

ONE

BEING GRATEFUL DESPITE THE CIRCUMSTANCES

Trust in the LORD with all your heart,
and do not rely on your own insight.
In all your ways acknowledge him,
and he will make straight your paths.

—Proverbs 3:5–6

Anyone who has read Charles Dickens’s famous novel *A Tale of Two Cities* probably remembers its opening phrase: “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.” Who of us has not had a moment when we felt, or longed to feel, that life could not get any better than this? Those “best of times” are captured in our memory banks: the birth of a child; their Baptism, First Communion, or Confirmation; a bridal shower, a honeymoon, a fiftieth wedding anniversary; the trip of a lifetime, a family reunion, one’s first car or house . . . the best, to be sure.

How we long to repeat that first kiss or that chance meeting with the person meant for us or that perfect breakfast with the

sun rising over the shore or that job we loved so much that we couldn't believe we were being paid to do it.

Commingled with these good times, and perhaps always lurking in the shadows, are the “worst of times”—sudden infant death syndrome; the official visit or letter declaring the death of a beloved daughter or son in a war zone; the diagnosis of a terminal disease; a pink slip firing the family breadwinner; the loss of a spouse who happened also to be one's best friend. We want nothing more than to forget that infant's funeral or the devastation of hearing that our brave soldier is missing in action or severely wounded or the look in the eyes of our dearest friend when the routine visit to the doctor ended with tragic news. How is it possible to keep a steady stream of gratitude flowing when boulders of bad news tumble into it?

When my friend and mentor Fr. Adrian van Kaam wrote his bestselling book *Spirituality and the Gentle Life*, he recalled the day when his typist was about to quit. She asked him, “How can you write so eloquently about gentleness and devote most of the chapters of your book to the themes of anger and aggression?” Dismayed as he was about her leaving, he told her why he had done so, and his reply to her was one I'll never forget. He said that an author writes not so much about what he has attained as about what he is still striving to gain. He admitted that he had to work through what angered him and what evoked aggressive feelings, because unless he faced them, he could never succeed in practicing a gentle lifestyle. That lesson applies here. We have to face the abyss of ingratitude in our souls if we are to be released from its grip and see the grateful

side of every experience. The death of someone we love can pull us further from the other people we love and further still from gratitude. The choice is ours. We can, as the familiar saying goes, see the glass half-empty or half-full. The latter option is the one toward which we ought to aim.

Like you, I want to improve my life on every level. Socially, I hope to enjoy satisfying and trustworthy friendships. Physically, I try to follow wise advice regarding nutrition and exercise. Functionally, I seek to use the skills God gives me to serve others in family life, church, and society. Spiritually, I strive to be a woman of prayer living in the awareness that without God's grace, I am and can do nothing. Daily I seek to experience more harmony between body and spirit, thought and action, head and heart.

Even at my worst moments, new depths of meaning may emerge. Because the word of God is “living and active” (Heb 4:12), I cannot predict where God will lead me. For every answer I receive, another question may be forthcoming. As I read in Psalm 86:5–7, “For you, O Lord, are good and forgiving, abounding in steadfast love to all who call on you. Give ear, O LORD, to my prayer; listen to my cry of supplication. In the day of my trouble I call on you, for you will answer me.”

God addresses us as much in felt absence as in faith-filled presence. The generosity embedded in a grateful heart is what stands behind acts as simple as washing the dinner dishes or as profound as a busy parent stopping to listen to a tearful child. Rather than performing chores to prove how clever or productive we are, we try to see all that we do from a divine

perspective. Life is not a ledger sheet on which God adds or subtracts graces based on performance models. Both paupers and princes are pleasing in God's sight. The benefits we receive, deserved or undeserved, are God's way of showing us how much we are loved.

Contemporary research has evidence to prove that a grateful outlook on life can boost our immune systems, decrease low-grade depression, and enhance our energy quotients. By contrast, ingratitude may prompt us to blame others for our problems or to feel as if life is empty of meaning. Ingratitude, with its litany of endless complaints, results in sorrow, not joy. We may be driven to tackle projects at a fevered pace, only to find that we remain strangely ineffective.

Required of us is not mere behavioral modification. To begin anew calls for internal examination of our penchant for living in thankless, distrustful ways. What follows must be the willingness to convert our hearts and the readiness to choose to act in a more thankful manner.

I don't think it is possible to say thanks despite the circumstances in which we find ourselves until we are willing to learn from our mistakes. Let's face it: no matter how sincere our efforts to turn to thankfulness, we relapse to ingratitude all too often. I confess that my heart is a veritable battlefield between positivity and negativity. One minute I thank a coworker, the next I am tempted to judge her unkindly. The analytical "me" leads to self-talk that goes something like, "In the grand scheme of things, does it really matter whether I am grateful or not? Who really knows or cares anyway?"

