

## Experiencing Thanksgiving

Northwestern University is in Evanston, Illinois, near the shore of Lake Michigan. For many years the school had a volunteer crew of students available for rescue services. On September 8, 1860, the lake steamer LADY ELGIN foundered and passengers and crewmembers abandoned ship. On shore a student named Edward W. Spencer from Garrett Biblical Institute (the Methodist seminary at Northwestern) saw a woman holding onto some wreckage and dove in to save her. He swam beyond the breakers and brought her safely back to shore.

But there were others, so he kept going back even though he was shaking with exhaustion. He saved seventeen people that day before he collapsed from exposure and fatigue. For the most part he recovered but he never regained full health for the rest of his life. In fact, he never did enter the ministry for which he was preparing. He moved to California where he lived to the age of eighty-one. The newspaper story that reported his obituary said that not one of the seventeen people he saved ever came back to thank him.

It sounds a bit like the New Testament story about Jesus in Luke 17:11-16:

*Now on his way to Jerusalem, Jesus traveled along the border between Samaria and Galilee. As he was going into a village, ten men who had leprosy met him. They stood at a distance and called out in a loud voice, "Jesus, Master, have pity on us!"*

*When he saw them, he said, "Go, show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were cleansed.*

*One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice. He threw himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him—and he was a Samaritan.*

Leprosy was terrible—somewhat comparable to AIDS today. It was a contagious skin dis-

ease that maimed and disfigured its victims. Those who had it were forbidden to have contact with healthy people; they were required to stay at least 50 yards away. Wherever they went they had to shout, "Leper! Leper!" as a warning to healthy people.

Jews and Samaritans normally wouldn't have anything to do with each other. They wouldn't even speak to each other. But leprosy banded them together. Their problems were greater than their prejudice.

As Jesus came by these men pleaded for help: "*Jesus, Master, have pity on us!*" To them nothing was more important than leprosy and healing. Neither medicine nor religion had helped them. Their only hope was a miracle from the Master. Otherwise, the rest of their lives would be filled with physical and emotional pain.

And Jesus did it! More than pity, he gave them health. He gave them the rest of their lives. He gave them their families, friends, homes and future.

But only one said, "Thank you!"

Every time I read the story I wonder which one I would have been. I'd like to think I would be the one who came back, but I fear

the odds are that I wouldn't. The majority of those lepers were caught up in other things. The majority focused on some new problems. The majority forgot.

Who do you think was the greater loser? Did Jesus lose because he did not hear "thank you" from the nine men? Or did they lose because they missed the extraordinary opportunity to experience God through thanksgiving? By far, they were greater losers!

The one who came back got something much better than health, better than a cure, better than perfect skin, better than going home again. He experienced God in human form. He looked into the eyes of the Great Physician. He spoke face-to-face with the Lord himself. He heard the praise

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and the promise that Christ spoke to him. He experienced God through thanksgiving.

We can experience God through thanksgiving, too. We can thank God in three ways. First, we can acknowledge that God is responsible for our good. Thankfulness is always an acknowledgement of responsibility. If I send you a thank you note for a Christmas present I am saying you are responsible for my getting the gift. It would be nonsense for me to receive a gift from you and send a thank you note to someone else. Also, it would be nonsense to say thank you for something I bought for myself. If I did it for myself there is no point in thanking you. “Thank you” acknowledges responsibility.

Second, thanking God means acknowledging that God is responsible for the good in our lives. Not thanking God is saying he is not responsible and taking credit ourselves for anything we have that’s good.

In James 1:17 we read, “*Every good and perfect gift is from (God).*” This raises some of the fundamental questions of life and of Christian faith: “Where does good come from?” and “Where does evil come from?”

The Bible teaches that good comes from God and evil comes from sin. To be Christian is to believe this; to not believe this is less than Christian. So, we must sort out the laundry of our lives. Just as we separate the whites from the coloreds and put them in different piles, so we must sort out the bad and the good. The good is from God. The bad is from sin and Satan.

Often we don’t get this straight. People have bad things happen to them—we get sick or divorced or lose our jobs or have a loved one die—and we blame God. We hold him responsible for evil. And he is not! Worst of all, holding God responsible for evil fails to acknowledge that he is responsible for our good—and we become ungrateful.

There is a powerful and pointed description of non-Christians in Romans 1:21: “*For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.*”

What is good in your life? Some may say, “Not

much!” Listen well! Although our problems are real and many, do not let them blur your vision of God’s good—because our lives are loaded with good! We have life. We have God. We have Jesus Christ, the forgiveness of sin, the guarantee of heaven, the Holy Spirit and much more. Materially we live in a nation of prosperity. We have wonder drugs. We have families and friends and jobs and more. Not everyone has everything, but surely we ought not fail to thank God for the good we have. Let us not be so foolish as to see only what we lack!

The Christian way is to acknowledge our responsibility for our sin and to acknowledge God’s responsibility for our good. It is when we acknowledge this that we can do what I Thessalonians 5:18 suggests: “*give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.*” Do it! Experience God through thanksgiving that acknowledges that God is responsible for our good.

