

## BEING MINDFUL OF GOD'S BLESSINGS - THANKSGIVING

We make our beginning in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.  
Dear Lord God, Sanctify us in Your truth, Your Word is truth. (John 17:17)  
We ask that Your Word would be a blessing to our lives. Amen.

Let's take a closer look at our opening prayer. It's part of a prayer which Jesus prayed and is found in **John 17:17** "Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth."

This verse is a small part of Jesus' prayer for His disciples, and His prayer for us. This prayer of Jesus is found in John 17:1-26. He prayed this prayer in The Upper Room before going to the Garden of Gethsemane, the evening before His death on the cross. Jesus knew He would be crucified yet His thoughts and prayers were focused on His disciples and on us. His prayer and His heart's desire was that we would be sanctified by the Word of God. As stated in **John 1:1**, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Putting these two verses together, we see that Jesus is truly present in the Word of God. He makes God's Word active and powerful to sanctify our hearts, our attitudes, our minds and our lives.

Our opening prayer is an example of using Scripture in our own prayers. Jesus prayed "sanctify them in Your truth" ... together, we can pray 'sanctify us in Your truth' ... and individually, in our own prayers, we can pray 'sanctify me in your truth'.

In a previous Bible study, we saw how nature can remind us of God's presence, which can then remind us to draw near to Him in prayer. As we look around outside, we see many things in nature that remind us of God's presence. As we look at everything in our lives, there are many things that remind us of His presents, His gifts, His blessings. All His presents, all His gifts, all His blessings are given to us in love, for our benefit and for the benefit of His kingdom. God's presence is everywhere. His presents, His blessings, are also everywhere.

We are surrounded by His presence. We are also surrounded by His presents. Previously, we focused on God's presence. This time, we will focus on God's presents – His blessings.

God's most recognized and most appreciated blessings are the beautiful and pleasant ones: sunshine, good weather, good friends, good food, a good and faithful spouse, our family, jobs, healthcare, and a safe place to live. Everything that is good, pleasant and enjoyable is an obvious gift and a blessing from our gracious heavenly Father. The spiritual blessings we enjoy are: faith, forgiveness, fellowship, prayer, sanctification, contentment, trust, the comfort and strength of His presence, worship and God's Word. For all these blessings, we give Him thanks!

Now let's look at God's blessings that are less recognized and less appreciated. Did you know that guilt can be a blessing? When guilt brings us to Christ for confession, repentance and forgiveness, it's a good thing – it's a blessing. Sin is rebellion against God. Guilt is a gift from the Holy Spirit to let us know when we have sinned against God. When this gift of guilt brings us to repentance, God removes both the sin and the guilt. He restores us with a clean conscience and a right spirit. Some psychologists consider guilt to be damaging to emotional health but it's actually the sin itself which is damaging to emotional health. When the Holy Spirit convicts sinners with guilt and drives them to Christ in repentance and confession, God's full forgiveness is received. His forgiveness is deeply beneficial to our emotional and spiritual health and well-being. We see this in **Psalm 32:5** "I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,' and you forgave the iniquity of my sin." God's forgiveness blesses us and restores us with spiritual and emotional peace and strength.

Let's look at two men in the Old Testament who picture the blessings of guilt, repentance, and forgiveness. One was a 'good man', the other, a very 'bad man'. Both had sinned. Both were brought, by the Holy Spirit, to repentance. Both received forgiveness from a just and holy God.

In **1 Samuel 13:14**, Samuel told King Saul "The LORD has sought out a man after his own heart, and the LORD has commanded him to be prince over his people." That 'man after (God's) own heart' was David. In **1 Kings 3:6**, King Solomon said his father, David, "walked before (God) in faithfulness, in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart." And yet, King David committed a grievous sin against God when he committed adultery with Bathsheba and had her husband, Uriah, killed in battle. When confronted by the prophet Nathan, David said, in **2 Samuel 12:13**, "'I have sinned against the LORD.'" Nathan said to David, 'The LORD also has put away your sin; you shall not die.'" David's guilt, confession, and repentance brought him to God's forgiveness.

**2 Chronicles 33:9, 12-13** " (King) Manasseh led Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem astray, to do more evil than the nations whom the LORD destroyed before the people of Israel." Manasseh was captured by Assyria, bound with chains and taken to Babylon. <sup>12</sup> "When he was in distress, he entreated the favor of the LORD his God and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers. <sup>13</sup> He prayed to him and God was moved by his entreaty and heard his plea and brought him again to Jerusalem into his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the LORD was God." God promises in **1 John 1:9** that "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." Forgiveness is one of God's great blessings!

