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Gravy and gratitude

EATON RAPIDS – On Thanksgiving day of 2020, I cooked my first turkey. I spent the night before seasoning the turkey, injecting it with all the buttery goodness and spices that make my cajun palate happy. I woke up early, bagged the turkey, and placed it in the oven. I'll never forget the feeling I had when I opened the oven 7 hours later...

My dreams of a beautifully roasted, cajun spiced turkey turned into a dry and chewy nightmare. In my first attempt at cooking a turkey, I had misread the recipe and cooked a thawed turkey at the required temperature and time of a frozen turkey. To say I was disappointed, discouraged, and frustrated would be an understatement. However, hope was not lost. My ever patient and caring wife came to my rescue with a hug, a smile, and some pretty amazing turkey gravy.

The gravy, not the turkey, became the star of the meal for our family that day! It was rich, flavorful, and served as a great topping on every side on the table. It even gave new life to my recent batch of turkey jerky! In just one short hour, I realized that my frustration had turned to contentment, my discouragement to joy, and my frustration to gratitude.

Pastoral ministry often comes with a variety of challenges and setbacks, many of which can become quite discouraging for the pastor and his family. Our best laid plans can often leave us feeling like that turkey; dry and burnt.

If we allow ourselves to focus solely on what didn't work, we will miss the opportunity to be grateful for the things that did. Here are 5 ways you can turn bad circumstances into moments of gratitude this Thanksgiving season.

1. Start your day with a prayer of thanksgiving.

"It is good to give thanks to the LORD, to sing praises to your name, O Most High; to declare your steadfast love in the morning, and your faithfulness by night."

Psalm 92:1-2

Like drinking a good cup of coffee, gratitude is a spiritual caffeine. It focuses our attention away from our problems and toward Jesus Christ, the ultimate solution to them all.

2. Don't become a victim to your circumstances.

"Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness."

James 1:2-3

Every trial, every circumstance, is an opportunity to be refined into the image of Jesus. Take joy in the process, and enjoy the fruit of steadfastness when it comes.

3. When the main thing fails, be grateful for the one thing that didn't.

"Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you."

1 Thessalonians 5:18

You put in all that time and preparation. I get it. But there's always a reason to rejoice. Don't let a bad circumstance ruin a good opportunity to give thanks to God.

4. Don't forget the bigger picture.

"Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain."

1 Corinthians 15:58

Last month, our church plant celebrated the baptism of a 66 year old friend that my wife and I had been praying would come to Jesus. Dozens of conversations, hours of prayer, and many tears took three years to bear fruit. Yet, every conversation, prayer, and tear made a difference. God is weaving small victories into Gospel testimonies. Be grateful for each step.

5. Be grateful for someone else's success.

"Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves."

Philippians 2:3

The imperfections in my leathery turkey only helped to highlight the utter perfection of my wife's turkey gravy. Pride craves accolade, but humility gives it away.

May your thanksgiving be filled with lots of laughter, time with family, and a nice, juicy turkey to eat. If something falls apart, I pray that you will have a bit of turkey gravy to be thankful for.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chris Ridler is the founding pastor of Living Hope Community Church, a church plant in Eaton Rapids, MI. He is also the 5th-8th grade Social Studies at Island City Academy in Eaton Rapids. He has been married to Becky for 20 years and has one son.

When the idea of discipling another woman stresses you out

ANN ARBOR – *“There is no way I am qualified for that.”*

“What in the world would I do or say?”

“What if she saw the mess of my life?”

“Where could I possibly find the time to do that?”

“What if this younger woman is an emotional drain to me?”

These are the knee-jerk questions that rise up within my heart when I consider what it costs me to disciple another woman. The idea can make me break out into a cold sweat.

However, I read passages like Titus 2:3-5, Matthew 28:18-20, and 1 Thessalonians 2:8, and I am challenged that discipling a younger woman in the gospel isn’t an option to be considered— it’s a command to be obeyed. I also see that God created me as a woman with a unique calling to reflect God’s nature to, as Gloria Furman often says, “nurture life in the face of death.”

We cultivate life.

We mother (with or without children of our own).

God has commanded us to make disciples. He has uniquely wired us as women to make disciples. However, in my flesh, I wrestle with fears, lies, and a desire for personal comfort as I consider actually doing it. Maybe you feel like me? When was the last time you pursued a younger woman (spiritually younger, not necessarily by age) and invited her to follow you as you follow Jesus?

To serve us as Michigan Baptist women, I want to provide some helpful encouragement to some of the obstacles that we may feel as we consider the cost of discipling women. There is so much to say about this topic, so admittedly, this encouragement only scratches the surface. However, one of the best pieces of advice that I have received about doing anything seemingly hard is this:

Start simply. And, simply start.

What if I feel ill-equipped?

The good news: You are 😊 you can roll your eyes and say “Gee, thanks Emily...”), but if you are in Christ, you have the Holy Spirit who will empower you. The Lord always uses ill-equipped, ordinary, messy people to accomplish His purposes... so the good news is that you are the perfect candidate.

Mark Dever says, “discipling is simply helping others to follow Jesus” or put another way, “deliberately doing spiritual good to someone so that he or she will be more like Christ” (CITE). The truth of the matter is that you can always find someone with whom you can deliberately do spiritual good—even if it is simply gathering to pray, listen, and share what the Lord is teaching you through His Word with her.

Practically, here are a few great resources that may serve you:

- [Discipling](#) by Mark Dever
- [This Discipleship podcast series](#) from Journeywomen
- [Growing Together](#) by Melissa Kruger

Who do I choose to disciple?

That’s a great question. Pray through this question and allow the Holy Spirit to guide you. Here are a few questions to help you discern:

1. Who, within my local church, am I burdened for them to grow in Christ?
2. Is there anyone within my small group that would be a natural fit?
3. Is there someone that I serve alongside in my area of service at church that I should consider?
4. With whom in my church does my schedule naturally sync up? Is it logistically possible to meet on a regular basis?

What if I cannot possibly manage adding another thing to my schedule, or another person to my life?

This is a tender and yet very real obstacle. With help from the Holy Spirit, walking with God in His Word, and living in regular fellowship in the local church, you may have to discern that you are not in a season of life to pursue someone in an intentional discipleship relationship. There are seasons of life where we must live within our God-given boundaries and not meet with someone regularly. I am thinking particularly about seasons of grief and crisis where we simply must focus on persevering moment by moment through the fire in which the Lord has placed us.

However, because it's a command given to followers of Christ, and we were made to do it, we have to carry the tension in all seasons of life that despite its cost, it is one worth paying. As Karen Hodge often says while drawing a timeline on a board, we need to “live for the line

[eternity], rather than the dot [the temporary circumstances we are facing].” We need to orient our lives around the central task of making disciples because our hearts are set on eternity—when we will gather with our brothers and sisters around the throne of grace and worship God.

Ofentimes, the obstacle I feel in discipling a younger woman is simply believing I am already too busy and carrying too many burdens to possibly entertain adding one more thing to my schedule. However, the truth is that discipling a younger woman is a kind invitation from God that will (1) expand my heart; (2) fuel my walk with Him; and (3) help me more effectively mother, serve in my local church, love my husband, cart children to and from extracurricular activities, run errands, do my work, and more—otherwise known as fulfilling my other responsibilities.

Discipling others expands your heart.

I am a mother to four children. When I first found out about having my second child, I was genuinely nervous about my ability to love both children well. Would my oldest feel slighted because I had to focus on the baby? Would my love be divided between two children?

However, I learned that love doesn’t divide into two pieces when you have two children. Love multiplies. Love doubled, then tripled, then quadrupled for me as I welcomed each child into my life. As we consider discipling younger women, we think that our hearts are at capacity and we cannot possibly handle one more person in our lives.

However, love doesn’t divide. It multiplies.

Each person we know and love increases our hearts—they don’t take away from our love for others. Like the Grinch whose heart grew three sizes in one day, each person that the Lord gives us to love, increases the size of our heart and our capacity for love. What a kind invitation from God!

Discipling others fuels your walk with Him.

