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ACTIVATED

Vol 24 • Issue 11

THE ROAD TO HAPPINESS

Highway to heaven

Festivals of Gratitude

The origin story

A Tale of Two Gifts

Adopting a new
mindset



EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

THE GRATEFUL LEPER

The Gospel of Luke tells us that as Jesus was making His way to Jerusalem for His final Passover, ten men who had leprosy approached Him and called out from a distance, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!"¹ Despite knowing the suffering and pain that the next days had in store for Him personally, Jesus was moved with compassion and told them to go show themselves to the priests. (Jewish law required a priest to examine and confirm that cases of leprosy were healed.)

The lepers immediately set out to find a priest, and "as they went, they were cleansed of their leprosy."² It's interesting to wonder what might have gone through their minds as they left Jesus, and also whether their healing was gradual or sudden. We can imagine how thrilled they all must have been when they realized that the miracle had taken place, but Luke tells us that only one of the men was so filled with gratitude that he ran back to Jesus, praised God in a loud voice, and threw himself at Jesus' feet to thank Him.³

In a twist that would have shocked onlookers, he was a Samaritan, a group despised by Jews of Jesus' time. "Didn't I heal ten men?" Jesus asked. "Where are the other nine? Has no one returned to give glory to God except this foreigner?"⁴

The lepers all showed faith that Jesus would heal them, as they set out to find a priest while they were still sick, but Jesus' comment highlighted their lack of gratefulness. From this account, we see that God doesn't just want His followers to *believe* in Him, He also should be recognized and praised in every situation. "Be thankful in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you who belong to Christ Jesus."⁵

Being grateful is obviously easier in some circumstances than in others, but I hope this issue of *Activated* gives you some ideas for developing a gratitude attitude, whatever comes your way.

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1. Luke 17:13
 2. Luke 17:14 NLT
 3. See Luke 17:15–16.
 4. Luke 17:17–18 NLT
 5. 1 Thessalonians 5:18 NLT

For more information on *Activated*, visit our website or write to us.

Website: activated.org

Email: activated@activated.org

Local contacts:

South Africa:

Email: activated@helpinghandsa.org

India:

Email: activatedindia@activated.org

Nigeria:

Cell: +234 (0) 7036963333

Email: activatednigeria@activated.org

Philippines:

Cell: (0922) 8125326

Email: activatedph@gmail.com

EDITOR Ronan Keane

DESIGN Gentian Suçi

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THE ROAD TO HAPPINESS

BY KEITH PHILLIPS

WHEN ASKED WHAT IT MEANS TO PRAISE GOD, my then-four-year-old grandson Logan explained, “It’s when we tell God, ‘Good job!’” I chuckled when I heard that, but it got me thinking. Why are we told time and again in the Bible to praise God, to tell Him “Good job”? He deserves it, of course, because He certainly did a good job when He created us and our infinitely complex universe, and moment by moment He does a good job at holding it all together.

He deserves our praise and thanks for a job well done, that much is clear, but sometimes I wonder what He gets out of it. I’ve seen what praise can do for Logan or me or anyone else. I know how it builds us up, but does God really need that? He’s all-powerful and all-knowing. Surely, He already knows how great He is. Why would He need to hear that from us?

I think it’s mostly for *our* benefit. I think we need to hear it from us. We need to think about His goodness,

1. See John 17:3.

Happiness is neither within us only, nor without us; it is the union of ourselves with God.—*Blaise Pascal (1623–1662)*

God wants to see prayers that are filled with genuine praise and thanksgiving for what He has done in the past. He wants our hearts to be filled with awe and gratitude for His blessings. He wants us to set up memorials in our hearts testifying to the provisions He has given us.—*Michael Youssef (b. 1948)*

and to put it into words. We need it, and for at least three reasons.

First, it puts things in perspective. It reminds us of our human limitations and frailties, and of God’s power and goodness toward us.

That leads to reason number two: it puts us on a positive path, in a hopeful frame of mind. That’s important, because we can’t even begin to trust God until we realize that none of the things that stand in our way are insurmountable, with His help.

