



INTRODUCTION & PART 1

Welcome to our Series on Gratitude and Praise, two marvelous tools given to us to lift us up during difficult times, such as this pandemic which can so often feel like a dark cloud hovering overhead, even if only subtly in the background. Gratitude and praise can pull us out of the muck and mire of our circumstances and raise us above those dark clouds into God's presence and act as a healing balm in trying times. Exercising them doesn't always come naturally but is the best antidote for our emotional and spiritual lives.

This is because Gratitude can change our lives in a myriad of ways and Praise can change our hearts, placing our hearts within God's own heart and presence.

Let's begin with Gratitude.

It is amazing what benefits science has uncovered when we practice gratitude

Here's a list of just a few ways gratitude opens us up to a healthier emotional life, which in turn positively affects our physical lives as well, as it:

- Reduces stress
- Improves our self-esteem
- Enhances our relationships
- Gives us greater empathy
- Deepens self-control
- Blocks toxic emotions
- Increases our brain activity

Practicing gratitude can actually *change our brain* and has a cumulative effect in helping control our emotions and enhance our ability to learn. The average person has 2/3 of thoughts are negative—and negative thoughts are cumulative too. We want to turn that around, allowing 2/3 of our thoughts to be thankful, and change the pathways in our brains to live **in a more overall** positive state of being.

Gratitude, at its root, is based on how God has generously and freely poured out his blessings on us, especially those that were unmerited, including and most especially the gift of his Son. St. Paul in a moment of spontaneous joy expressed it this way in 2nd Corinthians, “Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift!”

The beautiful thing about gratitude doesn't just affect us. As a state of thankfulness it also affects the way we relate to those around us. It increases in us a generosity that is in turn generated forth from us to others. When we are grateful, we tend to desire to give to others graciously, that is without need of repayment, ***just for the sheer joy of giving and blessing another***. We do this in imitation of--and in a similar way that—God has done for us.

And all of this, the practice and benefits of gratitude—***everyone can afford***—there's no monetary requirement. It just takes the ***conviction*** to put gratitude and praise into action and to enjoy then the benefits that flow from them.

So let's explore together these wonderful gifts of gratitude and praise of God, the opportunity to draw nearer to him and experience his presence more fully in our lives.

PART 2

FOSTERING GRATITUDE

How do we attain and maintain an attitude of gratitude?

Consider this scripture from Matthew's gospel:

For to the one who has, more will be given, and that person will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what that person has will be taken away. Matthew 13:12

This contains within it a spiritual principle that can readily be applied to gratitude: the more grateful you become, the greater increase you will receive in gratitude and in the many gifts that accompany it, including joy.

One spiritual leader put it this way:

I make two lists: First my Gratitude List. Then I make a Want List. I need to start with gratitude because God is not going to give me more until I'm grateful for what I have. Then, I notice God moving things from my Want List to my Gratitude List. God desires to give me good gifts and does so when I'm grateful for what he's already given me.

I believe there's some real genius here. It's not that we want to be grateful in order to get more, but God waits for us to be grateful because, then, we will be in better position to receive and be good stewards of new gifts he wishes to lavish upon us.

With that in mind, let's briefly look at 7 Possible Practices:

1. Start with a **Gratitude List**. Take some quiet time and give yourself some space to write what you are grateful for, for the littlest to the greatest blessings, from waking in the morning for e.g. to being surprised with a great and wonderful turn of events in your life. And it's important to write down/type your list to make it more concrete, plus you can return to this list at any time, as it will foster joy in your heart and buoy you up.
2. It would be good to **do a new list every day**. It does not necessarily have to be as long as the first list, and you can have repetitive items on it, but try to expand your awareness with new things you see in your life for which you can or should be grateful.
3. After doing this for a time, make your **Want List** as well and notice when things move from one to the other list.
4. **Do small acts of kindness**, some spontaneous and others thought out in advance. Sometimes small things can make a very big difference to someone: a smile, a friendly hello, holding the door, noticing and expressing thanks for gestures someone does for you—especially what they may do on a regular basis and you may have simply overlooked because of

being preoccupied or you've taken for granted. Speaking about "small and insignificant", I remember as a young college student walking on campus and how normal it was for everyone to look down, not wanting to make eye contact with people walking opposite them. I purposely used to break the silence and say hi with a smile. Many people looked up and lit up. Someone cared enough to say hello. Someone in a sense saw their significance. It was a small gesture on my part, but it meant something to many who felt isolated and alone.