Another odious intention that can smother a grateful outlook is the need to look good in the eyes of everyone around us. Appearances can become more important to us than examining our motives for acting in a certain way. If anyone dares to question what drives us, do we immediately go on the defensive? Can't they see that our aim is to function more efficiently than anyone else in the office? Don't they understand that the pressure to perform perfectly is more important to us than taking time for self-examination?

To correct these morose ways of reasoning, I need to hold on to at least these two thoughts: there is a blessing in every burden, and the mystery embracing us is ultimately benevolent.

What happened to my aging mother offers a vivid example of what I mean. Dizzy spells of an unknown origin forced her to go to the hospital for observation. One test followed another as our family anxiously awaited the outcome. I remember holding Mother's trembling hand when a nurse named Lizzy came into her room to take her vital signs. She and my mother struck up a conversation. They chatted about this and that, and then Lizzy asked if there was any more she could do for her: "Helen, how about it? Let me bring you a glass of orange juice and a cookie to go with it." Her demeanor was patient, and Mother responded with gratitude. When Lizzy left the room, she said, "That nurse knows my name and cares about how I feel." Lizzy was a skillful caregiver, but more than that, she had an uncanny ability to make a frail woman feel better.

I notice, as I'm sure you do, that when I am feeling stressed, fatigued, and perhaps caught in a nasty set of circumstances, I

tend to lose the graciousness Lizzy displayed that so blessed us. Consider how my neighbor Daniel felt when he was handed a pink slip without warning. What happened to the promotion he had been promised before the company downsized? His temper flared up like a firecracker and tore through his intentions to assess the situation more rationally. Despite his best efforts to be an exemplary employee, he felt undervalued and ill-treated, especially after he was fired. In a calmer moment, he began to reassess these circumstances in a more thankful manner. Working with the staff in human resources, he discovered that he was eligible for an opening in another branch of the business. It meant moving, but he and his family agreed that this was a minor hassle since he would still have a job. Difficult as it was, he found lots of reasons to be thankful.

As Daniel later shared with me, opting for gratitude prevented him from chiding himself when he first thought he would be without work and blamed himself, thinking, “*I should have known better. I ought not to have done that. I am shocked that my best efforts produced such paltry results.*” He went from wallowing in self-pity, blame, and anger to praying with humble confidence, “*God, come to my assistance. Lord, make haste to help me.*”¹

After hearing Daniel’s story and thanking God for its good outcome, I found myself meditating on the first mystery of joy that the Blessed Mother experienced, the Annunciation. Despite the circumstances of Mary’s tender age and purity, the angel of the Lord invited her to accept the call to be the mother of God’s own Son. The narration of this story culminates with

Mary's consent. When we have heart-rending choices to make, we can count on her help.

Much later, her son made a similar appeal to his disciples. In his farewell discourse in the Gospel of John, Jesus asks them in so many words what the Spirit asked of Mary. How he longed for them to be with him, as his mother was, so that their *yes* to God in circumstances that would test their faith by fire would flow from pure and grateful hearts.

As we heed the call of grace to live a more committed, Christ-formed life, the invitation to say thanks may be given to us when we least expect it. In shy but stirring whispers, the breath of the Spirit begins to break through the stubborn fortifications of ingratitude that have trapped us. We notice a diminishment of such stressors as excessive time urgency, task avoidance, and useless worry because others with whom we work seldom take time to listen to us. We may have displayed hostile feelings toward them because we concluded that they only wanted to advance their crass ambitions. The Spirit softens such harsh outlooks on life and challenges us to initiate more compassionate encounters, allowing the love of God to appeal to others through us.

In this state of grace, the Prince of Peace enters into our daily existence and sheds light on its meaning. Jesus opens us to “the wisdom from above [that] is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace” (Jas 3:17–18).

No earthly power can match the joy we feel in Christ's presence. It sweeps away all traces of fear and unforgiveness. His light begins to shine through our entire being as the halo effect that sacred art so touchingly depicts. We find our peace not in passing pleasures but in the love of God that "has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us" (Rom 5:5).

Formation in gratitude despite the circumstances in which we find ourselves begins to be habitual when we look at ordinary events in a way that enables us to behold their extraordinary potential. Examples abound. "Yes, it's a cold, damp morning, but think of how much better this cup of hot coffee tastes. The timer I set on the new coffee maker last night is a marvel of modern technology. The old percolator made even the best brews taste bitter." In a media-oriented world, the focus is on the spectacular, but we must not miss the richness of the ordinary that unrolls at our feet.

