was not a self-made man. He was a product of a godly heritage that came to him from his grandmother.

The Bible is filled with grandparents. All of the Patriarchs of the Old Testament were grandparents, and practically every famous person in the Bible was a grandfather or grandmother. Every person in the genealogy of Jesus was a grandparent. The grandfather of Jesus is mentioned 3 times. A major portion of the Bible was written by grandfathers. But Lois is the only person in the Bible actually given the label of grandmother. There is one in the Old Testament given the name grandmother as well. Her name was Moaca the grandmother of King Asa, but she was a bad example. So Lois is the only named grandmother in the Bible with a positive influence.

Her grandson Timothy is one of the major New Testament servants of God, and Paul's two letters to him are a major part of the New Testament. We do not know a lot about Lois, but her faith touched her family, and through her family has touched all of history. She became an ideal example of the value and influence of grandparents, and on this grandparents day we want to focus on the role they play in God's plan for the family. It is of interest to note that the Greek word for grandmother is mamme. It is very close to mommy, and from which we get the term of respect, which is mom.

Grandparents should be addressed with terms of affection and respect. A Swedish proverb says, "Where there is a grandmother in the house the children always have a friend." In a world where children in greater numbers than ever have to endure the trials of divorced parents, and multiple kinds of abuse, the grandparents often are the glue that keeps together any semblance of continuity. If kids lose the present, but still have a past to tie into, they can bridge the gap to the future,

but rob them of their grandparents too and they are cut off and abandoned. That is why the courts in recent years have given grandparents the right of visitation so that no matter how messed up the parents are, the children can still develop a healthy relationship to grandma and grandpa.

Rita Fuentes received this letter from her grandson that illustrates the impact of grandparents, and one way we can let them know of our love.

"Dear Nana and Pop-pop:

I was reading a book written by one of my favorite poets, Rod McKuehn, and all of the sudden the phone rang. Immediately I scanned my desk top for some kind of bookmark and settled on a wallet-sized photo of you two from 1983.

After finishing my phone conversation, I opened the book and saw those two familiar faces saving my place. And then it occurred to me that the two of you have been saving a place for me for a long time now.

So basically, in celebration of Grandparents Day, I decided to let you know that I have a special place saved in my heart for both of you."

When the Star Tribune back in 1991 asked for letters of affection from 11 thousand students they did not write about boyfriends and girlfriends, or even about mom and dad, but mainly about grandparents. One of the main values grandchildren love is the escape from legalism they experience in their home. Grandparents will often let rules slide. This is called spoiling the grandkids, but it is great fun for everyone involved. When I was a young boy I was not allowed to drink coffee, but grandma would put a little in the bottom of a glass and then fill it up with milk. I felt proud to be able to drink coffee at grandma's house. There is no such rule there about no cookies before supper. All of the forbidden treats are available at any time at grandma's house.

It is part of the fun of the young and the old to escape for a while from the legalism of everyday life. It makes grandparents feel like liberators. Freedom is a gift that grandparents give to children. They need the discipline of rules and consistency that parents give them, but they also need to taste the freedom to explore, which grandparents often allow on a different level than they get at home. Grandparents help them see the bigger picture of their mom and dad. They are adults who were once children and they did a lot of crazy things as kids too. Grandparents tell about all of the silly pranks of their parents. This is great fun and gives the kids perspective. They also know they are loved when they blow it, for blowing it is part of the family tradition.

In the Old Testament there were cities of refuge where guilty people could run to for protection. Many children see the home of their grandparents as their city of refuge. Even the guilty need a place to flee to where they can be accepted in their guilt until they can work out their problem, and grandparents can provide this refuge. I can remember running across the field to grandmas house when I felt rejected at home.

Grandparents focus on making life fun for children, and teach that being spiritual and committed to Christ does not mean a loss of enjoyment and pleasure. They do not demand as much as parents, but give a lot out of sheer grace, and ask nothing in return. They illustrate the love of God who gave His Son while we were still sinners. The free gifts of love

from grandparents leads to a sense of gratitude in grandchildren. They have to get into their 20's or 30's before they fully appreciate all that mom and dad have done for them, but they can feel it early toward grandpa and grandma, and that leads them to want to do what pleases their grandparents. Grandparents provide an alternate atmosphere for children. They do not carry the daily burden of raising children, and so they are more free to provide an atmosphere of more fun.

Millet, the French artist, who gave us the Angelus and The Man With A Hoe, and some 20 other works that are in the Louvre in Paris had a godly grandmother. At his wedding she said to him, "Remember my Francois, that you are a Christian before you are a painter. Never sacrifice on the altar of Baal." He promised he would not use his gift for any evil, and he kept that promise to his grandmother. Her standards became his, and like Lois, she passed on her faith to her grandson.

I read of Darwin Carlisle, the girl who refused to die. Her mother abandoned her at age 9 and left her in an unheated attic for several days. When she was found her legs were so frostbitten they had to be amputated. Here was a case where great grandma took over. She was fitted with artificial legs, and great grandma went to court to get custody. She gave her great encouragement to overcome her handicap, and in two months Darwin was roller skating and riding a bike. You can never underestimate the influence of grandparents.

