

Why Giving Thanks Is Good For You

Psalm 107:1, 8-9, 22

She was one of the first female novelists here in America. Because of the success of one of her early books, she became the editor of the first women's magazine in America, called *Godey's Ladies Book*. She held that position until she was nearly ninety years of age. In 1830 she published a collection of poems for children, which included her own original poem, "*Mary Had A Little Lamb*," which by the way, was the first song ever recorded. She was also the first to urge equal education for American girls, the first to start day nurseries for working women, and the first to suggest public playgrounds.

Her name was Sarah Josepha Hale. She was a young widow with five children when in 1827 she began a personal campaign to have a day of Thanksgiving established as a national holiday. In later years, as the nation was threatened by a civil war, she advocated that a day of Thanksgiving celebrated across the country might even help prevent war. And as the hostilities heated up, she literally wrote thousands of letters by hand to state and national officials, requesting a national holiday. Across the years she wrote letters to five different American presidents and every governor in the country. She also wrote editorials in which she even suggested what the menu should be for a Thanksgiving dinner: turkey, stuffing, pumpkin pie, cranberry sauce, and mashed potatoes.

Finally, in 1863, when Sarah Hale was 74 years old, Abraham Lincoln listened, and the result was the first Thanksgiving proclamation by a president since George Washington. In his proclamation, Lincoln wrote of various blessings our country had enjoyed, and then said:

No human counsel hath devised nor hath any mortal hand worked out these great things. They are the gracious gifts of the Most High God, who, while dealing with us in anger for our sins, hath nevertheless remembered mercy. It has seemed to me fit and proper that they should be solemnly, reverently and gratefully acknowledged as with one heart and one voice by the whole American People. I do therefore invite my fellow citizens in every part of the United States, and also those who are at sea and those who are sojourning in foreign lands, to set apart and observe the last Thursday of November next, as a day of Thanksgiving and Praise to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the Heavens.

Those are remarkable words, especially considering the fact that this proclamation making Thanksgiving a national holiday was issued after three long and bloody years of the Civil War, with one more still to follow. And here's something you may not know: that proclamation came at a time when God was doing something remarkable in Abraham Lincoln's own heart. Only four months earlier, 60,000 men had lost their lives at the Battle of Gettysburg, and Vicksburg had fallen in defeat.

When Lincoln visited Gettysburg to dedicate the cemetery, exactly one week before the first national Thanksgiving Day, he delivered his now-famous Gettysburg Address. While he was there, Lincoln walked among the graves of the soldiers who had lost their lives there only recently. And something happened to him that changed him forever.

He later wrote these words to a clergyman:

When I left Springfield [Illinois, to assume the Presidency], I asked the people to pray for me. I was not a Christian. When I buried my son, the severest trial of my life, I was not a Christian. But when I went to Gettysburg and saw the graves of thousands of our soldiers, I then and there consecrated myself to Christ.

So if we make a timeline of the events, the Battles of Gettysburg and Vicksburg were in July, Sarah Hale wrote the President in September, the proclamation was made in October, and the Gettysburg Address was made in November, all in 1863. Sarah Hale may have been prompted by the Union victories at Gettysburg and Vicksburg to write the President once more.

It appears that Lincoln was not a believer when he wrote that first Thanksgiving Day proclamation. But what does all this have to do with Thanksgiving? I can't prove it, and I am certainly no historian, but I sincerely believe Lincoln's new understanding that our nation should be thankful to Almighty God was a key factor in his turning his heart over to Christ.

Why did Sarah Hale persist for nearly forty years to get our government to declare a national day of Thanksgiving? She knew that the pilgrims had annually observed a season of giving thanks to God, and that some communities in the northeast still did in her day. She wrote, "There is a deep moral influence in these periodical seasons of rejoicing, in which whole communities participate. They bring out . . . the best sympathies in our natures." She firmly believed that the habit of giving thanks, and doing it together, had a key spiritual benefit, would serve to unite our

country, and should be done. It may have certainly had a spiritual benefit for Abraham Lincoln.