Once I had the privilege of serving with a mission team among newly converted Zulu people in South Africa. I reminded myself to ponder how fortunate I was to have a ballpoint pen in my purse, when in these primitive schoolrooms a stubby lead pencil was a treasure. I noticed that the Range Rover transporting us from village to village was so sturdy that we hardly felt the ruts in the road. What must it be like to traverse them on a bicycle with tires so worn one practically peddles on the rim? The scraps from our dinner table would have made a full meal for the hungry children we met. We had blankets to pull under

our chins while they did not even have beds. What had we done to deserve these gifts? How could we not be grateful for them?

Helpful sayings in this regard might be these:

“I do believe God’s plan is always better than my own.”

“This may not be the position I wanted, but at least I have a job when so many of my peers are unemployed.”

“Maybe my parents weren’t perfect, but whose are? Life might have been unimaginably more difficult had I been an orphan.”

Ceasing to obsess over what has to happen for us to be happy is the key to celebrating the giftedness of each day we are alive.

This counsel is incredibly countercultural since reliance on our own resources has been made into a sacrosanct virtue. What child has not been taught to pull up her bootstraps, stop asking God or anyone else for help, and get on with life? The goal being taught to reach is not dependence on the initiative of grace but rather individualistic independence.

In a functionalistic culture like our own, this do-it-yourself mentality prevails. Its corollary is to turn us into producers of useful goods and services, worker bees more valued for what we do than for who we are. Self-help books tend to obscure the truth that our own efforts to save ourselves always fall short of the mark.

The great Evangelical preacher Corrie ten Boom confesses in her autobiography, *The Hiding Place*, that she who had spoken so eloquently of the healing power of Christ’s forgiveness could not shake the hand of a Gestapo guard she recognized

in her church. Though the war was over, the remembrance of what the guard had done to her and her sister Betsie paralyzed her power to forgive. Only when Corrie prayed to the Lord to enter her heart and soften it did she feel a warm flood of grace move from her shoulder through her arm to the hand that reached out to grasp his. God initiated in Corrie the grace to practice what she preached. The moment she surrendered to it, she was able to do what Jesus asked and turn the other cheek. The same may happen to us when we stand before a mountain of negativity and ask God to move it. We do not have the power to move it, but God does.

Even in the flea-bitten, filthy bunkers of the Nazi prisoner-of-war camp in Ravensbrück, Betsie ten Boom reminded her then-doubtful sister Corrie that there is no pit so deep that the Lord is not there. For Betsie, there were only God moments, whether saying grace over a bowl of watery soup and a crust of stale bread or rising from the ground after receiving a cruel beating. Every time she practiced appreciation in these deplorable circumstances, a light radiated from her being that inspired the other women in the barracks not to lose hope. With few words, she became a saintly teacher who gave God free rein over her life and her death.

Once, while doing the work of a beast of burden, Betsie in her frailty prayed softly, nonstop, to Jesus, begging him to show her that he was near. Suddenly another prisoner rushed to her side, risking being beaten by the guards, and pressed into her hand a gnarled crucifix she had been carrying. She said to Betsie, "Here, you take him. You love him more than anyone

I know.” The tears streamed down Betsie’s face. Between her filthy fingers, she held the sign for which she had prayed, and she proclaimed without words the supernatural beauty of this precious gift.

Growth in grateful living changes our hearts and restores our compassion for others. When more battered women were pushed into the already overcrowded barracks where Betsie and Corrie were imprisoned, they were the first to make room in their bunks to house them. Because every life was precious to them, they did what they could to help these women crushed by grief and on the verge of despair. Betsie taught Corrie to temper her initial, often prejudicial, assessment of new arrivals and to see behind their grim appearances souls terrified of their captors and begging for some sign of humane treatment.

When a woman full of hate challenged Betsie’s claims that “God is love,” she resisted the temptation to engage in a theological debate and devoted herself instead to showing as much kindness to her as she possibly could. In a situation as unreasonable as Ravensbrück, what good would it do to try to reason one’s way to the truth of God’s word? Betsie simply chose to live what she believed, and her witness softened the hardest of hearts. She showed everyone that God is with us in the gains and pains of daily life. That was the secret of her capacity to give thanks always. That was why the guards who assumed they had control over her had no authority at all. Even the most demeaning task had a dignity about it that her faithful heart could readily grasp. Betsie taught her little congregation the art of appreciation. She directed their tired eyes upward to