I don’t really know how the Lord does it, but I know it to be true. When we step out in faith to point others to Jesus, it turns the gears of our hearts towards our own growth in Christ. We feel more needy, so we run to Him. We prepare to teach truths that we desperately need ourselves. We speak exhortations that the Spirit uses to challenge our own hearts. We feel burdened over our inabilities and our concerns for our sister in Christ, so we pray fervently. We worship joyfully when we see the Holy Spirit at work. I don’t know how it works, but making disciples is a fuel to our own walk with the Lord.

Discipling others helps me be more effective in all other areas of life.

The roles we have and the responsibilities we carry aren’t divided into silos separated from one another. Instead, because I disciple this woman from my church, I am more effective in all other

areas of my life. I jokingly reminisce that it was through investing in a younger woman that I learned that side parts in your hairstyle are out, and middle parts are in. However, more than keeping up with the trends and speaking the next generation's language (which is important), discipling others has strengthened me in my motherhood to four young children.

When I confess my sin of anger during my discipleship meeting with my friend, I am specifically killing the sin I often commit towards my children. I am also modeling to my children that followers of Jesus make disciples. As I learn to teach this to the younger woman at my church, I am better equipped to teach my children the Scriptures around the kitchen island. While I am applying this specifically to my own daily context of motherhood, this principle can be applied broadly to whatever your own daily life looks like.

We often think that we don't have the space to disciple someone else, but I propose that maybe we cannot afford to skip discipling others because of the other responsibilities we carry.

Sisters, I pray that as you consider your calling to disciple another woman, that you would be encouraged to start simply, and simply start. There is so much joy on this journey of following Jesus, and He is inviting you to join His work in pointing people back to Him.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Emily Guyer is a wife, mother, and servant of the Lord Jesus Christ. She is married to Michael, lead pastor of Treasuring Christ Church in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and together they have four children – Amelia, John, Caroline and Graham. She serves as the Director of Kids Ministry at Treasuring Christ Church and also as Graphic Designer for Journeywomen. She is passionate about others knowing, loving and following Jesus. She loves to travel (she has a soft spot for North Carolina beaches, Disney World, and unique cities), have meaningful conversations, drink Ethiopian coffee, and create beauty through designing, writing and teaching. She is happiest when she is with her family and dear friends.

‘Value of belonging’ at CP-fueled retreat for Black pastors

ASHEVILLE, NC (BP) – For Charles Owusu, founding pastor of the Ghanaian majority Word of Life Baptist Church in Lithia Springs, Ga., the inaugural Refresh Retreat for Black Southern Baptists was a valuable resource in his work as a pastor to pastors.

It was an object lesson in “the value of belonging” to the Southern Baptist family, especially for young church planter Emmanuel Kyereko, whom Osuwu is mentoring.

“Sometimes it takes people much longer to appreciate the value of belonging to a body like the SBC (Southern Baptist Convention), but that was something that he experienced,” Osuwu said of Kyereko. “It’s not just SBC wanting us to support the Cooperative Program, but also, the SBC provides that nourishment and the strength that we need, especially when things are difficult for us.

“It helped (Kyereko) to know that we actually belong to a bigger family, and that the family is concerned about us, and helps us to fulfill our calling.”

The Cooperative Program, Southern Baptists’ grassroots funding mechanism to support ministry nationally and internationally, allowed pastors and their wives to attend the Oct. 13-15 retreat for a nominal fee. It was the first Refresh Retreat designed specifically for Black Southern Baptists, drawing a capacity crowd of more than 200 to the Billy Graham Training Center at The Cove.

J.J. Washington, national director of personal evangelism at the North American Mission Board (NAMB), helped recruit pastors to attend the event sponsored by NAMB and the National African American Fellowship of the SBC (NAAF).

He pointed to the Cooperative Program as a key factor in making the event a reality. “It’s the fuel,” Washington said of the Cooperative Program, “and I’m grateful for it. I truly believe in the reality that we can do more together than we can by ourselves.

“We get a budget for evangelism, and then we do these Refreshes,” he said. “We wanted to keep the cost so, so low, so that they would not have any excuse not to [attend].”

The event was designed to minister specifically to pastors and their wives who minister among the diverse Black cultures in the SBC, including various African nationalities, African Americans, Haitians and others.

“We do these Refreshes all the time, but this was the first one that was geared towards the Black Church experience,” Washington said of the event which incorporated music, issues and preaching important to the culture. “In Southern Baptist life, if you’re a minority, you learn how to exist in both worlds. But I think for a lot of the guys, it felt good to be in a context that they were familiar with.”

Owusu was refreshed by the preaching, which included messages from H.B. Charles Jr., senior pastor of Shiloh Metropolitan Baptist Church in Jacksonville, Fla.; Mark Croston, national director of Black church ministries with Lifeway Christian Resources; and William Branch, assistant professor of preaching and Bible at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary.

“That was so phenomenal. It is the Word of God that brings life, and I could feel the power of the Word that was preached,” Owusu said. “It was life-giving, life-transforming. That’s my biggest takeaway. I don’t think I have encountered that much intense ministry of God’s Word, and that was great for me.”

The preaching brought rest.

“I had people pour into me as I pour into others,” he said. “That also brought relaxation. I know what to do when I’m in a problem, or when things are tough. It helped me to relax.”

Speakers addressed spiritual, physical, emotional and financial health, as well as leadership, prayer and evangelism. Concurrent events were held for pastors’ wives, featuring writer and teacher Brenda Croston; author, personal coach and speaker Kim Hardy; retired school teacher Pam Mitchell, and Kathy Litton, NAMB’s director of planter spouse development.

Wives appreciated the event as both instructional and motivational, said Hardy, a key leader in [NAAF’s new network](#) for wives of senior pastors.

The retreat “provided a contextualized experience and environment for African-American pastors and wives to have a time of renewal. We were encouraged by God-centered, inspirational, soul-stirring messages and music,” Hardy said. “The consensus among the wives was, ‘I pray this event continues through the years and never stops.’”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Diana Chandler is Baptist Press’ senior writer.

Never too late: A new purpose on mission field for 70-year-old woman

BARDSTOWN, KY (KT) – When Sue Foster’s husband died two years ago, she lost more than her best friend. She lost her purpose.

Len Foster was sick for an extended time, and Sue became a fulltime caregiver. That became her purpose and, when he died, a part of her went with him.

“When he passed, I was just lost,” she said. “I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t feel like I had much purpose in life. I was having physical illness and depression.”

Sue was nearly 70 years old and spiraling into a season of depression. She turned to the only one who had the answers she was seeking. "After a couple of months, I kept praying to the Lord: What do you want me to do now?"

God had more purpose than depression and grief in store for her. He showed her a path that was not only a passion for her but one that had been for her late husband – mission work. It was the perfect remedy for that depression and as she received confirmation after confirmation, a new joy began taking hold of her life. It was intense.

"I sold my house and could not find another house in Louisville," she said. "I found a house in Bardstown and, after visiting lots of churches, I kept coming back to Wickland. (Baptist Church). The irony was, they were planning a mission trip to Kenya. I immediately felt in my heart, I need to go on this trip."

She and her husband had done mission work in Florida, but this would be her first international trip. "While I was there, I kept feeling that tugging at my heart."

The urge never left her after she returned home from Kenya. But could a 70-something be a missionary? "If not now, when?" she said.

Foster began looking at the International Mission Board website, mostly looking for long-term mission trips. But she also learned that the IMB has a program called the International Service Corps, which is designed for retirees.

"I got a call, and they said we think this would be a great pathway for you," Foster said. "I started working with an International Mission Board consultant and doing training courses. The more I did, the more convinced that was what the Lord wanted me to do. It was energizing.

"To really validate, in my opinion, that this is Lord's calling, I asked, 'If this is not what you want me to do, give me a stop sign, give me a roadblock.'"

It never came.

Foster was invited to a three-day interview conference, passed with flying colors and then began looking at a post to serve. Her choice was the Middle East but because of her life experience – she worked in finance and administration – logistics seemed to be a better fit.

"But I really want to be in the field," she said. "When I started looking for jobs, everyone I was interested in, the door closed on me. Logistics is where I ended up."

She will be working in eastern Africa helping IMB missionaries with travel plans, new medical attention and helping with reports along with doing some ministry with women.

Foster was overcome with a feeling she thought would ever exist again. "I didn't know if I'd ever feel true joy again. I really now feel true joy."

