Thankfulness and Joy are With Us

Close your eyes for a moment and play the imagination game with me…

Imagine a quiet place.

A place where you are free to read and pray for hours.

A place where your clothes are provided and laundered.

A place where you don’t have to keep up with the high price of all the new fashions. Because everyone wears the same kind of clothes.

A place where your meals are served to you everyday.

A place where you have scheduled time for exercise.

You have times set apart for social interaction.

You have a fence to protect you and strong outer walls.

You don’t have to pay any utility bills.

And you have no need to pay auto insurance.

Can anyone guess the place that I am thinking of?

I had on my mind two places this could either be describing a prison or a monastery.

Dr. David Soper, in *God Is Inescapable*, suggests that basically the difference between a prison and a monastery is just the difference between griping and gratitude. Undoubtedly this is true. Imprisoned criminals spend every waking moment griping; self-imprisoned saints spend every waking moment offering thanks. Dr. Soper says that when a criminal becomes a saint, a prison may become a monastery; when a saint gives up gratitude, a monastery may become a prison.

—Ray O. Jones

Another once said, “If a man wants to live a life of bitter anger, he will find many paths before him.”

As believers we should be living a life of joyful thanksgiving. So what keeps us from rejoicing?

Certainly not the cross of Christ! We sing words like “Thank you for the cross, Lord.” It is easy for us to thank Jesus for the work He did on the cross, but what about thanking Him for the cross He has given us to carry?

Do you think the song “Thank you for my cross, Lord” would be super popular? It might not be popular, but it is to be our attitude, as Jesus said to His disciples:

23 “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. 24 For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it. 25 What does it profit them if they gain the whole world, but lose or forfeit themselves?[[1]](#footnote-1)

Luke 9:23-25 ESV

Becoming a follower of Christ will mean forfeiting our own choices for our lives and instead making our choices in accordance with God’s will for our lives. This will mean suffering bathed in joy. Hebrews 12:2 tells us to “(Look) to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame…” If we are to be thankful in all circumstances that means that we are to be thankful for the cross that we carry, the cross being, our entire life as a Christian. As strangers or exiles away from our heavenly homes, we are groaning along with all creation, but our groaning is to be overwhelmed or at the very least overshadowed by thanksgiving. We are to be thankful for our time here as we live our cross-centered life. As Matthew Henry puts it:

*The “cross” here means all sufferings, as men or Christians; providential afflictions, persecutions for righteousness’ sake, every trouble that befals us, either for doing good or evil. The troubles of Christians are rightly called crosses, in allusion to the death of the cross, which Christ was obedient to; …[1.] Every disciple of Christ has his cross, and must count upon it; as each has his special duty to be done, so each has his special trouble to be borne, and everyone feels most from his own burden. Crosses are the common lot of God’s children, but of this common lot each has his particular share. The burden we’ve been given is our cross which Infinite Wisdom has appointed for us, and Sovereign Providence has laid on us, as He sees fit for us.*

Think back to the example that I started with…

Imagine a quiet place.

A place where you are free to read and pray for hours.

A place where your clothes are provided and laundered.

A place where you don’t have to keep up with the high price of all the new fashions. Because everyone wears the same kind of clothes.

A place where your meals are served to you everyday.

A place where you have scheduled time for exercise.

You have times set apart for social interaction.

You have a fence to protect you and strong outer walls.

You don’t have to pay any utility bills.

You don’t have to do any home maintenance.

And you have no need to pay auto insurance.

Does this sound like your life?

Is your house quiet?

Are you free to read and pray for hours?

Do you have time for scheduled exercise?

Does someone else pay your utility bills?

Would rather have the burden of loud kids, paying your own bills, struggling to get time alone and struggling to find time to exercise? Or would you rather live in prison?

In fact, I would rather live in my house than in a monastery. Yes, living in my home has certain burdens connected with it, but the joy connected to it far outweighs the burden.

Though it is true that our cross is a burden. It doesn’t change the fact that every day is a day for joyful thanksgiving because of what Jesus has done for us. As Paul wrote to the Thessalonians…

“*Be at peace among (ourselves)…Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for (us).*” (1 Thessalonians 5:13–18, ESV)

The choice is ours.

As Christians every moment of everyday should be like Thanksgiving. I can say this is true because every moment of every day is ordained by our Father God. The Merriam-Webster’s dictionary defines “thankful,” as “**conscious** of benefits received.” The difference between an attitude of thankfulness and an attitude of complaining depends on our awareness of our all-powerful God. Prison or a monastery, which do you live in?

There is an old saying that says, “Wherever you go, there you are.” It is suggesting that our attitudes and actions are paramount in how we interpret our situation. People who cultivate thankfulness can be thankful in prison and people who cultivate bitterness would be bitter in a monastery. If you give up on gratitude even the most blessed places on earth can seem like a prison.

