

Prayer: Thanksgiving

by J. Oswald Sanders

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The second element in prayer is thanksgiving, which is the glad and appreciative acknowledgment of the benefits and blessings God gives, either to ourselves or to others. It is an integral part of prayer, not an addendum to it.

Thanksgiving is to be distinguished from worship, for thanksgiving is not so much occupation with the perfections of God as it is the grateful acknowledgment of the love and kindness He has lavished on us. Worship easily and naturally leads us to thanksgiving, for God's perfections find expression in the daily gifts and blessings He gives.

Even if Scripture did not exhort us to give thanks always and for all things, common courtesy would accord a prominent place to thanksgiving in our prayer life, for we are constantly at the receiving end of God's generosity. Appreciation is the basis of healthy human relationships, and it is surely no less important in our relationship with God.

Aristotle called Memory the scribe of the soul, and it is good for us to let her do her work.

The Psalms abound in thanksgiving. "O give thanks unto the LORD" (Psalm 118:1, KJV). "Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget none of His benefits" (Psalm 103:2). "Give thanks to the LORD, for He is good; for His lovingkindness is everlasting" (Psalm 118:1).

The prayers of our Lord were not lacking in this element. The occasions on which it is recorded that He gave thanks are significant but rather unexpected: At the grave of Lazarus (John 11:41); when He fed the five thousand (John 6:11); when the seventy returned with shouts of victory (Luke 10:21, KJV); when He instituted the Lord's Supper, giving thanks for the bitter cup He was to drink (Luke 22:19).

We too should call to mind the Lord's dealings with us—His mercies, which are new every morning (Lam 3:22-23), and the temporal gifts that recur with such regularity. We are unconscious of a great many of our blessings; they therefore go unacknowledged. "I have experienced today the most exquisite pleasure that I have ever had in my life," said a young invalid; "I was able to breathe freely for about five minutes."

Psalm 103 is a classic of worship blended with

thanksgiving. A paraphrase by Dr. A. B. Bruce provides a model for our emulation.

God is a beneficent Being. He delights to bestow penitence, He forgives sin, heals diseases, saves life, crowning His worshippers with garlands of love and mercy, and making their hearts young with gladness. He is a righteous God who espouses the cause of the oppressed and shields them from wrong; a magnanimous God, who bears patiently our shortcomings with a Father's heart, full of pity towards frail men, subject to infirmity and pain. He is mighty as well as merciful, sitting in majesty on His heavenly throne, and ruling as King over all, receiving perfect obedience from the manifold powers of His universe, which do His will and show His glory.

The psalmist's heart overflowed in thanksgiving and praise as he meditated on these themes, but he was conscious of the tendency that we know only too well—failure to give thanks for blessings received and prayers answered. So he apostrophizes his soul: "Bless the LORD, O my soul, and *forget none of His benefits*" (Psalm 103:2, italics added). We should have a definite time every day when we remember these with gratitude.

Thankful For Everything?

Thanksgiving is not difficult when it flows from our recognition of the temporal and spiritual blessings that we consider desirable. But what of the burdens and disciplines, the sufferings and sorrows of life? Surely we cannot be expected to give thanks for those! But this is exactly what God does expect us to do. We are left with no option if we are His obedient children. "In *everything* give thanks" (1 Thess 5:18, italics added). "Always giving thanks for *all things*" (Eph 5:20, italics added). These commands are devastatingly inclusive.

No one would suggest that this is always easy, but it is always possible, or God would not expect it of us. There is an Arab proverb that says, "All sunshine makes a desert," and it is true that if life were all joy and prosperity, unmixed with sorrow and adversity,

our characters would be immeasurably the poorer. Our loving Father knows the exact proportions in which to mix these ingredients, and we should thankfully and without question accept His dealings with us as the very best for us.

The correct response of the heart is expressed in The Scottish Prayer Book: "We praise Thee for the grace by which Thou dost enable us so to bear the ills of the present world, that our souls are enriched by a fuller experience of Thy love, a more child-like dependence on Thy will, and a deeper sympathy with the suffering and the sad."

On His way to exile, Chrysostom exclaimed, "Thank God for everything!" Thanking God in one of his matchless letters, Samuel Rutherford wrote, "O, what I owe to the furnace, the file and the hammer of my Lord Jesus!"

A missionary was greatly discouraged. He knew that his work was not progressing as it should. One day, while visiting another missionary, he saw a motto card on the wall: TRY THANKSGIVING! It was an arrow to his soul. He suddenly realized that this element had been largely missing from his prayers.

There had been plenty of asking God for things he desired and needed; he had asked desperately at times, but had forgotten to thank Him for what he received. He began to count his blessings and to pour out his heart in thanksgiving.

At once the power of the Spirit began to surge through him, and the work at his missionary center began to prosper. His lack of thanksgiving had been quenching the working of the Holy Spirit. Have we been guilty of the same sin?

The old couplet runs, "Prayers and praises go in pairs, they have praises who have prayers," and this should be true of us. John Newton, the converted slave-trader, used to give thanksgiving a practical twist by saying that true thanksgiving is thanksgiving.

When we reach heaven and are in the immediate presence of God, other aspects of prayer will cease, as being no longer necessary or appropriate; but thanksgiving and worship will continue throughout eternity.

Prayer

Father, with thankful and humble hearts we appear before Thee. We would thank Thee for all the benefits that we have received from Thy goodness. It is to Thy blessing that we owe what success we have found. Every opportunity for doing good, each victory we have gained over ourselves, every thought of Thy presence, are alike Thy gifts to us. The best thanksgiving we can offer Thee is to live according to Thy holy will.

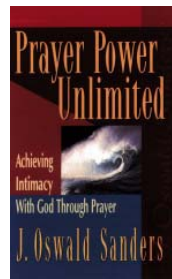
Michael Sailer



A native of New Zealand, the late **J. Oswald Sanders** (1902-1992) was a consulting director for Overseas Missionary Fellowship, the organization founded by Hudson Taylor in 1865. He preached and taught in conferences in many countries and wrote over 40 books on the Christian life, including *The Incomparable Christ*, *Satan Is No Myth*, and *Enjoying Intimacy With God*. He received the Order of the British Empire for Christian service and theological writing.

In his preface to *Prayer Power Unlimited*, Sanders writes:

The supreme importance of prayer is tacitly admitted by most evangelical Christians. It is accepted as an article of faith. And yet there are few areas of the Christian life in which there are more regretful confessions of failure and disappointment.



The author does not pose as an authority on the subject – only a fellow student in the school of prayer; he is very conscious of the heights yet to be scaled.

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