

The Transforming Power of Thanksgiving

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Introduction: Beyond a Holiday to a Holy Habit

As we approach that special season when Americans pause to celebrate Thanksgiving, I want to challenge you today with a transformative truth. Yes, we rightly commemorate the remarkable story of the Pilgrims and that first harvest feast in 1621—a story rich with God's providence and worthy of annual remembrance. But if we limit thanksgiving to a single day on the calendar, we miss the deeper, more powerful biblical principle that can revolutionize our daily walk with Christ.

My thesis today is straightforward: Thanksgiving should not merely be an annual celebration but a daily declaration. This isn't just pastoral advice—it's a biblical mandate with profound implications for your spiritual health, emotional well-being, and even your physical body. Let me show you why cultivating a lifestyle of gratitude may be one of the most important decisions you make this year.

I. The Goodness of Gratitude: Ancient Wisdom Meets Modern Science

A. The Biblical Foundation

Turn with me to Psalm 92, verses 1 and 2. Written over three millennia ago, these words contain a truth that resonates across the centuries:¹

"It is good to give thanks to the LORD and to make music to Your name,
O Most High, to declare Your love in the morning and Your faithfulness
at night."

Notice carefully the psalmist's word choice. He doesn't say it's merely *polite* to give thanks. He doesn't suggest it's simply *nice* or socially appropriate. The Hebrew word used here is *tov*—good—carrying the weight of moral rightness, beneficial effect, and divine approval. The psalmist declares under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit: It is objectively, measurably, eternally GOOD to give thanks to the LORD.

B. Scientific Validation of Biblical Truth

Now, here's what fascinates me about our contemporary culture: science is finally catching up to what Scripture has declared for thousands of years. As I've said many times in my ministry, gratitude is the healthiest of all human emotions.² I didn't originate that observation through psychological training—I discovered it in the pages of Scripture and have watched secular research confirm it decade after decade.

Consider the remarkable findings emerging from our leading universities and research institutions:

Harvard Medical School researcher Dr. Tyler VanderWeele has documented that gratitude isn't merely a pleasant emotional state—it's a practice that literally extends human life.³ His longitudinal studies demonstrate that individuals who intentionally cultivate thanksgiving experience not only increased longevity but enhanced quality of life across multiple metrics.

Dr. Daniel Amen, a Christian psychiatrist whose work I deeply respect, has utilized advanced brain imaging technology to reveal something extraordinary: gratitude activates the brain's joy centers while simultaneously deactivating fear responses.⁴ Let that sink in for a moment. When you engage in thanksgiving—when you meditate on God's goodness and enumerate your blessings—your brain's very structure responds by amplifying joy and suppressing anxiety. The physical organ God designed to house your consciousness is literally rewired by gratitude.

The research from UC San Diego adds another dimension: cardiac patients who maintained gratitude journals for just eight weeks showed measurable improvements—reduced inflammation markers, enhanced sleep patterns, and normalized heart rhythms.⁵ Think about that—something as simple as writing down what you're thankful for improved their cardiovascular health!

Even during the pandemic, when anxiety and depression reached epidemic proportions, University of Nebraska researchers found that students who practiced daily gratitude journaling didn't merely cope better—they were statistically protected from clinical depression and anxiety disorders.⁶

C. The Spiritual Discipline That Transforms

Friends, gratitude is not a passive sentiment. It's not something that occasionally wafts through your consciousness on a pleasant afternoon. Gratitude is an active spiritual discipline—one that, according to neuroscience, literally rewires your neural pathways, heals emotional wounds, and fortifies your soul.

Proverbs 17:22 tells us, "A cheerful heart is good medicine."⁷ What Solomon wrote three thousand years ago, Dr. Amen confirms today with PET scans and fMRI imaging. Science has finally validated what believers have known through revelation and experience: gratitude is good—measurably, miraculously, and eternally good.

II. The Generosity of Gratitude: Thanksgiving as an Act of Giving

A. The First Thanksgiving: Acknowledging the Source

Let's travel back to the autumn of 1621. After a devastating winter that claimed nearly half their company, leaving only 53 survivors, the Pilgrims faced their first New England harvest. They gathered corn, barley, fish, wild fowl, and venison. They were alive—barely—and they were profoundly grateful.

But here's what distinguished these courageous believers: they knew precisely where their blessings originated. Historical records make clear that their first instinct wasn't to congratulate themselves on their survival skills or agricultural techniques. Their first response was to acknowledge God as the source of every provision. They understood James 1:17—that every good and perfect gift descends from the Father of lights.⁸

B. The Etymology of Thanksgiving

Consider the very word "thanksgiving." Break it into its component parts: thanks-giving. This is revelatory, isn't it? Thanksgiving is fundamentally an act of *giving*, not receiving. When we give thanks, we're offering something precious—our recognition, our praise, our acknowledgment—to Another.