We have all been entertained by Bill Cosby. We have his grandfather to thank for that. Bill is a funny guy even off stage, and he loves to tell funny stories. His grandfather was his role model, and he was always clowning around and telling funny stories, and so Bill became a comedian because of this influence. His grandfather usually had a moral point to his stories, and so Bill learned to stick with good clean humor. A grandfather with a less godly sense of humor would have influenced him all together differently.

Grandparents have gone through many hardships and yet because they are faithful in their faith they have a great impact on children. I can remember my grandmother, who had 9 children and who labored from morning till night on the farm, still having time to be faithful in her Bible reading. She even continued to play Christian music on the organ into her 90's. Her faithfulness to the Lord and the church had a great impact on me, for she was an example of persistence in faith. You do not just serve the Lord while you are young, and then back off as you get older. You persist in faith and the labor of love all of your life. This poem by an unknown author fits my grandmother perfectly, and many others as well.

Grandmother, on a winter's day,
Milked the cow and fed them hay,
Slopped the hogs, saddled the mule
And got the children off to school;
Did the washing, mob the floors,
Washed the windows, and did some chores,
Cooked a dish of home-dried fruit,
Pressed her husband's Sunday suit,
Swept the parlor, made the bed,
Baked a dozen loaves of bread,

Split some fire wood, and lugged in
Enough to fill the kitchen bin;
Cleaned the lamps and put in oil,
Stewed some apples she thought would spoil;
Cooked a supper that was delicious
And afterward washed up the dishes;
Fed the cat and sprinkled the clothes,
Mended a basket full of hose;
Then opened the organ and began to play,
"When you come to the end of a perfect day."

I have known Christians who are very embarrassed by the antics of their grandparents when they get so old that their arteries harden. They begin to do things they have never done in their lives. One old godly gentleman began to swear, and he had never used such language in his life. His daughter was mortified, but I assured her that everyone who knew his godly history would recognize that this is the result of his loss of control due to old age. It is not a sign that he is rejecting his faith. A quiet talk with the man revealed he was persisting to the end in his faith, and this deviation from it in his language was not a matter of choice.

The example of persistence is a powerful influence on grandchildren, and if old age weakens that appearance of persistence grandchildren need to realize that this is a matter beyond the control of the person they love. Most of my family were not Christians when I was a child. It was my grandmother's faith that influenced me, and then through me touched my parents. My personal experience confirms history and Scripture. Grandparents make a major difference in this world for the kingdom of God.

Margaret Mead, the world renowned author, wrote, "The closest friends I have made all through life have been people who also grew up close to a loved and loving grandmother or grandfather." This was true for Paul and his dear friend Timothy, and it is our responsibility as grandparents to make it true for those who befriend our grandchildren. We need to pass on our faith so that our grandchildren can pass it on again to the next generation.

17. THANK GOD HE LET ME PLAY Based on Gen. 45:1-11

William F. Kirk was a columnist who loved baseball, and just before his death he wrote this poem couched in baseball terms to express his thanks for life.

"The doctor knows what his trained eyes see,
And he says it is the last of the 9th for me;
One more swing while the clouds loom dark,

And then I must leave this noisy park.

**'Twas a glorious game from the opening bell,
Good plays, bad plays and thrills pellmell;
The speed of it burned my years away,
But I thank my God that He let me play!"**

Not everybody gets into the game, and many who do strike out before they get on base. Many others are left on base and never get home to make their efforts count. Joseph felt this way when he was in the pit and then in prison. God had taken him out of play and put him on the bench. He thought he was in there pitching and really on the ball, but his brother said he was a foul ball and off base, and so they sent him to the dugout. His brother Judah went to bat for him, and so he wasn't out in left field, but got a rain check on the game of life, and he was sold into slavery rather than left to perish in the pit.

It took Joseph several innings to learn the score, but he finally realized he had not struck out after all. It was about 20 years later (that is a baseball park figure) when the final inning arrived and he was the pitcher. He tells his brothers that even though they broke the rules of fair play, the umpire, which was God, was not throwing them out of the game. Instead He is saying "play ball". He is giving them a second chance. Joseph is saying to them that the grace of God has taken their evil deed and turned it into a great good. He took their foul ball and made it, not only a fair ball, but a home run. He turned their devilish plot into a divine plan of deliverance. The bottom line is that all 12 brothers could end their life by saying thank God He let me play.

They all had plenty of trials and hardships, and some of them lost their contracts and suffered a lot of penalties, but God let them play the game of life and become the foundation for His chosen people. That is the number one basis for Thanksgiving. It is just the fact that God has let you play the game. All of us are only here today because God has let us play the game of life. There was hundreds of thousands of other potential players when you were conceived, but God chose you to get in the game. The theological term for this is called providence. It is God's working in history to determine who gets to play the game, and who gets to win the game.

