

Joke: A young couple gave birth to identical twins.

They were struggling to make ends meet and didn't feel as though they really could provide for them like they deserved. So, after much consideration and prayer they decide that the best thing for the baby boys would be to give them up for adoption so that they can have a better shot in life. One of the boys is adopted by a Spanish family who name him Juan, the second goes to an Indian family who name him Amal.

18 years later the birth parents receive a package from Juan with a letter saying how grateful he is to them along with a ton of pictures of him and his life. The birth mother inconsolably sad, her husband says "are you not happy? You always wondered what he looked like, whether he had my eyes or your nose and now you know" "I know and I'm really happy that I got to see the pictures but it makes me even sadder that I have no pictures of Amal."

The husband replies "they're identical twins, if you've seen Juan you've seen Amal!"

In a few days we will be celebrating Thanksgiving and there is so much for us to be grateful for. Stores miss it they went from Halloween to Christmas.

Depending on what survey you look at Christmas is the first most celebrated. Easter second. Not bad so far. Mother's Day came

in towards the top. However Halloween came in before Thanksgiving.

But the truth is thanksgiving ought to be something we have each day. I'm glad for the day we set aside, but our life should be consistently one of thanksgiving.

I thank God everyday for something. I am thankful for each of you, for my family, for my job, for friends, this church. The list could go on and on.

And I'm pretty sure that if we went around the room and asked what each of you were thankful for each would have something that you could say.

Grateful for the job you have.

Grateful for the spouse and kids.

Grateful for the home.

And we need to be grateful for all of it. Amen.

Let me share three points about being thankful. Maybe four.

Point number one is this: Gratitude and thanksgiving is a door to God's presence.

Psalm 100:4 (NLT): Enter his gates with thanksgiving; go into his courts with praise. Give thanks to him and praise his name.

Enter His gates with thanksgiving go into his courts with praise.

There something about praise and worship. Scripture tells us that He inhabits the praises of His people. And as we enter the gates with thanksgiving it moves the heart of God.

Point number 2: Gratitude brings freedom. It brings freedom because with gratitude you enter into the presence of God and where the spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.

I think there's a story in the Bible that exemplifies how gratitude and thanksgiving brings freedom. It's found in the book of Jonah. Jonah was a prophet who God asked to go to a city called Nineveh and Jonah didn't want to go. He didn't like the city, didn't like the people. So he went the opposite way.

A long story short, he ended up in a boat and a storm arises and people are wondering why and even believing it was some kind of punishment from God. And after awhile Jonah admits that it's him. I'm running from what God asked me to do so he was thrown overboard and he ended up inside a fish for three days.

Let me just pause here and tell you I'm not saying that every storm in your life is because your running from what God wants you to do and you are out of His will. This one was, not all yours are.

Back to Jonah, that's a whole new level of problems with him. You may have problems, I have problems too, but what happens to Jonah well that's a whole new ballgame in the existence of problems. I have never been in the belly of a fish for three days and I dare say you haven't either.

So here's Jonah inside the belly of this fish. I can't even imagine what that was like. It had to have been horrible.

But look what Jonah is doing inside the belly of the fish. . .

Jonah 2:9 (NIV): But I, with shouts of grateful praise, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good. I will say, 'Salvation comes from the Lord.'

So even in the belly of a fish, Jonah, gives thanks to God. Not because of his circumstances but in spite of his circumstances.

And because Jonah, down in the bottom of the sea inside the fish gave thanks, he enters into the presence of God because God inhabits the praises of His people, and where the spirit of the Lord is there is freedom.

And look what happens. . .

Jonah 2:10 (NIV): And the Lord commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.

Hear this church your thanksgiving brings freedom. Your thanksgiving brings deliverance.

Listen it may not be when we were hoping, or how we thought it would be but I believe that you will find deliverance and freedom when you have a spirit of gratitude.

Sooner or later that fish is going to spit you out on dry land if you just keep thanking God. Because gratitude brings freedom.

Point 3 is that gratitude is a daily choice.

Look at Paul and Silas the story is found in the book of Acts chapter 16. Paul and Silas were two of the disciples who unlike Jonah did exactly what Jesus asked them to do without hesitation.

He asked them to preach the gospel and to pray for people and they did. And because of that, they were beaten, they were arrested and put into the inner cell of a jail, chained up with their feet fastened to the stock.

If anyone had a right to have questions, to complain, it was Paul and Silas.

They could have said, we did what Jesus asked us to, and look what happened. Why are all these things happening to us? They could have created a grudge, been filled with bitterness and disappointment but instead they choose to do something completely different from what many of us would have done.

