



OUR DAILY BREAD
Resources for Spiritual Questers

Choosing to be Grateful

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There are two extremes of situations in our lives when a feeling of gratitude comes almost automatically to us; when we get something we want, and when something we don't want is over. We don't consciously choose gratitude in those moments, it simply washes through us and we let it in. Those are times when God's will seems to be aligned with our will. The feeling of gratitude, whether to a person, a situation, or to God, brings us a dimension of happiness and peace, a feeling that, if we reflect on it, seems to come from beyond this world, it is in a sense 'heavenly'.

So the question I would like us to reflect on tonight is 'Can we choose to be grateful?', 'Can we achieve the heavenly feeling of gratitude, and the happiness and peace it brings, in times when we don't have what we want, and when we are in the midst of things we don't like?' We all know life is a roller coaster, and each of us likely has something, or many things, we are currently struggling with; medical conditions, financial setbacks, the grief of losses, workplace conflicts, relationship difficulties, feelings about national politics, or fears about world events. Internally, we may be living with depression, insecurity, doubt and confusion. How can we choose to be grateful in the face of all these challenges?

Let's look for role models in the scriptures. When faced with trouble, and the anger of his foes, King David, the Psalmist, called on the Lord to 'preserve him,' to 'stretch out his hand' and to 'save' and 'vindicate' him. The raw emotion of this psalm shows us the depth of David's relationship with God was one of trust, belief and gratitude. The Psalms overall display a vast breadth of human emotion in relationship to God. David indeed rode the rollercoaster of life centuries ago, and, no surprise, as there is nothing new under the sun, we can still relate to the raw emotion and longing for happiness and peace that David sings of in Psalm 138. David calls on the Lord and the Lord answers and emboldens him! David speaks from the context of the challenges he faces, and at the same time reaches to the Lord to sing a song of praise and bows down before him. He opens himself to gratitude for having God in his life, in the midst of challenging times.

Here is a passage from the writings of Emanuel Swedenborg, who inspired the founding of my church, on the power of the humility David demonstrates

“The Lord does indeed require humility, adoration, thanksgivings, and many other things from people, which appear like repaying, but the Lord does not demand these things for His own sake; but they are for the sake of the individual person; for when a person is in humility one can receive good from the Lord, because one has then been separated from the love of one’s self and its evils, which are the obstacle to the Lord’s inflow; and therefore the Lord wills a state of humility in a person for their own sake; because when one is in this state the Lord can flow in with heavenly good.”¹

When we choose to humble ourselves in our relationship to God, we are in fact choosing to be grateful for God in our lives. In this experience of choosing to be grateful, we open ourselves to align our will with God’s will, we allow the clarity of the Lord’s guidance to enlighten our minds, the calm of the Lord’s presence to still our hearts, and the confidence of the Lord’s strength to do what we feel God calling us to do. Our inner experience of choosing God over the cares of the world, changes us, and can bring a sense of timelessness as we ‘get off the roller coaster.’ As David found amidst his troubles and the anger of his foes, it is possible to feel grateful no matter what life brings our way, when we humbly reach out for God’s help.

If we each look back on our experience of life thus far, on the ups and downs of the roller coaster of our individual stories, we have likely already experienced, and survived, numerous challenges, losses, griefs, conflicts and national and world changes. We, living in the linear time of this natural world, can only see God’s presence with us in hindsight. We can reflect on what we learned, and how we grew, and when we offered our unique participation in each situation. We know times when we call on the Lord, and when we tried to exert our will, our ideas and our expectations. And, if we open our eyes humbly to look at our past, we can discern how that went for us. We can look back on our successes and failures of exerting our own will, and the successes and failures when God emboldened us through difficult times, and rejoiced with us through glad times. And, most tellingly, when we felt happiness and peace in the process.

During this week of Thanksgiving, I encourage you to reflect on your own journey, and choose how you will go forward into tomorrow. God’s eternal perspective is out of our reach, but knowing that God is guiding us to learn through our challenges and love through our difficulties,

¹ Swedenborg, Emanuel. *Arcana Coelestia*. Trans. John Potts. New York: Swedenborg Foundation, 1963. Print.

for our eternal good, may feel like a choice worth making. Choose gratitude for life itself and you will see opportunity in every joy and every sorrow to walk a spiritual path, and to align your will with God's will for the purpose of becoming a community of people who live 'on earth as it is in heaven.' As a hospice chaplain, I meet many people who are embracing this gratitude for life, making every moment count, saying the truth as they are given to see it, expressing love to family and friends and strangers, and acting with such a visible alignment with God's will that it brings a palpable light and warmth into every interaction they have. I have felt their happiness, peace and joy. One man, bandaged head to toe, having broken every bone in his body in a motor cycle accident, when I gently touched his arm to say 'God Bless You,' responded, 'He already has!' In the midst of his pain and suffering, he glowed with a gratitude for being alive!

The poor widow in the Gospel of Luke is another shining example! Let's put ourselves in her shoes for a moment. She is preparing to go to the temple to bring her offering; she likely dresses in her best to go out to join in a religious observance that is important to her, and now she looks into whatever container she keeps her coins in to decide what to bring. Can we imagine her thoughts and feelings in that moment? As a widow, she has experienced loss and grief. As a woman without a husband in those days, she most likely has no reliable income to live on. Yet she picks out of the container the only two coins she has. Can we imagine that she is trusting that the Lord will provide for her needs tomorrow, that she is feeling gratitude for the fact that she has two coins to give, that she, in her gratitude for life, may be happy and even joyful that she has two coins to give to the temple, to the Lord. Jesus saw her action, and lifts her up to the attention of the disciples to show them what wholehearted gratitude, humility and trust before the Lord look like. She is an example of how to live the life that leads to heaven, how to choose to be grateful. But each of us today, must open ourselves to the unique way that God is leading us.

In 1 Corinthians 12:4-7 we read

“Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who

activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good”²

And this is where life gets exciting! When you choose to be grateful for your life, and open yourself to God’s leading and calm and strength, you become more fully who God knows you are!’ When we choose God, align our will with God’s will as we are given to see and understand it, we fulfill our potential in ways that we might never have imagined. What are we being given to learn from this God-inspired participation in our lives, grateful for every up and down, twist and turn? Maybe like David, we’ll be creatively inspired to pen songs of praise and thanksgiving. Maybe we’ll be inspired to bring our unique perspective to people and situations we may have been shy of in the past, maybe we’ll simply show love and share truth with every person we meet. And maybe in this way of living, we will be blessed with the happiness and peace, and even joy, of ‘giving all we have’ as the poor widow did. Jesus showed the disciples, and shows us now, that it is truly ‘in giving that we receive’ in his honoring the poor widow and her gift of the Spirit.

The observance of a day of Thanksgiving is the beginning of a season of opportunities to rededicate ourselves to living life from a spiritual perspective. May you bring your attention to thoughts of gratitude as you prepare for family gatherings and corporate worship. May you be inspired to look within, to reflect on your path and make choices for your future that align your will to God’s will.

May you find the happiness and peace that comes from truly humbling yourself before God, asking for guidance, inspiration and strength to live the good and the truth that God will uniquely manifest through you, as you ‘choose to be grateful.’

² New Revised Standard Version Bible: Anglicized Edition, copyright 1989, 1995, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved