

CHAPTER 3

CULTIVATE THE ATTITUDE OF THANKFULNESS UNTIL IT IS A HABIT

*⁴Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice!
Philippians 4:4 (NASB)*

*¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.
1 Thessalonians 5:18 (NIV)*

*And now we thank thee, our God, and praise thy glorious name.
1 Chronicles 29:13 (RSV)*

*¹It is good to give thanks to the LORD
And to sing praises to Your name, O Most High;
Psalm 92:1 (NASB)*

*¹I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart,
in the company of the upright, in the congregation.
Psalm 111:1 (RSV)*

*¹⁶ I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers.
Ephesians 1:16 (NIV)*

*⁵⁷ But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.
1 Corinthians 15:57 (NIV)*

*⁷I will offer to thee the sacrifice of thanksgiving
and call on the name of the LORD
Psalm 116:17 (RSV)*

*²³He who brings thanksgiving as his sacrifice honors me;
to him who orders his way aright
I will show the salvation of God!"
Psalm 50:23(RSV)*

As children, most of us will have been told that we need to be thankful and to express it by saying so out loud. It is easy to see why. Firstly, it is good manners and it makes us more pleasant to be with. However, there is far more to it than that. Having an attitude of thankfulness towards God, and also towards other people, has a major bearing on how well we do in the Christian life and how far we progress as disciples. An ungrateful, complaining Christian will not get very far. Moreover, such grumbling and moaning will displease God and we will receive God's discipline as a result of it.

Consider the reaction of the Israelites after God had performed a whole series of miracles to get them out of Egypt. They were travelling away from Egypt and towards the Promised Land when they saw Egyptian soldiers pursuing them. It is understandable that they should feel afraid, but they went beyond that in their reaction. They began to *complain* about God and even said that it would have been better if He had left them in Egypt:

⁹The Egyptians pursued them, all Pharaoh's horses and chariots and his horsemen and his army, and overtook them encamped at the sea, by Pi-ha-hi'roth, in front of Ba'al-ze'phon. ¹⁰When Pharaoh drew near, the people of Israel lifted up their eyes, and behold, the Egyptians were marching after them; and they were in great fear. And the people of Israel cried out to the LORD; ¹¹and they said to Moses, "Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to

die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, in bringing us out of Egypt? ¹²Is not this what we said to you in Egypt, 'Let us alone and let us serve the Egyptians'? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness."

Exodus 14:9-12 (RSV)

The people grumbled on this occasion, but it wasn't the exception. It was the norm. They continued to complain about other things, and about the desert and the food in particular:

¹They set out from Elim, and all the congregation of the people of Israel came to the wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had departed from the land of Egypt. ²And the whole congregation of the people of Israel murmured against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness, ³and said to them, "Would that we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate bread to the full; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger."

Exodus 16:1-3 (RSV)

Although things were difficult, God provided for all their needs. He gave them food in the form of manna, which He provided supernaturally. Even so, that did not prevent the people complaining on a subsequent occasion when they faced another difficulty. This time it was lack of water:

¹All the congregation of the people of Israel moved on from the wilderness of Sin by stages, according to the commandment of the LORD, and camped at Reph'idim; but there was no water for the people to drink. ²Therefore the people found fault with Moses, and said, "Give us water to drink." And Moses said to them, "Why do you find fault with me? Why do you put the LORD to the proof?" ³But the people thirsted there for water, and the people murmured against Moses, and said, "Why did you bring us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our cattle with thirst?" ⁴So Moses cried to the LORD, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me." ⁵And the LORD said to Moses, "Pass on before the people, taking with you some of the elders of Israel; and take in your hand the rod with which you struck the Nile, and go. ⁶Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb; and you shall strike the rock, and water shall come out of it, that the people may drink." And Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. ⁷And he called the name of the place Massah and Mer'ibah, because of the faultfinding of the children of Israel, and because they put the LORD to the proof by saying, "Is the LORD among us or not?"

