



## Chapter 5 Thankful

### **Psalm 150 CEB**

*Praise the LORD!*

*Praise God in his sanctuary!*

*Praise God in his fortress, the sky!*

*Praise God in his mighty acts!*

*Praise God as suits his incredible greatness!*

*Praise God with the blast of the ram's horn!*

*Praise God with lute and lyre!*

*Praise God with drum and dance!*

*Praise God with strings and pipe!*

*Praise God with loud cymbals!*

*Praise God with clashing cymbals!*

*Let every living thing praise the LORD!*

*Praise the LORD!*

When I worked at Saint Luke's United Methodist Church in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, I participated in a weekly women's lunchtime small group. One of our undertakings was to read *One Thousand Gifts* by Ann Voskamp and to take "The Joy Challenge" outlined on Ann's website. I was in my early twenties and had never had a daily gratitude practice. I was thankful for all kinds of things, but I had never documented daily what brought up feelings of gratitude.

I remember sitting in the beautiful library conference room with wise women, who all had very different lives, counting our blessings and discussing what we were learning through Ann Voskamp's memoir. Her story was inspiring and honest. Her simple commitment to document the gifts she saw around her each day transformed her life. Could gratitude change each of ours?

At the time, this act of individual and communal thanksgiving did not transform my life. I didn't know how to be fully present nor did I know how to truly feel my feelings. Making a list of things I was or should be grateful for became a rote thing I felt I had to do in order to perform what it meant to be a perfect disciple of Jesus/a perfect lay staff person of a church. I remember writing down five things I was thankful for each day and being very grateful for them. But I didn't feel grateful, and I did it only because I thought I had to. This is not the kind of "thankful" I am writing about in this chapter.

Thankful, as defined by me in my thirty-third year, is a feeling or expression of admiration, approval, or gratitude. It's an extremely important spiritual discipline written about in the Old and New Testaments, as well as in other religious texts. Thanksgiving is a grounding practice that allows us all to shift our foci from survival, pain, stress, and pessimism to admiration, joy, and optimism. It is a way of making ourselves aware of all that we receive from our Creator, our various relationships, from the world around us, and from complete and total strangers. Gratitude reminds me of my place in the giant interconnected web of life.

When I set out to find a Scripture passage for this chapter, I knew it had to be from the Book of Psalms. I love psalms, and I don't know enough about them. Like a lot of poetry, each chapter is mysterious and multifaceted and straight in your face. The Book of Psalms is an incredible book of Hebrew poetry, and the poems I am drawn to most are the ones that express great gratitude and praise to God, but that's not all that's in the Psalter. And I think gratitude is a lot more than a list of things we are grateful for. The psalmist must have known this too.

The Psalter contains several genres: prayers for help and lament (both for individuals and communities), hymns of praise to be sung in worship, songs of thanksgiving for individuals and communities, instructional psalms, royal psalms relating to the king, and liturgies used in worship at the Temple.<sup>1</sup> The Psalter could be read as one whole book<sup>2</sup> or is divided into five books.<sup>3</sup> If we side with The New Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary on the Bible, then the five books are:

- Book I (1-41)
- Book II (42-72)
- Book III (73-89)
- Book IV (90-106)
- Book V (107-150)

Psalm 150 is the Closing Doxology of Book V and of the entire Book of Psalms. If you were to read the Book of Psalms from chapter 1 through chapter 150, you'd conclude the experience of moving "from lament to praise and from individual to communal songs"<sup>4</sup> of praise and thanksgiving for all that God has done and will do for the people of God. This psalm tells every being to praise God in every way and with every kind of music.

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1 (David L. Peterson) The New Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary on the Bible (Abingdon Press 2010)

2 (William P. Brown) Interpreting Biblical Texts: Psalms (Abingdon Press 2010)

3 (Peterson)

4 (Peterson)

I think it is important to note that the psalmist has included individual and communal psalms. In the US, we often get bogged down in individuality. That keeps us from connecting fully with our communities. In other countries, the community is more important than the individual, and individual needs that are outside of the expected norm are missed. The psalmist was so wise. We need both! We need the space to recognize our own joys and laments, and we need space to recognize the joys and laments of togetherness. We need the space to be fully human individually and together.