This implies something crucial: genuine thanksgiving requires a Receiver. It presupposes someone at the other end of our gratitude who is worthy to receive it. For Christians, that Someone is the Lord God Almighty, the Author of every blessing, the Sustainer of our very existence.

Psalm 92 asks and answers the essential question: "To whom should we give thanks?" The response is clear and unambiguous: "It is good to give thanks to the LORD." Not to fortune. Not to fate. Not to our own cleverness or strength. To the LORD—Yahweh, the covenant-keeping God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

C. The Theology of Divine Provision

When you give thanks to God, you're making a profound theological statement. You're declaring, "This didn't come from my power or my wisdom. Every capability I possess, every resource I control, every opportunity I enjoy—it all originates with You, God. You are the Source, and I am merely the recipient and steward."

King David captured this beautifully when he said, in effect, "Everything we offer You, God, already belonged to You in the first place. We're simply returning to You what came from Your hand."

The Pilgrims understood this theology deeply. They lived it out in that first Thanksgiving gathering. And oh, how I pray that our nation might return to those foundational principles—that we might once again unite as a people to acknowledge God's sovereignty and thank Him for His manifold blessings.

D. The Pervasiveness of Divine Gifts

James 1:17a states it with perfect clarity: "Every good gift and every perfect gift comes down from the Father."⁸ Every. Good. Gift. Not some. Not most. Every single blessing you enjoy—from the spectacular to the seemingly mundane—originates with God.

Therefore, when you awaken tomorrow morning, it's not just appropriate but spiritually necessary to begin with thanksgiving: "Lord, thank You for rest. Thank You for shelter. Thank You for protection through the night. Thank You for the ability to see, to hear, to move, to think. Thank You for my family. Thank You for

provision." The list is endless because God's mercies are new every morning (Lamentations 3:22-23).⁹

Let me ask you directly: Have you given thanks to the Lord today? Not a rushed, perfunctory blessing over a meal, but genuine, heartfelt acknowledgment that everything you are and everything you have flows from His gracious hand? Have you recognized that you live and move and exist because of His sustaining power (Acts 17:28)?¹⁰

This is where thanksgiving becomes transformative. It's not merely good manners—it's the recognition of ultimate reality.

III. The Godliness of Gratitude: A Biblical Command and Christlike Character

A. The Biblical Imperative

Gratitude isn't optional in the Christian life. It's not a spiritual extra credit assignment for particularly pious believers. Gratitude is a repeated, emphatic biblical command. Scripture instructs us to "give thanks in all circumstances" (1 Thessalonians 5:18), to "give thanks always" (Ephesians 5:20), to "enter His gates with thanksgiving" (Psalm 100:4).

Why does God command thanksgiving? Because gratitude makes us like Christ and distinguishes us from the world. It's a spiritual discipline that progressively transforms our character to reflect His image.

B. The Cultural Contrast

I don't know if you've noticed, but there's a growing coldness in our culture—not meteorological but relational. Common courtesies are vanishing. You hold a door, and people brush past without acknowledgment. You extend kindness, and it's met with indifference or suspicion.

But this shouldn't surprise us. The Apostle Paul, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit nearly two millennia ago, predicted precisely this cultural deterioration.

C. The Prophecy of Ingratitude

Turn with me to 2 Timothy 3:1-5. Paul writes:¹¹

"Mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy..."

Notice that word—ungrateful. Right there in the catalog of end-times characteristics, alongside pride, abuse, and ungodliness, Paul identifies ingratitude as a defining mark of a society in spiritual decline.

Many respected Bible prophecy scholars believe we're witnessing these very characteristics intensifying in our generation. Jesus said that as it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man (Matthew 24:37).¹² What characterized Noah's generation? Self-absorption. Indifference to God. Hearts consumed with continual evil. And a profound lack of gratitude.

D. The Christian Alternative: Living Like Christ

But believers are called to a radically different standard. First John 2:6 makes it crystal clear:¹³

"Whoever claims to live in Him must walk as Jesus walked."

Let me emphasize that: If you claim to belong to Christ, you must conduct your life in the manner that Jesus conducted His. This isn't legalism—it's the natural outworking of genuine salvation. When the Holy Spirit regenerates your heart, He progressively conforms you to Christ's image (Romans 8:29).¹⁴

Now, this isn't something you accomplish through human willpower. You can't manufacture Christlikeness through sheer determination. It's the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit in the born-again believer. When you repent of your sin and place your faith in Christ's finished work on the cross, God's Spirit takes up residence in your heart. You are regenerated, made new, empowered to walk in ways that were previously impossible.