One of the notable themes of the account of Joseph is his gratitude for God's providence in his life. Providence means God's providing hand for protection and progress. When all goes well and Murphy's Law is counteracted so that even bad things work out for good, that is what we call providential. One of the synonyms for providence in the dictionary is lucky. That is the secular perspective. They would look at Joseph's life and say he was just lucky. But when you see the Lord in charge, and not impersonal luck, you call it providence.

Joseph is so aware of the hand of God in his life that he just keeps on repeating it. In verse 5 he says, "God sent me ahead of you." In verse 7 he says, "God sent me ahead of you to preserve and save you." In verse 8 he says, "It was not you but God who sent me here." In verse 9 he says, "God has made me lord of all Egypt." Joseph was not blind to all the human hands in his history. His brothers sold him to the Midianites, and they carried him to Egypt. The lying wife of Potiphar put him in prison where he met the chief cup bearer of

Pharaoh, and he finally told Pharaoh about his ability to interpret dreams. Pharaoh made the decision to put him in charge of the country. A lot of people are playing a role in his life, but Joseph knows that the hand behind them all is God's hand. Everybody was just doing their own thing, but God was the one who was using it all to achieve the goal of salvation.

The reason Joseph could forgive his brothers was because he saw the hand of God in history. You can forgive people of their terrible evil against you if you can see that God uses even that for His goals. I am amazed at Joseph's ability to forgive and forget. Many, if not most, who get to the level of power he had would get revenge on all who did them wrong. Joseph could have had the lustful wife put in prison or stoned, but that was not his style. He never sought revenge on any of the people who treated him like dirt. He was just grateful for a God whose hand was on his life and let him play the game.

All of us experience God's providence. What we seldom stop to think about is that God's providence works even in the lives of nonbelievers as well as believers. Christians often want to be so exclusive with God, and, like the Jews of old, think of him as caring just about them and nobody else. They forget the plan of God is to bless the whole world and not just a special segment of it. When God led Joseph to the head of Egypt it was not just to save his people from the famine, but the Egyptians and other peoples as well. Providence is not God's hand in history just for the Jews or Christians. History is filled with God's providence in the lives of people in all nations. God's special love for His chosen people does not mean He does not lead and guide in the lives of those who are not His people. The goal of God is that all would become a part of His people, and He does not ignore them until they do.

One of the traditions that the Jews have is that Pharaoh himself became a believer in Jehovah. Many of the Egyptians became converts and left Egypt with the Jews in the exodus. Thank God for His providence, for it is a matter of universal grace. It is the key reason for gratitude everywhere in the world. In reading the autobiography of Gandhi I was impressed with his experience of and thankfulness for the providence of God in his life. He had an experience not unlike that of Joseph. He writes about how a friend once took him to a brothel, but how God protected him from sin. He was almost struck blind and dumb in this den of vice, and the woman he was with lost patience with him and showed him to the door. He felt great shame, but was grateful that God had saved him. He had other occasions when God in mercy saved him from his own sinful self.

Here was a great leader of non-Christian people who could thank God for His providence in his life, just as Pharaoh could. There is hardly a famous person in history who has not experienced the providential hand of God in his or her life. Jeoffery Bocca in *The Adventurous Life Of Winston Churchill* tells of how as a young soldier in South Africa Churchill was on a train that was blown up and attacked with fierce fire power by the Boers that the troops were cut to ribbons. He survived with just a slight wound in the hand, but he was captured and taken a prisoner of war.

The prison camp in Pretoria was a nightmare, and he planned an escape with two other men. As soon as he went over the wall the alarm sounded and the other two could not make it. He was alone on the outside without the maps and the compass the others had. He made his way to the railroad station and leaped aboard a freight train. When he was

discovered missing the houses of British citizens were searched, and reward was offered for him dead or alive. He had no idea where the train was going, and so he jumped off at dawn and made his way through high grass and swamp until he was weak and exhausted. By nightfall he came to a small community. He was starving and he knew he could not survive without help. Someone passed in the darkness and Winston called out to him.

Bocca writing from the perspective of the secular mind describes what happened: "By a stroke of the most unbelievable luck the man proved to be an Englishman, the only Englishman in hundreds of miles. Winston, as he was led off to a hasty sanctuary, was told that had he spoken to another human being he would have been arrested, as the whole country was on the lookout for him. He was then left at the bottom of a mine with some food, candles and a copy of Robert Louis Stevenson's *Kidnapped* until means of transportation could be devised."

He escaped and became England's first hero in the war. He went on to become one of the greatest leaders in the 20th century. This is what we call the providence of God. If God had not guided, he would have died in combat or in prison camp as an unknown 25 year old soldier. It was the hand of God that led him to his place in history.

The only problem with stories like this of Joseph, Gandhi, and Churchill is that we tend to let the spectacular nature of them lead us to conclude that God's providence is only active in the lives of the famous and powerful. This is not the case at all, for God by saving one and leading them to places of power saved vast numbers. The one is unique, but God's providence was not just for the one, but for the many. All the brothers and their families, and all the millions of their unknown posterity were saved by the providence of God in Joseph's life. Millions of lives were touched by Gandhi and Churchill as well. The purpose of providence is not to bless the few, but to bless the many.

