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Thanksgiving

by William P. Wilson, M.D.

-- *Commentaries from past newsletters* --

It is a new century and a new millennium. When I was growing up I never thought about living until the year 2000. Six years ago I was certain that I would not make it because of my heart. Thanks to modern medicine I am here to face at least the first few years of it. I have to say that it brought a few new challenges. Even though our computers were Y2K ready, and I did not expect any problems, we had one. It was not our computer, but the software we use to keep our financial records. It had a bug which plagued us for a month. The company who sold it to us is not very good at tech support, but it is though good software.

When I was deciding what to write about in this newsletter, I felt led by the Spirit to write about giving thanks. I had one problem, though, I have never heard it emphasized in the churches that I have attended. I admit that our current church has had us give thanks a few times. As well, I have not heard anyone testify to their experiences in giving thanks. I cannot, therefore, write about the experiences of others. I can only write about my own. What I am about to tell you is how God has shown me that thanksgiving has great psychological significance for us Christians.

When the calendar rolled over on January 1, I began to think back at the years of my life and stood in awe at what God had done. The old hymn *Count Your Many Blessings* came to my mind and I realized that I needed to count them and then give thanks to God for his beneficence. I knew that God's will is that we should give thanks. The Bible also has many examples of the role that thanksgiving played in the lives of the men and women who loved God. In 2 Samuel 21, David begins a long prayer of thanksgiving recounting all of the blessings of God he had accumulated in his life. David was also eloquent with his prayers of thanksgiving in his Psalms. In several of them he sums it all up by saying, "His loving kindness lives forever." Paul frequently gave thanks for the people to whom he was writing, but he gave us strict instructions to give thanks in all things. He said, "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." I have to admit that it took me a long time to realize that I had to heed his injunction to give thanks in everything.

One of the first lessons God taught me occurred when I was still on the faculty at Duke. It occurred when I was about ten years into my walk with the Lord. I had a series of trying patients in the hospital, and I was overloaded with work, teaching, writing, and speaking in churches. I was exhausted and miserable. I came home on a beautiful fall evening, the trees were in full color and the weather was perfect with a mild temperature. After dinner at twilight when the setting sun

bathed the colored leaves with gold, I went out on the front porch and sat in the big swing we have there. As I was slowly swinging, I became aware of the extraordinary beauty of the evening. Then I began to pray. I told the Lord that I was miserable, but that was as far as I got with my whining and complaining. My mind shifted gears, and I began to thank God for all the good things that I could see around me. I thanked him for the beauty of the day, the swing and the pleasure it had given us during the years. I thanked him for our house and the nice furnishings he had let us purchase. I thanked him for my wife who loved me so. I thanked him for our children and the love they have for us. I thanked him for our cars. I continued thanking him for both the big and little things in our lives. This time of thanksgiving continued for many more minutes. When I finished I no longer felt miserable.

Some months later the Lord gave me another lesson in thanksgiving. At the time, I had the children give an extemporaneous prayer of thanks at our evening meal. It was intended to teach them how to pray. They had a standard rotation from the oldest to the youngest. One evening it was our youngest's turn to give thanks. He began his prayer with a thank you Lord for the food. He did, however, continue. He said, "Thank you for the forks, the spoons, the knives, the plates, the glasses, the bowls, the napkins, the water ". . . at this point the other children were snickering. He thanked God for a few more things, and then gave his Amen. Seizing the moment, I told the children to pass me their plates. I stacked them in front of me and asked for their silverware. I then told them to go ahead and eat their dinner. Five voices cried out in unison. "We can't. You have our silverware and plates." My response was to say to them, "You snickered when Bob thanked God for them. I thought maybe you really were not thankful for them, and really did not need them." The four who had snickered at his childish prayer realized that it is right to be thankful in and for everything. I think we all did.