If she needed more confirmation from the Lord, it was coming. Foster sold her house in one day, but her most pressing concern was for someone to take her pets. "I have to find a home for two precious dogs who have been with me since they were puppies."

Foster was having trouble finding a home for them, until she and her sister went on a cruise to Bermuda. They were having dinner with two ladies who owned two standard poodles, the same breed as her dogs. They agreed to foster them.

"On a cruise, what are the chances?" she asked, suggesting more confirmation. "That was God. He is magnificent."

"God just spoke to her heart," said Wickland Pastor Rodney Lynch. "She has felt the call to missions. We are doing this "Calling Out the Called" talking about pastors, worship leaders and youth pastors but we don't think about what our senior adults can do."

Lynch said Foster has the support of Wickland, a mission and ministry-minded church. It supports church plants in Nicaragua and Salt Lake City, helps with a refugee ministry in Bowling Green, participates in the backside ministry at Churchill Downs and helps a pregnancy center. Lynch's youngest daughter, Mackenzie Lynch, is also a missionary.

Foster and her sister went on the cruise for a purpose. She was going to sprinkle her husband's ashes at sea. She said he would whole heartedly approve of what she is doing with her life and her new purpose.

"He enjoyed life until the day he couldn't remember anymore," she said. "I know he would be excited. He would absolutely love that I'm doing this."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mark Maynard writes for Kentucky Today, www.kentuckytoday.com, where this article first appeared. Kentucky Today is a news resource of the Kentucky Baptist Convention.

Thankful, grateful and blessed

PLYMOUTH – I am truly a creature of habit. Each morning after I rise, I make my way to my basement man cave where I shower, shave, rearrange what hair remains on my head, dress for

the day and then take my daily regimen of medications. All the while, Hershey, my faithful canine companion, watches my every move from his prone position in the main room that gives him visual access to the bathroom and my dressing room.

As if on cue, the moment I wash down the last pill and put the drinking cup back in the cupboard, he rises and waits for me to turn out the last light and we make our way up the stairs to the kitchen/ living area.

I let him outside for his morning business and while he is outside, I make my first cup of that caffeinated concoction that is created from the vestiges of the nectar of the gods. Many of my diehard coffee addicted friends goad me with the fact that I prefer my brew with a touch of non-caloric sweetener and my favorite flavored creamer of the season. One friend calls it “Foo–Foo” coffee. Nevertheless, I like it. He just doesn’t know what he is missing.

I request “Alexa” to play my morning mood music, of either instrumental hymns, Andrea Bocelli, or the relaxing tones from the horn of Chris Botti. Then as soon as Hershey comes in from outside, he lays across the foot of my chair and waits for me to sit down with my coffee and I-Pad for my morning quiet time. He immediately raises his head for his morning chin rub and then settles down for my remaining ritual and the rest of my time of reading, reflection and prayer.

As I have said, I am a creature of habit and that is reflected in the cups from which I drink my morning's enlivening elixir. These cups are not just my favorites because of their size and feel but also because of the message they convey and bring to my heart and mind each day. One has engraved upon it the word, “THANKFUL” and on the other “GRATEFUL”. I have since ordered another cup with the word; ‘BLESSED’ embossed on it as well.

These simple and unpretentious vessels are daily reminders for my heart, soul and mind. The words thankful and grateful are similar in meaning and are at times used interchangeably in application but in fact they are somewhat different. Thankfulness represents a present interaction concerning an event, experience, gesture of kindness, gift or even a conversation. Whereas, grateful is an ever improving and ongoing show of appreciation as the result of a deepening relationship. The new cup that will complete my trinity of morning messages, BLESSED, means the experiencing of divine kindness, mercy, or goodness.

This month is a time that we have as a nation set aside a day to be thankful, grateful and to acknowledge how blessed we truly are. I believe this is a wonderful holiday and should be celebrated and expressed as fully as possible. Yet, from my experience, this is an attitude and action that should be incorporated in our daily lives and not just on a single specially designated holiday.

One of my favorite contemporary worship songs that we sing at Rhiza Church, where Sabrina and I attend when I am not preaching at another church, is entitled “The Goodness of God.” The first verse and chorus are written here.

I love You, Lord
For Your mercy never fails me
All my days, I've been held in Your hands
From the moment that I wake up
Until I lay my head
Oh, I will sing of the goodness of God

And all my life You have been faithful
And all my life You have been so, so good
With every breath that I am able
Oh, I will sing of the goodness of God

It is the chorus that speaks to me with such intensity and expresses the truth of God and the experience of my life. He has always been faithful even when I have been faithless. His goodness has remained even in the midst of my wickedness.

It is because of these and so many other reasons that I am THANKFUL for His many provisions and never-failing supply. This is why I am GRATEFUL for His continual, ever-present, endlessly expanding love for me and the unfathomable relationship He wants with someone like me. To say that I am a BLESSED man is inexpressible. There are not enough words or languages in the world to verbalize that fact.

So on my worst days and my best, I drink from my favorite cups and warm my heart with the truths with which they remind me. I am THANKFUL and GRATEFUL to be such a BLESSED man.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tim Patterson is Executive Director/Treasurer of the Baptist State Convention of Michigan. Elected unanimously in May of 2015, Patterson formerly served for 9 years as pastor of Hillcrest Baptist Church in Jacksonville, Fla. He also served as trustee chair and national mobilizer for the North American Mission Board.

Cigarettes to gratitude

PLYMOUTH – Many of us have similar Thanksgiving traditions that can be worshipful. After scanning the four family-centered rituals, would you continue to read and discover three rhythms of life that can build a scaffolding of gratitude in your life?

A scaffold, because wise believers are always under construction removing the pollution of cynicism to reveal the divine gifts, from the Father, of gratitude and joy which are implanted into our believing lives at that second of salvation.

1. Before serving the meal, ask each person at the table to share one thing for which they are thankful for this year.
2. Invite each person to express gratitude for another person at the table until each person has been appreciated aloud in front of others.
3. Give opportunity for each person at the table to say 2-3 sentences of thanksgiving in a continual circle of prayer before eating the meal.
4. Have a large stick-it poster on the wall near the dining table where before sitting down for the meal, everyone is invited to write down 1-2 words that will prompt them to testify about their subject of thanksgiving before they eat from their plate.

The following three statements and three scriptures will bring renewal to your soul teaching you once again how gratitude and joy are expressions of worship to our Lord.

A Grateful Attitude Leads to Happiness

Ephesians 5:20 says, "Give thanks for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."

During the late 1960s when life was simple and we were naïve about a lot of dangerous things, my dad would go to work about three o'clock in the afternoon at the car factory, and my mother would slip a few dollars into my hands with the following instructions, "Tony, for supper, would you walk over to the little store and pick up a gallon of milk, some brown and serve rolls, some eggs, and a carton of cigarettes?" My ten-year-old reply to my precious mother was, "Sure Mom, I will."

I marched to the store with money in my hand and in less than ten minutes returned home with the goods to hear my mother's kind words of appreciation, "Thank you, Tony, for doing that for me." Add my mother's "thank you," to the store owner thanking me for shopping at her store, and me saying thank you to the store owner for bagging my groceries and you discover there was a lot of appreciation in just ten minutes. Today, all of us are wiser and not as naïve. We stopped buying those "cancer sticks" a long time ago. Mom is still with us.

In our daily lives, there should be a chasm of difference between saying a courteous "thank you" to a restaurant server and expressions of gratitude to our Heavenly Father, the indwelling Holy Spirit, and the sacrificial Jesus Christ. On the scaffold of your life can you see the distinction?

My wife and I share life every day. We speak graciously to one another using words like, please, thank you, you're welcome, and more words of courtesy and appreciation than I have space to list. But the favorite moments of our days, is when we listen to one another speak prayers of thanksgiving to the Heavenly Father expressing our gratitude for his care, his company, and his continual guidance. As a result, even when times are disappointing, when others let us down, when outcomes are not as pleasant as we desire, we can honestly say that we are happy.