But Thanksgiving was decreed long before that, and not by mere mortal man. We can go back to the Scriptures to find that we are to be thankful people. Here are some examples, with two things that tie them together:

1 Chronicles 16:8 *“Give thanks unto the Lord, call upon his name, make known his deeds among the people.”*

Psalms 50:14 *“Offer unto God thanksgiving.”*

Psalms 95:1-2 *“Come, let us sing for joy to the Lord; let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation. Let us come before him with thanksgiving and extol him with music and song.”*

Psalms 100:4 *“Enter his gates with thanksgiving.”*

Psalms 105:1 *“Give thanks to the Lord, call on his name; make known among the nations what he has done.”*

Colossians 3:15 *“Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful.”*

1 Thessalonians 5:18 *“Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”*

And of course our Scripture for today, Psalm 107:1, which reads, *“Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures forever.”*

There are others, but that’s enough to make an important point. All of these verses, from both the Old and New Testaments, are about being thankful. That’s the first thing which ties them together. The second thing is such a stunning truth that it may literally change your life if you are willing to heed and obey what the Scripture teaches. Here it is: They are all imperatives. They are all commandments.

Now what that means is that we are commanded, over and over and over again in the Scriptures, to be thankful, to offer our thanksgiving to God. And this is to occur not only when things are going just as we like them, but also when things are inconvenient and less than perfect, and yes, even when they are scary.

If giving thanks is a commandment of Scripture and it is, then it follows that *not* giving thanks is sin. It also follows that any attitude of heart that is not thankful is sin. That means grumbling and complaining is sin. It means that when I complain about the circumstances or even inconveniences of my life I am standing in direct opposition to what Scripture teaches, and I am in sin.

Even doctors and scientists agree that being thankful has a very positive benefit on our bodies. Researchers have found that adults who frequently feel grateful have more energy, are more optimistic and have more social connections than those who are not grateful. They are less likely to be depressed or even to become drug- or alcohol-dependent. They earn more money, sleep better and have stronger immune systems.

When we are grateful people, researchers, say there are even chemical changes in our bodies. Gratitude lowers blood pressure, and can even help us lose weight or quit a bad habit, and get this can affect how fast we age. Gratitude can boost our immune systems, so we don't get sick so often. So without even consulting Scripture or even considering this question from a spiritual viewpoint, researchers in study after study have said that giving thanks is good for us.

But that is what the Bible has said all along. We read this in Psalm 92:1 *"It is good to praise the Lord and make music to your name, O Most High"* (Psalm 92:1). So from a Christian viewpoint, here is why giving thanks is good for us:

1 It helps us to focus more and more on God's mercy and less and less on our troubles

Once upon a time there was man who complained about everything. His wife tried real hard to please him, but because he found something wrong with everything, she failed miserably. Every day, it seemed, he woke up in a bad mood, and began his complaining at the breakfast table. If the eggs were scrambled, he wanted them poached. If they were poached, he wanted them scrambled.

One morning, the long-suffering woman poached one egg and scrambled the other, put the plate in front of him and waited for his reaction. He glanced at the plate, snorted, and said, "You scrambled the wrong one."

One day he went to the creek with his mule. He complained so much that the mule got annoyed and kicked him to death. At the funeral, when all the men walked by the wife she shook her head yes, and every time the women walked by she shook her head no.

The minister asked "Why are you shaking your head yes for men and no for women?" Her response was, "The men would say how sorry they felt for me and I was saying, "Yes, I'll be alright." When the women walked by, they were asking if the mule was for sale! ."

It's easy to express our gratitude to God when He blesses us, but not so easy when everything goes wrong. Henry Ward Beecher, a prominent American preacher of the 19th century, once pointed out that "The unthankful heart discovers no mercies, but the thankful heart finds, in every hour, some heavenly blessings."

Gigi Graham Tchividjian is one of Billy Graham's daughters. She once told a story about the time she ordered sand for her children's sandbox. The sand truck arrived on time, but left deep trenches in the grass, and broke off branches from overhanging trees.

Then it got stuck, and the more the driver worked to free the truck, the deeper it sank, until finally it began sliding down the hill. They called a tow truck, which left more deep ruts in the grass. That driver also broke sprinkler pipes, splintered branches, and uprooted small trees. Both trucks were stuck. Eventually, truck number three arrived—the cab of an 18-wheeler.

Gigi said her yard looked like a war zone. The day had been a disaster. But when she tucked in her eight-year-old for the night, she was astonished at his prayer: "And thank You, Lord, for the exciting day and all the entertainment we had!"