Much later I bought a book, *The Power of Praise and Worship*, by Terry Law. It further reinforced the lesson I had been learning about giving thanks in everything. In it he told of the death of his wife in an auto accident. He was devastated by the loss of someone whom he loved so dearly. He was in London when she was killed, and had to break the news to his three children over the phone. During the next several weeks he was in such despair that he seriously considered giving up the music ministry to which God had called him. Later, still in despair, he had an encounter with Oral Roberts that ended it. It occurred when he and Oral had a conversation about their recent losses of loved ones. Oral had suffered when his son was killed in an airplane crash. In the interchange Oral gave him some advice. He told him to go home and praise the Lord. Terry's response was to think that doing such a thing was beyond him.

If you look up the word praise in Webster you will find that it is to commend, or express a favorable judgment of. There are those in the Christian world, though, who think that praise is to give thanks to God for what he has done. Terry could not see himself praising the Lord for his wife's death. He was angry at a God who

had let his wife die. Even so, he tried to be obedient to Oral's suggestion. He went home and tried to praise the Lord. At first the words came out completely empty. Still, he persevered until his words of praise began to have some meaning for him. After about 2 ½ hours he suddenly felt a great release and his despair was gone. In the process of healing him, God also revealed the future course of his life.

Terry's book had a great impact on my thinking about the scriptural injunction to give thanks in everything. This was of use to me in an episode that was to occur several months later. This is what happened.

I had been one of the founders of one of the first clinics in America that took care of people with chronic pain. I found the work very trying because you could not cure most of them, and helping them was not highly productive. It is the kind of work that creates burnout if you do it full time and see the sufferers with compassion. Even so, I continued because I really enjoyed my two colleagues and our clinic manger Pat Dirito with whom I worked. One of the problems I faced working there was that the patients would say to me, "Doctor you don't know what it's like to be in pain night and day. It never lets up." I had to agree. I did not know what it was like.

One of the problems we faced in the clinic was a disease called the myofascial syndrome. This was an inflammatory process in the connective tissue and muscle in various parts of the body. No matter what you did for them, the pain persisted. Anti-inflammatory drugs, psychoactive drugs, cortisone injections and steroids all were to no avail. We would see one or two people in each clinic with this syndrome. Then one day I noticed that I had severe pain in the upper part of my left shoulder. I had no other symptoms so I knew I had a myofascitis! It was in a group of muscles attached to my shoulder blade. Over the next two weeks the pain became increasingly severe. It was a hot, searing pain that was there night and day. My colleagues did everything they could think of to control it. They used medicines, cortisone injections, heat and massage--nothing helped. After two weeks of intense pain I awakened one morning at 2 A.M. in very acute pain. Not being able to sleep, I got out of bed and began to pace the floor praying for relief. Then I remembered that Paul said in all things give thanks and that Terry had been told to give thanks. I am sure that like Terry, giving thanks was the hardest thing I had ever tried to do up to that point in my life. Even so, I began to give thanks. I kept on and finally told the Lord that I did not know what lesson I was to learn from this experience, but I was grateful for it. I prayed for over an hour. Each day I prayed fervently and gave thanks. In about two weeks the pain began to abate and in a few days disappeared. A few days later a patient said to me. "Doctor you don't know what it's like." I said, "Oh yes I do! I really know!" Then I realized that God had shown me what great physical suffering is like. It gave me the ability to be more compassionate with my pain patients. I could comfort them with more meaning.

Retrospectively, there have been times when I should have been thankful, and wasn't. In the 1970's I established a program for Christianity and Medicine at Duke University Medical Center. Numerous students (108) and many young psychiatrists (30) and other physicians (20) came to study with me to learn how to integrate their faith into their medical practice. After over 15 years of success with the program, I heard a rumor that our departmental chairman who had supported my efforts was going to be promoted to a higher position in the university. If this happened it was obvious we would be getting a new chairman. When someone asked me what kind of a person I wanted, I told them it did not matter to me. I didn't care if Ghengis Khan came. I was close to retirement, so no matter what came I thought I could last for another three years.