Third and best of all, it brings us into loving communion with our Creator, whom to know is life eternal.¹ That’s the purpose of this life, His reason for it all. It’s His ultimate goal and His daily wish for us. That’s what’s in it for Him and us both. When we tell God “Good job,” think about what we’re saying, and really mean it, we can experience a little bit of heaven on earth.

KEITH PHILLIPS WAS *ACTIVATED*’S EDITOR-IN-CHIEF FOR 14 YEARS FROM 1999 TO 2013. HE AND HIS WIFE CARYN NOW WORK WITH THE HOMELESS IN THE USA. ■



THANKING GOD IN ADVANCE BY FAITH

BY MARIA FONTAINE

IN THE LAST FEW YEARS, I've faced various situations where I had no idea how they could possibly be solved. Sometimes, it seemed as if they didn't *have* solutions. However, because my faith was firmly planted in the truth of God's Word and the knowledge that He never fails, and I was seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit as Jesus told us to, I knew that somehow, there would be a solution.

Jesus said: "I still have much to tell you, but you cannot yet bear to hear it. However, when the Spirit of truth comes, He will guide you into all truth. For He will not speak on His own, but He will speak what He hears, and He will declare to you what is to come. He will glorify Me by taking from what is Mine and disclosing it to you."¹

The Holy Spirit was sent to us after Jesus' death to help us understand the truth and to apply Jesus' words to whatever situation we find ourselves in. I believe that is why, when we revisit the Scriptures, they often take on

new meaning for us, as the Holy Spirit shows us how to apply them or reveals more of their depth to us.

There are many examples in God's Word of how to approach the challenges of life. One such example that I find applicable to many difficulties that I encounter is the story of King Jehoshaphat in 2 Chronicles chapter 20, where he had no hope of any kind of human rescue from the various superior forces that were against him. In fact, there were three armies joining together to try to destroy him and his people. He said to God, "We don't know what to do, and so we are looking to you for help."²

Jehoshaphat gave God the glory and thanked Him for His greatness and the wonder of His love. He reminded himself and the people who had gathered of all the times when God had come through for them in the past. He wanted everyone to recognize how their great God had come to their rescue time after time after time when there seemed to be no hope in sight.

We all have times when it looks like there is no solution to the situation we find ourselves in. And that may well be the case without God's intervention.

1. John 16:12-14 BSB

2. 2 Chronicles 20:12 CEB



As we express our gratitude, we must never forget that the highest appreciation is not to utter words, but to live by them.

—John Fitzgerald Kennedy (1917–1963)

We can't say, "Jesus, I'll trust You and praise You as long as You do this or that for me, or You don't allow this or that to happen." We need to place ourselves in His hands, knowing that He will always bring us through and cause whatever we face to work together for good in the end. When you thank God for something after it happens, that's gratitude. It takes faith to thank God for the answer to your prayers before it happens.

By faith, you can thank God in advance before you see the answer. You can say something like, "Jesus, You know that request I made the other day? I thank You that the answer is mine. I don't have to see it to know that You have answered. You have promised to answer, and that's all I need. I thank You that the matter is already settled, and when it's Your perfect time for the best solution to appear, it will."

You don't keep saying, "Please give it, please give it, please give it." Instead, you say, "Jesus, here's my heart cry that I know You will answer according to Your will.

3. See 1 John 5:4.

4. Hebrews 11:13, 16 KJV

Thank You!" That is a manifestation of your faith, when you thank God *in advance*.

Whatever you feed, that's what gains power in your life. Focus on thanksgiving and praise, and that will feed your faith! Faith is the victory!³ Manifest that faith through your words, your thoughts, the intents of your heart, and you will overcome the world. Fill your mind with words of thanksgiving and praise, and you will come through victorious in the end.

Hebrews 11 states: "These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. But now, they desire a better country, that is, an heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city."⁴

In this life, those men and women of faith in Hebrews 11 often didn't see all that was promised to them, but they knew the author of those promises! They knew that He wouldn't fail! For them, faith became a way of life that permeated their thoughts and decisions. It was



a conviction that grew throughout their lives so that whatever they faced in the moment was secondary to what they knew by faith was to come.

Those of faith in the Old Testament believed without seeing Jesus' redemption manifested during their lifetime. We have the blessing of knowing that Jesus has already redeemed us, but we still can't see all that Jesus has promised to those who love Him.