We live by the words in Ephesians 5 when it says, "Give thanks for everything to God the Father." From our personal Bible studies and diet of sound preaching and teaching at our local church, and our frequent sessions of prayer throughout the day we continue to learn what is good for us and what is bad for us. We are careful to give thanks to a generous and righteous Lord who knows what is best for us when we don't know ourselves. Our attitude of gratitude leads us into a joy that accompanies us daily.

Successes in Our Lives Are Shared with Others

1 Thessalonians 5:18 says, "Be thankful in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you who belong to Christ Jesus."

My childhood in Flint, Michigan was filled with failures and successes. I knew the difference between failures and successes because I saw others succeed where I failed, and I saw others fail where I succeeded. During fifth grade our school's teachers became obsessed with spelling bee contests between the different classes. I discovered I was good at memorization and spelling.

One day as competing classes stood across the room from one another, students were dropping out one after another on this particular day of the spelling bee championship because the teachers selected some tricky words. The word that defeated most of us was the word, "depot." Everyone tried with d-e-p-o-e, or d-e-p-o-w, or d-e-p-o. As my turn came, I recalled that one of the drives to our favorite fishing spot in the next county was through Durand, Michigan where there was an old train depot that was never used. I saw the sign each time we went fishing which was often, so I planned on spelling the word, d-e-p-o-t when it came my turn.

However, at the last second, I was afraid to spell it with a "t," because it didn't make sense to me. So, I let my fear of embarrassment lead me to misspelling the word just like someone else had done two turns before me. I can still recall the look of disappointment on my teacher's face when I misspelled the word. Moments later, she whispered to me, "Tony, I thought you would know the word and win the year's championship for us." My fear of embarrassment overcame my rational observation of a word on a train station sign in Durand.

To the world we will look strange giving thanks to the Lord in difficult times; but it is what the Bible teaches us to do. 1 Thessalonians 5 says, "Be thankful in all circumstances." In a world

where others will cast the spotlight of success on themselves it is tempting to ignore the influence of those who helped us get to where we are: the Lord and those he places into our lives.

As Americans surrounded by capitalism, we need to be careful that we do not look for profiting from transactions with the Lord. You know what I am saying. Our prayers sometimes contain outlines like this, “Lord, if I do 1, 2, and 3, I know you will bless me with blank.” Instead, we should be praying, “Lord, if nothing changes, and you don’t move the mountain before me, and if you don’t split the water of trial drowning me, I will still trust in you.”

Our thanksgiving will grow immeasurably when we trust the Lord in every circumstance rather than seek a transaction. I recently told someone waiting on the improved health of his precious daughter, “We are grateful for doctors who help our children, but the people who become our lifelong friends are the ones who calmly sit in the hospital waiting room sharing our fears, crying with us, waiting for the outcome, then pressing forward into the outcome. That is what we do when we express our gratitude in all circumstances to the Father and those around us.

Gratitude Makes Us Feel Rich, Complaining Makes Us Feel Poor

Colossians 3:15 says, “Let the peace that comes from Christ rule in your hearts. For as members of one body, you are called to live in peace. And always be thankful.”

I discovered that I have a life-long allergy to complainers, moaners, faultfinders, and problem-makers. They do not cause me to sneeze or give me a rash, but I find an uncontrollable urge to get away from them, to stop visiting with them, to avoid them.

I grew up lavished with encouragement and support. Yes, my mother would say, like yours, “If you don’t have anything good to say, be quiet.” I enjoy feeling rich in the Lord’s love and care. I savor meaningful relationships with people who are gracious and thankful. I feel like I am covered in a warm blanket of love when I voice the blessings in my life.

When I express gratitude, I am not bragging on me. I am boasting in the Lord’s merciful love for a sinner like me. I love telling stories about my life and the lives of others where the Lord is the obvious hero. Sometimes you have to watch that you don’t drift out of the freshwater of gratitude into the swirling current of complaining.

During the 1980s, while studying for my master’s degree in Kentucky, I commuted to work with another seminary student to save money for baby formula and diapers for two daughters. Let’s pretend the other student’s name was John because his name was really John. In a matter of weeks while pursuing my degree to help me become a pastor, I discovered that John’s constant mood was critical of others, and he could complain about everything.

Before I knew it, our commute transformed me from a student excited about learning to a student grumbling about every professor and every expectation. One day during a quiet time of

Bible study and prayer, I was led to try and redeem our conversations in the car to words that were uplifting. Sadly, the mood never changed for the two weeks I tried, until I finally said to John at the end of the week, "I will not be commuting with you to seminary anymore, I cannot take the complaining and fault-finding you talk about all the time. It brings out in me something I don't want to become."

Yes, our friendship ended on that day, but it was worth it. From the scaffold of my life, I removed a man who would have helped me perfect a cynical outlook and instead chose to focus on the Father who took a nobody from Flint to learn about his love from many teachers.

I was taking Colossians 3 as fact when it said, "Let the peace that comes from Christ rule in your hearts. For as members of one body, you are called to live in peace. And always be thankful." I did not want to become poor like John, I wanted to be rich in gratitude and joy.

Those who are focused on craving the wrong things and not receiving them are miserable, while those of us who reach to be embraced by the loving arms of our Heavenly Father while feeling the breath of his spiritual voice on our necks are the happiest of all.

My prayer for you and your family this Thanksgiving is that you will find your next steps to increase your gratitude so that the Lord's joy will fill your minds, your hearts, and your hopes for a bright future.

1. Gratitude leads to happiness. Ephesians 5:20, "Give thanks for everything to God."
2. Successes in our lives are shared with others. 1 Thessalonians 5:18, "Be thankful in all circumstances."
3. Gratitude makes us feel rich, complaining makes us feel poor. Colossians 3:15, "You are called to live in peace. And always be thankful."

Happy Thanksgiving from Tony and Jamie Lynn.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Tony L. Lynn is the State Director of Missions for the Baptist State Convention of Michigan. Before coming on staff at the BSCM, Tony served as lead pastor for more than six years at Crosspoint Church in Monroe, Michigan. He and his wife, Jamie, also served with the International Mission Board in Africa and in Europe.

Pray for God's bold strength

*"For this reason, I bow my knees before the Father,
from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name,
that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory
to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man,
so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; and that you,
being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints
what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ
which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God."*

Ephesians 3:14–19 (NASB95)

PLYMOUTH – God put this passage of Scripture on my heart when I started my ministry with the churches of the Baptist State Convention of Michigan. As I read the Apostle Paul's prayer, verse 16 especially stuck out to me. Paul prays that the church "be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man..." The focus of my ministry has been to "Strengthen Churches." Spiritual strength is what you and I need individually as believers, and it's what we need collectively as the people of God. We need strong believers in strong churches glorifying God, and taking steps to advance Gospel movement.

The Apostle Paul is in prison for his faith in Christ as he prays these words. It's a remarkable scene. This man who has traveled to some of the greatest cities of his world to share the Gospel is now in prison because of that same Gospel. His world is reduced to the space between the walls that held him. Physically, he can only move a few feet in every direction. The most important distance he moves is to his knees. From there, he prays a prayer that touches the heart of God for the people of God.

I can see Paul in my mind as he kneels "before the Father" in verse 14. He is entering the presence of the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords. The word "before" means "facing." The picture is of an intentional turning toward God. Paul focuses intently on God as he willingly bends his knees in humble submission. His heart and mind are captured by the God who changed his life on the Damascus Road. His body is imprisoned, but Paul's reality is not defined by the difficult circumstances around him, but by the Christ above him. Paul prays and the impact of that prayer reverberates in the church even today.

Paul boldly asks God in verse 16 "that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man..."

Paul's burning desire in this text is not for his freedom. It would have been OK for him to pray for release, but that's not his first concern. He prays for God's people to be strengthened. Isn't that amazing? His prayer isn't about him. It's about us. He asks God to make us strong in Christ.

Notice where this strength comes from. It comes from the riches of God's glory. Do you see the flow? It's from God to us. It comes to us according to the riches of His glory. That's good news because there is no limit to the riches of God's glory. Paul asks God to strengthen us, not out of our riches, but according to His riches.

The universe, and all that it contains, cannot contain the riches of God's glory. Here is a deep, abiding, limitless source of strength, available to believers from the inexhaustible riches of God's glory. Paul prays for us to be strengthened with power through His spirit in the inner man according to the riches of God's glory.