God's providence is universal. Jesus says that God makes the sun to shine and the rain to fall even on the unjust and the rebellious pagan world. There is the reality of judgment as well, but even the lost world is blest with food, clothing, and a host of material benefits by the providential hand of God in history. It is a fallen world, but it is also a world that is greatly blest with pleasures and joys because of the providence of God. This is the foundation for all thankfulness, for if God did not care about man and get involved in history it would be hell on earth for everyone.

God's goodness is manifest to all, and the result is that there is thankfulness to God even in the non-Christian world. Do you think that only the Jews were grateful for Joseph's plan to save the world from famine? Do you think only Christians in India were grateful for Gandhi, or only Christians in England were grateful for Churchill? Every great thing God does in history for the benefit of great numbers leads to non-believers being grateful as well as believers. The non-believer often calls it luck, but many do acknowledge that God's hand has guided, and they have a sense of gratitude to God, even if they are not a part of the family of God by faith in Christ.

What we need to see is that the providence of God is an area of common ground for the Christian and non-Christian. Anybody can be grateful for good things, and the world is full

of them. This is where you develop a relationship with a non-Christian. You find the common ground of the things for which you are thankful, and then you witness to your faith that this is not luck. The blessings you both enjoy are by the providence of God in history. You explain that God loves the world and all peoples, and that He has blessed the world abundantly. His greatest blessing being the gift of His Son for the forgiveness of sin and eternal life. Every blessing in life is a pathway that leads right to Jesus, for every blessing in life is a part of God's providence to lead us to Him.

The non-Christian world has the capacity for thankfulness. This is the universal virtue that links all men, and we need to use it. Some have killed this virtue and they are blind to God's goodness. That is what Paul says led the pagan world to such darkness and judgment in Rom. 1. Their thinking became futile and they went blind in their hearts because they ceased to give God thanks. When the virtue of thanksgiving is gone, you are dealing with a person who is blind. But when it is still working, you have an ideal foundation for building a relationship that can lead to salvation.

Paul says in Rom. 2:4 that the kindness of God is to lead people to repentance. If they can see His providence in their lives, and how they are blest beyond what they deserve, and they have tasted of His patience and tolerance, they can be brought by their sense of thankfulness to receive God's greatest blessing in Christ. There is a tendency to take a negative approach of convincing people they are terrible sinners, and in need of a savior. But the Bible gives us a positive approach as well. Convince people they are blessed and have much to be grateful for, and that they need to open themselves up for all that God has for them, especially the salvation He has provided in His Son.

The providence of God in life is the best way to reach people for the kingdom of God. Thanksgiving for anything can be your clue that a person can be lead by it to receive all that God has provided for them. The providence of God is one aspect of theology where you can get on common ground with almost anyone. There are literally thousands of books in both the secular and Christian realm that deal with the providence of God.

Dr. Arthur Hewitt was addressing the Vermont Medical Association and he told of his experience at age 7. His father was working on the barn and fell. He had a serious injury. He ran to the neighbor a mile away and got the attention of the men thrashing. They got a doctor and got his father to the hospital where a surgeon saved his father's life. He said, "I would count it an honor to be received by the king of England, or the president of the United States, but I would rather take the hand of John Wheeler who saved my father's life and the happiness of my home for a quarter of a century." Suddenly everyone stood and applauded and Dr. Hewitt was wondering why. A gray-haired old man rose and said, "Thank you sir. I thank you." Dr. Hewitt was introduced to Dr. Wheeler for the first time. In the providence of God these two men were in the same place at the same time so gratitude could be communicated.

The most amazing story is reported by Doug Storer. Allen Falby was an El Paso county highway patrolman who was chasing a speeding truck and he lost control and slammed into the tail gate of the truck. He ruptured an artery in his leg and was bleeding to death. Alfred Smith, a businessman who was driving home, saw the accident and stopped. He whipped off

his tie and tied it around the patrolman's leg and stopped the flow of blood to a trickle. When the ambulance arrived he learned he had saved Allen's life. He was in the hospital for several months, and after corrective surgery he eventually returned to his job.

Five years later around Christmas time Allen received a radio call to investigate an accident on US 80 where a car had smashed into a tree. He reached the wreck and pulled the unconscious driver out. He saw that he had severed an artery in his leg and was bleeding to death. He quickly applied a tourniquet and made the man comfortable on the ground. Only then he recognize the victim as Alfred Smith, the man who had saved his life 5 years before. In the providence of God they had each been there for the other to save each others lives. The patrolman was so grateful for the happy ending in both cases, and he said, "It all goes to prove that one good tourniquet deserves another." Call it luck, or call it fate, but the Bible calls it God's providence. God is saving people physically every moment of every day by His providence.

We are to be thankful as Christians that God's providence goes beyond His care and guidance for His own people. If God had not cared for the Egyptians as well as the Jews life would not have been so good for God's people. Joseph told his brothers that you can forget all your distress for being so evil. God in His providence has used even your folly for good. The Egyptians are so pleased by God sending me here to save them also that they have offered you the best land in Egypt to live in. The Egyptians were very thankful for Joseph and his plan that enabled them to survive the famine. They bent over backwards to make life good for Joseph and his family. God worked through thankful pagans to bless his people with abundance and even luxury.