God wants us to trust Him in all circumstances. If the answer to your prayer comes immediately, then rejoice. When you don't see the answer right away, keep thanking Him anyway, because you trust Him. You have His assurance that He will keep you and give you strength and all that you need to hang on until the answer arrives.

Faith in God that when we have asked, He has heard our petition and will answer in the way He knows is best, could in some ways be compared to a trust fund. Trust funds can take on many forms, but they are most often used to ensure that money or other assets are distributed in a way that will provide maximum benefit to the receiver over the long term.

A friend of mine was a recipient of a trust fund. Sometimes, the trust would limit what funds were given to him even though he requested more. But then, an unanticipated medical event occurred, and he was

desperately in need of funds for his care and support. Because the trust had rationed the funds, the money was there when it was needed most.

Likewise, God provides the answers to our prayers according to His perfect will and what will bring about the greatest good in the situation and in our lives. That's why it's so important to have faith in His love for us. We need to trust in His wisdom.

Whether the answers to your prayers are manifested immediately or whether they take time to be manifested or whether God has a different plan altogether in mind, we can trust that the answers have been settled in heaven. When we thank Him for His faithfulness, we're declaring our trust that the God of the universe who loves us and has already sacrificed so much to save and restore us and to be with us through everything is going to *continue* to be who He is to us: a friend, a father, a protector, a savior, a healer, the source of all truth and power, a provider of all that we need, a guide, and the answer to every problem and question we will ever encounter.

MARIA FONTAINE AND HER HUSBAND, PETER AMSTERDAM, ARE DIRECTORS OF THE FAMILY INTERNATIONAL, A CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY OF FAITH. ADAPTED FROM THE ORIGINAL ARTICLE. ■



Bring back the joy

ANSWERS TO YOUR QUESTIONS



Q: I feel less happy than I did when I was younger. How can I regain some of the joy of life that I've lost?

A: At some point, many adults have looked at a child playing blissfully and wished they could turn back the clock. Children at play look happy, carefree, and thrilled about life. They laugh a lot, are easily entertained, and get excited about the simplest things. They have their problems and hurts too, of course, but they are resilient. Children live in the moment and generally spend more time being happy than adults. Here are a few ways you can recapture some of that childhood magic.

Rediscover the world around you. Take a closer look at things that form the backdrop of your days—buds on the tree you pass on your way to work, rays of morning sun through the kitchen window, white clouds against a cerulean sky, the spiderweb on the drain spout.

Savor your food. Don't just eat and run; slow down long enough to think about and enjoy it. When was the first time you had that dish? What favorites do you have now that you didn't like as a child?

Learn something new. Children don't have time to get into ruts because they're too busy discovering new things.

Take up a new hobby or activity. Read a new author. Travel, even if only vicariously via travelogue.

Reward yourself. Set a goal for the week and pick out a reward for when you reach it. Anticipation is one of the best incentives, and it works at any age.

Talk to a child. If you want a fresh perspective, ask a child about almost anything. Wit, wisdom, imagination, hope, pathos—they've got it all. Don't be surprised if you are revisited by some of your own happy childhood thoughts.

Take downtime. Your world won't come crashing down if you stop doing and accomplishing for a few minutes. Relax. Contemplate happy thoughts.

Be thankful for small things. A child can be delighted by an inexpensive gift, a chance to go outdoors, a bit of attention, a swing at the park. Think of the little things you enjoy, and give thanks. ■



The things which the child loves remain in the domain of the heart until old age.

—Khalil Gibran (1883–1931)



FESTIVALS OF GRATITUDE

BY CURTIS PETER VAN GORDER

THANKSGIVING IS A HOLIDAY OBSERVED IN THE UNITED STATES, Canada, Liberia, Grenada, and St. Lucia, but much of the rest of the world seems to only know about it through various movies or TV shows. However, Germany has a similar festival called *Erntedankfest* to thank God for a good harvest, and Japan has *Kinrō Kansha no Hi*, a day to commemorate labor and production and also for citizens to express gratitude to one another.

Most cultures and religions put importance on giving thanks to the Creator. The Native Americans had special thanksgiving ceremonies for the green corn harvest, for the arrival of certain fish species and whales, for the first snow, and for the arrival of their new year.