Let me pause here for those who may not have experienced this new birth. If you recognize yourself as a sinner separated from God, if you acknowledge that you

deserve His judgment but desperately need His mercy, you can be saved today. Confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord. Believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead. Trust in His completed work on Calvary as the full payment for your sin. Ask Him to save you, to forgive you, to come into your life and make you new. Romans 10:9 promises that if you do this genuinely, you will be saved.¹⁵

E. Jesus, Our Model of Gratitude

And once you're saved, once the Spirit indwells you, He enables you to imitate Christ—including Christ's consistent practice of thanksgiving.

The Gospels record at least four specific instances where Jesus gave thanks:

1. At Lazarus's tomb (John 11:41)¹⁶ — Before raising His friend from death, Jesus looked to heaven and said, "Father, I thank You that You have heard Me."
2. At the feeding of the five thousand (Matthew 14:19)¹⁷ — He took the loaves and fish, gave thanks, and multiplied them miraculously.
3. At the feeding of the four thousand (Mark 8:6)¹⁸ — Again, He gave thanks before the multiplication.
4. At the Last Supper (Luke 22:19)¹⁹ — He took bread, gave thanks, broke it, and instituted the memorial we still observe today.

If Jesus—the sinless Son of God, the Creator of the universe made flesh—consistently practiced thanksgiving, how much more should we?

F. The Apostolic Teaching on Thanksgiving

Paul, inspired by the Holy Spirit, makes the command explicit. In Ephesians 5:20, he writes: "Always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Notice three critical words: always, everything, in Christ's name. This isn't selective gratitude for pleasant circumstances. This is comprehensive, continual thanksgiving for all things, offered through Christ to the Father.

First Thessalonians 5:18 amplifies this: "Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus."

People often ask me, "Pastor John, what's God's will for my life?" Well, here's a clear starting point: **Give thanks**. In every situation. No matter the circumstances. This is explicitly identified as God's will.

Now, I'll be honest with you—this is challenging. When you're in the valley, when circumstances are difficult, when you're facing loss or pain or uncertainty, thanksgiving doesn't come naturally. Our flesh rebels against it. But this is precisely when intentional gratitude becomes a spiritual weapon of extraordinary power.

IV. The Groundbreaking Power of Gratitude: Thanksgiving That Breaks Chains

A. The Challenge of Thankfulness in Adversity

It's relatively easy to give thanks when everything's going well—when you receive the promotion, when the diagnosis is benign, when your children are thriving, when your finances are stable. In those mountaintop moments, thanksgiving flows naturally.

But what about the valleys? What about when the job is lost, the diagnosis is devastating, the relationship fractures, the bills overwhelm? Can you still give thanks to God?

I want to show you that gratitude in adversity isn't just possible—it's powerful beyond measure. It's a spiritual weapon that breaks chains, overcomes darkness, and releases divine intervention.

B. The Biblical Example: Paul and Silas in Prison

Let me take you to Philippi in the first century, as recorded in Acts 16. Paul and Silas had been preaching the Gospel—sharing the truth about Jesus Christ, proclaiming salvation through His name alone. And as has happened throughout history when God's truth confronts human darkness, they faced violent opposition.

They were arrested on false charges. They were stripped and brutally beaten with rods. Then they were thrown into the innermost cell of the prison, their feet locked in stocks, their backs raw and bleeding.

(As a side note, remember what happened to Charlie Kirk—assassinated for sharing the Gospel. Being a Christian can be dangerous. Solomon was right: there's nothing new under the sun. Persecution for truth-telling is as old as Cain and Abel.)

Now, imagine yourself in that prison cell. Darkness. Pain. Injustice. Uncertainty about tomorrow. What would your response be? Complaint? Despair? Bitterness toward God?

C. The Midnight Praise

But look at what Acts 16:25 records: "About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them."²⁰

Midnight. The darkest hour. Bodies broken, freedom stolen, future uncertain. And they're singing. Not complaining—singing. Not cursing their circumstances—worshiping God.

Their hymnbook was the Psalter. They were singing the inspired songs of Scripture, many penned by David who himself knew suffering, persecution, and injustice.