Exodus 17:1-7 (RSV)

God felt hurt and angry when the people of Israel complained about these problems, and for focusing on what He had *not* done for them, instead of giving thanks for all the amazing things He *had* done for them. But it wasn't a one-off occasion. They kept on and on moaning. God felt it was so unacceptable that He eventually needed to punish them for it:

¹Now the people became like those who complain of adversity in the hearing of the LORD; and when the LORD heard it, His anger was kindled, and the fire of the LORD burned among them and consumed some of the outskirts of the camp.

Numbers 11:1 (NASB)

However, the grumbling didn't end there, and neither did God's anger. Therefore, when the people of Israel were still in the wilderness, God decided that all the people who were over the age of 20 at the time of leaving Egypt (except for Joshua and Caleb) would be allowed to die in the wilderness. He therefore made them wait in the wilderness for another 38 years while all those who had complained died off, one by one. They were never allowed to cross over and enter the Promised Land, all because they had complained repeatedly and been so ungrateful. That is how seriously God took this:

²⁹ In this wilderness your bodies will fall—every one of you twenty years old or more who was counted in the census and who has grumbled against me.

Numbers 14:29 (NIV)

God feels very strongly about ingratitude and complaining. He really doesn't like it. Therefore, if we have any sense, we will take note. What is the point of God telling us what does, and does not, please Him about our attitudes, if we then pay no attention and just carry on as we were? If we don't listen to Him voluntarily, then He will have to escalate to more drastic ways of correcting us. Why would any sensible person want that, when we could simply choose to listen willingly?

Ingratitude is the norm. Gratitude is the exception

We are selfish due to our sinful, flesh nature. Therefore the norm is for us to be ungrateful. Gratitude is exceptional. We have all experienced ingratitude from others and we don't like it. Yet we also know we have all been guilty of it ourselves. Jesus frequently encountered it. On one occasion He healed ten lepers of their leprosy, but only one of them thanked Him. The rest just walked away, without saying a word:

¹¹While He was on the way to Jerusalem, He was passing between Samaria and Galilee. ¹²As He entered a village, ten leprous men who stood at a distance met Him; ¹³and they raised their voices, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" ¹⁴When He saw them, He said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they were going, they were cleansed. ¹⁵Now one of them, when he saw that he had been healed, turned back, glorifying God with a loud voice, ¹⁶and he fell on his face at His feet, giving thanks to Him. And he was a Samaritan. ¹⁷Then Jesus answered and said, "Were there not ten cleansed? But the nine--where are they? ¹⁸"Was no one found who returned to give glory to God, except this foreigner?" ¹⁹And He said to him, "Stand up and go; your faith has made you well."

Luke 17:11-19 (NASB)

I would like to be able to adopt a superior attitude concerning those nine lepers who never thanked Jesus, and to say that their ingratitude was astonishing. However, I have done the same thing myself, many times. I have often failed to thank God for His kindness to me and I have also failed to thank other people who have helped me.

As I look back now I can think of all sorts of people, especially teachers, bosses, and work colleagues, who have taught me, helped me, trained me or corrected me. Yet, while they were doing these things I did not always appreciate, or even recognise, what they were doing for me. I sometimes took such people for granted. There were times when I even resented them.

I have since found, having been a boss myself, that staff often took me for granted or failed to recognise the efforts I made to help them. That bothered me, but it also reminded me of how I had equally failed to appreciate my own bosses in the past. I cannot go back now and deal with those past events differently. But I can, at least, try to alter my attitude from now on.

The corrosive effect of grumbling and complaining

Ingratitude doesn't stay silent for long. It inevitably turns into grumbling out loud, which is an even worse problem. It has a corrosive and poisonous effect on everybody. It harms the person complaining. Plus it undermines those who listen to it, and especially those who begin to join in with it. That's another dangerous feature of moaning. It is highly contagious.

Any member of staff in a workplace who is prone to complaining will soon cause others to join in. An atmosphere of discontent and resentment will then quickly spread all around that office or factory. Within weeks, a happy workforce can be turned into a sour, embittered group through the influence of just one or two regular complainers.

They will soon have most of the others focusing on every place where the "glass is half empty". They too will then start seeing things in the most negative light possible, rather than choosing to see those things as opportunities, learning experiences, or even privileges. I've come to the conclusion now, after many years' experience in business, that I will not recruit or continue to employ an unhappy, complaining person.

