



Choosing gratitude

A study in contrasts

I spent the summer before going to university helping an elderly lady who occasionally came to our church. I would cut her lawn and do minor jobs around the garden. Each time I had finished, she would serve lemonade and tell me her life story. She must have been so lonely – though I was too young and naïve to feel her pain. Her story, oft-repeated, was a tragic one. She had fallen in love as a young woman, but her father had forbidden the relationship and so it had ended. This affected her health – she became ill with rheumatic fever. It also tied her to the parental home so that her mature years had been

spent caring for aging parents. She always ended with the same diatribe: ‘My father ruined my life. I nursed him, but I can never forgive him. I’m still angry when I think about it.’

Anger had congealed into bitterness that became the background music of her life. She was kind to me, but her experience had strangled and destroyed her life. I don’t know whether she ever became a Christian and found the release that forgiveness brings, but her story is a warning about the danger of bitterness. She died alone during my first term at university.

During that first term I became friends with Andy, a third-year law student. I was a working-class lad with a strong Brummie accent; Andy was an old Etonian with an elegant turn of phrase. The gospel really does break down barriers!

Andy suffered from a progressive and aggressive muscular disease which severely limited his mobility. At the age of twenty-one he looked like an old man, leaning on a stick and struggling with stairs. He was in constant pain and knew that his life expectations were severely limited.

Yet he was one of the most joyful Christians I have ever met. His life was marked by gratitude and thankfulness in a way that was infectious. He was one of the strongest evidences of the power of grace that I have ever known. His life made Jesus visible, intelligible and desirable. He could have chosen the path of bitterness, but instead he chose the way of gratitude. It was a deliberate and daily decision to look beyond suffocating circumstances and to focus on God's goodness.

Two stories and two very different responses.

We all have our own stories. Sometimes the circumstances of life seem overwhelming. At such times we face a choice. We can become resentful, angry and bitter. Or we can look beyond the trial to the gracious faithfulness of God and respond in thankfulness and gratitude.

We cannot control our circumstances, but we can control our response. Gratitude is a choice. And it is a choice which bears succulent and sustaining fruit.

Reasons to be grateful

Gratitude appreciates the good things that God has poured into our lives. More than that,

it deliberately affirms the goodness and worth of the Giver. Secular writers acknowledge that gratitude fosters psychological and physical health. Studies have shown that a negative mindset can lead to bitterness, resentment and anger, and can easily spiral into depression.

This should not surprise us, since it is just what the Bible teaches. What is less clear is how a secular world view, which leaves God entirely out of the picture, can ever foster a gratitude which is immune to the adverse circumstances of life. The beauty of the Christian faith is that our gratitude is focused on the God who is above our situation and whose plans are always for our ultimate good. Like Habakkuk we can declare,

*Though the fig-tree does not bud
and there are no grapes on the vines,
though the olive crop fails
and the fields produce no food,
though there are no sheep in the sheepfold
and no cattle in the stalls,
yet I will rejoice in the LORD,
I will be joyful in God my Saviour.*

*The Sovereign LORD is my strength;
he makes my feet like the feet of a deer,
he enables me to tread on the heights.*
(Habakkuk 3:17–19)

The Assyrian came down

To help us explore the grace of gratitude we will focus on Psalm 66 in the subsequent chapters of this book.

This is an anonymous psalm of thanksgiving written to celebrate a great national deliverance. Many commentators link it to the defeat of the Assyrian army before the gates of Jerusalem, which is recorded in 2 Kings 19. The Assyrians were the undefeated superpower of the day. They had already conquered Israel and captured Samaria (2 Kings 17). Now they had a stranglehold on Jerusalem. In the words of the poet Byron,

*The Assyrian came down like the wolf
on the fold,
And his cohorts were gleaming in purple
and gold;*

*And the sheen of their spears was like stars
on the sea,
When the blue wave rolls nightly on
deep Galilee.¹*

Godly King Hezekiah prayed and the Lord delivered his people:

That night the angel of the LORD went out and put to death a hundred and eighty-five thousand in the Assyrian camp. When the people got up the next morning – there were all the dead bodies! So, Sennacherib king of Assyria broke camp and withdrew. He returned to Nineveh and stayed there (2 Kings 19:35–36).

Byron immortalises it in the conclusion of his poem:

*And the widows of Ashur are loud in their wail,
And the idols are broke in the temple of Baal;*

¹ Lord Byron first published ‘The Destruction of Sennacherib’ in 1815 in his *Hebrew Melodies*.

*And the might of the Gentile, unsmote by
the sword,
Hath melted like snow in the glance of
the Lord!*

Just a glance from God scatters his enemies and saves his people.

We cannot be dogmatic, but Psalm 66 would certainly fit in with this great display of God's saving power. The psalm reflects on the history of God's people and is realistic about the ups and downs of their experience. At the same time, however, it is bubbling over with thankfulness and will help us to engage with this subject ourselves.

Reflections



1. Why is bitterness dangerous?
2. How can we be grateful in spite of our circumstances?
3. Read the story of the deliverance of Jerusalem in 2 Kings 19:1–37. What does it teach about prayer and about God?