When my children were growing up, I used to don my Pilgrim outfit and they would dress as Native Americans. Then we would dramatize the story of the first Thanksgiving.

In 1620, after an extremely difficult voyage, the 102 passengers on the *Mayflower* arrived in Cape Cod, Massachusetts. The passengers and crew were a combination of religious separatists, indentured servants, and others. Due to a delayed departure, they arrived in winter and were dangerously low on provisions. Approximately half of the passengers and crew died in the first year from sickness and malnutrition.

The next year, thanks to help from the local Native Americans, the Wampanoags, they learned how to plant crops using fish as fertilizer and the colony achieved food security. They were so thankful they decided to hold a celebratory feast to show their gratitude to God for their



A PRAISE FOR THE DAY

Lord, I lift my heart, mind, and spirit to You in prayer, praise, and thanksgiving. You are the giver of all good things, and You are all good things to me.

You are my Creator, my Father, the source of life and strength. You cause the sun to rise, the light to shine, the night to come. You hold me in Your arms. You console me in my sadness. You warm me with Your love. You shield me and protect me and provide for me.

All peace, contentment, and blessings come from Your hand. I praise and honor and thank You. Amen.

God says to give thanks in everything. That doesn't mean you need to give thanks *for* everything. You don't need to give thanks *for* that bad day. Or *for* that bad relationship. Or being passed over at work. Financial hardship. Whatever it is—you are not to give thanks *for* the difficulties, but rather *in* the difficulties. That is a very important distinction, and one I think we often miss. Giving thanks *in* everything shows a heart of faith that God is bigger than the difficulties and that He can use them, if you approach Him with the right heart and spirit, for your good and His glory.—*Tony Evans (b. 1949)*

survival. The Wampanoags joined in the festivities and brought five deer to the feast. In the years that followed they continued the practice, and in 1623, Governor William Bradford issued a formal proclamation for men, women, and children to gather on Thursday, November 29, to “render Thanksgiving to Almighty God for all His blessings.”

George Washington, the first American president, proclaimed the first nationwide thanksgiving celebration on November 26, 1789, as “a day of public thanksgiving and prayer to be observed by acknowledging with grateful hearts the many and signal favors of Almighty God.” These days, it's a good opportunity to bring families together across all the divides that put strain on our society and get people of different opinions and persuasions sitting down at the same table.

Ramona Peters is the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe's Tribal Historic Preservation Officer. She had this to say about the positive aspects of the holiday: “A heartfelt

Thanksgiving is very important to me as a person. It's important that we give thanks. For me, it's a state of being. You want to live in a state of thanksgiving.”

About 40 years ago, I was living in Bogor, Indonesia, on a very tight budget. A traditional Thanksgiving *feast* with pumpkin pies and cranberry sauce certainly wasn't on the cards, but I prayed for a special dinner. That day, our neighbor appeared and gave us his goose that had been run over by a car neatly at the neck, which turned into a sumptuous feast that we shared with others.

Someday, we will enjoy a fantastic feast called the Marriage Supper of the Lamb with Jesus and people of all races and cultures.¹ A big part of the gratitude we will feel is when we realize how big His love for us is despite our mistakes and shortcomings. It is with that end in mind and the joy of the journey in getting there that I give thanks.

CURTIS PETER VAN GORDER IS A FREELANCE WRITER AND MIME ARTIST² WHO SPENT 47 YEARS DOING MISSIONARY ACTIVITIES IN 10 DIFFERENT COUNTRIES. HE AND HIS WIFE PAULINE CURRENTLY LIVE IN GERMANY. ■

1. See Revelation 19:7–10.

2. <http://elixirmime.com>

GODLINESS WITH CONTENTMENT

BY JOYCE SUTTIN



I WAS THINKING ABOUT A BIBLE VERSE THIS MORNING AS I WALKED THROUGH MY NEIGHBORHOOD. I was thankful for the beautiful morning and for a healthy body that did not limit me from walking and enjoying the world around me. As I counted my blessings and felt a rush of happiness, a verse came to me, “Godliness with contentment is great gain.”¹

It struck me that we’ve all had to learn to do without at various points of our lives. But here God was telling me that having gratitude for whatever I was able to do is great gain.