Now, that's a prayer! It's a bold, audacious, incredible prayer for the People of God! You and I need that strength as we follow Christ. So, let's follow Paul's example and pray boldly for God to strengthen Michigan Baptist churches. Let's pray that God strengthens us according to the riches of His glory. And let's watch as God does great and amazing things in and through spiritually strong people and churches.

As I retire, I can think of no better benediction to leave with Michigan Baptists than the words of Paul:

*"Now to Him who is able
to do far more abundantly
beyond all that we ask or think,
according to the power that works within us,
to Him be the glory in the church
and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen."*

Ephesians 3:20–21 (NASB95)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mike Durbin is the State Evangelism Director for the Baptist State Convention of Michigan. Before joining the state convention staff, Mike served as Church Planting Catalyst and Director of Missions in Metro Detroit since 2007. He also has served as a pastor and bi-vocational pastor in Michigan, as well as International Missionary to Brazil.

Hear God's voice

WINDSOR, ONTARIO – The voice of God came to Jesus at all the great moments of his life. It came at his baptism, when he began the work that God gave him to do (Mark 1:11). It came on the Mount of Transfiguration, as he again affirmed taking the way that led to Jerusalem and the

cross (Mark 9:7); and it came when he faced the ordeal of the cross (John 12:27-34). I believe that what God did for Jesus, he wants to do for us. God wants you to hear his voice. "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me" (John 10:27 NIV).

No Quick Fix

Choosing God's Best by Don Raunika warns us not to go for the quick fix. "There's not a method to follow. Your relationship with God is the key to hearing when God speaks to you. The object of prayer is intimacy with God, not quick answers. Over time you will know his voice." The sheep know the shepherd's voice because they spend time with him. They cultivate intimacy with the Master. That takes time.

Accept the Answers

Moreover, don't ask unless you're willing to accept God's answers. Don't ask for guidance unless you are prepared to act on it and have a desire to know, and do all the will of God. He is always willing to make his purpose known, but he will not show you his will if you are merely contemplating obedience, weighing the pros and cons. Jesus himself came down from heaven not to do his own will "but to do the will of him who sent me" (John 6:38 NIV). He did not simply consider God's will, he actively, purposefully, and joyfully obeyed. So must we.

Listen Hard

Don't expect God to shout either. Quiet is essential to effective listening. You can't jam your mind with social media and television twelve hours a day, and expect God to reveal his plans to you during a commercial. "Be still, and know that I am God" (Ps. 46:10). I find that hard to do because I am a Type-A, always-moving, kind of guy. But it's fundamental to hearing God's voice. "Since then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God" (Colossians 3:1-3 NIV). Set your heart and mind on Jesus and listen.

Watch Out for a Plug

If we are passively or openly rebelling against God in some area of our life, we put a plug in the pipeline God uses to deliver his word to us. Unconfessed sin is a major plug. "Your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear" (Isaiah 59:2 NIV).

Become God's Fool

We also need to be willing to be God's fool. God gave us common sense and he expects us to use it. Most of the time, his will makes sense to our reason and intelligence, but not always. Sometimes his direction cuts across all human reason, all human sensibilities, and even

contradicts it. When the Holy Spirit uses the Word of God to speak to you clearly, and give you marching orders, obedience may be counted as madness in the eyes of the world. “For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1 Corinthians 1:18 NIV).

Friends, we need to hear God’s voice in the Scriptures in these last days, follow his leading, and obey him wholeheartedly. The charge is critical for all, but especially leaders in the church. “Keep watch over yourselves...” (Acts 20:28-31 NIV). Listen carefully to God’s Word and obey him for His glory and your good!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Garth Leno is the Pastor/Planter Care Specialist with the BSCM. He serves in a similar role with the Canadian National Baptist Convention, and he is the founding pastor of The Gathering Church in Windsor, Ontario, a church he planted with his wife, Patty, and a few of their friends.

God is always working

SHELBY TOWNSHIP – Years ago, I injured my back when I was reaching to throw something away, my chair rolled out from under me and I fell straight down, compressing my lower lumbar. Through the years, my back has had its ups and downs, but recently it’s been a constant area of struggle.

I just completed my second round of physical therapy in the span of a year and a half. When I began, I didn’t begin with a positive mindset or even a great attitude. When you struggle with chronic pain, sometimes it’s hard to keep your focus higher than your situation. This round of therapy did not start off the same as the therapy I underwent previously. It was frustrating, hard, and I was ready to quit. I was so focused on myself, that I couldn’t see what God was actually trying to do.

Several weeks went by and I kept pouring my heart out to God, not understanding why my healing wasn’t coming. Then just as our loving God does, He began to speak to me about my healing. He showed me that if He hasn’t removed this pain from my life, there must be a reason why He is allowing it to remain.

My prayers began to shift. I continued to pray for healing, but I also began to ask God to reveal to me how he wanted to use this pain in my life. All of a sudden, the Holy Spirit began illuminating the conversations I had been having with my physical therapist. God reminded me that if I didn’t have back pain, then I wouldn’t know the people at physical therapy. So, about

halfway through my time at physical therapy, my perspective shifted. I began to pray for opportunities to minister to my therapist.

In John 5:17 Jesus says,

“My father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working.”

God is always at work around us, and He wants to use everything we go through in life to minister to others. It can be hard for us to look past ourselves. That is why we need the Holy Spirit to help us see where God is at work.

My back is the worst in the morning when I first get up. Sometimes it will stay that way all day long, and other times it will loosen up as the day progresses. My therapist told me every morning when I first get up, before I shower or do anything else, I should lay over the exercise ball face down to stretch out my back. Of course, at this point I am willing to do just about anything!

To my surprise it did help to decompress my back! Around day 4 or day 5 of doing this exercise first thing in the morning, the Holy Spirit impressed on my heart that I was beginning my day in a surrendered posture. Just as much as I needed to rely on this posture for my physical healing, I also needed to begin my days in a surrendered posture before the Lord.

Whoa! I couldn't believe this revelation! I felt the Holy Spirit impress on my heart the vital importance of surrendering my day to God in prayer, and inviting Him to own my day – *even before I go to the Bible.*

With this revelation, my back pain didn't seem to consume me anymore. I realized that God was actually speaking to me through my pain. He also showed me He has a purpose for it, and that made all the difference in the world. I then felt the Holy Spirit tell me to share that revelation with my therapist.

So, on my final day of physical therapy I was able to share with my therapist how he had a much higher purpose than just my physical healing, but that God used him to show me something much deeper. Then I proceeded to invite him to church.

Now I begin my days over the exercise ball, not just for my physical health but also for my spiritual health. I begin every morning with a prayer of surrender. I encourage you to implement a prayer like this into your morning routine. Attach it to something you are already doing and then watch God work!

God,

Today I surrender my day to you. Open my eyes to see where you are already working. Give me a heart to minister to the people you have put right in my path. I also pray for courage to act when you invite me into your plans. Help me to hold my plans loosely so

that I can be available to fulfill the plans you have for me. I ask that you fill me with your Spirit today so that I can discern your will.

Amen

God wants to use you! We just have to look past ourselves and our circumstances to see where He is already at work in our regular daily activities and join Him.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Karen is married to Scott Blanchard, pastor of Lakepointe Church, and moved from Florida to Michigan in the summer of 2009 to plant Lakepointe Church in Shelby Township. She enjoys mentoring and discipling women and also leads women's life groups through her church. She is passionate about helping women find their purpose in who God created them to be. She is on staff at Lakepointe Church and loves being part of what God is doing in the Metro Detroit area!

Feed My sheep

He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" and he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep."

John 21:17

HUDSONVILLE – I have 2 boys. My oldest is two and is learning how to communicate his needs. He will run and play so hard that he loses his breath, panting, "I need water." That is a real need. At night before going to bed, he will also tell us, "I need a special treat", as he reaches for the candy bowl. The truth is many people don't know what they need. It is our job as pastors to lead and feed our people.

Our deepest needs are met in Jesus Christ. We are sinners in desperate need of a Savior. We need God's intervention to transform us from the inside out. We need to be daily living in prayer and Scripture. He is the source of all our wisdom and direction.