I wonder how often we recognize the blessings that God brings into our lives providentially by means of non-Christians. Joseph's own family was a pain to him, but the non-Hebrew world was full of people who helped him and gave him one blessing after another. They finally exalted him to where he could fulfill the plan of God to save the known world. Your biggest blessings in life may not come through Christians at all. The doctor who saves your life may be a non-believer. The man who stops to help you in a crisis may be one who holds none of your beliefs that you hold dear.

One of the most famous doctors in the world is Dr. Viktor Frankel whose writings have been a blessing to myself and millions of other Christians, but he is not a Christian. He is a Jew whom God led to survive the concentration camp of Hitler, and he became a great teacher about suffering. God's providence is seen in his life. Before World War II started he was in Vienna where he was invited to come to the U. S. Embassy to get a visa for immigration to America. He had a chance to escape, but he knew his parents would be taken to a concentration camp, and he just did not know what to do.

As head of the Department of Neurology at the Jewish Hospital he had enough pull to keep his parents from being arrested. If he left the country all would change. He longed for what he called a hint from heaven. He went home and saw a piece of marble on the table. He asked what it was and his father said that he found it at the sight of the synagogue which the Nazis had destroyed. "Why did you take it," he asked, and his father said, "It is part of the tablet where the Ten Commandments were carved. There is one Hebrew letter on it which

abbreviates one of the commandments." Everyday he asked his father which one it was. His father's answer was that it was the commandment to honor thy father and mother. Viktor right then decided to forget his visa and stay with his parents. He paid a heavy price and saw countless numbers die in the camps, but God spared him and made him a blessing through his writings to people all over the world.

When you thank God for His providential blessings, remember they come to you from every direction, and from sources you would never dream. Your physical life, pleasures, success, and joys often come to you by God's providence through many peoples and nations. Your goal is to be a blessing in turn to every nation. As Christians we are to be tools for God's fulfilling of His promise to Abraham to bless every person in the world. This is the game of life, and every day we should say somewhere along the way-thank God He let me play.

18. THANK GOD FOR A HAPPY ENDING based on Gen. 45:1-15

A woman went into a meat market and ordered two pounds of hamburger. The clerk yelled back to the butcher, "Two pounds of enthusiasm!" "Why do you call it enthusiasm," she asked? "Because he puts everything he's got into it." This is certainly a description of Joseph. He never did anything half way. He put everything he had into it, be it the task of being a good slave, a good prisoner, a good manager of a nation, or, as we see here in Gen. 45, being a good forgiver. They don't come any better than Joseph.

The brothers knew this could be the end of the line for them, and they were speechless when he revealed that he was Joseph. Verse 3 says that they were terrified and were not able to even respond to him. They had visions of being taken to a torture chamber and ending their days in pain suffering at the hands of professional sadists. It was a dog eat dog world and they now stand like a poodle dog looking into the jaws of a German Shepherd. But thank God, feelings and fears are not always a valid measure of reality. Joseph did not seek revenge. He gives a speech of comfort and encouragement that makes these brothers out to be almost heroes, for he says for them not to worry, but be happy, for their very act of evil was used by God for their salvation. He urged them to go get their families and come back to enjoy life in the richest part of the world where all their needs will be met.

This was like a fairy tale, for they lived together in Egypt as one big happy family. The last chapter of Genesis can be summed up quite nicely with the words, "They lived happily ever after." These 12 brothers lived in peace and prosperity for the rest of their lives, and they all died in Egypt. Vance Havner says that when he was a boy he liked to read the last page of a novel first. Then he could read through it and know that no matter how deep the trouble of the hero he could cheer him on knowing there was a happy ending.

The book of Genesis is like the book of revelation in this way: both have plenty of sin and

suffering, but both end on a high note of victory and happiness. When you are caught in the middle of either book, you can feel it is like hell on earth, but that is the way it is with any play, and especially the play of life. Quarles wrote,

**"My soul, sit thou a patient looker-on,
Judge not the play before the play is done,
Her plot hath many changes; everyday
Speaks a new scene; the last act crowns the play.**

How can we be thankful in a world where there is one trial after another, and where bad news not only fills the pages, but the records of life that never get into the paper? In a fallen world where brothers sell brothers into slavery out of jealousy anything can happen to fill life with tears. God's people escape none of this nonsense in a fallen world. But thanksgiving can still fill the heart when tears fill the eyes because God is the author and director of the play, and He has revealed to us how it all comes out. A little boy was petting his beagle dog and his mother said, "That dog looks so sad." He responded, "Yeah, it has a very sad face," but pointing to the wagging tail he added, "But look it has a happy ending." That is the message of the Word of God about history, and that is why when life is at its worst there is still a basis for thanksgiving.

The story of Joseph and his brothers is not about the happy ending of heaven, but about the happy ending to a very hard journey in time. We want to focus on three things Joseph and his brothers could be grateful for.