While we can't be certain which specific psalm they sang, I believe compelling evidence points to Psalm 107. Why? Let me give you four substantial reasons:

First, Psalm 107 explicitly describes the prisoner's condition. Look at verses 10-14: "Some sat in darkness, in utter darkness, prisoners suffering in iron chains, because they rebelled against God's commands and despised the plans of the Most High... Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and he saved them from their distress. He brought them out of darkness, the utter darkness, and broke away their chains."²¹

Can you see the precise correspondence? Paul and Silas were sitting in darkness—the innermost prison cell. They were suffering in iron chains—their feet were locked in stocks. And what follows in the psalm? God breaks the chains and brings deliverance from darkness. This is not coincidental—this is prophetic foreshadowing of exactly what was about to happen in that Philippian jail.

Second, Psalm 107 is structured as a corporate thanksgiving song. It contains four distinct scenarios of people in desperate circumstances who cry out to the Lord and experience His deliverance: those wandering in the desert (vv. 4-9), prisoners in darkness (vv. 10-16), those sick and afflicted (vv. 17-22), and those endangered at sea (vv. 23-32). Each section concludes with a refrain: "Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for mankind" (vv. 8, 15, 21, 31).

This call-and-response structure makes it ideal for two people to sing together—one could lead while the other responds, creating the "hymns" (plural) that Acts 16:25 mentions. It's a song designed for participatory worship, perfect for Paul and Silas's situation.

Third, Psalm 107 addresses multiple types of suffering and deliverance. Paul, throughout his ministry, had experienced every category this psalm describes: he'd been lost in the wilderness, imprisoned in chains, sick and near death, and endangered in shipwrecks. This wasn't just a song about their current imprisonment—it was their testimony in song form, rehearsing God's faithfulness through every trial they'd endured.

But most significantly—fourth—Psalm 107 begins with the very declaration that becomes the weapon of spiritual warfare: "Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever" (v. 1). Not "Give thanks when circumstances are favorable" or "Give thanks if you feel like it," but a categorical declaration: God is good, and His love endures—period. Forever. Regardless.

This is what makes Psalm 107 the perfect song for midnight in a Philippian prison. Paul and Silas weren't singing about their circumstances—they were singing about God's character. They weren't focusing on their chains—they were declaring the goodness and eternal faithfulness of the One who breaks chains.

D. Gratitude as a Spiritual Weapon

Can you see what Paul and Silas were doing? They were wielding gratitude as a weapon against the powers of darkness. In the natural realm, they were defeated—imprisoned, beaten, helpless. But in the spiritual realm, they were victorious, deploying the most powerful weapon in the believer's arsenal: thanksgiving directed toward Almighty God.

They weren't in denial about their circumstances. They weren't pretending everything was fine. They were making a declaration of faith: "God, You are good. Your mercy endures forever. These chains don't change Your character. This prison doesn't limit Your power. We will give You thanks because You are worthy, regardless of our circumstances."

When you face troublesome times, I want you to remember this moment. When darkness closes in and everything within you wants to despair, I want you to do what Paul and Silas did: Look beyond your circumstances to your unchanging God and declare, "Lord, You are good. Your mercies endure forever." Make it your chorus to heaven. Repeat it. Meditate on it. Let it become the soundtrack of your trial.

E. The Gratitude Quake

And here's what happens when you do this—the same thing that happened to Paul and Silas. Acts 16:26 records:²²

"Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everyone's chains came loose."

This was no ordinary seismic event, friends. This was a gratitude quake. This was heaven's response to worship in adversity. This was God demonstrating that gratitude is groundbreaking, earth-shaking, chain-breaking power.

The walls shook. The ground trembled. The doors burst open. The shackles fell off. All because two men chose thanksgiving over bitterness, praise over complaint, faith over despair.

And the same power is available to you.

F. The Science of Gratitude and Healing

Now, let me share with you what Christian counselors and researchers are discovering about gratitude's power to break spiritual and emotional chains:

Dr. Karl Ko, a Christian counselor, has documented that when trauma survivors begin thanking God for His presence and work in their story—even during the painful chapters—they experience breakthrough in forgiveness.²³ Gratitude softens

hearts hardened by hurt. It doesn't deny the wrong or minimize the pain, but it shifts focus from the offense to God's greater mercy.

Dr. Mark Verkler, a Messianic Jewish psychologist, explains that gratitude builds what researchers call "attachment security" with God.²⁴ When believers practice thanksgiving, recognizing God's faithful presence even in fragile moments, they develop deeper emotional resilience and spiritual stability.

From a neuroscience perspective, Dr. Daniel Amen's research shows that gratitude practices can actually rewire trauma-affected brains.²⁵ Trauma dysregulates the fear centers—the amygdala becomes hyperactive while the regulatory prefrontal cortex becomes less engaged. But consistent gratitude practice strengthens those regulatory centers, reducing anxiety and hypervigilance.