I came home and looked up the Bible passage to find the context. As I read the surrounding verses, I saw that Paul was telling Timothy, a young leader in the church, to be careful about equating godliness with financial gain.

This is a beautiful passage on having the right perspective and not letting materialism and a desire for more possessions cause us grief. I had already been learning this past year that shopping can be an unnecessary exercise in pleasing myself that can end up being wasteful if I’m not careful. Learning to be happy and grateful with a simple life is a key to contentment.

1. 1 Timothy 6:6

2. 1 Timothy 6:6–12,17–19 NIV

Godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.

But you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith.

Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age.²

JOYCE SUTTIN IS A RETIRED TEACHER AND WRITER AND LIVES IN SAN ANTONIO, USA. CHECK OUT HER BLOG AT [HTTPS://JOY4DAILYDEVOTIONALS.BLOGSPOT.COM/](https://joy4dailydevotionals.blogspot.com/). ■

THANKFUL FOR SETBACKS

BY ROSANE PEREIRA



AFTER MY HUSBAND PASSED AWAY, I was living alone with my younger children—one young adult who was already working, two teenaged boys, a younger daughter, and a preschooler—and I was also caring for my sister’s poodle, Poof, for a few months.

I frequently felt overwhelmed, and to make things worse, one afternoon while on a walk, Poof got attacked by two other dogs from a neighboring house and got a big cut close to his left eye. At the veterinarian, Poof got a bath, a haircut, and a few stitches, and a sweet nurse said, “Don’t get discouraged, everything will be all right. These things happen to everyone!” Her encouraging words saved me that day!

Over the next days, everyone in my family united to care for little Poof. The boys put mosquito netting all around the area where he stayed to avoid flies laying eggs in the wound, and everyone took turns dressing the cut and mixing his medicine with his food. This brought us all together as a family, and thankfully, by the time my sister came to pick up her dog, he was all healed without even a scar.

The late Christian writer Merlin Carothers emphasized the concept that “God’s people are intended to give Him

thanks in everything that comes their way, for there is nothing that He cannot turn to good and use as a source of spiritual growth to those who love and trust in Him, and the results can be miraculous.” When we praise God for His goodness in any difficulty, we draw closer to Him and bring Him into the situation, trusting Him to act in our favor.

Showing gratitude for others is very important too. Life is hard enough for most people, and it’s so refreshing to hear a positive word of gratitude when the waves are big and threaten to drown us. Maybe that’s why Jesus taught us not to judge others.¹ If we could see the burden that our neighbor is already carrying, like God does, we would be eager to help instead of judge.

To remind myself of the importance of gratitude, I also keep a gratitude journal. Even though I don’t add to it every day, when I do I try to list at least three things I’m thankful for. This exercise helps to lift me up and above the difficulties I’m facing at the time, and to put everything in the right perspective.

ROSANE PEREIRA IS AN ENGLISH TEACHER AND WRITER IN RIO DE JANEIRO, BRAZIL, AND A MEMBER OF THE FAMILY INTERNATIONAL. ■

1. See Matthew 7:1–3.



EXERCISING GRATITUDE

BY CHRIS MIZRANY

“ENJOYING EXERCISE” has always seemed a contradiction in terms to me. Exercise is work, exhausting pushing-yourself-to-the-limit effort, and certainly not at the top of my enjoyment list. I know one is supposed to find joy in reaching fitness goals, but sometimes I just want to reward myself with extra sleep or a slice of cake. However, I reached that point where I looked at myself in the mirror and realized I wasn’t making progress. So I’ve been trying to get back into a fitness routine—and what better goal than a 15 km run through our suburb that my friends and I participate in every year?

Every day, I worked out till my muscles burned, and then a little further. I did, and did, and did. And then I crashed. The day of the run, I couldn’t find any reserves of strength; I felt awful. I waited hopefully till just an hour before the start but didn’t improve. So it was with huge regret that I had to bow out and watch my friends go without me.

Since I wasn’t going running anymore, I decided to visit a quadriplegic friend. I normally love seeing my friend, but this time, I was feeling sorry for myself, and also rather embarrassed at my lack of achievement.