Look at it in Acts 16. . .

Acts 16:25–26 (NIV): About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. 26 Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everyone's chains came loose.

I love that because it shows us that even through you may not ever fully control your circumstances you can always fully control your attitudes.

Listen you and I will never be in full control of whatever happens to us but we can have full control regarding the attitudes with which we respond to the circumstances.

Paul and Silas makes a choice. Even though we suffer in this prison, even though we don't really understand the situation, and have questions about why, yet we will praise you, we choose to still give thanks.

The ancient Roman philosopher Cicero said, "Gratitude is not only the greatest of virtues but the parent of all others."

Study after study has shown that being grateful has incredible mental, physical, and emotional benefits.

And later the Apostle Paul writes to the church in Thessalonica. . .

1 Thessalonians 5:16–18 (NIV): Rejoice always, 17 pray continually, 18 give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

Notice what Paul said, he said giving thanks in every circumstance isn't just a good idea, it's the will of God.

So many of us struggle to know what the "will of God" is for our lives.

We ask maybe even beg Him in prayer to show us, we ask Him to show us what we should do, where we should live, who we should marry, and on and on the list goes.

And those things are good to do. I think we should get God's input on everything. Unfortunately most of us don't do that. We will ask for the big things but not everything. But remember what Paul said pray continually.

But in our asking what if in reply He were to say to us, *"I just want you to be grateful, no matter the circumstance."*

And the beautiful thing with the story of Paul and Silas is that their decision to respond to all these trials with thanksgiving led to the release of not only them, but of everyone around them.

Scripture says not only did their chains come off and not only did their prison door open up, but every chain was broken and every door in that prison was opened.

When you and I choose an attitude of gratitude it will not only affect you, it will affect everyone around you. Your gratitude will affect your family. Your gratitude will affect your workplace, your school, the people around you, your neighborhood.

By choosing gratitude we can enter into the presence of God and release freedom.

And the truth is it's easy to be grateful when things are going well, but when things get difficult, we're quick to default back to

complaining and grumbling. I think this is why the apostle Paul advises us to be grateful in *every circumstance*.

What circumstance? . . . Every

I think we can all agree that it's not easy to be grateful in every circumstance. In fact there are many situations where it's hard to imagine how to be grateful.

And hear this church, there are questions that we may never get answered on this side of heaven, and yet, we are called to be thankful, faithful, to trust, and to stand firm in our faith.

There's a story from John 11, that highlights this truth. Let's look at it. . .

John 11:1–7 (NIV): Now a man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. 2 (This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay sick, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair.) 3 So the sisters sent word to Jesus, "Lord, the one you love is sick." 4 When he heard this, Jesus said, "This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it." 5 Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. 6 So when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days, 7 and then he said to his disciples, "Let us go back to Judea."

When Jesus receives word from Mary and Martha that Lazarus is sick he is about a day's journey away. Lazarus wasn't just someone that Jesus kind-of knew or had met on an occasion.

The note that Mary and Martha sent to Jesus said, "*Lord, the one you love is sick.*" And verse 5 continues with, "*Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus.*"

This was a family that Jesus not only knew very well but had a special and intimate relationship with. May have even stayed at their house when He was in town.

Maybe you have someone in your life that's not necessarily a family member but who is close to you like a family member. And you can say like Jesus that you love them. Now, imagine that you've just received news that they are very sick.

Now to try and imagine getting the news then taking an extra two days after hearing they're very sick to respond to them.

Sure they didn't have cell phones to call or text like we do today so maybe that would even be a little worse today because of how quickly we can respond. But Jesus purposely waited two days to even begin the journey.

And if that happened do you think your friend would *feel* like you really loved them? Probably not. Yet, this is exactly how Jesus responds to the news about Lazarus. He stays where He is and he just keeps on doing ministry before telling the disciples, "*Let us go back to Judea.*"

And for us that might seem a bit confusing, but actually, Jesus has already given us divine insight into what's really happening in verse 4 when he says, "This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it."

God knows what he's doing. It may not appear that way to the disciples around him, or to the sisters back in Bethany tending to their dying brother, or sometimes to us today, but the truth is *God knows what He's doing even when we don't understand it.*

And listen we are never told to understand everything God tells us to do, but we are told to trust and believe everything He tells us.

He is working in and through the situations that are going on in our lives. The challenge for us is to remain faithful, thankful, and steadfast even when we don't get what we want. Even when our prayers go seemingly unanswered.