5. If you have children at home, or if your spouse, or housemate or friend is agreeable, **talk each day about the best part of your day** or what made you grateful that day.
6. How about **writing a letter** to someone who could use encouragement, maybe someone living alone or going through difficulty? Letter writing is almost a lost art form today, as are "thank you" notes, but I can't tell you how affirming it is for me to get one. The fact that someone took the time to think of me and express it means a lot, and especially now when we're all so physically removed from one another. Our words have creative and life-giving power to build up. Let's use them well!
7. Try to **surround yourself with beauty and things that inspire you in your environment** at home and work, one that brings you calm and a sense of peace. Sometimes what we allow into ourselves or into our space can be toxic for us and affect our demeanor, so do your best to create a sacred space wherever you are that is free from what drags you down or causes you to be cynical.

And for the icing on the cake, let me leave you with this:

You have been thinking about all those around you and trying to act kindly toward all during your waking hours. **Before retiring, let us make it our priority to offer our thanks to God for special moments throughout our day where we felt his presence through another person, a work of art, creation, a good book or what have you.** If we start and end our days with gratitude, then we will have a fuller heart and be stronger for it. Max Lucado shared this bit of wisdom: "The grateful heart is like a magnet sweeping over the day, collecting reasons for gratitude...Gratitude gets us through the hard stuff. To reflect on your blessings is to rehearse God's accomplishments." And if we do that, won't that draw us nearer to the One who, as Jesus says, want to give good gifts to his children?

PARTS 3, 4 and 5

These next three segments in our series will highlight the amazing, life- changing benefits of praise and how to engage ourselves fully in that most worthwhile spiritual activity:

Praise Part I

Why is Praise so important to our spiritual health?

We would hope that praise for God would always be intuitive, but when times get tough, it's **counter** intuitive, so it has to be learned and practiced as a discipline until it is second nature. It is not work when you love the one you are praising. Think about it in human terms. When you're proud beyond words of your child or young friend, you can't wait to praise her out loud and in the company of others, even strangers! The same is true with adults whose natural or creative gifts we admire and applaud.

When it comes to God, so often our default is to grumble and complain when things aren't going the way we hope or expect. It's part of our fallen human nature. Our ancestors in the faith were the same way. God miraculously delivers the Israelites and destroys their enemies, the Egyptians, in an undeniable and mighty way and shortly thereafter the Israelites are hungry and complaining in the desert? What happened? They lacked faith that God would take care of them, even after that dramatic saving event.

So too we. In order to praise and not complain, we have to intentionally learn how to praise and then exercise it until it is our new default position. And when we do, the "windows of heaven" (as sacred scripture says) open up to us and can pour down blessings upon and in us, because we have opened the windows of our soul through praise to receive them!

Therefore, we want to praise God because, from a completely unselfish point of view, **God is worthy of all of our praise** for who he is and what he has done for us.

It's not that he **desires** us to praise him for *his* sake as if he's a celestial egotist but for us to praise him for OUR SAKE.

That is, God doesn't **need** our praise but **we need** to praise him because as we do that we put ourselves in a right and ordered relationship with him and everything else in our lives. When we praise we are growing in God's likeness, we are loving

like he does, with no agenda except to love for the sake of the Other. We are not self-absorbed, but go out of ourselves in love, and *that is transforming*.

When we praise God, we are placing him first in our lives. When we do, everything else aligns as it's supposed to.

If we have our relationship with God ***out of order*** then ***we lack order in our lives*** and can get lost in chaos. What **praise** does for us is it **redirects us to place God first him first and therefore at the center of our life. Since we were wired for God, then placing him in the center is what brings our life's greatest fulfillment.**

I had a friend once say to me, "God must be an important part of your life." That was an intriguing way to put it and became a eureka moment of understanding of how to explain my relationship with God. I responded, "No, God is not an important part of my life. He IS my life, the source, the context, that which gives me meaning and purpose." He's not one of many things. He is not on the shelf, where I can take him down, dust him off and use him for my purposes at will (like the genie in the bottle).

When we praise God, he becomes our life. St. Paul says, "For me, life is Christ". He is the context out of which we live. Where is this grounded? This is the consistent current running underneath the word of God and comes even more to the fore by Jesus in the Lord's Prayer where our priorities are listed in order of importance, beginning with hallowing God's name and praying for his kingdom to come, in other words: God is first, praise of him is essential to keep his holiness before us and to bring about his reign for the benefit of our lives and the life of the world. He says as much in the Sermon on the Mount: "Don't worry about what you are going to eat, drink, or wear. Seek first the kingdom..." then the dark clouds of worry over material things cede way to living in the Presence and glory of God who is our LIFE. "Lord, your love is better than life. My lips will sing your praise."

