

CHAPTER FOUR

Turn It Back to Praise

So far in the pages of this book we've looked at worshipping God on the road marked with suffering. But let's focus for one chapter on the other side of things—making sure that we journey to the place of praise in times of abundance. The fact is, we can be quick to question God when things go wrong for us, but slow to honor Him when things go well. The challenge is to take every blessing He pours out on our lives, and turn it back into praise. As someone once commented, "Saying thank you is more than good manners. It is good spirituality."¹

Gratitude is an essential ingredient in our worship "diet." Indeed, thanksgiving has always been a great way for the people of God to take a first step into worship. As Psalm 100 exhorts us,

Enter his gates with thanksgiving
and his courts with praise;
give thanks to him and praise his name (vv. 4-5).

Gratitude is a heart attitude that we must train ourselves in—for we're so quick to neglect it. Scanning through Scripture, time and again we see the people of God needing some direction in this area. The story of the Exodus and the people of God wandering discontentedly around the desert show just how easy it is for murmuring and moaning to set in—leading us far from the paths of gratitude and contentment. And on many occasions, the likes of the psalms and the New Testament letters remind us to be thankful—highlighting yet again that this may not always be the first instinct of our hearts. The story of the 10 lepers illuminates this even further. Jesus healed all 10, but only 1 returned to Him in thanks and praise (see Luke 17:11-37). Where were the other 9? For some reason, they just kept on walking. Perhaps they had meant to return in thanksgiving at some point, but became distracted with celebrating and never quite got round to it. Perhaps they got too wrapped up in themselves and forgot the One who was the source of their joy and healing. Yet it's easy to see ourselves in this picture—so often receiving the gift but somehow, in the midst of the blessing, forgetting the Giver. Our consumer-driven society has birthed a generation of takers. We'd do well to be led in worship by that one returning leper—who praised God loudly and threw himself at the feet of Jesus in extravagant thanksgiving.

The discipline of thanksgiving involves a constant stream of decisions to recognize and respond to the many kindnesses that have been poured out on us. The more we cultivate this heart posture, the more it will begin to flow naturally in our lives. It's like a small snowball at the top of a hill. Choose to set it in motion, guiding it down the slope, and it soon grows larger and larger. At a certain point, it runs away with itself, developing a momentum all its own. In the same way, when we become mindful of thanking God for even the smallest details of our lives, we soon find ourselves caught up in an endless list of things to be grateful for.

We need look no further than our bodies to get the ball rolling. The biology of our bodies has to be one of the most overlooked things when it comes to prayers of gratitude towards God. Do you like your own body? You should. We are an incredible mix of cells—with organs of such mind-blowing complexity that the best man-made technologies of our day still come no way near to matching them. So many of the complex internal parts we use every day, we barely give a second thought to. But when we take a moment to marvel at them, they become a fantastic opportunity to explode in thankfulness before God.

Take the brain, for example. When was the last time you thanked God for your brain? That you can remember

names, faces and life events? That you can read the pages of His Word and store Scripture verses in your mind? That you can compute, conceive and store in your memory so many of the wonders He has made? With 500,000 kilometers of nerve fibers and messages traveling along them at speeds of a hurricane-force wind, the brain is something to be incredibly thankful for.² Yet it is just one part of our fantastically designed anatomy.

When was the last time you went to God in gratitude for your heart? The human heart beats 100,000 times a day and, in the space of 70 years, would pump enough blood to fill a skyscraper. The volume of blood pumped each minute is about 5 liters. But during physical exertion, the volume per minute can rise to 25 liters—so that the entire blood volume is pumped through the body five times per minute.³ You'll never give thanks with a grateful *heart* in the same way again!

Move on to your senses—have you ever wondered that you can smell your favorite flower, taste your favorite food, and hear all kinds of interesting and moving music? And have you ever thought of giving thanks for something as seemingly ordinary as your skin? If not, then now might be a good time. One square centimeter of your skin contains about 6 million cells, 100 sweat glands and 5,000 sensory corpuscles—as well as 200 pain points,

25 pressure points, 12 cold-sensitive points and 2 heat-sensitive points.⁴ We take for granted this amazing part of our created bodies—but when we begin to investigate it, we are led through the gates of thanksgiving into the courts of praise. We join with the psalmist in crying out:

I praise You because I am fearfully and wonder-
fully made;
your works are wonderful,
I know that full well (Psalm 139:14).