When I arrived, I halfheartedly asked him how he was doing. He said, “I’m fine, although earlier there was a huge spider on the wall just above my bed, and though I saw it, there was nothing I could do! I couldn’t get away; I just had to call for help and wait for my caretaker. That was pretty awful.” And then he chuckled.

Suddenly my grump fog cleared. I realized how blessed and privileged I am to have full use of all my limbs, to have a body that may get tired or run-down but isn’t confined to a bed or wheelchair. In that moment, my blessings exponentially multiplied in my mind. And I found myself laughing along with him and beginning to enjoy the evening.

If there’s one thing this experience taught me it’s that each of us has so, so much to be thankful for and—like my friend—so many reasons to be cheerful in spite of difficulties. Beyond that, if God has blessed you with potential, exercise it! I’m getting back into my routine, and I’m praying for the strength to keep on, both physically and spiritually, till I reach my goals.

CHRIS MIZRANY IS A MISSIONARY, PHOTOGRAPHER, AND WEB DESIGNER WITH HELPING HAND IN CAPE TOWN, SOUTH AFRICA. ■

THE ROAD TO PEACE OF MIND

BY ANNA PERLINI

A WHILE AGO, I went through one of those periods in life that seem to be overloaded with stress. There was a major crisis and tension on the work front, and all this spilled over into family and personal life. Doesn't it usually go that way?

Up to that point, I'd considered myself quite a calm person, able to withstand aggravating circumstances and be patient with difficult personalities. I guess it's good to realize that even your strong point sometimes can fail you, and if nothing else, an apparent disappointment and failure can help you remain humble.

It so happened that I lost my patience—my well-treasured, vintage patience, and more than once! I was constantly tense and on edge, and that started affecting my sleep and my general health. I was becoming a different person and saw myself going down a dangerous path.

I knew that if I wanted to keep my sanity, I had to find a way out—and in fact, the way happened to be right outside my door!

There's a windy, uphill road just around the corner that takes you to a mountain pass about 8 km away. That seemed like a worthwhile goal, so I started going on daily walks.



I'm a good walker, but going uphill has never been my favorite, so I started slowly and went a little further each day, until I was finally able to make it to the end and back.

Along the way, I'd listen to music and inspirational podcasts, pray for my children and others, and admire the gorgeous views, the majestic trees, and the occasional wildlife. As I was almost always alone, I'd occasionally sing, and sometimes I'd even cry. Sometimes, as I left the house, I was so pent up inside I felt I was about to explode—and in fact, many of my "walks" started at such a pace that I was almost running—running from problems and tensions, and hopefully into God's arms.

That particular challenging period of my life is over, but I'm sure others will come. Those uphill walks helped me to unplug from my reality and connect with God and His perfection. They helped me get rid of tension, frustrations, and negativity, breathe fresh air and think heavenly, positive thoughts.

I still go up that road, though not as often. As I've practically memorized each step, it has almost become part of me. It contains my heartbreaks, my tears—and my newfound joy.

ANNA PERLINI IS A COFOUNDER OF PER UN MONDO MIGLIORE,¹ A HUMANITARIAN ORGANIZATION ACTIVE IN THE BALKANS SINCE 1995. ■

1. <http://www.perunmondomigliore.org>



Who is it that says most?
Which can say more
than this rich praise,
That you alone are you?
—William Shakespeare

HE REMEMBERED

BY SALLY GARCÍA

“I MET ONE OF YOUR FORMER STUDENTS AT A PARTY LAST NIGHT. We were talking about you,” wrote a friend of mine in an email. “He told me that you taught him to read.”

Immediately I could feel myself going through the time tunnel back to that event about 30 years ago. I had forgotten, but yes, it came back to me. He was a very bright first-grader, but he was easily distracted and struggled with his reading. I made a point to practice one-on-one with him, and in less than a month he was doing fine.

He remembered! If he had said, “She was a good teacher,” or “I enjoyed her class,” I would have smiled and thought *How nice!* But it was his specific appreciation over an achievement we shared that touched my soul. He remembered it fondly and was grateful, even enough to mention it to my friend 30 years later!