If that's not enough, here's something eye-opening. St. Paul tells us praising God is God's will for our lives. What's that you say? Yes, he says in 1 Thessalonians "Rejoice always; pray without ceasing; in everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus" (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18). Very rarely is it stated so clearly what God's will is for each of us, but Paul wants us to have no doubts! God's will is always for our benefit.

Praise Part II

Last time we talked about the first benefit of praise to God, that of putting God in his rightful place in our lives, in the center, on the throne if you will, and that everything else becomes rightly ordered as a result.

Other Benefits to Praise of God:

1. **As we lift God in praise, we too are lifted up.** When our heart is set on God, when it is in flight to God (vid: eagle or another flying), God meets us more than half way and lifts us up into his presence. We rise above the clouds, so to speak, and that helps us see as God sees, with God's perspective. It's all about where you're standing as to what you see.

Speaking of this, I had an interesting insight flying home from out West. As we were ascending into the clouds and I looked down, I noticed everything that I thought was so big on the ground suddenly became very small, almost insignificant. And the clouds, which of course looked large from ground, now were much larger and far more magnificent. It occurred to me at that moment that this must be how God sees. Yes, he is with us, he is imminent, but he reigns in the heavens and, when he looks down, our problems are but dust, and they are nothing for him to handle. If that is the case, this should fill us with great joy and buoy us up, knowing that, if we but bring our problems to God, he is more than capable of handling them and can help us work through them.

So, if we're above the clouds, it helps us have the "mind of Christ" being lifted up out of our circumstances and into his company, which can then put our heart and emotions in a healthy place. We're not dictated by the events that surround our lives, but instead are encircled by God's presence, power and peace.

2. In this unselfish place, when we praise God just because of who he is and his generous love for us, **we are filled with his life, his love, and even receive direction from his heart for our lives.**

If we want to see as God sees...to love as God loves, and to be used by God as his instrument of love in the world, to find our purpose and complete our mission...then it is our JOY to praise him. We don't have to FEEL joy to praise him, but joy will come in the praising of him. And that leads to the third benefit

3. **Gratitude and praise are organically connected with JOY.** The word "Joyful" is actually an accurate translation of the word "blessed" in the beatitudes. The word in Greek is *Makarias*, a joy so deeply rooted in you

that cannot be taken from you. That's why Jesus can say, "Blessed/Joyful" are you who mourn, are persecuted, etc. because the gift given to you cannot be touched by outside forces, factors or foes. It is planted in a place in your soul where only you and God reside. It is yours to keep, foster, cherish and grow, even though we allow it to be temporarily covered over by the dark clouds in our humanness and weakness at times.

The way to lift the fog or get out from under the clouds is to practice gratitude and praise of God.

There's a beautiful illustration of this from nature:

Eagles don't wait for a storm to overtake them. They pierce the clouds to fly above the storm and ride the winds. They use the storm to fly higher and to buoy them up and to REST, to glide on the winds of the storm. Just so, we have to pierce the clouds to get above the storm. That's where praise comes in for us. We don't allow the clouds to be over our heads but when we praise God, setting our hearts and minds toward him, we rise **above** the clouds and use the storm wind to carry us to a higher destination, closer to the heart of God and his destiny for us.

Praise Part III

Just **how do we get started in making praise a part of our daily prayer practice?**

We can start off as simply as this:

1. **Make God your number 1 priority the moment you awaken.** Begin each day with a word of thanks, offering your day to him for his glory.

Once consistently doing that, expand your praise of him. Some important elements to a focused praise time:

1. **Prayer postures:** Body is Temple of Holy Spirit...St. Paul says we are to offer our bodies as a Living Sacrifice of Praise (Rom 12:1) : Body helps direct our praise and helps put our whole selves into praising God (not just our mind and our mouth but all of us, all of who we are). St. Dominic came up with 9 postures for prayer, but just to highlight one: lifting up our hands—an ancient prayer posture of the early church. As one person said so beautifully, we lift up our arms as a little child would to his Father that he might pick us up, hold us to himself, carry us. ***God comes to meet us in praise.*** Ps 22:3 says "God inhabits the praises of his people." He comes to

rest on us and simultaneously causes us to rest **in him**. So use your body in praise, as an instrument to direct and focus your praise. (For more on how to set up a prayer space, see our video at this link: <https://youtu.be/8gakPxG5yYw>)

2. We can begin praising God quietly in our hearts and that's where it begins, but believe it or not, **praying out loud when no one else is around can be doubly effective** in keeping our hearts focused on the Lord and directed toward him.