John 11:17–22 (NIV): On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. 18 Now Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, 19 and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. 20 When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home. 21 "Lord," Martha said to Jesus, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died. 22 But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask."

When Jesus finally gets to town, Lazarus has already been dead for four days. When Martha comes out to meet Him she says, *"If you had been here, my brother would not have died."* Mary

eventually meets up with Jesus as well, and says the exact same thing her sister Martha did, *“Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”*

Martha and Mary both feel that their brother Lazarus wouldn't have died if Jesus would have “shown up.” They wanted. . .they expected Jesus to answer their prayers in the way that didn't happen, they are obviously were saddened and disappointed that Jesus didn't come in time to save their brother.

Here's a question for you. Have you ever felt frustrated or disappointed with God? Maybe you've even said the same thing at some point in your life that Martha and Mary said, *“Lord, if you had been here...”*

But what's important to remember is that Jesus was operating on a different and divine timeline.

Isaiah 55:8–9 (NIV): For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the Lord. 9 “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

He had an ultimate purpose and plan for showing up when and how he did. We learn what that is later in the story.

John 11:38–44 (NIV): Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. 39 “Take away the stone,” he said. “But, Lord,” said Martha, the sister of the dead man, “by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there

four days.” 40 Then Jesus said, “Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?” 41 So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, “Father, I thank you that you have heard me. 42 I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me.” 43 When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” 44 The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, “Take off the grave clothes and let him go.”

Let me just pause here for a moment? I will get back to the text in a bit but I need to say this. Lazarus came out of the tomb after 4 days still wrapped in his grave clothes. He never could have been free walking in them. And you and I are the same way. God has called us to an abundant life. But we try to walk around with the grave clothes of the old man which has died. We have become a new creation.

We are so unwilling to let go of somethings and because of that sometimes God can't bless us with the better things.

And we have some in the Body of Christ that God has done something amazing on the inside, He has healed you, gave life to you but outside you're still bound by addiction, shame, and regret. God wants you to know you don't need to carry those anymore. Leave them at the cross where He died so you could live free.

He has something better if you are just willing to let go, He has something new if you will let go of the old.

Back to our story. . .

Jesus' knew Lazarus would live and He knew that it would bring glory to God the Father. And it's important to catch something that Jesus says, *"Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I know that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me."*

Jesus "thanks" the Father for hearing Him, and mentions that the Father "always hears Him."

This truth is so important to remember when trying to be thankful in difficulty and grateful through every circumstance in life.

We need to remember that the Father loves us, that He has a plan and a purpose in all things. . .

Romans 8:28 (NIV): And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

On top of all of that it's imperative to understand that He always hears our prayers. Not that He always answers them the way we would want, but that He always hears and knows what we need before we even ask.

Listen, sometimes God says yes right away and I am truly thankful when He does. Sometimes He says yes but not today so I need to be thankful in the waiting. And there are other times God says no,

and I need to be thankful for that as well because when God says no it's because there is something better.

Jesus was told no. He was in the garden praying and look what happened. . .

Luke 22:42 (NIV): Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done."

The Father said no and because of that we can be where we are. No Jesus there is no other way, Scripture needs to be fulfilled I called you to become the sacrificial Lamb so that my sons and daughters can be in right relationship with Me.

I'm glad for that no. Aren't you? That's the good news of the Bible. Jesus died that we might live. That in itself is worth my gratitude.

When we root ourselves in the sovereign love of God, we have all we need for any and every circumstance that may arise in life.

Even when things aren't going the way we would want them to, we can say, "Thank you Lord."

Thank you for listening to us.

Thank you for knowing us.

Thank you for providing all that we need.

Doris Day once said, "Gratitude is riches. Complaint is poverty."

And we are truly "rich" in God and His love.

If gratitude is riches then let's focus this season on living extravagant lives of grateful praise. Instead of focusing on all that we don't have, or all that we think we should have, let's focus on what we do have. And thank God for all of it, sparing nothing from His glory. . .

The goal is to give it all over to God. Your hurts, pain, bitterness, unforgiveness, anger, frustration, anxiety, and sin. To trust Him completely. To abide in His good and perfect will for our lives.

To, *"Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus."*

Then and only then will we be able to proclaim, just like the Apostle Paul did in 2 Corinthians 9:15

2 Corinthians 9:15 (NLT): Thank God for this gift too wonderful for words!

Prayer

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Next week we will be starting our new series for Christmas (talk about the plans for Christmas Eve service which is on Sunday). The series is called Songs of the Savior you don't want to miss it.

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