I. THANK GOD FOR HIS PROVIDENCE.

He cares about the world, and he gets involved. Thankful people like Joseph see this, and they acknowledge the hand of God in history. God was working in Joseph's life, but also in the lives of the whole Egyptian population and many other peoples of the world. God's providence is not limited to His people, but extends as far as His love, which includes the whole world. The result was that the Egyptians were thankful for God's providence, and they became a blessing to God's people, and made it possible for them to enjoy a happy ending of these final chapters of Genesis.

If you read the autobiography of any person who is humble about their blessings in life, you will read things like this, which is taken from the autobiography of Benjamin Franklin: "and now I speak of thanking God, I desire with all humility to acknowledge that I owe the mentioned happiness of my pass life to His kind providence, which led me to the means I used and gave them success." This is precisely the spirit of Joseph, and should be the spirit of every person who has achieved any goal they are grateful for, for it is only by the providence of God that there is any success.

The first English settlement in America was in Jamestown, Virginia. It was a disaster. Nine out of every ten people who set sail for this new world colony would die the first year. In 1610 the survivors decided to abandon the new world. They all got on their ships and were on their way when the sails of the large ship Deliverance appeared. Lord De La Warr had been sent to be the new governor, and he urged them to return to the abandon town. He

knelt on that land which had been so unkind and thanked God for bringing them there safely. Had he been just a little later all of history would have been different, and all the people would have died, for they only had food on their ship to get them a third of the way back to England.

They had an immediate service of thanksgiving for God's providence in saving the project. It was still a long hard struggle, but the project was saved, and the history of America was radically altered because the hand of God intervened in history. The examples are numerous, but let me share one more before we move on.

Benedict Arnold was in charge of West Point during the Revolutionary War. He plotted with the British to betray his country and let the British take West Point, which would have been a major victory. Major John Andre was their contact man. Arnold sent secret plans of the fortification of West Point through him. He was dressed as a civilian, and the plan should have been fool proof. But Andre had the bad luck of mistaking an American patrol for a British patrol. He let it slip that he was a British officer, and he was immediately searched. They found the plans in the heel of his shoe. This was not enough to foul up the plan, however, for they sent the prisoner to Benedict Arnold to explain how he happen to have such plans.

It just happened that Major Ben Tallmage, Washington's Chief of Intelligence was in the area. He put two and two together, and although Arnold escaped to a British ship, West Point was saved and General Washington saw the hand of God again in the history of our land. He reported to the American people, and I quote, "Treason of the blackest dye was yesterday discovered....The providential train of circumstances which led to it affords the most convincing truth that the liberties of America are the objects of divine protection."

When the war finally ended with the British surrender, George Washington said, "The hand of providence has been so conspicuous in all this, that he must be worst than a infidel that lacks faith, and more than wicked, that has not gratitude enough to acknowledge his obligations." The more you know of history in the Bible and outside of it, the more you know that you have an endless obligation to thank God for His providence. Everything we have to be grateful for in America is ours, not because we are worthy, but because of the providence of God. The happy ending of Joseph and his brothers was not reward for their righteousness, but it was grace, and they had an obligation to be forever grateful for the providence of God.

II. THANK GOD IT PAYS TO WAIT.

Most of us hate to wait. We wait in lines at the store, at the bank, and in traffic. The thing I like least about our stay in Florida was the constant waiting for the draw bridges. The thousands of boats made it necessary for these bridges, for there was no way to get through the channels to the ocean without them. The first two times it was a unique experience, but the novelty soon wore off and it was a nuisance to sit there for ten minutes in a mile long line of traffic waiting for the bridge to go down.

Life is full of such experiences, and so we all play the waiting game. There is no escape,

and so we all need to learn how to wait well if we hope to be thanking God for a happy ending. Since endings are always at the end of a story, it takes time to get to them, and often along time. In Joseph's case it was 2 decades. He could have been giving up and refusing to believe God was going anywhere with his meaningless suffering. He must have prayed often, "How long O Lord before you fulfill the dream you gave me in my youth?" He had his fill of the nightmare, but where was the dream? Why must we always wait for the dream to be fulfilled?

We want the story of Joseph to be the Reader's Digest version. Joseph went out looking for his brothers one day, but he couldn't find them. He found an Egyptian Pharaoh, however, who just had a dream he could not understand. Joseph said I could tell you what it means, and after he did Pharaoh took him to Egypt and made him second in command and told him to bring his whole family down with him. Here we have the whole story with a happy ending without that long and miserable middle. Why bother with all the pitiful pit, and prison scene? Just get to the palace and cut out all the agonizing waiting. It would not make much of a movie, but it would certainly be easier on the nervous system on those involved. But the Divine Director of life's movie says waiting is basic to life.