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

2 Timothy 3:16-17

People are longing to be led by spiritual leaders. People are lost and searching for direction. As pastors, we are called to spiritually lead and feed the people we are called to steward. We are called to be spiritual leaders in our community. We need to be rooted and grounded in the Word. And then, we need to help our people grow in the Word so that they are able to identify their needs and develop a biblical worldview.

Where are you leading your people? Do you have clear expectations for the people that you are leading? Would your people know where you are leading them and what expectations you have of them if you asked them today? So many of us do not spend the time to actually lead our people, cast vision for them, and provide them with clear expectations. Spend some time praying about it today. Where are you leading your people, and what are you feeding your people?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Andrew Honeycutt lives in West Michigan. He is a husband to Krista and father to two little boys. He serves as the Byron Center Campus Pastor of Chapel Pointe in Hudsonville.

Is thankfulness enough?

KALAMAZOO – As fall approaches, we look in anticipation of the beautiful array of colors, crisp air, and of course, football. There's also the annual celebration where many of us gather with family and friends to consider and recount the things for which we are grateful. If it continues as currently trending, many of us in Michigan will be thankful for a long-awaited winning season for the Lions.

Like many of you, I was raised to be thankful, to express my gratitude, never taking our many blessings for granted. For me, it was a natural expression of my place in the world. I was not owed anything. Yet, I was blessed with loving parents, great friends, health, and security of a warm home.

As I grew, the "attitude of gratitude" was a defining filter through which I viewed the world. I viewed my thankfulness and gratitude as a means of affirming and valuing others, which in turn fostered humility in my life. I was happy with my resultant world view.

At the age of 16, at a Youth for Christ camp, I was confronted with the person of Jesus for the first time in my life. The presentation of Christ and the evidence put forth was compelling. I determined at that time, "If Jesus really is who He says He is, then I must therefore be who He says I am." I was a sinner in need of His grace. I received Him that night.

Again, I was grateful for all the people who prayed for me, those who presented Christ, and my buddy who tricked me into going to a Campus Life event in the first place. That's too long of a story for this time.

Many years have passed since I first gave my life to Christ. He has taken me on a journey that I never anticipated, and it's been great. I have a wonderful and beautiful wife with the sweetest heart I could ever hope for. I have two awesome children that we adopted from Uganda. They are smart, funny and picking up way too much of my sarcastic humor. So much to be thankful for.

Yet, in recent years I began to notice something I had never before realized. I was lacking worship in my prayer time. For years I had considered gratitude and worship to be synonymous. I thought, by expressing gratitude, that I was also expressing my love for God. My prayer would normally start and end with thanksgiving. That is, of course, a good thing. Yet I was missing something very important.

You see, I realized you can be thankful for and express gratitude to someone you don't even know. You do not need to love someone to be thankful for them. I thank the server who brought our meal, the uber driver, and the tech support person on the phone. Clearly God is worthy of much more.

Too often, thanksgiving is transactional in nature. This or that was done, I liked it, therefore I am grateful. The server gave me great service. Thank you. Lord. You brought me a new job. Thank you. I have a warm home to sleep in. Thank you, Lord.

I started to notice that my gratitude was too often based upon my approval of the situation or outcome. Again, it was transactional. A hard example was being laid off earlier this year. I wasn't thankful. I was scared, confused and angry. But isn't God still good? Yes. Does He still love me more than I could ever imagine? Yep. Does He still desire for me to sit in His presence? For sure.

The big difference between thankfulness and worship is that worship is relational. It is God-focused. When our thankfulness is transactional, it is self-focused. God wants our heart to be in relationship with Him first. He wants our hearts to rejoice in who He is, not solely for what He's done. It is in relationship with God that our proper worldview is formed, and worship is birthed. Our focus and worship of Jesus should inform our understanding and perception of our circumstances. Only then can we move from a transactional form of thankfulness and gratitude.

It seems crazy, but it took all these years for me to recognize that God desires and is worthy of so much more than just my thankfulness. He wants a heart that delights in who He is, depending on Him alone. I've finally learned that true thankfulness produces worship, and true worship will produce thankfulness.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dale Frye is a Church Planter in Kalamazoo, MI. He is a husband and Father to 2 adopted children from Uganda. Saved at the tail end of the Jesus Movement in Southern California through YFC and Calvary Chapel Costa Mesa. He has worked in industry leading teams of product designers and developers for nearly 40 years. Now, he is pursuing a new calling into Church Planting.

Grace and gratitude

HOLLAND – Gratitude is a universal virtue. In every age and every culture, people enjoy being on the receiving end of gratitude. Even those who would doubt or deny the existence of God would see the expression of thanks as beneficial to all. In his book *The Religious Affections*, Jonathan Edwards distinguishes between what he referred to as “natural” gratitude and “gracious” gratitude.[1] Natural gratitude shows appreciation for good gifts, such as pleasant weather, good health, and prosperity.

Gracious gratitude starts from a different place. It’s rooted in who God is—his character, goodness, love, power. It is an indispensable attitude of the believer that says, “God owes me nothing, and I owe him everything.” Luke 17:11-19 is an account of how this attitude was cultivated in one man’s life. On his way to Jerusalem, Jesus entered a village and was met by ten lepers. Every natural reason to be thankful would have been absent in the life of a leper. The grotesque skin lesions rendered them unclean, estranged from their families, and banned from the temple.

Luke reinforces the sense of separation by saying in verse 12 that the ten lepers stood at a distance. It’s a picture of separation and desperation. But are not the lepers a picture of what we are apart from Christ? As the Apostle Paul puts it in Ephesians 2:12, “Remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.” Outside of Christ, we have something far worse than leprosy. We are covered with guilt that puts us in danger of being excluded not just from earthly friends and family but from heaven itself.

Gracious gratitude is cognizant of our desperate state before God. Normally, a leper would have shouted “Unclean, unclean!” to warn people from a distance. But the lepers in Luke 17 do more than declare their hopeless situation, they cry for mercy: “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us” (v13).

Jesus always has time for people. It's no wonder then, that in an act of compassion, he cleansed these men. He told them to present themselves to the priests according to Leviticus 14:1-32. But one of the ten notices that he is not only cleansed but healed: "Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice; and he fell on his face at Jesus' feet, giving him thanks. Now he was a Samaritan" (vv15-16)

Something different happened with him than with the other nine. It's unclear why he started going to the priest with the other nine men. The priest would have never declared him clean—he was a Samaritan! He was despised, regardless of whether or not he had leprosy. Yet the healing power falls upon him, nonetheless. God's grace is such that no matter who you are or what you've done, you can be cleansed and healed. This Samaritan didn't belong in the temple, but he belonged to Jesus now.

I don't think we should ever get over the fact that Jesus—the happiest of beings, rich and powerful beyond imagination, who sits at the right hand of God—came to earth to take our miseries. Furthermore, Jesus' response indicates that to be ungrateful is an affront to God. "Then Jesus answered, 'Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?'" (V17).

Undoubtedly, you're preparing to gather with friends and relatives over Thanksgiving to eat more than you should. That's certainly something to be grateful for. But if that's where it begins and ends, you're no better off than the nine who didn't return. Remember this: God owes you nothing, but he was gracious enough to send his Son on your behalf to absorb the debt of sin.

Charles Spurgeon once shared the gospel with a woman who was so talkative that he could hardly get a word in. Eventually, she listened to him long enough to hear the Good News. Once she understood God's mercy for her in Christ, she said, "Oh, Mr. Spurgeon, if Christ saves me he will never hear the end of it!"[2] Isn't that precisely the case? His grace demands eternal gratitude and we will be returning thanks to him forever.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ben Hernandez, PhD, is the lead pastor of Calvary Baptist Church in Holland, MI. He holds degrees from Dallas Baptist University, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, and Southeastern Seminary. He and his wife Sarah have one son, Theodore.

[1] "A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections, in Three Parts," in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Sereno Dwight, revised and corrected by Edward Hickman (1834; reprinted Banner of Truth, 1979), 1:276.

[2] This story from the life of Charles Spurgeon is recounted in R. Kent Hughes, *Luke: That You May Know the Truth*, 2 vols., Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1998), 2:173–74. Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke*, ed. Richard D. Phillips, Philip Graham Ryken, and Daniel M. Doriani, vol. 1 & 2, *Reformed Expository Commentary* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009).