By that I mean someone who is habitually like that and who chooses to remain so. They are always unproductive, disruptive and divisive. They also drag down those who are around them and make them unproductive too. It would be difficult to over-state the harm that a regularly discontented person can do.

They would probably do less harm to your business if they went around pouring acid over the furniture and equipment. The harmful effect of that would probably be less expensive than the damage caused by allowing habitual complainers to work for you. The influence always seems to operate in only one direction. Complainers never get 'dragged up' to the level of the happy staff.

They always seem to bring the contented people down to their level. So, in my business, I learned to take it seriously, just as God does. I took decisive action to exclude, or even remove, such people. I prefer that they go to work for someone else, who is less particular about what type of staff he takes on.

Complaining and resenting will cause your personality or character to become sour

If you complain habitually and tend to resent people then your very nature will become sour over time. The effect is very marked. The person becomes like sour milk. It affects them to their core, and a sense of grievance overtakes them. For example, I can think of a man who works at a garden centre near my house. Whenever I have been there he seems bitter, reluctant and uncooperative.

On one occasion I overheard him speaking in a disparaging way about his boss, the proprietor of the garden centre. He was openly doing so in front of me, a customer. I don't think he cared that I could hear him. In fact, the expression of his reservoir of resentments had become so normal for him that he probably didn't even notice that he was doing it.

The net effect of it all was that he was obviously unhappy. Yet, what was the chain of causation? Was he bitter because of the circumstances of his life, or was his life the way it was because of his bitterness? It was probably both. That is where giving thanks can really change a person's life. To give thanks to God, and also to express one's gratitude to others, is not only a *symptom* of an already healthy heart-attitude. It is also the *cause* of it. In other words, we can cure ourselves of sourness, and even of selfishness, simply by learning to give thanks.

To complain is to lack gratitude

One of the things that most displeases God about complaining is that it indicates an underlying ingratitude. That is a very hurtful thing for anyone to have to deal with, even for God. Being a parent, and also running a business, has helped me to see why ingratitude is such a bad thing. It is a deep insult. It indicates that we care very little for the person whom we are failing to thank or appreciate.

I did not properly appreciate, or thank, my parents when I was younger. Now that I have children myself, it gets to me if they take me for granted, or don't appreciate what I do for them. We all feel wounded when we are used, or taken for granted, by other people. That is especially so where we have gone out of our way to help and yet the other person seems only to be aware of what we *didn't do* for them.

People have often done that to me. However, I can't easily condemn it, because I know that I have also done it to others. Even worse, I know that I have done it to God. And I've done it many times. I'd like to cut all complaining out of my life, but it isn't easy. Even so, that should be our aim.

To complain is to lack understanding

Whenever we complain we also reveal the fact that we lack understanding and a sense of proportion. Firstly, we are failing to remember all those countless things that God has done for us, or which He has protected us from. It indicates that we are focused excessively on something else, that we wish was not happening, or that we lack, but forgetting everything that we do have.

Or, at least, it means we are not keeping those good things in proper perspective and remembering them, even while we struggle with some difficulty. I have noticed that I tend only to get irritated and moan about small things, i.e. just the little delays and minor disappointments of life. When I've had to face much bigger crises, blows and losses, I've usually been much calmer.

It's possibly because when I face major problems I remember to pray and seek God's grace to help me to endure. However, when the problem is very minor, I tend to forget to pray. So, I am less likely to ask for His help and therefore have to deal with the problem on my own, in my own strength. That may explain some of it.

Complaining indicates that your sinful flesh nature is alive and well and has not been crucified.

When niggling little problems get under our skin and cause us to complain, they demonstrate that our sinful flesh nature hasn't been properly crucified yet. That's not a good sign, but there is at least this one advantage in being exposed to aggravating little problems. Our reactions remind us that we need to work harder to crucify our own flesh and die to self. Low level suffering or inconveniences, especially unexpected ones, are very good at exposing areas of uncrucified flesh, where the sin nature is still active within us.

