

Welcome! Great to be with you today. We are getting ready for Thanksgiving this upcoming week, and we are studying what God's word has to say to us about giving thanks. We are in a four-week series called *Grateful*, and God has already taught us a lot.

In week one we talked about the *power* of gratitude. We teach our kids to say thank you and train them to be grateful. When an adult gives them a piece of candy, their instinct is to tear into it and devour it as if they hadn't eaten food in a week. But right before they put it in their mouths, their parents ask them, "What do you say??" We want our kids to be relationally aware, to be kind, and to say, "Thank you!" We learned about all the positive benefits of being grateful: decreases in blood pressure, anxiety and depression, and increases in decision making ability, productivity at work, satisfaction in relationships, more patience and generosity. All things we want, and gratitude is the pathway. We learned that there are over 100 passages in the Bible that call us to give thanks, and Jesus himself became our perfect example, giving thanks to his Father all throughout his life. We looked at 1 Thessalonians 5:18, which says, "Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." This is God's will for us: that we would be a grateful people!

Last week we talked about the *enemies* of gratitude. We all want to be grateful, but if that is going to move beyond a dream or a wish and actually shape our character, who we are at the core, we are going to have to fight against the enemies of greed (which tells us I want more), entitlement (which tells us I deserve more), comparison (which tells us I'll only be grateful when I have more than you), and foolishness (where we are simply unaware of all the blessings we have). We fight against all of those by cultivating gratitude, where we learn to be content with what we have, where we are reminded that we deserve nothing and yet God has graciously given us all that we have, where we celebrate the victories of other people, even if they have more than us, and we are increasingly aware of all the expressions of God's favor and kindness in our lives.

Here's the thing: even if we want to become grateful people, and even if we fight against all the enemies of gratitude that we learned about last week, there is still a very difficult obstacle we are going to have to overcome. And honestly, a lot of people never make it past this obstacle. It's too difficult, too hard. This week we are calling our message "the challenge of gratitude," and we want to focus on how we can become grateful people, even when we endure very difficult experiences.

Obviously, we could talk about some lighthearted hardships. A father of two young kids asked me the other day how's it going now that I'm a father of two kids – a one-month-old and a oneyear-old – and I said, "You know how it's going! I'm sleep deprived, our house is a disaster, I am changing 15 diapers a day, I constantly have throw up on my clothes, and I show up 10 minutes late everywhere I go!" Now, all those things are true, but we are so grateful for those challenges, because we are so blessed to have a healthy little baby girl in our house!

I was talking to a family in our church the other day, the mom got COVID about 2 months ago. I was asking how she was feeling, and she said, "I'm fine...but I still haven't got back my sense of smell." I said, "Oh no, that's horrible, I'm so sorry." She said, "Don't be! Now I can't smell when my one-year-old needs a diaper change, so daddy has to do it all!"

Again, there are some lighthearted ways that we can be grateful in the midst of challenges, but then there are challenges that are a lot more difficult for us to work through! How do we choose gratitude when we lose a loved one? How do we choose gratitude when we get a cancer diagnosis? How do we choose gratitude when we find out our spouse is cheating on us? How do we choose gratitude when we look back on a childhood without a father? Or on a childhood filled with abuse? How do we choose gratitude when we lose a job or when a friend betrays us? Life is filled with real, deep heartbreaking pain, which doesn't make gratitude any less important, but it does make being grateful a challenge.

In today's sermon I want to lay out a roadmap which will mark out for us the journey to being grateful people, even in the midst of life's pains, struggles, and heartaches. That is our desired destination: to be grateful people no matter what life throws at us. And as we go on that journey, we are going to see four pivotal mile markers along the way:

Here's Mile Marker 1: *honestly deal with the weight of your loss*. This is a very important step, but one that is so difficult that sometimes we try to avoid it, sidestep it, or at least minimize it. We are so eager to be happy again, to feel good again, to appear to be put together again, that we tell ourselves and we tell others, "I'm okay." Sometimes, in the wake of tragedy, our adrenaline causes us to think that by sheer determination we can will ourselves to be better again – but the reality is that we may not be better for a very long time.

Think about this from a physical perspective: we all know what it's like to get a minor cut, like a paper cut. It stings a little, we put a bandaid on it, and we are as good as new in a few days. But what if you were in a car accident, you had major injuries all down the right side of your body, a broken hip, cracked ribs, dislocated shoulder. If you tried to treat that like a paper cut and get back to normal in a few days, we'd all say, "You're crazy, your body is going to need surgery and a long time to heal!" We get that with physical pain. What about with emotional pain, spiritual pain, relational pain? Have we tried to deal with a major car accident like it's a paper cut, and just get back to normal in no time?