Clinical studies demonstrate that regular gratitude practice:²⁶

- Lowers cortisol (the stress hormone)
- Strengthens immune function
- Improves sleep quality
- Reduces symptoms of depression and anxiety

As I've said before, when you give thanks, you're not denying your pain. You're declaring your trust in the One who holds your future.²⁷

G. A Contemporary Testimony

Let me share a brief testimony. Maria, a woman who had experienced significant trauma in her childhood, felt emotionally fragmented well into adulthood. In therapy, her counselor suggested a simple discipline: each evening, write down three things you're grateful for.

At first, Maria struggled. Her entries were basic: "The sun came up. My car started. I had food." But she persisted. A quiet sunrise. A kind word from a friend. A moment of peace in prayer.

Gradually, over months, Maria noticed changes. Fewer nightmares. Deeper calm. A growing sense that she wasn't walking through her pain alone.

She later testified: "Gratitude didn't erase my past, but it helped me see God carrying me through it."

V. Practical Application: Reframing Your Life Through Gratitude

Let me give you some practical ways to implement this transformative discipline:

Instead of saying: "I hate this traffic." Try saying: "Thank You, God, for a vehicle that runs and gets me where I need to go."

Instead of saying: "I'm so tired of this illness." Try saying: "Thank You, God, for medical care, for medication, for another day of life. Help me reflect Your goodness to others even in this limitation."

Instead of saying: "Nobody appreciates what I do." Try saying: "Thank You, God, for the gifts and strength You've given me to serve. May You be glorified as these gifts flow through me."

Instead of saying: "I can't pay my bills." Try saying: "Lord, You're sovereign over all things. You know exactly what I'm facing. You've provided before, and I trust You to provide now and in the future. Thank You in advance for what You're going to do."

Do you see the pattern? You're not denying reality—you're reframing it through the lens of God's character and faithfulness.

Conclusion: From Annual Celebration to Daily Declaration

Psalm 92:1-2 declares: "It is good to give thanks to the LORD and to make music to Your name, O Most High, to declare Your love in the morning and Your faithfulness at night."¹

Morning and night. Daily. Continually. Not once a year around a turkey dinner, but as the habitual rhythm of your walk with God.

If you're wondering where to start in understanding God's will for your life, start here: give thanks. Psalm 100:4 instructs us to "enter His gates with thanksgiving and His courts with praise."²⁸ That's how you approach God in prayer. That's how you begin each day.

Tomorrow morning, before your feet hit the floor, before you check your phone, before you mentally rehearse your to-do list—pause and give thanks. "Lord, thank You for another day. Thank You for breath and life. Thank You for Your presence. Thank You that You're in control. I trust You with this day."

Take time each day to cultivate gratitude. Thank God for your health, your home, your family, your freedom. Gain perspective by remembering our brothers and sisters in restricted nations who face imprisonment, beating, and death for doing what we do freely every Sunday—gathering to worship Christ. Visit the Voice of the Martyrs website for that perspective-giving glimpse into their courage and suffering.²⁹

As we approach Thanksgiving this year, I pray this message marks a turning point for you—not just an annual celebration but the beginning of a daily declaration. A good, giving, godly, groundbreaking practice that will transform your brain, heal your heart, and fortify your soul.

May this Thanksgiving be for you what it was for Paul and Silas—not just a pleasant sentiment but a powerful weapon that breaks chains and releases the miraculous.

Next week, we'll begin a new series, "The Dark Side of Christmas," examining what Scripture reveals about the Antichrist and the end times. I hope you'll join us.

Until then, practice gratitude. You won't regret it.

God bless you, and have a truly transformative Thanksgiving.

In Christ, Pastor John

Footnotes

Note on Charlie Kirk reference: The transcript mentions "Charlie Kirk" being assassinated. This may be a conflation with historical Christian martyrs or a misstatement. If this refers to a contemporary incident, it should be verified for accuracy before publication. The conservative commentator Charlie Kirk (Turning Point USA founder) is alive as of the sermon date. This may have been intended to reference a different martyr or historical figure.

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9. Lamentations 3:22-23 (NIV) ↵
10. Acts 17:28 (NIV) ↵
11. 2 Timothy 3:1-5 (NIV) ↵
12. Matthew 24:37 (NIV) ↵
13. 1 John 2:6 (NIV) ↵
14. Romans 8:29 (NIV) ↵
15. Romans 10:9 (NIV) ↵
16. John 11:41 (NIV) ↵
17. Matthew 14:19 (NIV) ↵

18. Mark 8:6 (NIV) ↵
19. Luke 22:19 (NIV) ↵
20. Acts 16:25 (NIV) ↵
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