There's a valuable lesson in that. Perhaps that is one reason why God keeps on allowing some rain to fall into our lives. It brings us down to earth and reminds us of our real condition, and the true level of our maturity, or immaturity. It also reminds us of our need for Him and of our need to do battle with our sinful flesh nature and to keep putting it to death. (See Book Seven for more detail).

So, one important thing which is revealed when we choose either to complain or to give thanks is whether the 'new man' or the 'old man' is in control of us at that moment. The old man is a name the Bible uses for our sinful flesh nature. The new man, conversely, is the phrase the Bible uses for our own spirit which is born again and comes to life when we become a Christian. The new man cannot sin, whereas the old man cannot do anything other than sin. Both are part of you and you will have that old man within you and causing problems until you die. Then you will, at last, be rid of him.

At any given moment, you have to decide whether you will let your old man or your new man be your 'spokesman'. The question is to which of them will you 'pass the microphone'? You always have a choice at any given moment. You can let the old man speak, in which case he will complain. Or you can let the new man speak, in which case he will give thanks. So, you can easily tell whether your new man or old man is speaking on your behalf, simply by listening to whether your mouth is giving thanks or moaning.

To complain is to demonstrate that we are self-centered

The fact that we complain also indicates that we are still self-centered, rather than focused on Jesus and on other people, as we ought to be. Again, that discovery is our cue to seek to change and to ask God for His help. When we do complain, thus indicating that we're preoccupied with self, then the best thing to do is to openly acknowledge it. Confess it to God as sin, rather than trying to justify it or deny it. Ask Him to redeem the situation by using those difficult circumstances constructively and profitably, so as to help us to see what we're really like, and to change.

God is never to blame for anything and He is never unjust. Therefore, whatever happens, you can never validly complain about Him

When we complain and grumble we can get to the point where we are actually blaming or accusing God for things. We might not say it out loud, but that could be what we are really thinking. Whenever we do that we are deluded. God is never to blame for anything, no matter what it is, or how it happens. Whatever you may have experienced, He is not at fault for it. God is perfect. He never does anything wrong or unjust. It is an impossibility, and we are foolish even to entertain the idea.

Therefore, don't even consider criticizing God or lashing out at Him. Don't even do it indirectly or by implication. You would be accusing the wrong person. If you have been blaming Him, then you have been falsely accusing the best friend you've ever had. Far from being the cause of your problems, He is your closest ally. He cares for you more than anybody else, no matter how bad your circumstances may be. He also has a plan for each of us which is for our good, not to harm us:

For I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.

Jeremiah 29:11 (RSV)

Job had to suffer more testing than any of us are ever likely to face. He lost all his children and all his possessions in one day. Yet, he refused to blame God for it. That fact warmed God's heart because, although Job never knew it, the very reason he had lost everything was because the Devil had challenged God to test Job. Satan had said that if He did, then Job would curse God to His face. However, Job didn't. He refused to blame God, and that needs to be our attitude too:

²⁰Then Job arose, and rent his robe, and shaved his head, and fell upon the ground, and worshiped.

²¹And he said, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return; the LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD." ²²In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong.

Job 1:20-22 (RSV)

At the end of the book of Job, God Himself speaks in response to the various explanations of his sufferings that had been put forward by Job's friends, and even by Job. The things they said did not accurately reflect the true facts, or represent God's actual views or motives. We all need to be so careful, because we are very limited in our understanding. We can only grasp parts of what is really going on at times.

We would therefore be seriously at fault if, with our severely limited minds and incomplete knowledge, we tried to be too emphatic about things we don't understand and which only God can. In particular, we must never speak, or even think, in such a way as to suggest that He is at fault, because He never is. If we think He is, we are just wrong and foolish, no matter what the circumstances may be:

‘Then the LORD spoke to Job out of the storm: 7 “Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me. 8 “Would you discredit my justice? Would you condemn me to justify yourself? 9 Do you have an arm like God’s, and can your voice thunder like his?’

Job 40:6-9 (NIV)

Thankfulness opens our eyes to see the world more accurately and in proper perspective

God tells us repeatedly to be thankful. When we are it has the effect of opening our own eyes. It enables us to see the world more realistically. It puts our circumstances into perspective and corrects the way we see God and the people around us. Expressing our gratitude in one area also helps us to see what else we have to be thankful for. So, don't wait until you already *feel* thankful. Express thanks now, regardless of how you feel.