Many of you are probably familiar with Philippians 4:4-7

**“4**Always be full of joy in the Lord. I say it again—rejoice! **5**Let everyone see that you are considerate in all you do. Remember, the Lord is coming soon.

**6**Don’t worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done. **7**Then you will experience God’s peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus.”

Paul wrote this while he was in prison…Or was he in a monastery?

Remember, being thankful is being “conscious of benefits received.”

Where do we live?

Is this world a prison or a monastery?

Do we trust God and rejoice in Him always or is our lack of control a means for anger, anxiety, and despair?

This doesn’t mean that life will not be hard. Remember Paul (from prison) wrote…

**21**For to me, living means living for Christ, and dying is even better. **22**But if I live, I can do more fruitful work for Christ. So I really don’t know which is better. **23**I’m torn between two desires: I long to go and be with Christ, which would be far better for me. **24**But for your sakes, it is better that I continue to live.

**25**Knowing this, I am convinced that I will remain alive so I can continue to help all of you grow and experience the joy of your faith.

Philippians 1:21-25

So how does a message from a guy in prison apply to us on a Thanksgiving weekend?

It is a challenge for you and I to live every day with the conscious awareness of all of the benefits we have received.

One part of the challenge of being conscious of the benefits, is reading the Scriptures in order to know the benefits. We cannot be grateful if we do not read about, think about and talk about what God has done for us. Romans 8 is a great place to find attitude adjusters…

I will quickly share a few gifts of God that are found in Romans 8:24-38…

1. We have hope (v. 24).
2. The Spirit helps our weakness by praying for us, and He does this perfectly because He intercedes for us according to the will of God (v. 27).
3. God causes all things to work together for good as we are loving Him and called according to His purpose (v. 28).
4. We have a glorious purpose—to become conformed to the image of His Son (v. 29).
5. He has foreknown, predestined, called, justified, and glorified us (v. 30)!
6. God is for us (so who can possibly stand against us?) (v. 31)!
7. He did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us (v. 32).
8. He will freely give us all things (v. 32).
9. We can have no charges brought against us, because we have already been justified by the ultimate Judge (v. 33).
10. We cannot be condemned, because Jesus died, was raised, and intercedes for us (v. 34).
11. We will NEVER be separated from the love of Christ (v. 35)!
12. Tribulation will not separate us from Christ’s love (v. 35).
13. Distress will not separate us (v. 35).
14. Persecution will not separate us (v. 35).
15. Famine will not separate us (v. 35).
16. Nakedness will not separate us (v. 35).
17. Peril will not separate us (v. 35).
18. The sword will not separate us (v. 35).
19. We overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loves us, even when persecuted all day long (v. 37).
20. Death will not separate us (v. 38).
21. Life will not separate us (v. 38).

I know that was quick…go back to Romans 8 when you feel like you are living in a prison. As a Christian, God opens the door of every prison and breaks every chain that would bind…But where we live doesn’t depend on our geography, it depends on our attitude.

With the wrong attitude as Christians, we will be like prison inmates who are just waiting for Jesus to come and get us out of jail.

With the right attitude as Christians, our life can be a sweet song that brings joy to a bitter world.

As Paul said… “For me, to live is Christ and to die is gain…But for the sakes of others” he said, “It was good that He remains.”

Be thankful for the life you have here and now. It isn’t always easy. In fact it is a cross to bear, God designed it that way. But it isn’t others who make it difficult and unbearable. Nothing and no one can destroy our true thanks. Being thankful is possible with whoever, whenever, and wherever. And it is dependent on being conscious of what Jesus has done for us.

Our thankfulness and joy is within our reach. In fact, it is with us wherever we go and it is available to us at all times.

When you are Christmas shopping this year will you focus on the joy associated with giving gifts or the pain of paying the credit card bill?

As you work at your job will you meditate on the headaches of the workplace or the joy of getting your paycheck?

Think about Jesus’ first earthly miracle, when He turned water into wine.

I think it would have been easy for him to be bitter. The King of Kings and Lord of Lords is among the people who He came to die for and save from their sins and all they seem to want from Him is wine.

I’ve had the opportunity, with my family, to make hard cider from my parents’ apples. It is hard work, and it is a pretty long process. Thinking about the labor involved turns into an arduous chore. On the other hand, if I think about the smile it brings to those who taste the finished product, the work load becomes light and easy.

Joy and thankfulness are not situational or based on geography. They are founded on who or what is inside us. So today, I want to encourage you to focus on Christ, in you, the hope of glory. If you do that your prison will be converted to a place of peace, and your bitterness will be changed to an overflowing cup of joy.

1. *The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. Nashville : Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989, S. Lk 9:23-25 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)