The point is, even though we don't like it, it pays to wait for God to step in and bring about a happy ending to what seems like a horror show. Thank God that waiting is not wasted. Isa. 30:18 says, "For the Lord is a God of justice. Blessed are all who wait for Him." This verse is so fascinating because in the first part of this verse the same Hebrew word for the blessed waiters on God is used of God Himself. The verse begins in the KJV which best brings out the double use of the Hebrew, "And therefore will the Lord wait." If God wanted everything to go fast there would be no plan of salvation. There would just be swift judgment and all would be over. His own people were disobedient, and often under judgment, but God does not give up. He waits because He knows the chances to bless will come again.

Life is not a matter of sheer power for God. He makes the rules, and He plays by them. Man has free will and so evil is real. God does not get His will done on earth as it is in heaven. It is not instant success. Even God has to wait for man to learn the folly of His ways and repent, and then turn again to cooperate with God's will. If God cannot get to the happy ending without waiting, then we are foolish if we expect to do so. Waiting is just part of the game of life, but it is worth it just because there will be a happy ending. If you look up weight in the concordance, you will discover that it is not easy, and it gets to be a hard and wearisome task, but it pays in the end.

Isa. 40:30-31 sums up the subject like this: "Even youth grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall, but those who wait on the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint." Richard Henricks wrote, "Second only to suffering, waiting may be the greatest teacher and trainer in godliness, maturity and genuine spirituality most of us ever encounter." Even so, how many people like what it good for them?

I was at Cub a few weeks ago and ordered one of the roasted chickens. This girl was not a morning person obviously, for she just could not get organized. She didn't know where the

gloves were, she didn't know where the wrapping was, and she could not find the stickers to put the price on the package. Lavonne was waiting for me at the check out, and I was getting anxious about ever getting that chicken. This girl was running around like a chicken with its head cut off. She was burning up calories but getting no where, and I had to start talking to my nervous system that was suggesting I just walk away and grab a pizza.

I stuck it out to the end, however, and I was so grateful when she finally handed the chicken to me that I even said thank you. The point is, it was hard and I wanted to not wait, but because I did I had a happy ending to that wait, for not only was the chicken a dollar off the usual price it was truly delicious. It was worth the wait, but I was so tempted to not wait. This is what life is all about. It is about waiting, or not waiting.

1. It is about teens waiting for marriage before sex.
2. It is about childless couples waiting for a baby.
3. It is about singles waiting for a date and mate.
4. It is about parents waiting for the fever to break, and the child be healed.
5. It is about waiting for that job, that promotion, that raise, that break.
6. It is about waiting for circumstances of all kinds to change for the better.
7. It is about waiting for Christ to come and deliver us from a world of evil.

Life is filled with waiting, and what makes it hard is that we are always in a hurry and God often is not. He is long suffering and puts up with a lot that we cannot stand. The result is the constant temptation to leave the path of God's revealed will and find a short cut. The life of Joseph is given to us so that we can see that it pays to wait for God to do it His way. Joseph could thank God that it pays to wait because he waited.

Fortunately for us Paul lets us off the hook by making it clear that we don't have to like it, and we don't have to wait with a smile on our face. In Rom. 8:23 he writes, "But we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, grown inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies." There is no point in pretending that waiting is pure pleasure. It was hard for Joseph and it is hard for us all at some points, but the fact is, only those who are willing to wait for God's best will be able to say, "Thank God, it pays to wait."

III. THANK GOD BROKEN THINGS CAN BE FIXED.

This broken relationship of Joseph and his brothers could have been a Humpty Dumpty type broken thing that could never be put together again. Families break up all the time and never get reconciled. Our world is crowded with piles of broken relationships. In the ancient world people threw out their broken pottery and this piled up, and now archaeologists are in their glory as they dig it up and put it back together. In our modern world we are such a throw away culture that we throw away relationships as if they were chipped pottery.

Joseph brothers did this with him. They did not like what they considered a flaw in him, and so they threw him away, and broke up the set of 12 brothers. They lived 2 decades with this broken up family, and it seemed like it would be broken permanently, just like Jacob's heart was broken by the loss of his son. But thank God, broken things are not all like

Humpty Dumpty. They can be fixed, and this family of Jacob, which had been broken apart by jealousy and resentment, was now cemented together again, and never in the lifetime of these 12 brothers to be broken again. The family circle was complete, and all 12 brothers lived together in harmony until they died.

There are people who love to take a piece of furniture that is marred and mend it. They love to take a car that is ruined and restore it. They love to take a garment that is ripped and repair it. God loves to take a relationship that is ripped apart and bring about reconciliation. This is what the Gospel is all about. God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself. The relationship of God and man was broken by sin, but God sent His Son into the world to deal with sin in such a way that man can be forgiven and restored to fellowship with God. The most broken thing in the world was fixed by God, and this is grounds for endless praise and thanksgiving.

History is filled with what we see here with Joseph and his brothers. For 2 decades they had no contact, and Joseph could have built up a mountain of resentment, but God helped him see that even their evil toward him was used to get him to a place of power where he could save his people. God helped him to test them too and see that time had changed them. They were now brothers with love and loyalty to the family.

Joseph was touched so deeply by their loyalty to Benjamin that he let loose with a flood of uncontrollable tears. These were not Hollywood tears, but an authentic expression of emotions of thanksgiving that their broken relationship could be fixed. The famine problem was being fixed, and now the family problem was also being fixed.