Do it as a decision of your will, even if you don't yet feel thankful. Later on your feelings will follow your actions and come into line with what you are saying. Expressing thankfulness lifts your own spirit, changes your mood, and will help you to actually become thankful. It does so even if you weren't feeling that way when you began giving thanks.

Thankfulness helps us to endure things more patiently

Expressing thanks also helps us to grow in patience and endurance. It alters the way we see things and gives us peace and greater resilience. A thankful person can endure far more than a person who is ungrateful. That is partly because they see the world, and their situation, more accurately. They will take into account the positive factors which are so easily forgotten if we are focusing on what we lack, or on something which has annoyed or disappointed us.

This is so important. A thankful person will become, and remain, an encouraged person. If so, they will be very difficult to defeat. However, a complaining person will, inevitably, become discouraged. As such, they will be much easier to defeat. They will find it much harder to overcome their circumstances or to win the battles which life throws at all of us.

Thankfulness is good for our health, spiritually and physically

The habit of being thankful if, practised over a long period, will have a powerful effect even on our health. It will change us spiritually and physically. We know, even from our own experience, that that is true. I also know from a consultant I know who specializes in mouth and throat cancer that there is a distinct pattern among the patients they see. It tends to be men who are bitter, angry and unhappy that get most of these cancers. The Bible would support that general point:

*A joyful heart is good medicine,
But a broken spirit dries up the bones.
Proverbs 17:22 (NASB)*

*Do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.”
Nehemiah 8:10 (b) (NASB)*

Thankfulness needs to be expressed out loud, not just in thought

You might convince yourself that you are a thankful person deep down, and that you feel thankful even if you don't express it. But that won't do. What really counts is what you *say*, not what you think, or believe you think. The way God has made us is such that our mouths have a vital role to

play. We need to speak, not just to feel. Thankfulness needs to be expressed in words. It's not enough just to feel thankful inwardly, or to think thankful thoughts. We need to say it out loud to God and also to other people:

*¹O give thanks to the LORD,
for he is good;
for his steadfast love endures forever!
²Let the redeemed of the LORD say so,
whom he has redeemed from trouble
Psalm 107:1-2 (RSV)*

We cry out loud to God when we are in a crisis, rather than just thinking silent thoughts asking for His help. So too, our thanksgiving needs to be audibly expressed, either in speech or in song:

*¹⁹Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble,
and he delivered them from their distress;
²⁰he sent forth his word, and healed them,
and delivered them from destruction.
²¹Let them thank the LORD for his steadfast love,
for his wonderful works to the sons of men!
²²And let them offer sacrifices of thanksgiving,
and tell of his deeds in songs of joy!
Psalm 107:19-22 (RSV)*

Moreover, our thanksgiving should frequently be in the presence and hearing of other people, not just when we are alone:

*³¹Let them thank the LORD for his steadfast love,
for his wonderful works to the sons of men!
³²Let them extol him in the congregation of the people,
and praise him in the assembly of the elders.
Psalm 107:31-32 (RSV)*

*³⁰With my mouth I will give great thanks to the LORD;
I will praise him in the midst of the throng.
Psalm 109:30 (RSV)*

We need to get into the habit of finding, and taking, opportunities to speak out loud to give thanks for our blessings. We must tell God and tell others. The very act of speaking in that way will improve us from the inside out and change how we think, feel, and act. Plus, it will affect other people and do them good. It will make us a positive influence, rather than a bad one.

Thankfulness and praise enable us to become closer to God and to gain access to Him

See how the Psalmist expresses this thought in this well-known verse:

*⁴Enter His gates with thanksgiving
And His courts with praise.
Give thanks to Him, bless His name.
Psalm 100:4 (NASB)*

The above verse contains an important clue as to how to get into God's presence. The clear implication is that the very act of giving thanks is what enables us to enter God's gates, i.e. at the outer

edge of His presence. Then, praising Him enables us to go even closer and enter His inner courts. It refers to moving from the outer to the inner areas of God's dwelling place.