The Bible invites us to deal honestly with the weight of our loss. We see this all throughout Scripture, but perhaps nowhere as clearly as in the Psalms. The Psalms are the collection of prayers and songs that Israel would offer to God. The psalms trained God's people how to worship him and relate to him in the appropriate way, and a lot of these psalms declare how great God is, how he is worthy of praise and how he is always looking after those who love him. But there are also psalms of lament. Lament is a word that means "a passionate expression of grief." Lament is the cry of a heart that is broken, full of anguish and loss. Lament is a way for our soul

to say, “Inside, it feels like I’ve been in a head-on collision. I feel pain everywhere. I don’t know if I’m ever going to be myself again.”

Let me give you just a few examples: Psalm 6:3, 6-7 says, “My soul is in deep anguish. How long, Lord, how long?...I am worn out from my groaning. All night long I flood my bed with weeping and drench my couch with tears.” Can you remember a time in your life when you’ve been there? Does anyone feel like that is where you are right now? If that is where you’ve been at, if that is where you are at, God wants to meet you there, right where you are. *The only place God can meet you is right where you are at, not where you pretend to be at.*

There are 150 psalms total, and of the 150 psalms, how many of them do you think are psalms of lament? Psalms of pain and loss and heartache? 58. Almost 40% of all the psalms in the Bible are teaching us how to be honest with our heartache. There is a verse in the bible that tells us to rejoice in the Lord always, but there is also an entire book of the Bible called Lamentations. Does God want us to be people who are always giving thanks? Yes. That is the desired destination, but if we are going to get to that place, and have it be real, not superficial, disingenuous, and trite, we have to begin the journey at mile marker 1, dealing honestly with the weight of our loss.

The next stop on the journey is Mile Marker 2: *take confidence in the fact that God is good and can be trusted.* And notice that this does not say the suggestion, the wish, the hope, or the vague belief that God is good and can be trusted, but in *the fact* that God is good and can be trusted.

Of the 58 psalms of lament, every single one of them – not some, not most, but every single one of them – express confidence that God is good, that he can be trusted, and that even though life is really hard right now, God will work through the hardship to bring redemption. Listen to how we see this in Psalm 27:13-14. After lamenting that he has felt abandoned by the people closest to him, and after saying that false witnesses rose up to maliciously accuse him, David finishes the psalm with these words: “I remain confident of this: I will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. Wait for the Lord; be strong and take heart, and wait for the Lord.” The psalmists were always honest about their heartbreak, but they were also confident in the goodness of God.

There’s a wonderful family in our church who years ago went through great loss, who met God in it, and who came out stronger on the other side because of it. I asked them if they would share part of their story with us. Listen to these words they wrote:

During one of the hardest seasons of our lives we had to bury a niece, a brother-in-law, a father, and then finally, our 5-year-old daughter, Kaylen. Grief settled on us like a heavy blanket. At times, it was hard to even move. We knew that life was more than these losses and eventually we would have to move forward, but how were we to heal from these incredibly deep wounds? We went back to our Bibles and began searching for answers. We read through the psalms and saw that even though these people of faith

endured extreme hardships, there was a consistent theme of praise, gratitude, and thanksgiving in their hearts. God's word helped us to see all the blessings he has given us and taught us how to find joy again. Not joy because of our loss, but joy in the midst of our loss. Joy knowing that God takes even the hardest things the world can throw at us and uses them to transform us. Finding that joy allowed us to give thanks. And as we gave thanks to God in the midst of our loss, we sensed him bind up our wounds and put our lives back together!

Did you see what that couple did? They dealt with the full weight of their pain, and they dove into God's word and took confidence in the fact that, even in the midst of their pain, God was good and could be trusted, they knew that he would meet them in this, and in his love and mercy he would even redeem this and find a way to turn this for good. And this couple now helps to lead our GriefShare ministry for those who have lost loved ones. I hear report after report from people who have gone to GriefShare and have been encouraged and found hope because of that couple and their story.

Again, the process of becoming grateful people in the midst of challenges is a journey that begins with being honest about the weight of the pain you are facing. Next we take confidence in the fact that God is good and can be trusted, and then we hit Mile Marker 3: *worship God where you are at*. When we worship we are, we are not declaring that everything about our life is good, but we are declaring that God is good. Worship is not a proclamation that our circumstances are perfect, but that God is perfect. In worship, we lift our eyes off ourselves, and off our situation, and we place our focus on Him.