Third, we must have an *attitude* that appreciates God’s goodness. Thanksgiving is much more than an acknowledgement of the mind. It is also an attitude of the heart. While some may say otherwise, the truth is that we choose our attitudes. Some choose to have bad attitudes and others choose to have good attitudes. It is much more a matter of choice than of circumstance.

One day a young Southern Baptist pastor in Kentucky, John Claypool, made two visitation calls in the same hospital. His first stop was the room of a middle-aged lady about to be discharged. When he introduced himself she blasted him for not coming sooner. Then she complained about the lousy hospital food, berated her children for not being there to get her and criticized the medical staff for not making her healthy faster.

Young Pastor Claypool was not too anxious to make the next call. It was another woman of about the same age on the same floor of that hospital. This woman was dying from cancer. As he got up his courage and walked into the next room she spoke first:

*You must be Pastor Claypool. Thank you for coming to see me, although you really shouldn’t have. There are lots of other people who need your time and at-*

*attention. I'm doing just fine. The doctors and nurses here are wonderful. They give me such good care. And the food is just great. Of course, I only have two teeth left to eat with but, thank God, they both meet in the middle!*

The difference—the second woman had an attitude of gratitude; the first woman did not.

II Timothy 3:1-5 describes “terrible times” and non-Christian bad attitudes:

But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God—having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with them.

Notice the word “ungrateful” in the middle of the list. The advice of Philippians 2:5 is this: “*Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus.*” Good advice! Jesus’ biography often tells about his attitude, an attitude of gratitude to God. He often stopped in the middle of what he was doing and thanked God—for food, for miracles, for good. Jesus knew life well. Jesus is our example. Jesus had the right attitude!

Matthew Henry, an English scholar and writer, was mugged on

a visit to London. When he returned to his guest room, beaten and robbed, he wrote in his diary:

*Let me be thankful first because I was never robbed before; second, because although they took my purse they did not take my life; third, because although they took my all, it was not much; and fourth, that it was I who was robbed, not I who robbed.*

Matthew Henry had an attitude that appreciated God’s goodness. Do you? If not, I encourage you to choose such an attitude. Choose to see God’s good; choose to be grateful; choose to experience God through thanksgiving. Choose the attitude of Matthew Henry. Choose the attitude of

Jesus Christ.

Experiencing God through thanksgiving is more than acknowledging that God is responsible for our good. It is more than an attitude that appreciates God’s goodness. It is also action that demonstrates our gratitude.

Sometimes we best understand a concept both by what it is and what it isn’t. How would you describe actions of gratitude? What would you list as the opposite of grateful actions? The Bible has an intriguing list in Ephesians 5:1-4:

*Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.*

*But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God’s holy people. Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving.*

Actions of gratitude include imitating God, loving like Jesus and giving gifts and making sacrifices for God. Actions of ingratitude are any hint

of sexual immorality, any kind of impurity, greed, obscenity, foolish talk and coarse joking. In other words, truly thankful Christians act and talk like God rather than like unbelievers.

Our words of gratitude to God are frequent; saying something stupid, especially if it is sexually obscene, is out.

Using psychological terminology, we sometimes refer to people “acting out” what is inside of them. Well, grateful Christians “act out” their gratitude. If we are truly thankful to God we behave in ways that look like and sound like God. If we are constantly critical, it is because we are full of criticism. If we are constantly immoral, it is because we are full of immorality. If we are constantly thankful, it is because we are full of gratitude. Again, the choice is ours. We choose what we do. We may choose to imitate God and love

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like Jesus, to skip greed and be generous, to stop saying stupid things and start saying grateful things. We may choose action that demonstrates our gratitude to God.

One summer we took a family vacation driving from Minneapolis to Phoenix. It was on that trip that our station wagon turned over 100,000 miles. We traveled by way of Red Mountain Pass, one of the highest and most dangerous roads over the Continental Divide. As we neared the pass summit late one afternoon the engine quit—and with it the power brakes and power steering went out. Fortunately, we were not far from a pull off so we rolled the car over to that pull off. It was then at we saw a monument that had been erected in memory of a pastor and his family who had gone over the side of the mountain at that very spot!

Not many cars went by that late in the day, but a man from the little town of Ouray stopped and took all six of us into town where we got a motel. The next day he graciously picked me up at the motel and drove me back up the mountain to get the car.

Wondering how to respond, willing to pay for the services he had given, I asked him, “How can I thank you?” He said, “Just treat someone else well and remember me.” “That’s all?” I asked. “That’s a lot,” he replied. Now, any time I help a

stranded person I remember him and experience both him and his goodness all over again.

How much more so with God! He loves us more than anyone else ever could. He gave his Son to die for us. He sticks with us through every triumph and tragedy of life.

When we stop long enough to think it through we acknowledge that “*every good and perfect gift*” we have comes from God. Our hearts well up with gratitude and we ask, “God, how can I thank you?” and God says, “Love me and love others the way I’ve loved you.” So, every time we love like this we remember and experience both God and his goodness all over again. We experience God through thanksgiving!

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