Surprise! Surprise! Our chairman did get promoted and we did get Ghengis Khan to replace him. It was obvious from the beginning that he was not in favor of me or my program. It did not take him long to order me to take my course for medical students out of the catalogue. Then he moved me to a building on the other side of the campus making it difficult for me to take care of my inpatients. I was not assigned to teach courses in the university hospital. I still could teach at the VA, because he could not control my teaching there. Then he told me not to publish any more papers that related to religion and psychiatry. During this time I became increasingly angry and hurt to the core. I wanted to hate the guy but the Lord kept telling me to forgive him. I spent all of my prayer time forgiving him. I knew I should give thanks, but it was not in me. I had given most of my adult years to the university and was loyal to it. No one seemed to care what was happening to me. I got no comfort from my colleagues. Some of my students did give me a little comfort, but I did not tell them what was happening so they could not commiserate with me.

Finally, I came to the conclusion that I had to do something. I knew that I had three choices. I could retire, I could fight him, or I could just put up with what he was handing out and be quiet for another three years. I considered each of these in reverse order. I knew I could not put up with his persecution because I did not want to continue earning money (that is another story) that he could use to run the department. As for the second alternative, my friends in the Christian Legal Society wanted to take him to court. It was my nature to put up a fight, but the Lord would not give me permission to do it. I was left with the final alternative, I decided to retire. If I had known what was about to happen, I would have given profuse thanks.

When I made the decision, the New Directions offered to give me office space. Many of the people who supported my program at Duke provided funds to renovate the area and furnish it. Patients were happy to come to where we were located. As soon as I had moved I was asked to come teach in other parts of the world.

Today I thank the Lord over and over again that he had a plan for my life and used me to carry techniques of Christian counseling to many areas of the world where it was desperately needed. Throughout my life I had loved to go to far away places. It began when I was a child as I poured over National Geographics dreaming of going to the places illustrated there. I never thought that I would go, though, to some of the places He took me. I have gone to places that few people from our part of the world ever go. I have done things that most people just read about. I have eaten foods that none of the people I worked with in the university have even thought of.

God has taken me to teach in medical schools around the world. I have been to the Philippines and taught in the national medical school in Manila. I have been to the Ukraine and taught in the Medical University in Kiev. I lectured in the medical schools in Hong Kong, Tubingen, Nairobi, Harare, Capetown, Pretoria, Durban, Bloemfontein, Johannesburg and Vellore.

I have been to the jails of Juarez Mexico, and to the Greek islands including Patmos. I have followed one of Paul's journeys and stood in the Agora in Athens, walked the Via Dolorosa, and seen the temples in Petra. These are things that neither my colleagues nor I would have done if I had stayed at Duke. I have ridden horses in Jordan, a camel in Egypt, an elephant in the Nepalese jungles, a hot air balloon over the Masai Mara, a flat bottom scow up a jungle river in Madagascar, and a series of cable cars up to Les Diablerets in Switzerland.

I have proclaimed the Gospel to natives in Zimbabwe, Madagascar, Ethiopia, Mexico, South Africa, the Philippines and all over the US. God has made it possible for me to lift him up. This is not to say that I did not lift Him up when I was at Duke. I did whenever I got the chance, but I have had far more chances in diver's places since I left the university.

It is not hard for me to give thanks these days. He seems to be able to keep me going and doing for Him even though my body is decaying. He keeps renewing my mind too. I am thankful. I am sad when I realize that there is so little thanksgiving in our Christian world today. We do have Thanksgiving Day each fall, but I am not sure that people spend much time giving thanks. The main thing they do is eat and watch TV.

After traveling all over the world and seeing the poverty that exists, I am even more thankful for what he has done for us in this country. Each time I sit down to eat I think of the "feast" I had at Kubaba Zimbabwe. I had to dedicate a church building that The New Directions had obtained the funds to build. It was in the bush 100 kilometers off the pavement. When we cut the "ribbon" (actually it was a piece of string) it was followed by a wonderful service. We had over an hour of singing. I then preached, but I think I was a disappointment to them because I did not preach for a couple of hours. I only preached for an hour. Then we went to have the "feast." It was in the pastor's house. It was in a mud and wattle hut with

a roof of thatched elephant grass. It had no windows. We were first given a plate with two large pats of cooked Sadza (Sadza is a cooked mixture of corn meal and a little flour moistened with water). Over this we ladled roast goat with gravy, and some roast Guinea fowl with much gravy. For them it was a delicacy. Unfortunately the goat was tough and the Guinea fowls were skinny. It was, though, the best they had and we were being treated to it. I ate it with relish.