Giving thanks brings us closer to God, such that we can enter the 'gates' at the outer edge of His dwelling place. Praise brings us even closer, such that we can go in to His court, thereby having direct access to Him and being heard by Him, in much the same way as we might gain access to a King or President. Anyone can write to a President, but not everybody can have direct personal access to his office.

So, if we want to get closer to God we need to focus on both thanksgiving and praise. Set out to make both of these central to your whole way of life. Doing so will alter you and your attitudes, but it will also enable you to enter God's presence in your prayers and to relate to Him more intimately. This is not just some formula to manipulate God and get Him to do what you want. It means adopting a wholly new attitude and approach to God and persisting with it until it becomes the norm. Then it will seriously impact our relationship with God.

Thankfulness is primarily a decision, not a feeling

We often make the mistake of waiting until we feel like giving thanks before we do so. However, it doesn't work that way. Thanks are due to God whether we feel like it or not. We are to express our thanks as a decision of our will. It doesn't need to be the natural outpouring of an excited or happy mood. It's fine if it is, but it doesn't need to be.

The reality is that that is not always how we feel. Sometimes we are not naturally happy or buoyant. However, we cannot allow ourselves to be limited or controlled by our feelings. God is worthy of our thanks and praise at all times, regardless of our changing moods.

⁶As therefore you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so live in him, ⁷rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

Colossians 2:6-7 (RSV)

The real reason for thanking God is not that we feel thankful. It is simply that He is worthy of being thanked, whether we feel it or not. Our responsibility is to decide to be thankful and then to decide to express it, regardless of what our actual feelings might be. We are to offer thanks as a form of offering or sacrifice. That may well mean doing so when we do not feel like it and when, instead, we actually feel low or sad or anxious:

*"Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving
and pay your vows to the Most High;
Psalm 50:14 (NASB)*

*¹² I am under vows to you, O God;
I will present my thank offerings to you.
Psalm 56:12 (NIV)*

*He who brings thanksgiving as his sacrifice honours me;
to him who orders his way aright I will show the salvation of God!"
Psalm 50:23 (RSV)*

When the Bible refers to offering God a "sacrifice" of thanksgiving, the implication is that our offering of thanks is a decision or a step, rather than a spontaneous outburst. It's something we choose to do and to give. It's not just a feeling. It may even be difficult, and require us to overcome our feelings. We may even need to tell ourselves what to do:

***¹⁷I will give thanks to the LORD
according to His righteousness
and will sing praise to the name
of the LORD Most High.***

Psalm 7:17 (NASB)

Twice the Psalmist says "I will" when He refers to giving thanks. He is speaking of His will, not his feelings, and indicating that he is deciding to give thanks. It is a choice, or a resolve, not an emotion. In fact, he is actually speaking to himself and instructing himself to give thanks. The Psalmist quite often tells himself what to do. Here he is telling himself to bless the Lord:

***1Bless the LORD, O my soul,
And all that is within me, bless His holy name.***

***2Bless the LORD, O my soul,
And forget none of His benefits;***

Psalm 103:1-2 (NASB)

Presumably the Psalmist tells himself to do this because, at that moment, giving thanks is not his natural inclination. It is not what he feels like doing, but it is what he chooses to do, because he knows he should. We need to copy him in that approach.

Make a decision always to rejoice and give thanks, regardless of your circumstances

Make a decision that no matter what your circumstances may be, you will give thanks to the LORD anyway. Do it every day, indeed several times every day. Train yourself to give thanks. Set out to make it your habit. The more often you do it, the more habitual it will become. Then you will find it easier to continue to thank God by force of habit, even in hard times:

***¹⁷ Though the fig tree should not blossom,
nor fruit be on the vines,***

the produce of the olive fail

and the fields yield no food,

the flock be cut off from the fold

and there be no herd in the stalls,

¹⁸ yet I will rejoice in the Lord;

I will take joy in the God of my salvation.