Thankful for a pandemic?!

YPSILANTI – Who would have thought we would thank God for a pandemic?

I don't have to tell you what it was like. You lived it. The fall-out from many churches felt like limbs being torn away from the Body of Christ.

Gratefully, our little congregation didn't lose a single life to a virus. But we watched the slow-motion, lockdown, train wreck, take person-after-person away to other churches where they had a) a building, b) kids programs, c) youth programs, or d) a like-minded political view.

Since we had met in a rented school building where no outside organizations, including churches, were allowed to meet, we decided to offer an alternative way to "gather."

We knew that there was no substitute for physically gathered worship, but there we were. So for eighteen months we "Zoomed" our worship services. Before 2020 most of us thought that zoom was something you did when you were late for church!

Since we couldn't gather for a mid-week prayer meeting, we started one online. And the few who took it seriously poured their hearts out to the Sovereign God who works all things together for the good of those who love him and who are called according to his purpose.

Prior to that 18-month "prison-like lockdown" we never thought it would feel like a sunny new day when fifteen whole people bravely met inside a cavernous school auditorium that swallowed us up and made us feel even smaller. But we sang praises through joyful tears. We were together again, like post-exile Israel!

Since we had been stashing away money usually spent on rent, we decided to invest in some equipment to help us stream our services to those who were still unable to make their way back to a physical space for worship. We dubbed the tech crew our "Stream Team," and they learned a new craft via tutorial videos bravely trying something they had never done before.

And of course, we heard from some who said, "It's a shame so many people choose to stay home and drink coffee in their jammies when they should be in church." And I get it. I really do. I have preached for years, and there's no substitute for being with other members of the faith family to sing, pray, give, hear the Word proclaimed and explained, to be challenged to live as a true disciple, and to practice the biblical "one anothers."

But we asked, "God, where are you at work?" And since several members' health and/or mobility simply wouldn't allow them to make their way back, we streamed.

And that's when God did something wonderfully unexpected. He allowed others to find our streamed worship services. Many who joined us were also homebound. Some lived in other countries. We developed a relationship with a pastor in Kenya. He still emails to remind us that

he's praying for us. A pastor in India tells us he's using our media Bible teachings to prepare for his own messages since they have no formal training where he lives.

Now when we "gather" for worship, complete with streaming, we estimate that one third of the participants are actually inside a building. Two thirds are joining us from some other location, in several United States and at least two additional countries. Recently, after asking God to forgive me for my lack of faith, I said, "Thank you, Lord, for a pandemic. You are still a Romans 8:28 kind of God!"

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Clark Cothorn is grateful to serve as Pastor at Living Water Community Church, Ypsilanti, MI. Living Water is a congregation continuing to learn how to R.E.A.C.H. (Recognize Everyone And Communicate Hope). Clark and his wife Joy live in Milan, MI. They have three grown children and two grandchildren.

Rangers standout rookie Carter proclaims 'Jesus Won'

ELIZABETHTON, TN (BP) – Jason Holly, the youth minister at First Baptist Church in Elizabethton, remembers when Texas Rangers rookie outfielder Evan Carter was a boy playing in the local Grasscutter football league for 6-8-year-olds. Holly had a tiny Superman logo printed specifically for Carter.

"I stuck it on the back of his helmet, and only his," Holly said. "And I said, 'You're Superman.' He was just that good."

Rangers fans are starting to agree with that assessment. Carter, who started the 2023 season in the minor leagues with Texas' Double-A squad, is finishing it in the World Series. The 21-year-old became the youngest player since Mickey Mantle to bat third in a World Series lineup in Friday's opening game.

He made an immediate impact for Texas, doubling off the wall in the first inning to drive in the game's first run. Texas went on to win 6-5 on an 11th inning homer by Adolis Garcia. Carter has reached base safely in all 14 games he's played in this year's postseason.

"It's a dream come true," Carter told Derek Jeter in a postgame interview about playing in the World Series. "You always want to be ready to go in the minor leagues. To think that I'd have been in the World Series this time, this is unreal."

Holly coached Carter in youth football and baseball until Carter's middle school years. He remembers joking with Carter's dad that the kid would be going a long way in baseball.

"He was just that talented, at a very young age," Holly recalled. "When he was in little league, I remember throwing the ball to him as hard as I could, and he was about 9, and he just would hit it right back at you. He was a phenomenal athlete."

Carter's family is part of Central Community Christian Church, a nondenominational congregation outside of Elizabethton. But he regularly attended programs and events at First Baptist Church during his childhood and teenage years.

"Evan and his family are very grounded people," Holly said. "They're very humble. They're very gracious. Evan has always been this even-keeled kid. With his faith, he's always stayed steady."

That's why Holly wasn't surprised when, after Carter was called up to the Rangers in September, he took his first batting practice wearing a blue T-shirt with the message "Jesus Won" prominently displayed across his chest.

"I always felt like Evan was grounded on the Lord, and he had his eyes, his ears and his heart the right way," Holly said.

In an interview in the dugout prior to his Major League debut, Carter wore that "Jesus Won" shirt while speaking to the media about being a part of the Rangers team.

"It's unbelievable," Carter said to start the interview. "I'm grateful, and I thank God for the opportunity."

[That shirt](#) has become practically ubiquitous in Elizabethton, as Carter's performance and profile have continued to skyrocket since his arrival with the Rangers. Fellowship of Christian Athletes sells a Carter edition of the shirt, with "EC" and Carter's number 32 on the sleeve. Carter and his wife Kaylen shared on social media that they want to use their platform in baseball to give back to their community in Carter County, Tenn.

Proceeds from sales of the shirt benefit Central Cares, a program from their home church that helps provide for children in impoverished situations, and to help provide an environment for young baseball players in their community to succeed.

Holly said that Carter and Kaylen have been together since sixth grade.

"You can just tell how they treat each other that the Lord is front and center for both of them," he said.

Holly, who also teaches at Elizabethton High School, said the “Jesus Won” shirt has given him the opportunity to engage a lot of students who wear it with the message. That’s just one way he says that Carter has made an impact on his community and how he is a role model to others.

“Evan’s a very humble, quiet person,” Holly said. “The thing he tells a lot of people is, ‘You can be great without being loud, and you can be great without causing problems, and you can be great without being flamboyant.’”

In that sense, Holly said Carter is similar to Elizabethton’s other star athlete, former Dallas Cowboys tight end Jason Witten.

“Both of those guys kind of have the same character,” Holly said. “They’re quiet, family people. They just show kids that you can be the right person and be awesome.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Maui fire survivor recounts experience, TBM response

LAHAINA, HI (BP) – When Mari Finn awoke on Aug. 8 to heavy winds and no power, she assumed it was like any other storm that would pass. But as the storm progressed, a wildfire blazed through Lahaina. It ultimately destroyed more than 2,000 acres and killed 97 people.

Months later, Finn finally was allowed to return to her property, but she was not alone. A team of Texas Baptist Men disaster relief volunteers were right beside her in October as she sifted through the ash, hoping to find anything that may have survived.

Standing on her property and looking at the devastation, she recounted Aug. 8, when the fire erupted. Finn, a technology coordinator at a high school in Lahaina on the island of Maui, expected to go to school for the first day of freshman orientation. She never made it.

Maui was expecting a hurricane, but not in Lahaina. By 6:30 a.m., there were rumors of a wildfire by the elementary school, but soon cell phone service was disrupted, cutting all communication and access to social media.

The wind continued to intensify.

“You couldn’t walk around straight because of the way the wind was pushing you,” Finn said. “You had to kind of lean so you wouldn’t be knocked over.”

Gusts of wind pelted the sand against her legs so hard she had bruises the next day. The wind continued to blow, and the fires continued to grow.

Policemen used their car radios to inform residents to evacuate, but many residents felt they were safe from the fire. Because of the winds, it was hard to smell the fire, Finn said.

It gave a false sense of security. Residents had no way of knowing how close the fires were until they could see them. By then, there was little time to escape.

Finn and her family were able to evacuate, but many others didn’t make it. Some died trying to save their families. When Finn was allowed to return to her home two months later, it was destroyed. Dust, ash and rubble were all that remained of the home she lived in with her parents and niece.