This same picture carries on in the history of Britain and America. They were foes in the Revolutionary War, and there was a great break in their relationship. But then came the threat of the Nazi's. In Joseph's day it was world famine that brought he and his brothers together. In the 1940's it was world aggression that brought nations together. In 1941 President Roosevelt and Churchill of England met for the first time in Newfoundland. They sat on the British battleship The Prince of Wales. They worshipped together and prayed for God's guidance to lead them to victory over a frightening foe. They joined in the song with thousands of sailors.

**"Eternal Father, strong to save,
Whose arm hath bound the restless wave,
Who bidd'st the mighty ocean deep
Its own appointed limits keep.
Oh here us when we cry to thee,
For those in peril on the sea."**

The President could not hold back the tears that stung his eyes, and he shot an embarrassed glance at his companion who was also weeping tears from his eyes. Thank God for tears of gratitude because broken things can be fixed. Former foes were now faithful friends facing and unprecedented evil, and they were confident that by the grace of God even the brokenness that Hitler brought to the world could be healed. Brokenness doesn't get much worse than it did in World War II, but thank God broken things can be fixed.

The stories of broken relationships that were restored, and happy reunions after years of separation could fill a library. What we see here with Joseph and his brothers is symbolic of reunions that go on all through history, and fill the pages of history with tears of thanksgiving. Just a couple of days after General Douglas MacArthur cleared the enemy out of Seoul, Korea, he was to turn the government over to President Rhee. Fires were still burning inside the city as he stood in the legislative chamber and began his speech, "By the grace of a merciful providence...." He went on to give God the credit for liberating the Korean people. President Rhee and his wife were weeping and soon all the Koreans were in tears. MacArthur himself could not restrain the tears, and so you had a world hero weeping with a room full of dignitaries because of being overwhelmed to gratitude to God because broken things do get fixed.

Joseph may have never gotten to see his family again, but now he is going to see a host of nieces and nephews he had never seen. A man isolated from all relatives for 20 years is now apart of a large family. A branch broken off the tree is now grafted back into that tree with more relatives than the average person would ever have. He was now a part of a people who were saved and united by the providence of God. The broken family was not only fixed, it was bigger and better than ever.

If God was not a God of history who got involved, the brothers would have had to break up for survival, and the sons of Jacob would have been scattered over the earth. But God got involved and the result was that they stayed together and became a nation of people. The Old and New Testaments reveal clearly that God specializes in fixing broken things. That is what the Bible is all about, and that is what the Gospel is all about. Some poet put it,

"He came to mend earth's broken things,
That Carpenter of old:
God's broken law; men's broken hearts,
And broken dreams untold.
He came to mend earth's broken things,
To rest each weary soul:
His body broken on the cross-
Broken, to make us whole."

This is the paradox of the ages. Jesus was broken in order to fix up and make whole all that was broken in this world. Not only can we thank God that the broken can be fixed, but we can thank God that He can use what is broken for His plan. If you feel broken and of little value at times, like Joseph had to have felt when he was in the pit or prison, do not despair. God specializes in using broken things. Jesus took broken people with broken health and broken relationships, and He made them whole. The woman at the well had a history of broken relationships, but He made her whole, and He used her to touch the whole Samaritan community.

The people that others were willing to throw away like a piece of broken pottery Jesus treasured, and He sought to put them back together as whole persons. Psalms 34:18 says, "The Lord is close to the broken hearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit." Jesus never threw anybody away. Joseph's brothers said that he was worthless and a nuisance and that

they would be better off without him. But God took this broken young man and used him to mend a broken world. God is always using broken things.

The broken picture of Gideon that gave him a great victory.

The broken bread by which He fed the multitudes.

The broken alabaster box by which he was anointed.

The broken roof by which a paralyzed man was brought to Him for healing.

The broken piece of the ship by which Paul and others were saved.

The broken body of Jesus whereby God fixed it for all sinners to be mended.

Thank God that what is broken can be fixed, and thank God the broken can itself be used to do the fixing. In a fallen world where none of us are completely whole, but always to some degree still broken, this is wonderful news.

These sons of Jacob and brothers of Joseph were changed, but they were still broken, and yet God used them to form the foundation for His people. The 12 that Jesus choose were still full of flaws and they were broken, but He used them to form the New Testament people of God. God uses broken people because in a fallen world there is no other kind. So there is no basis for putting yourself down as a broken tool. Those are just the tools God is looking for to achieve His goals.

In one the great Cathedrals of England is a beautiful stained glass window displaying the great personalities of the Bible. It was made by the artist of broken bits of glass that had been discarded. God is the master artist, and He can take the lives of people broken by sin and make them a thing of beauty. The reason we can thank God for a happy ending to this story of Joseph and his brothers is because Joseph could see that though revenge could be sweet for a while, reconciliation could be sweet forever. That is why he choose the way of forgiveness and the restoration of their broken relationship. If we are willing to wait on the providence of God with a heart ready for reconciliation we will always enjoy a happy ending.