We see a wonderful example of this in the life of Paul. On one of his missionary journeys, he and his companion Silas came to the town of Philippi. They preached the gospel, baptized people, and began to make an impact in the city. Then word began to spread about him, and eventually the government arrested him, brought him before the entire town and levied false accusations against him. That's where our story picks up Acts 16:22-24:

“The magistrates ordered them to be stripped and beaten with rods. After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully. When he received these orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.”

Not a good day at the office. Stripped, beaten, flogged, thrown in prison, into the inner cell, fastened their feet in stocks. I don't want to be too graphic here, but their prisons didn't have plumbing, so the inner cell was not just the center of the prison – it was also where all the human waste of all the prisoners collected. This is where Paul and Silas are, in stocks, with nowhere to go. Complaining would have been a natural response. Listing out your grievances would have made plenty of sense. But instead of bemoaning the injustice and pain, look at what we read in the following verse: “About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them.” Great pain and hardship, yet they chose to worship God right where they were at. Not waiting until their wounds had healed. Not waiting

until they were set free. Right there in the middle of the prison cell, in stocks, surrounded by waste, with open wounds all over their body. They weren't pretending their circumstances were good. They were declaring that even though their circumstances were very bad, God was still good. So they worshipped! And not only was their worship a testimony to the other prisoners, it also spoke to the prison guard himself, the man who was responsible for locking them up. He ended up giving his life to Jesus, and he and his entire household were baptized! Worshipping God in the midst of a crisis doesn't just glorify him and sanctify you. There is no telling the impact it can have on those around you!

A few months ago, a friend of mine here at church lost his job. And though it's been a difficult experience, he has chosen to worship God in the midst of it. I asked him if he would share his journey, and this is what he said:

Losing your job can create a lot of doubts. Doubts about your skill, doubts about your value, and doubts your future. In this season I'm doing all I can do: networking, sending resumes, setting up interviews, but I'm also expressing gratitude to God. I'm grateful for the ways he has provided for me in the past, I'm grateful for the ways he is still providing for me today, and I am grateful for the way he will provide for me in the future. Don't get me wrong – I see the shrinking bank accounts and I have concerns about what tomorrow might bring, but I know that God is faithful, I know that he will provide, and I have chosen to place my trust in him.

That's worshipping God right where you are at! And that sets the stage for Mile Marker 4: *stay connected to community*. On our own, when we are isolated and go through hardship, we can very easily slip into sorrow or cynicism, we can devolve into depression, despair or despondency. Listen to the wisdom of Ecclesiastes 4:9-10: "Two are better than one. If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up." Every one of us falls down. There is not a person who goes through life without taking hundreds of blows that knock us off our feet. And if we want to push through those challenges and become deeply grateful people, we need a community to help us do it.

I could give you a dozen examples in Scripture, but for the sake of time, let me highlight just two. First, consider David. Due to no fault of his own, King Saul decided he was a threat and wanted to kill him, so David had to leave his family, his home, and everything he knew and run for his life by hiding out in the wilderness and in caves. He was at his wits end. And right when he had gotten to the end of his rope, he got a visit from his best friend: "Jonathan went to David at Horesh and helped him find strength in God" (1 Samuel 23:16). In the midst of one of his greatest trials, his friend helped him find strength in God. That's the power of community. Everyone needs a friend like that, someone who won't just commiserate with us or give us a pep talk, but who will point us to God and help us find strength in him.

One of the best examples of our need for community is actually found in Jesus himself. On the last night of his life, when he was in the Garden of Gethsemane, he brought his disciples to be with him. He wanted to be with his three closest friends to find encouragement and strength.

Jesus said to them, “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death.” So what does he ask them to do?? “Stay here and keep watch with me” (Matthew 26:38). If Jesus, our God in the flesh, needed a community to get through his hour of testing, how much more so do we?

This runs directly against the rugged individualism of our culture...the pull yourself up by your boot-steps, keep your nose to the grindstone, work hard, never let them see you cry mentality. If we want to make it through life’s greatest struggles and still be joyful, grateful people, we need to stay connected to community, we need to share our lives with one another, people who will rejoice when we rejoice, and who will weep when we weep.