Compare that with what we have to eat here. Steaks, pork chops, leg of lamb, turkey, ham and plump chicken. We have every kind of cheese you can think of. We have milk by the gallon. We have all kinds of vegetables including beans, broccoli, lettuce of many kinds, cabbage, potatoes, yams, turnips, artichokes, radishes, and spinach. I could go on but I have made my point. Do you think you would like to eat Sadza three times a day with gravies only at one meal? How would your kids like it if they never could get milk again? Or suppose you had to eat rice three times a day 365 days a year, and with that rice you only had meat once a week. The rest of the time you ate a little fruit or greens. I am convinced that we should sincerely give thanks every time we eat. It is not right to say a rote "blessing." We cannot bless food. It is inanimate and blessings apply primarily to living beings. We can bless the elements of communion because we set them apart for divine use, but I don't believe we can bless other food. If I am wrong, let me know. My authority is James Wilson. In his book *Our Father Abraham* he says that the Hebrews did not bless food. They blessed God for giving it to them.

Then we are so blessed with the means of transportation and the network of roads we have. In most of the world outside of Europe, Japan and South Africa the roads are atrocious. The airports are disaster areas. The trains and busses are abominable. Maintenance of all means of transportation is grossly inadequate. Most people have to walk, ride a horse or steer and cart, or a bicycle to get where they are going. They carry big loads on their heads or back.

Housing is, as I have noted, inadequate. Even our slums are better than the housing of most people in the world. Thatch roofed huts with no windows, or tiny little concrete block houses with sheet metal or tiled roofs are found else where. Many people in the Philippines sleep in little lean-tos built of materials scavenged from the trash heaps. They are erected in the medians of the city streets where a median exists. In Juarez people live in the city dump and scavenge for food.

I hope that what I have just written does not irritate you. When I was a child, I was irritated when my mother told to think about the starving children in Africa when I did not eat all that she set before me. As an adult I often got irritated when people published pictures of children who were suffering from gross malnutrition or Kwashiorkor (protein deficiency). After I saw the children suffering in real life and looked at the anguish on the faces of their mothers, I could no longer get irritated. Compassion has a way of changing your views.

Going to the third world and living among the people changes your perspective on life. It also changes your perspective on what God has done here. He moved my ancestors to come to this continent. He moved them to establish homes in the wilderness. He moved them to declare their independence from Britain. He moved them to create a nation that has real freedom for each of us. He moved them to seek to become productive beyond their imagination. He moved them to harness the power of our natural resources for the benefit of us all. I am constrained by space so I can go no further, but I am sure you can name many more.

Let me close with the words from the hymn I mentioned at the beginning of this commentary. It has great instructional value.

COUNT YOUR BLESSINGS

When upon life's billows you are tempest tossed,
When you are discouraged thinking all is lost,
Count your many blessings, name them one by one,
And it will surprise you what the Lord has done.

CHORUS

Count your many blessings name them one by one;
Count your blessings, see what God has done;
Count your blessings, name them one by one;
Count your many blessings, see what God has done.

Are you ever burdened with a load of care?
Does the cross seem heavy you are called to bear?
Count your many blessings every doubt will fly,
And you will be singing as the days go by.

When you look at others with their lands and gold,
Think that Christ has promised you His wealth untold;
Count your many blessings money cannot buy,
Your reward in heaven, nor your home on high.

So amid the conflict, whether great or small
Do not be discouraged, God is over all;
Count your many blessings angels will attend,
Help and comfort give you to your journey's end.

Another contemporary song tells us to give thanks with a grateful heart. Do it every day!