I am writing this chapter in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, originally the Land of the Cherokee, which means I am writing in the US. True to the American stereotype, I am much better at individualizing my experience and living in isolation than I am at being a full participant in our community. I love that I can turn to the example of Jesus and see that he did spend time alone for prayer and revitalization. But he was also very active in his community. Since I am going to assume the majority of folks reading this chapter are also in the US and have been trained by the same “pull yourself up” mentality, I am going to focus on gratitude in the midst of community rooted in Jesus’ communal life.

Jesus grew up Jewish and participated in the happenings of his faith family. As an infant, he is dedicated at the temple. Every year, his family traveled to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. He attends synagogue every Sabbath. Jesus probably sang psalms with his community—lamenting the oppressive powers of the Roman Empire and celebrating the majesty of God’s creation. We know, based on the stories in the Gospels, he was rooted in community both in his faith family and in the group of friends he calls together to help him live out his call.

Faith communities, like the church, gives us the safety we need to feel and do the internal and external work God nudges us toward. In my denomination, The United Methodist Church, our communities affirm our individual calls into ministry with the faith community. Calling is not done in isolation, and it’s also a personal invitation from God to be set apart to shepherd the community towards better living and loving.

For me, knowing I am not alone helps me show up. Having people whom I trust support me helps me have the courage to live bravely and in the way I know God wants for all of us. There is safety and comfort in community. Community support reminds me that I am a special child of God and I belong. There is comfort in knowing we have one another with whom to cry and to celebrate.

In my experience with gratitude, it requires the personal recognition of the gifts in my life. But that means very little if I don't honestly share the highs and lows, joys and concerns with my community.

Gratitude looks different for me now than it did when I was a young thing. I am able to be present. I don't have many needs for the coping skill of dissociation that I relied heavily on when I was in my twenties. I now know new ways of coping with hard stuff, and I am not living in an environment that requires me to be stuck in survival mode. I am privileged in that way, and that should not be a privilege.

Now I wake up to find emails from a gratitude email chain I am a part of. Each morning, lists of things other people see and experience that make them feel thankful greet me with an invitation to take stock of what I am thankful for. I read the lists of my fellow travelers and remember that I, too, am awake and alive and attuning to the small joys all around me. I feel grateful for their shares, and I am present, usually with a cup of coffee, as I think about the moments and blessings that make me feel sunshine blooming in my belly.

Honestly, this lens change from bleary-eyed exhaustion to seeking out things to be thankful for may be the most radical thing I do each day. Our world tells us constantly how scarce goodness is, how scarce safety is. You must buy this car or that house or that amount of toilet paper to ensure that you don't get left out in the cold. Stopping that scarcity mindset and replacing it with one of abundance is radical. Saying, "I have enough for today. I have more than enough for today. I have support, self-trust, and stuff to make a sandwich! Life is abundant!" is countercultural.

## Mental Health Benefits to Gratitude

Besides being radical, there are also real mental health benefits to gratitude. When we are able to acknowledge things that bring us the feelings of thankfulness, “our brain releases dopamine and serotonin, the two crucial neurotransmitters responsible for our emotions, and they make us feel ‘good.’ They enhance our mood immediately, making us feel happy from the inside.”<sup>5</sup> A daily practice of being thankful has been documented to create the same chemical changes as antidepressants!

In one of her Sunday prayers, Nadia Bolz-Weber prays, “Lord, help me remember that gratitude is a free antidepressant that you provided as a factory installed standard feature, and that it is a gift you have given us, not one we give you.”<sup>6</sup> Think about that: Gratitude is a free antidepressant factory installed by God. It has real, documented mental health benefits. (I still take an antidepressant in addition to my thankfulness practice. Some of us will just always need more help.)

Giving our children opportunities to practice being thankful will actually be reinforced by their own brain chemicals. They will feel good by grounding themselves in the reality of blessings in their lives. That doesn’t mean that being thankful is easy just because it releases feel good chemicals in our bodies. But it does mean that if you can find a rhythm of honest reflection on the joys in your life, you can approach life from abundance instead of scarcity. And Jesus promised us life abundant.