“It was surreal,” Finn said. “It still doesn’t feel right.”

Finn returned to her property to recover any possessions that may have survived and connected instantly with the TBM volunteers there to help her.

“This experience is horrible,” Finn said. “But these people [the TBM volunteers] are amazing humans. They have been a blessing in this entire experience, and I am so thankful and grateful to have them here helping. As we got through the day together, they became like family. I mean, they are just like extended members of our family now.”

‘There’s a lot of tears flowing’

TBM volunteers have been in Maui since Oct. 7, helping residents, like Finn, sort through the ash and rubble and look for possessions on their property.

“There’s a lot of emotion that happens whenever they see their house for the first time,” said Curt Neal, TBM fire and flood coordinator. “When they left their house, it was fully intact. ... And of course, they’ve seen their house from afar, that there appears to be nothing but ashes. But when they get up close, that’s when reality hits. So, there’s a lot of tears flowing.”

Due to the condition of the properties and the potential of unsafe particles, volunteers must be fully suited in personal protective equipment from head to toe – white Tyvek suits, booties, a hood, goggles and a mask.

The protective gear is meant to keep the unsafe particles away from the body, but it also blocks ventilation. It gets hot, almost suffocating, in the suits in the mid-80s temperature and no shade.

The work is so physically demanding, the teams are required to rest 20 minutes for every 20 minutes of work.

“Fire recovery efforts can be very demanding physically, emotionally and spiritually because we’re working with families that literally had to run from their homes to escape a fire,” said Gary Herndon, a TBM volunteer in Maui.

“When they come back, oftentimes, there may be nothing left but a pillar or part of a cinder block wall. Trees, the vegetation, everything burned up. And so, it’s a work of love.”

The volunteers were able to help Finn recover several items – ceramic bowls and plates, coins, some jewelry and her brother’s army medals, which she said was a blessing to discover.

“I don’t believe we found a lot of things that are of great monetary value,” said TBM volunteer Ann Neal. “But what you find when you’re doing these ash outs is most people are not looking for those material things. They’re looking for things that mean something to them and their family that they can pass down through the generations.”

Being at her property and seeing the destruction was overwhelming for Finn. But she found comfort looking to her left and seeing the same mountain that was always there and looking to her right and seeing the ocean and hearing the comforting sounds of the waves crash against the beach just as it always does.

“The fire destroyed the material things in our lives, but left us with what is important – us,” Finn said. “Nobody in my family got injured or passed away, and we thank God for that every day.”

This story appeared in the [Baptist Standard](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Aimee Freston writes for Texas Baptist Men.

Renewed commitment to prayer leads Texas church’s transformation

TROUP, TX (BP) – Preston Lindsey has worn a lot of hats in his lifetime. He’s been a logger, pipe-fitter, oil field roughneck, telephone lineman, and a shipping manager and transportation director for a grocery chain. He spent 15 years as an agriculture teacher with the Troup

Independent School District before becoming its director of support services, a position he holds today.

One thing the 65-year-old never expected to be was a pastor. Yet, since January 2023, he has worn that hat as well, pastoring at First Baptist Church of Troup where, through an emphasis on prayer, the church is experiencing new life.

A native East Texan, Lindsey was raised in Mixon – a tiny community with fewer than 100 residents located seven miles southwest of Troup. He trusted Christ at age 10. He married Kelli, his high school sweetheart, attended Kilgore College, and later earned a degree from the University of Texas at Tyler. Lindsey still resides near Mixon on 50 acres with Kelli and two adult children, both with special needs. Another daughter and her family also live nearby.

No stranger to church work, Lindsey served 40 years as a deacon at FBC Mixon, where he led dozens of mission trips. Following a mission trip to Mexico two decades ago, he realized he was serving himself more than serving God.

“I realized then I wanted to serve Christ with all my heart,” he recalled. As he reached his 60s, he “really began to feel the call.” God was doing something. “He was leading me to be a pastor somewhere,” Lindsey said. “It pretty much scared me to death.”

Meanwhile, FBC Troup lost its pastor in June 2022. Lindsey understood some of the circumstances. He knew many people at the church and was saddened by its struggles. One Monday morning, Lindsey drove by FBC Troup as usual on his way to work at the school district. He pulled into the church parking lot to pray for the church, its members and the community.

Within 30 minutes, he received a call from one of the FBC Troup deacons asking him to fill the pulpit the following Sunday. He agreed, thinking the Lord might use him to help the deacons reorganize. He preached that Sunday and met with the deacons about the church’s issues.

The next Monday morning, he once again found himself praying in the FBC Troup parking lot.

“Lord, what are you asking me to do?” Lindsey recalled praying. Within 15 minutes, another FBC Troup deacon called to ask him to preach again the following Sunday. Lindsey agreed. The deacons then asked him to serve as interim pastor until things could be “straightened out.”

Lindsey was astonished. Yes, he was a lifelong Bible student, but he had no formal seminary training. He had just gotten through studying Moses with the youth group at FBC Mixon. Was it time to step out in faith?

“I wanted to serve the Lord,” he said.

So he said yes.

What followed is a “crazy story of what God’s doing,” Lindsey said.

A matter of prayer

If his ministry at FBC Troup was to honor God, Lindsey knew it had to begin in prayer – a truth he had learned at the 2021 Southern Baptists of Texas Convention Annual Meeting in nearby Flint. At that gathering, he said he heard “preacher after preacher” talking about how prayer had changed their lives and their churches.

“I brought that focus to Troup,” he said. If his involvement at the church began with prayer in the parking lot, his time as pastor would also start with prayer.

Whereas FBC Troup had once averaged around 120 in services, only 35-40 attended during the new pastor’s first month. The four deacons and Lindsey committed to pray, a commitment the church body, though small, also embraced.

They focused on 2 Chronicles 7:14-16, Lindsey said, spending weeks on that passage. “We prayed in church services. We prayed as a deacon group. We really wanted to understand what humbling ourselves meant,” he said. The church held a 12-hour prayer vigil in 2022 and again this fall, with people signing up for time slots and coming to the church to pray.

“After our church fell on our knees and asked the Lord for His direction, things happened,” Lindsey said.

It started in the youth department.

Tragedy brings unity

“Our youth exploded,” Lindsey said, crediting youth director Matt Ranshaw and his wife, Brooke, for bringing new life to the group and encouraging mission trips. Like Lindsey, Ranshaw is bivocational, serving also as a policeman for Tyler schools.

Students started sharing Christ with their friends. The youth brought their parents, friends and family to church. More than 170 kids and 35 volunteer workers participated in a recent Wednesday night youth group meeting, Lindsey said. That increase has spilled over into the church, which now averages 200 on Sundays.

“We’ve had 60 baptisms so far this year,” Lindsey said. “We’ve seen amazing things through our youth and the leadership. All that is of the Holy Spirit.”

Some of those amazing things started after a tragedy.

Youth camp at Piney Woods in July 2022 started out as a struggle, Ranshaw said. Kids were not gelling. Groups kept to themselves. Ranshaw was discouraged. Wednesday of camp week, he called Lindsey and learned that the congregation had prayed for youth camp that evening.

Things started changing quickly. Kids at camp started opening up that same night: students shared their struggles, some admitted to needing salvation, and others revealed brokenness. Camp ended on a spiritual mountaintop for many, and the students wanted to continue that when they got home.

The youth group started growing in numbers and spiritual maturity, which would soon be tested. On Sept. 9, 2022, during the Troup homecoming football game, junior player Cooper Reid – Lindsey’s cousin’s son – collapsed on the field. Cooper had gone to camp with the FBC Troup kids, although he attended another church.

Instead of the planned homecoming the following night, the school held a community prayer vigil for Cooper. FBC Troup kids attended, as did pastors, kids from other schools and community members.

Ranshaw saw his students’ faith in action.

“Sometimes you can teach kids all you want. Until they experience it, they won’t buy in,” he said, adding that he told his youth group, “Now you understand intercessory prayer.” The youth and church continued to pray for Cooper, who has since returned home and continues to make progress.

Progress is real for Ranshaw, Lindsey and FBC Troup. And all the progress has come as God has continued to show Himself faithful through their continued prayers.

This article appeared in the [Southern Baptist TEXAN](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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