Guilt can work in a similar way that pain does. Pain lets us know when something physical is wrong. Guilt lets us know when something spiritual is wrong. When guilt is viewed from God's perspective, when it prompts us to seek His forgiveness, guilt becomes a blessing from God.

Did you know that adversity, trouble, hardship and difficulty can also be a blessing? We see this in **Romans 5:1-5** "Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>2</sup> Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. <sup>3</sup> More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, <sup>4</sup> and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, <sup>5</sup> and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us."

Paul is not listing virtues that we can achieve by our own will. These are effects of the Holy Spirit's work in our Christian lives. As God helps us through suffering, He teaches endurance, He develops character in us, and He gives us hope. Suffering is transformed by our relationship with God. Suffering cannot steal the peace which Christ brings. We do not rejoice about the actual suffering, but we realize that God can produce good things in our heart through the suffering.

We all admit that suffering is not a pleasant blessing. It's definitely not one of our all-time favorites. Let's look at Mary, the mother of Jesus, as an example of a difficult blessing. She became pregnant out of wedlock, by 'Someone' who was not even her fiancé. You can just imagine the concerns and questions of Joseph, her parents, her family and her friends. Years later, her first-born son was put to death by His own people, crucified between two criminals.

**Luke 1:41-49** shows the great blessings that were given to Mary, "And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, <sup>42</sup> and she exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! <sup>43</sup> And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? <sup>44</sup> For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped

for joy. <sup>45</sup> And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord. <sup>46</sup> And Mary said, 'My soul magnifies the Lord, <sup>47</sup> and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, <sup>48</sup> for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed; <sup>49</sup> for he who is mighty has done great things for me.'"

The next verses reveal the downside of Mary's blessings. **Luke 2:34-35 NIV** "Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: 'This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, <sup>35</sup> so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.'" These verses reveal that Mary's great blessings were, at the same time, accompanied by difficult and challenging circumstances, also heartache and sorrow. In like manner, some of our blessings are also filled with hardship.

Next let's look at the blessings of Joseph, son of Jacob and Rachel. He was made second in command of all Egypt, he was the national 'Minister of Agriculture', the overseer of the harvest of the entire country. Joseph was given great blessings, great honor, and great prestige! Yet his great blessings were accompanied by difficult circumstances and great heartache. Think how 17 year old Joseph must have felt as his brothers ripped off his coat of many colors, threw him into a pit, then sold him to a caravan of Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver. In captivity, he was taken to Egypt, a foreign country, and sold as a slave to Potiphar. After serving Potiphar faithfully for years, he was wrongfully accused by Potiphar's wife and thrown into prison.

Joseph was in prison for years. It wasn't until he was 39 years old that he fully understood what God had done in his life. After 22 long years of 'character building', God finally revealed to Joseph why he had been taken to Egypt. When Joseph's brothers appeared before him to purchase food during the famine, Joseph knew full well why all these things had happened to him. He told his brothers in **Genesis 45:8** "It was not you who sent me here, but God; and he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt."

God had placed Joseph in a position to save his entire family. He endured much heartache and suffering, but God had placed him in the right place at the right time for His purpose. In spite of all Joseph's troubles and adversities, God brought about great blessings for Joseph, for his entire family and for the future nation of Israel. During all of Joseph's difficult circumstances, God was the one who had abundantly blessed Joseph in everything he had been given to do.

But in all those years, I wonder how many times Joseph asked God, "Why am I here, Lord? Why did this happen to me? Why did you let this happen to me?" When we look at Joseph's life from God's perspective, it becomes clear that all things, even the most severe and troubling events, were governed by God and used for His good purpose. His whole life, every part of his life, had been in God's hands and was a blessing, and became a great blessing for others.

In our own lives, when we are faced with difficult blessings, God doesn't promise to reveal to us what He is doing or why. God says in **2 Corinthians 5:7** "We walk by faith, not by sight." This means God asks us to trust Him as He goes with us through dark or difficult places where we have no explanation as to what is going on or what God has planned or why this is happening to us. **Romans 8:28** "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose." We have great comfort in knowing that God is with us throughout those dark or difficult places. His presence is always a blessing.

These two people from the Bible, Mary and Joseph, teach us that great blessing can also be accompanied by great hardship. So now, looking at our own lives, what are we supposed to do when our own so-called 'blessings' are accompanied by heartache and sorrow, by trouble

and hardship? How are we supposed to handle it? Even when we know, as the saying goes, that 'this is for our own good', how do we cope with all the difficult, painful things in our life?

Let's look at God's Word in **Deuteronomy 10:12-13** "And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, <sup>13</sup> and to keep the commandments and statutes of the LORD, which I am commanding you today for your good?" Note that even God says 'this is for your own good'! We see that His commands, His requirements, even His difficult blessings are not intended for our punishment but for our good.