Habakkuk 3:17-18 (ESV)

***¹⁶Rejoice always; ¹⁷pray without ceasing; ¹⁸in everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you
in Christ Jesus.***

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 (NASB)

Note that Paul says we are to give thanks "in" everything. He does not say we are to give thanks "for" everything. He means that however bad our current circumstances may be, we are still to give thanks in them. We are not necessarily giving thanks for the ordeal, or for our suffering. The point is that even in those adverse circumstances we should still look for things to be thankful for, such as our children, health, family, job, home etc.

Doing that puts the current difficulty into its proper context. We then realise that it is vastly outnumbered by the many blessings we also have. We still have much to be thankful for, however bad things may get. It is giving thanks in those painful situations that touches God's heart the most. That fact alone makes it worthwhile. However, it will also alter the way we see our situation and especially the way we react to it.

Sometimes giving thanks requires an effort of the will and can be a sacrifice

God is very realistic. He is well aware that at certain times, when we face tests and ordeals, it is difficult to give thanks. At such times to go ahead and give thanks anyway, despite not feeling like doing so, is a kind of sacrifice. It is something that you do as a decision of your will, from obedience rather than spontaneously. God values it very highly when we offer thanksgiving in that manner. As we saw above, the Psalmist refers to it as the “sacrifice of thanksgiving”:

*I will offer to thee the sacrifice of thanksgiving
and call on the name of the Lord*

Psalm 116:17 (RSV)

Therefore, try to develop the habit of giving thanks daily, every time you pray. Let it become a natural and permanent fixture in your prayer life, regardless of how you feel. Indeed, if anything, it is particularly at difficult times that you most need to give thanks. Firstly it pleases God, but secondly, it also helps you to refocus your thinking onto God, and on to all that He does for you, rather than dwelling on whatever your current problem is. That’s a good habit to have and will help you, in more challenging times, not to neglect to give thanks.

Develop the habit of reminding yourself about the ways that God has helped or rescued you in the past

Most of us tend to make the mistake of being overly fixated upon our current difficulties, whatever they happen to be, and forgetting the many times that God has helped us or rescued us in the past. For that reason, God regularly urged the Jewish people to remind themselves of the many ways that He had provided for them, or helped them, in the past and to believe that He would do so again. Here is a short passage where the Psalmist says that the people forgot what God had done for them in the past. He then begins to list some examples of God’s help:

*¹¹ They forgot what he had done,
the wonders he had shown them.*

*¹² He did miracles in the sight of their fathers
in the land of Egypt,
in the region of Zoan.*

*¹³ He divided the sea and led them through;
he made the water stand firm like a wall.*

*¹⁴ He guided them with the cloud by day
and with light from the fire all night.*

*¹⁵ He split the rocks in the desert
and gave them water as abundant as the seas;*

Psalm 78:11-15 (NIV)

It is good to do the same and remind ourselves daily of our own personal experiences of God’s past provisions and the ways He has rescued us, even if they are not as dramatic as those provided through Moses. It will adjust our attitude, as well as pleasing God.

God is especially pleased and touched when we thank Him in difficult circumstances

If you are struggling to see why thankfulness matters so much to God, try to imagine a situation in a family involving a parent and a child. Imagine that a child has looked forward to a day out at a theme park such as Alton Towers. But then it cannot go ahead, because the weather is too bad, so it has to be cancelled. Instead, the parent can only take the child to a cinema instead. What if that night, when being tucked up in bed the child was to say "*Thank you for taking me to the cinema today*".

That remark would be very touching to the parent and would be remembered long afterwards. Contrast that however with a child who was to complain to the parent and blame them for the cancellation of the trip to Alton Towers. That would be painful. Isn't it just the same with us and God? He is a parent and He feels the same emotions that you or I would feel when faced with such grateful, or ungrateful, words from our own child.

Why the Devil and his demons hate it when we are thankful

We've seen some of the reasons why thankfulness and praise are so important to God and so beneficial to us. It follows, therefore, that the demons who are assigned to obstruct you will not want you to be thankful. They will try very hard to stop you. They know exactly how much it matters and how much depends on it. Be motivated, therefore, by the very fact that the demons *don't* want you to give thanks. Let that very fact spur you on, all the more. Resolve that if the demons don't want you to give thanks, then that is all the more reason to do it.