So what do we do verbally? Various ways

3. **Begin by taking your Gratitude Journal or list of those things for which you are grateful and begin to thank and praise God for those blessings**
4. See the resource below, where I **refashioned scriptures that deal with praise of God into statements of praise** that will help direct your heart in gratitude to God. (Also you can go directly in your Bible to the "Psalms of Praise" some of which are Psalms 34, 89, 92, 95, 100, 103, 117)
5. Also do an internet search for St. Ignatius' **Examen** prayer to end your day with reflection and gratitude to God.
6. Some people find helpful **using the Titles for God** which usually contain some attribute, characteristic or action of God on our behalf in them. As you say them out loud, it is also a form of praise for who God is and what God has done/is doing in your life, for God is actively moving us every moment, even in our rest, to bring about his best for us. See the last page of the notes.

These are tools to get you started and over time, if you used them consistently, they will become a part of our spiritual dialogue with God because they will be IN you to help you enter into praise and thanksgiving, and will hopefully promote a thankful and joyful state of being. As foundational as these tools are, **your spontaneous praise of God is even more delightful to God because it flows from the deepest part of you.** Praise is not just a mind exercise, but to be complete, it should involve all of who you are.

Let's come out of those dark clouds, no matter how close or far away from our heads we feel they are, and enter into his presence singing for joy, as the psalms say, and let our God reign in the midst of our circumstances. Let us raise up our hearts and arms to him that he might pick us up and carry us, that we might always carry eternity in our hearts, the very presence of our God.



RIISING ABOVE THE DARK CLOUDS WITH GRATITUDE & PRAISE OF OUR GOD

SCRIPTURES RE-WITTEN AS DIRECT PRAISE AND THANKSGIVING

Psalm 9:1

*I will give thanks to you, LORD, with all my heart;
I will tell of all your wonderful deeds.*

Romans 12:1

I offer my body, my whole being, as a living sacrifice, to be holy and pleasing to you in worship. You have made my body a Temple of the Holy Spirit, so let me glorify you.

Colossians 2:7

*Thank you for rooting and building me up in you,
strengthening my faith and giving me an abundance of thankfulness.*

Colossians 3:15

Thank you for the gift of peace as a result of Christ ruling in my heart.

Hebrews 12:28

*Thank you that I am receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken.
I worship you with reverence and awe.*

Hebrews 13:15

*Through Jesus, therefore, I will continually offer to you a sacrifice of praise—
the fruit of lips that openly profess your name.*

Psalm 7:17

*I will give thanks to you, LORD because of your righteousness;
I will sing the praises of your name LORD Most High.*

2 Corinthians 4:15

*Lord, thank you for all you are and all you have done for me.
May all my thanksgiving overflow to your glory!*

Psalm 28:7

*You are my strength and my shield; my heart trusts in you, and you help me.
My heart leaps for joy, and with my song I praise you.*

Psalm 52:9

*For what you have done I will always praise you in the presence of your faithful people.
And I will hope in your name, for your name is good.*

Psalm 79:13

*We your people, the sheep of your pasture, will praise you forever;
from generation to generation we will proclaim your praise.*

Psalm 86:12

I will praise you, Lord my God, with all my heart; I will glorify your name forever.

James 1:17

*Thank you for every good and perfect gift from above, coming down from you,
the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.*

Psalm 118:1

Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever.

Revelation 4:9, 11:17

*With those in heaven, I give glory, honor and thanks to you who sit on the throne
and who lives for ever and ever*

*“We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, the One who is and who was,
because you have taken your great power and have begun to reign.”*

Psalm 107:21-22

*I give you thanks for your unfailing love and wonderful deeds for us.
I will give you a sacrifice of praise and tell of your works with songs of joy.*

Psalm 100:4-5

*I thank and praise you for you are good and your love endures forever;
your faithfulness continues through all generations.*

Psalm 117

Praise the LORD, all nations!

Extol him, all peoples!