When I was a teacher, I saw that general appreciation—“You’re a great student!”—wasn’t as beneficial to the pupil as specific praise—“You showed a lot of imagination with the characters of your story.” “Your presentation is so neat and well designed.” “Beautiful choice of colors!” “I love that humorous detail in your picture.”

I’m part of an online embroidery group. We post our completed embroidery projects and comment on one another’s work. The replies that say “Beautiful” or “Lovely” are encouraging, but the comments that feel the best are the ones that mention the color choices, the type of stitches, or the composition.

We all love compliments, we thrive on praise, we want to be appreciated and recognized. And when this encouragement is specific, it’s as if someone had told us “I see the details, and I see *you*.” That makes us shine.

SALLY GARCÍA IS AN EDUCATOR, MISSIONARY, AND MEMBER OF THE FAMILY INTERNATIONAL IN CHILE. ■

Have you met God’s Son? You can! You can open your heart to Jesus through a prayer and receive Him as your Savior—a prayer like this:

Dear Jesus, thank You for coming to earth and dying for me so I can be forgiven my sins, experience Your love here and now, and have the promise of eternal life in heaven. I open my heart and invite You in. Please fill me with Your Holy Spirit and help me get to know You better through reading Your Word in the Bible. Amen.

A TALE OF TWO GIFTS

BY MARIE ALVERO



EACH YEAR, we host a Christmas party at my house. All the guests bring something of approximately equal value, and we play a game to determine what gift we all end up with. This party is an annual tradition that my husband and I put a lot of thought into, and we plan our gifts very carefully. Unfortunately, last year the gift I ended up with was a gift card to a place I never, ever go, and I learned the gift had been re-gifted, and honestly, it left me with a sour taste in my mouth.

A few days later, we went to my husband's company Christmas party, and they held a raffle for a few random gifts. My husband won a gift card to a store that he's never gone to and had never heard about—it turns out it exclusively sells items for women—but he was thrilled because he'd had no expectation of getting anything in the first place.

I expected to get something that I'd value as much as the gift I'd brought to our Christmas exchange, and I was disappointed. He expected nothing at all, so his gift was pure bonus and he enjoyed the experience. In life, the more we think we deserve something, the less grateful we are.

I read a quote that said that joy is found in having an attitude of *expectancy* rather than *expectation*. Expectancy is the excitement of knowing that something good might

happen, but without a defined expectation of what that will be. Saint Paul demonstrated this when he said: "I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want."¹ His contentment wasn't due to a certain level of success or comfort, but in knowing that God's grace was enough for any situation.

I have a lot of things in my life that I never expected to have. When I remember that, I'm filled with gratitude! Unsurprisingly, those feelings can also fade a bit when I compare my situation to that of others, or I set an expectation for what I think I should have or achieve or receive or experience.

There are numerous studies on the practice of gratitude, and the evidence strongly shows that people with a grateful outlook live happier lives, are in more positive, long-term relationships, and they enjoy better mental health. The foundation for it all is being content with what we have and remembering that we aren't owed anything.

MARIE ALVERO IS A FORMER MISSIONARY TO AFRICA AND MEXICO. SHE CURRENTLY LIVES A HAPPY, BUSY LIFE WITH HER HUSBAND AND CHILDREN IN CENTRAL TEXAS, USA. ■

1. Philippians 4:11–12 NIV



FROM JESUS WITH LOVE

LET ME HELP

Life wasn't designed to coast through without any troubles or hardships. There will always be setbacks, difficulties, and pressures, but I can help you learn to see those as challenges to overcome.

I want to lift the weight of uncertainty from your shoulders. I want you to hold on to the knowledge that no matter how great the need, how dark the night, or how seemingly impossible the situation, I am in control and I never fail those who turn to Me for help. No matter what you are up against, My strength will be sufficient for you.

Bring all your cares to Me. You may be able to withstand a lot of pressure, but I can relieve the pressure.

I will never leave your side. I will give you sustaining grace,¹ rest of spirit,² and peace that surpasses understanding.³ No matter what's going on around you, you can be at peace when you are anchored deeply in Me. Beneath the churning waves, your anchor will hold.

Come to Me, lay your burdens on My shoulders, and find that I have all you need.

1. See 2 Corinthians 12:9.

2. See Matthew 11:28.

3. See Philippians 4:7.