James Pennebaker is a world class social psychologist who teaches at University of Texas. A few years ago, he and his team did a study about people’s ability to respond to trauma. They noted that some people experience trauma and seem hamstrung by it for the rest of their lives, and others experience trauma and not only recover, they end up stronger. So they began to do research to find out why. Going into the study they hypothesized that the ability to recover would be dependent on the social stigma of the trauma (those who were abused or who endured the suicide of a spouse would be less likely to recover, while those who suffered a loss without a negative social stigma would do better). That was their guess, but their research led them to the exactly opposite conclusion. What they discovered after extensive clinical research is that the number one factor in their ability to recover was if they had a family or friend or support group to process their pain with. In other words, put simply, *we need one another*. And we need to take good care of one another.

We want to be grateful people. We know the power and importance of gratitude. But being grateful people doesn’t just happen. We have to fight against the enemies of gratitude, we have to fight against greed, entitlement, comparison, and foolishness, and when life’s hardships come, we have to embark on this journey to gratitude by dealing with the weight of our loss, taking confidence that God is good and can be trusted, determining to worship where we’re at and staying connected to community. Today, we are going to end the message in a slightly different way than usual. I’m going to ask the leader of our spiritual direction team, Laura Dingman, to join me on stage, and she is going to guide us in a few moments of prayer, giving us time and space to meet with God on this journey toward gratitude.

This season has certainly brought about a lot of hardships for so many people. There isn’t a single person whose life hasn’t been affected in some way or another by COVID. There are so many others among us who have lost loved ones, have lost jobs, have lost marriages, have lost significant milestones being celebrated.

In the midst of this kind of loss, gratitude can be a struggle. While we won’t be able to deal with all we’re carrying in five minutes, we can begin the process. We want to offer a space to pray and carry those heavy loads to the feet of Jesus this morning.

Scripture tells us that God is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit. There is nowhere we can go that He cannot find us—even in the dark, darkness isn't dark to Him. Even when we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we don't have to fear because He is with us. He is Jehovah-Rapha—the God who heals. He is El Roi—the God who sees. He is the Prince of peace and wonderful counselor. And in every situation, circumstance, season, and with every breath, He is faithful and He is *good*.

With these truths in mind, we want to walk through a guided prayer time this morning. I'll lead us through each of the four movements, giving you a few moments of quiet space in between to offer your own prayer to God. Just be honest with him. Don't worry about the words being right. Tell him how you're feeling and what you're thinking. He won't be surprised. He already knows you and loves you still.

Let's take some time to pray, inviting the Holy Spirit to lead us.

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Lord God, we know you are close to the brokenhearted and you save those who are crushed in spirit (Ps 34:18). We bring our brokenness and our heartaches into your presence today, God, you know every one of our struggles. You see our pain. We long to be filled with gratitude, but at times our hardships can eclipse the ways you are working in our lives.

So, today, we want to acknowledge the weight of the losses we have experienced in recent months.

*Take a few moments to be honest before God about the weight you are carrying.*

*PAUSE FOR PRAYER*

Lord God, we give you the weight of those losses we're carrying.

God, we want to take confidence in the fact that you are good, and you can be trusted.

*Think about the goodness of God. Take a moment to remember his faithfulness, kindness, mercy, and love. Ask God to grow your faith and trust in him. Ask him to show you his goodness.*

*PAUSE FOR PRAYER*

Almighty God, we give thanks to you because you are good. We know your love endures forever.

Jesus, praising you in the good times seems easy. Worshipping you when things are tough is harder. Lift our eyes to you, Lord God, the Maker of heaven and earth, where

our help comes from. Allow us to see your majesty. Your sovereignty. To fix our eyes on your glory and grace.

*Spend a few moments in worship of our amazing God. Tell him what he means to you. Praise him for his nature. Invite him to reveal his majesty and his glory to you.*

*PAUSE FOR PRAYER*

Lord Jesus, You alone are God and worthy of praise.

God, while you alone can redeem my situation, you know my need for the body of Christ. Thank you for not leaving us alone in our situation. Thank you for our church community and for the people in my life who are walking with me in this difficult journey.

*Spend a few moments thanking God for the specific people he has placed in your life to walk through this journey with you. If you haven't shared the difficulties you're facing with someone, ask God for the courage to share them. Ask Him to lead you to the right person who can listen and point you back to Jesus.*

*PAUSE FOR PRAYER*

Lord Jesus, thank you for the ways you welcome our sorrow and suffering. We look to you to guide us as we heal. Jesus, you are a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief. You are familiar with pain and are Emmanuel, God with us—in every situation. You demonstrated your love for us by enduring suffering on the cross. Open our hearts to your love and may we be grateful as a result. Help us to find threads of gratitude even in the hard places. Amen.