*² For great is his steadfast love toward us,
and the faithfulness of the LORD endures forever.*

Praise the LORD!

Philippians 4:6-7

By prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, I present my requests to God, therefore I will not be anxious about anything in any situation. I will receive in place of anxiety your peace, which transcends all understanding that will guard my heart and mind in Christ Jesus.

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

I rejoice always in you, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is your will for me in Christ Jesus.

Psalms 95:1-3

Come, let us sing for joy to the LORD; let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation. Let us come before him with thanksgiving and extol him with music and song. For the LORD is the great God, the great King above all gods.

Ephesians 5:20

I will always give thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ

James 1:2-4

I praise you God and consider it pure joy whenever I face trials of every kind, because I know the testing of my faith produces perseverance that I may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

Revelation 19:1-6

I join in the roar of a great multitude in heaven shouting: "Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, for true and just are his judgments. Amen, Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns."

Psalms 104:15-28

Praise you, Lord! How many are your works! In wisdom you made them all; the earth is full of your creatures. There is the sea, vast and spacious, teeming with creatures beyond number— living things both large and small.

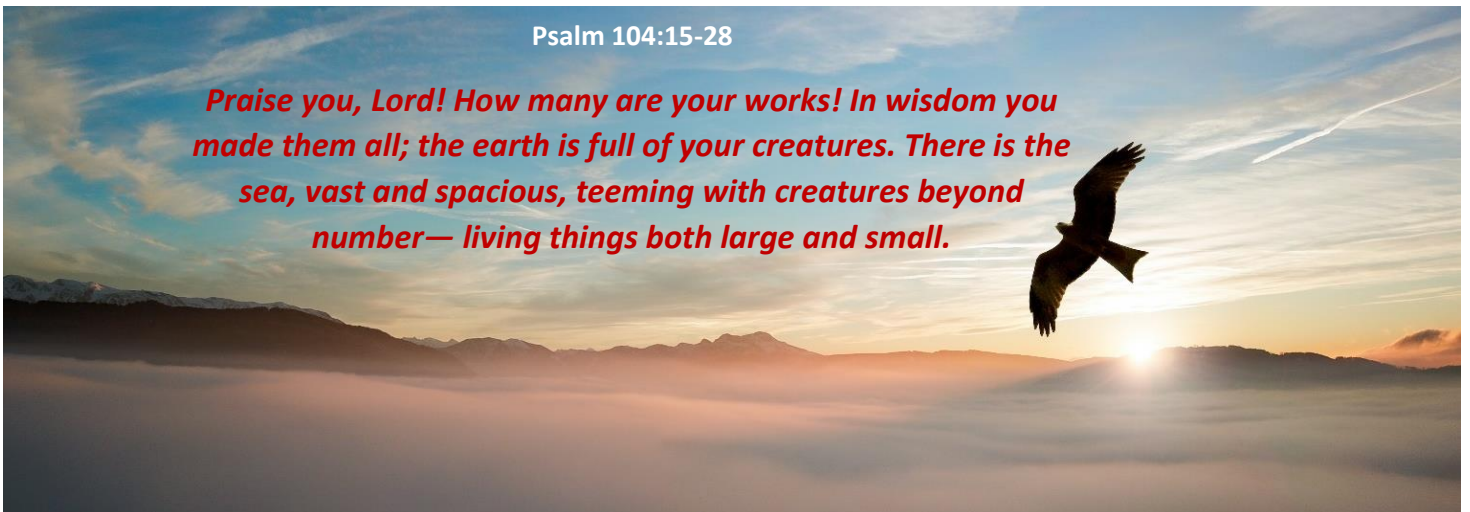


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TITLES of GOD as a LITANY of PRAISE

We praise you LORD for you are...

Our Creator
Our Sustainer
Our Rock
Our Redeemer
The One who saves us
You are...
Our Sanctifier
Our Hope
Our Peace
Our Mighty God

Our God Most High
God of the Armies of Heaven, the Lord of Hosts
Our Shelter
Our Strength
Our King of Kings and Lord of Lords

You are...
Our Provider
Our Healer
Our Deliverer
The One who makes us whole

Forever Present to Us
The Great I AM
Our God Who is the same yesterday, today and forever
Our Beginning and our End
Our God who calls our name
Our God who holds us in the Palm of his Hand
Our Advocate
Our God whose eyes of love and concern are ever upon us
Our Comforter
Our God who will never leave nor forsake us
Our God who delivers us with his strong hand and outstretched arm