Next, move on to your family and friends. Think about your social circles—how God skillfully weaved them together, bringing people into your world for whom you will be ever grateful to share life with. For those with the eyes to see, the depths of His providence are swirling all around us. As a personal example, we've been married for seven years—and looking back, we're so appreciative of the depths of God's providence at work in our relationship. We first set eyes upon each other in a church parking lot in England. What a romantic, yet holy, setting! We praise God for that brief moment—that in His beautiful way He would let our paths cross for a short while, smiling upon the long-term plan He had to knit our lives together. Over the years, though we were living three hours apart, a strong friendship started to grow; and a

while later we were both on the staff of a church, working with each other. In the end, it took a runaway mouse in the church building to bring us together. (It's a long story, but you'd be surprised what two hours of trying to catch a mouse together can do for a relationship!) The point is this: We must learn to rehearse the stories of God's providence in our lives—thanking Him for both the smallest details and the grandest designs. Every day God is working out His wonders all around us.

If we can begin to take regular, small steps into thankfulness, then before long we will pick up our pace and find ourselves taking great big strides of praise. Too often we neglect even the small things—for instance, saying grace before a meal. In one way, this is a small thing. Yet if we begin to adopt this discipline, we begin to carve out space two or three times each day to thank God for His provision. The arrival of the food on our table gives many reasons to be thankful. To illustrate this, let's consider the vegetables we eat. On the journey between the soil and our plates, they have been grown, harvested, cleaned, transported, sold and cooked. We thank God for their provision, but we must also thank Him for the many hands that have labored to bring them to us.

Before long, we're on to big steps in thanksgiving—thanking God for some of the grand themes of the

Christian life. The writer of Psalm 103 exhorts us:

forget not all his benefits—
 who forgives all your sins
and heals all your diseases,
 who redeems your life from the pit
and crowns you with love and compassion,
 who satisfies your desires with good things
so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's (vv. 2-5).

Salvation, healing, forgiveness, compassion and renewal—these are themes we should visit every day of our walk with God, and each of them can be found at the place of the Cross. The hymn writer Fanny Crosby wrote, “Keep me near the cross,” which is a great heart cry for any worshipper.⁵ For when we stop going by the Cross, we begin to lose sight of the depths of the pit we’ve been rescued from—and the heights of the mercy that saved us.

A thankful heart may not come easily—we can be so quick to let something not going so well in our lives cloud over the multitude of little blessings we have to be grateful for. Or else we spend hours asking God for something, yet only minutes thanking Him when He answers our prayers. Another pitfall in worship is to spend lots of time telling God what we have done for

Him and to neglect to thank Him for the far-more-momentous area of what He has done for us. In all of these areas, we must ask the Holy Spirit to help us cultivate a lifestyle and a mindset of gratitude.

Another way to start out along this road is to thank Him as the God of yesterday, today and forever—the One who was and is and is to come. In other words, begin by recalling a wonder He has worked somewhere along your life’s journey. Walk through your testimony in your heart and mind; go again by the place of the Cross and see all that He has won for you and done for you in that momentous place. Move on to the empty tomb and dwell for a moment on the joy of sharing in His resurrection. This is the first stage—thanking Him as the *God of yesterday*.

Next, bring gratitude for a kindness that He’s worked in your life today—perhaps an answered prayer or a friendship you value. This is to worship Him as the *God of today*. And last, look to the horizon and thank Him in advance for a wonder still to come, praising Him as the *God of forever* and thanking Him for the life that is to come. This kind of model frees us up from a mentality of grumbling and trains us in the way of gratitude. We join with the hymn “Great Is Thy Faithfulness,” reminding ourselves of God’s consistent love and care for us in days

gone by and worshipping Him as the bringer of “strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow.”⁶

Mature worshippers of Jesus learn to bring an offering in every season of the soul, for every high and every low, knowing that the worth of Jesus outweighs each and every pain and pleasure in this life. Centered on Christ, wholesome worship has room both for the heights of joy and the pits of despair. Every blessing He pours out, we turn back to praise. And even when the dark times close in on us, still we will be singing out, “Blessed be Your name.”