Wow! What a great attitude that little fellow had. True, there are times in our lives when we wish we had a little less "excitement"! It's all too easy as we move through our days to be upset about the trucks stuck in our backyard after they've left the deep ruts, and fail to see the wonderful blessings of excitement. But remember that the Scriptures tell us to "give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus" (1 Thessalonians 5:18).

Being thankful people enables us to remember all the goodnesses of God and the ways He has provided for us. It helps us to take our eyes off the things that plague us and burden us and to instead put our eyes on Him.

2 It strengthens our faith

Thomas Merton was a Catholic monk who lived during the 20th century. He once wrote, "To be grateful is to recognize the love of God in everything He has given us...and He has given us everything. Every breath we draw is a

gift of His love, every moment of existence is a grace, for it brings with it immense graces from Him.ö And this has a cumulative effect on our spirits.

When we are careful to live a thankful lifestyle, we remind ourselves that God is a God of love, that He truly cares for us, and that He is abundantly able to provide for us. When we are thankful, we remember that God has strengthened us in ways that we cannot always explain. We remember how He has stood with us, and prepared the way for us through difficult times. We remember trials weöve been through where God proved Himself to be strong on our behalf.

Hannah Whitall Smith wrote a book which has become a Christian classic. Itö called *The Christian’s Secret of a Happy Life*. She said, öIt is not because things are good that we are to thank the Lord, but because He is good. We are not wise enough to judge as to things, whether they are really joys or sorrow. But we always know the Lord is good, and everything He provides or permits must be good.ö When we can understand that God is good, and because He is good, everything He does is good, then our faith is strengthened as we give continually give thanks.

3 It replaces anxiety with joy

An old story says that Satan had a barn in which he kept all kinds of seeds ready to be sown in the human heart. He had a supply of discouragement seeds which was much larger than all the others, and that Satan could get those seeds to grow almost anywhere. But when he was questioned about it, Satan admitted that there was only one place where he could never get the seeds of discouragement to thriveö in the heart of a grateful person.

Of course, thatö just a story, but it is true that when we are thankful, we focus our thoughts on the blessings of God, on His person, on His love and provision and protection. We realize that God is faithful, has always been faithful, and according to His own Word, will never forsake us. Our thoughts center on the fact that this is the Almighty God, Who has no equal, the One who is so powerful that He spoke the universe into existence. Our thoughts are filled with the truth that God loved us so much that He sent His One and Only Son to die for our sins, and that He has provided an eternal place of security for us. When we are focused on things like that, our minds cannot at the same time be focused on worry and anxiety. Joy floods our hearts and minds, as the security and love of our Lord take over.

Philippians 4:6 tells us, “*Do not be **anxious** about anything, but in **everything**, by prayer and petition, with **thanksgiving**, present your requests to God*”ö and by the way, thatö another command in Scripture regarding giving thanks.

4 It teaches us to expect more blessings from the Lord

John Milton, who wrote *“Paradise Lost,”* once wrote “Gratitude bestows reverence, allowing us to encounter everyday epiphanies, those transcendent moments of awe that change forever how we experience life and the world.” In other words, when we are grateful to God as a matter of who we are, we come to expect more and more blessings from God. We start to look for them. We notice them more as we move through our days.

A man was walking with his daughter one clear winter’s night. Suddenly she said to him, “Daddy, I am going to count the stars.” “Okay,” he said, “go ahead.”

He patiently listened as she counted one after another. Finally she said, “Two hundred and twenty-three, two hundred and twenty-four, two hundred and twenty-five! Wow!” she said. “I had no idea there were so many!”

“Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits,” reads Psalm 103:2. When we begin to enumerate all the blessings our Heavenly Father has poured out on us, we may find ourselves saying, “I had no idea there were so many!” So while we may not be able to count them, let’s make sure that we don’t forget them!

Researchers in our day have proven that being grateful has many positive benefits on us physically, mentally, and emotionally. Sarah Josepha Hale believed that giving thanks as a nation may have prevented the Civil War. It certainly may have influenced Abraham Lincoln to give his heart to Christ. But what we’ve seen today is that God not only commands us to be grateful to Him, but that living a life of gratitude has some very positive effects on us as well.

But here’s something very important. The observance of Thanksgiving has a very interesting history, but regardless of how it started, it’s a fact that the Scripture commands us to be thankful. So today we have a choice placed in front of us: we can be obedient or disobedient. Either we are thankful and live lives of gratitude toward Almighty God, or we are not. It is a choice we make as a conscious decision.

“Choose you this day....”