Life abundant doesn’t mean getting everything we want. That’s a very individual and simplistic view of what Jesus means when he promises “life abundant” to us. I have always thought this meant feeling the full range of human emotions, having access to community that loves and supports us, and knowing we are loved just as we are. This is true abundance. And when I think about all the moments when I have not been afraid to be fully human, to share my vulnerable joys and concerns, and know that God loves me truly, I am thankful. What does this bring up for you? Do you have people, places, and things that open up the promise of life abundant for you?

5 (Madhuleena Roy Chowdhury 2021) <https://positivepsychology.com/neuroscience-of-gratitude/#:~:text=When%20we%20express%20gratitude%20and,feel%20happy%20from%20the%20inside>

6 [https://www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=3717950528312184&set=pb.100044288896659\\_-2207520000](https://www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=3717950528312184&set=pb.100044288896659_-2207520000)

## Life Is More Good Than It Is Bad

When we attune ourselves to the joys we have, even the smallest of joys, we acknowledge that there are things in our lives that make it worth living. We acknowledge that life is more good than it is more bad. The gifts that we recognize through being thankful make us motivated to keep going. And I have been so dark and twisty on the inside that I know this is a powerful tool that motivates me to see the tiny bits of joy instead of only seeing the terrible awfulness.

In 2020, there were a series of events that poured down on me in the midst of my pregnancy and postpartum. Every time I thought the worst thing that could have happened had already happened, another worst thing would happen. I was a new mom and felt entirely isolated. It was difficult for me to feel joyful unless I was with Rowan and Michael. They stir up feelings of gratitude in me.

With Michael, I am thankful that I can fully trust him with my needs, my feelings, my body, and my care. I am thankful he loves Rowan as deeply as he loves me. I am thankful he cooks every meal for me. And Rowan stirs up so much joy in me. Watching him play and grow makes me feel such gratitude in being his mom. I feel lucky he's mine! (I feel lucky that Michael is mine too.)

But the two of them and the gratitude I feel for them allowed me to truly ground myself in my truth that life is more good than it is bad.

This is an incredibly important skill for every human. Life is not easy, not simple, not perfect. I think of the poem "Good Bones" by Maggie Smith (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/89897/good-bones>). In it, she talks about how parenting is like being a realtor. Even if the home you're trying to sell is dumpy, you're likely going to talk about the good bones it has to sell it. She says the world is like this. The world could be beautiful if you, sweet child, make it so. Our job as parents and leaders is to help people cultivate thankfulness, so when the world becomes a mess, our children know how to see the smallest of joys and keep going.

## Recognizing Leads to Sharing

Rowan hasn't ever given me a gift. He hasn't taken care of me. He's a baby, and his whole MO is one of taking. This is 100% developmentally appropriate for his age and stage. It will be true for quite a while. He isn't able to truly share with anyone right now. Meeting his needs and creating a safe space for him to grow and thrive is a job requirement for parenting.

And someday soon, Rowan will learn to recognize these things as a gift he is grateful for. When we end our days together, we talk about his day. I run through what he did, what he seemed to feel, and what I noticed brought him joy. When he gets older, I will ask him what he did, what he felt, and what the highlights of his day were. I will point out things we can be grateful for and things we can help others with.

This act of recognition of the things that bring us joy also helps us recognize that we could NOT have these things that bring us joy. It helps us recognize that there are people in our world without access to safe shelter, clean water, healthy foods, supportive relationships, and all the other countless things that I am so lucky to have. Knowing I have these things makes me want to share them. It stirs up a sense of justice, of right and wrong, and a desire to help those around me currently in need of something. Helping our children recognize the things in their lives that make them thankful will lead them to generosity (chapter 7).

## Conclusion

The psalmist reminds us to find reasons to be thankful and to celebrate those things. It isn't indulgent; it's what makes life good. Celebrate the things that truly make you thankful.

<https://positivepsychology.com/gratitude-appreciation/>