

25th April 2021 10 am Transform: Thanksgiving

Service led by Andrew Attwood, Talk by Jane Garsed, Reading by Lindsey Attwood, Includes dialogue between Kevin and Fiona Dowle. Prayers by Andrew Attwood. *This transcript is only of the activity, the dialogue, the reading, the talk and reflection.*

Activity

[Andrew:]

Let's begin with a prayer and then I'll lead us into something to help us get ready for worship. Let's pray.

Father God, we thank You for Your presence today. Would You still our hearts now, and would You help us to focus. Would You help us to be open. Amen.

Let me just show you something. This is an old carton of things that we throw away, usually. Now I wanted as part of our preparation for coming to God this morning, to think of ourselves as a container of many things. I don't know where you are at, temperament-wise or inclination-wise, between being a natural grumbler or a natural grateful person who gives thanks: grumbler, grumpy perhaps? Or maybe more inclined to count your blessings. Sometimes life fills us up with experiences and things that happened to us.

- Discarded mask: how many of you, how many of us are fed up with lockdown?
- Receipts: how many of you are feeling a little bit battered financially even or constrained because you don't know what the future holds in terms of confidence with income, because of changes that have happened with the pandemic.
- There's half an old lemon in here: sometimes we can be subconsciously bitter, suspicious, sour, soured by experiences.
- Headache tablets: how many of you are unwell because you're just kind-of ground down by circumstances?
- Tissues: do you shed many tears? And do many of those kinds of experiences crowd your head to such an extent that it feels very hard to give thanks?

Are these the repeating things that come round and round again?

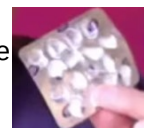
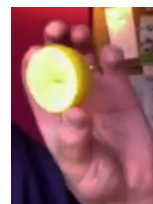
It's hard to get your head out of them, so that you can turn to God in praise and thanks. I want to invite you, just consciously this morning, to bin these things for now. So I'm just going to pray, and I want to give you an opportunity to join in with me, just to be aware of the kinds of things that go round our heads that aren't helpful, perhaps grumpy things or sad things.

Father God, even though they're not resolved as easily as this, we consciously choose just to bin these things, to put them to one side, so that we can have more space inside of ourselves to be open with a more thankful heart.

Again, just a moment of quiet while you prepare yourself in that way before God.

Come Holy Spirit.

So with that in mind instead of the distractions of difficulty or life in general, let's now move into a time of praise, giving thanks to God.



Kevin and Fiona Dowle on Thankfulness

[Fiona:] Kevin, what have been the best elements of the last 12 months for you?

[Kevin:] I think three things really. The first, I would say, getting off the treadmill. What I mean by that is, still being able to work from home, but having a much more flexible way of life, and not having to follow the sort-of classic nine-to-five routine: that that's been a real blessing for me.

I think the second big thing is that we've moved, we've moved to live in Cumbria. And that's been both exciting and very challenging at the same time. It's created quite a bit of uncertainty, alongside the raw blessing of living in, you know, one of the most beautiful parts of the country.

The third thing for me: I've actually enjoyed the experience of Zoom meetings: it's generated this whole new way of engaging in a whole new language like, you know, "you're on mute" and I've actually really enjoyed all of that.

[Fiona:] And what about other positive things that have happened in your spiritual life?

[Kevin:] There are two things really. First, a sense of thankfulness for that opportunity to get off the treadmill and have a bit more of a quiet life, spend time with God, increasing my prayer life if you like, more, you know, spending more time and actually listening to God: that's something I've been really thankful for. But in the last three months since we moved, my relationship with God has changed somewhat because for me, with the uncertainty that's come with a move in terms of, you know, how's it going to work out with my job, where are we going to live and things like that, I found myself relying much more on God, leaning on God if you like. And I've learned that there's lots of things in life, in the big picture of life, that I can't see, so having to trust God that He sees that picture that I can't has been, you know, a kind of a real shift, and I think that's where I am at the moment. So, yeah.

So Fiona, how about you?

[Fiona:] Well, looking back, although it was difficult at the start of lockdown because everything stopped for me, my work and everything, it was good, I think, to slow down, and I really enjoyed that really lovely weather at the beginning, being outdoors, opportunity to read and listen to podcasts, did some family history research and learnt to make yoghurt: simple things really. And now, and then later on in the year, there was an opportunity that came up for a job that I applied for and was successful in getting, and now since early January, I've been in a new role working with a community physio in the Lake District which has been really good and, yeah, a real positive.

[Kevin:] And so how would you say your relationship has been with God over this period of time?

[Fiona:] I think going back, you know, as I said earlier, going back into lockdown last year, having that space for quiet time, more than I've ever had, and so for prayer and Bible reading. I got into using the Lectio 365 app, which developed a good pattern, helping me listen to God and spend time with Him. And as you mentioned about Zoom meetings, the element for me that's been really beneficial and helpful despite this, has been with home groups, so the encouragement of having that fellowship ongoing, praying together and sharing, and that's really encouraged me in my walk with Jesus. Yeah, and I think when we were asked about sharing today about the best elements of the last year, the old hymn, *How Good is the God we Adore*¹ popped into my mind, and particularly the words which are "We'll praise Him for all that is passed, and trust Him for all that is to come."