When we face difficult blessings, God gives us good 'coping mechanisms' in **1 Thessalonians 5:16-18** "Rejoice always, <sup>17</sup> pray without ceasing, <sup>18</sup> give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." We also see good 'coping mechanisms' in **Philippians 4:4-9** "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. <sup>5</sup> Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; <sup>6</sup> do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. <sup>7</sup> And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. <sup>8</sup> Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. <sup>9</sup> What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me - practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you."

An attitude of gratitude is recommended by our loving God. Psychologists tell us that gratitude and thankfulness are the healthiest of all human emotions. A whole cluster of related characteristics seem to go together: gratitude, optimism, happiness and hope. Research has shown that primarily, gratitude is a deliberate attitude. In other words, it's a choice we make. Very little of a person's sense of wellbeing seems to be directly related to their circumstances. Rather it depends on an inner attitude of life, and a spirit of gratitude. It's amazing that even secular research has determined that gratitude is not based on the fact that everything is well with the circumstances in our life. As Christians, we know that gratitude is based on the fact that 'it is well with my soul' - as stated in the famous hymn 'When Peace, Like a River' (Hymn 763).

So we know what we're supposed to do, we know what God wants us to do, what He expects of us, ... pray, give thanks, rejoice, trust ... but do we fully obey His will? And can we fully obey His will? When we see what God's will is for us in the midst of difficult blessings, do we appear to 'rejoice' on the outside but still 'seethe' with resentment or anger on the inside? What is our heart feeling, what is our mind thinking, what is our inner attitude when we are in the midst of pain and when we are confronted with the many irritations, frustrations, and troubles in our life?

Trials, adversity, hardship and irritations are actually a 'test of the heart' from God.

**1 Chronicles 29:17 NIV** "I know, my God, that you test the heart and are pleased with integrity." What is a 'test of the heart'? An academic test in school determines what we know. A spiritual test determines if we will actually do what we know. According to **Luke 11:28**, "Blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it!" God has promised to bless those who keep the Word of God, who do and obey the Word of God, not just hear it, then forget it or ignore it.

Let's look at Paul's struggle with this issue. **Romans 7:15, 17- 8:1** "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate ... <sup>17</sup> So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. <sup>18</sup> For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. <sup>19</sup> For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. <sup>20</sup> Now if I do what I do

not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. 21 So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. 22 For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, 23 but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. 24 Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? 25 Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin. 8:1 There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."

As we can see from Paul's struggle with sin, we cannot perfectly obey God in all things. Because of the natural sin within our heart, there is a spiritual battle in our hearts, minds, will and actions. This makes it difficult to give thanks to God when we are hurting, either physically or emotionally. This makes it difficult to give thanks to God when we are angry. We cannot do this on our own. We cannot rejoice in all things on our own. We cannot maintain an attitude of gratitude on our own. But thanks be to God, He has promised to give us His help.

God promised to give us His help in **Ezekiel 36:25-27** "I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. 26 And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. 27 And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules."

When the prophet Nathan confronted King David with his sins, David prayed to God for help. **Psalm 51:10-12** "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. 11 Cast me not away from Thy presence, and take not Thy Holy Spirit from me. 12 Restore unto me the joy of Thy salvation, and uphold me with Thy free spirit."

God does not leave us on our own. He knows that, in our sinful condition, we cannot obey Him on our own. We cannot obey Him without His help. He promises to remove our heart of stone and give us a new heart. He has promised to give us His own Spirit. He tells us in **Romans 5:5** "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us."

When our own love is used up, when our own peace is lost, and when our own gratitude has turned to stone, we can ask God to fill our heart, fill our mind, and fill our spirit, with His love, His joy, His thankfulness, His peace, and His Spirit. We can ask Him to give us an attitude of gratitude. God desires that we greet all His blessings, the pleasant blessings as well as the difficult blessings, with thanksgiving because "we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose." **Romans 8:28**

And when we keep His Word, when we live by it, He has promised to bless and keep us. **Luke 11:28** "Blessed are they who hear the word of God and keep it."

**Prayer:** Heavenly Father, we give You thanks and praise for all Your many blessings, the difficult blessings as well as the comfortable blessings. Give us hearts that trust Your love and goodness in all things, so we can live with an attitude of gratitude, knowing Your hand is on our life. When we mess up, we thank You for the blessing of guilt which draws us to You for forgiveness. When our own thankfulness and our own love have been used up and are gone, we thank You for Your promise to pour Your love into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. Enable us by your Spirit to hear the Word of God and keep it. In Jesus' precious name, Amen.

**Closing Hymn:** When Peace, Like a River (Hymn 763 in Lutheran Service Book)