[Kevin:] Yeah, I would agree with that and I think one thing that we're both really thankful for is actually the time we spent in Kenilworth. We had nearly seven years there and especially the time at St. John's, I think, we felt so blessed and so thankful to be part of that community, so yeah, there's lots of things to be thankful for about the past, and praise Him for that and look forward to what is to come.

1 How Good is the God we Adore by J. Hart 1712-1768

Reading: 1 Thessalonians 5:12-18 [NIVUK 1984]

[Lindsey:]

12 Now we ask you, brothers, to respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you. 13 Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. Live in peace with each other. 14 And we urge you, brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone. 15 Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always try to be kind to each other and to everyone else.

16 Be joyful always; 17 pray continually; 18 give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

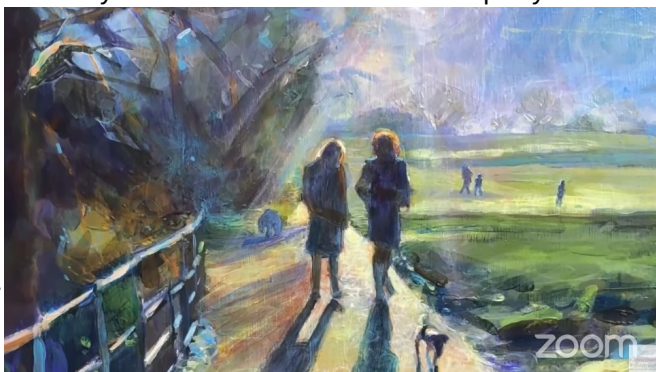
This is God's Word.

So now we're going to hear from Jane as she is going to talk to us.

Talk

[Jane Garsed:]

I wonder who you would regard as the biggest influencer in your faith journey, your biggest encourager? There have been a number of Christians, leaders and teachers for me who have really impacted on my journey. And particularly, they seem to have been there for a particular season. You know, when you're in a meeting and you hear a preach that you think has been written solely for your ears, or perhaps when you come upon a piece of Scripture that really is quite familiar to you and yet suddenly it speaks to you in a completely new way and brings new insights and understanding for you. Well, for me, the greatest influence in my Christian journey has been my sister, my sister Hilary, who became a Christian at the age of 18 and, unbeknown to me at the time, she committed to praying for me, and she prayed for 30 years for me before I eventually realised that I needed Jesus in my life. What a faithful pray-er she was! She has walked with me, she's pastored me, she's taught me, she's challenged me. She's walked with me through the pains and the disappointments of life, as well as those Hallelujah times. She and her husband are as much on fire for Jesus today, for leading people to faith as she was at the age of 18. Their faith is infectious, their passion for Jesus is invigorating and inspiring. Without Hilary walking this journey with me, I'm sure that I wouldn't have, in a human sense at least, overcome those hurdles that life has thrown at me.



And so imagine now the massive encouragement that this, the first of two letters to the church in Thessalonica, would have been to this bunch of new believers. In this intimate and tender-hearted letter, written with all the love of a parent to a child, Paul shows such praise and thanks to these new followers of Jesus. He writes to the church here to remind them that they were chosen by God, and filled with His power through the Holy Spirit. And he tells them how well they're doing. Paul begins, "We always give thanks for you. We continually pray for you." And he then goes on to reflect and acknowledge the endurance that they've gone through, and the hope they have in that.

This letter was written following the news Paul had received from Silas, and from Timothy, of just how well this church in Thessalonica is doing. They were

growing in their faith, despite the problems, despite the persecutions, despite being punished for that faith. They were persevering, even though brothers and sisters around them had lost their lives. For Paul, this news couldn't have come at a better time. Before going to Thessalonica he'd been jailed in Philippi. He was then forced to leave Thessalonica only after a few weeks, but trouble followed him to Berea, before he then moved to Athens where he was mocked and taunted. And so arriving in Corinth, Paul was low, he was disheartened. And in Acts 18 it refers to a vision that the Lord gave Paul to encourage him and to tell him not to be afraid. So this news, this great news about this church in Thessalonica, brought to him by Timothy and Silas, lifted his spirits. And so when Paul says in chapter 5 verse 18, "Give thanks in, not for, all circumstances, for this is God's will for you," we need to take it seriously. Paul knows what it is to suffer, and yet to give thanks. And of course, if that's not challenge enough, in the same verse he instructs us to be joyful always, and to pray continually.

For the Thessalonian church this was really important to hear, because Paul was teaching them and we see it in chapters four and five, about the Second Coming of Jesus and reminding them of the hope that they have, and we share, despite the loss and suffering that they're going through. We are reminded as believers to look beyond the here and now. Whatever we've suffered, whatever we're going through, he calls us to look beyond. In Romans 8:18, Paul says,

I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.

When it was suggested to me that I might like to give this talk, I initially thought that that was a great thing to talk about, thankfulness, you know there are so many really difficult passages to talk about in the Bible. But as I've looked around me, and at those very close friends going through huge suffering at this time, friends with terminal illness, life-threatening treatments, and those in our family battling, in our church family, battling to overcome such adversity, not to mention the effects of the pandemic, I know just what a tough message this is to hear, let alone to put into practice as well. But this is God's will for you and for me:

16 Be joyful always; 17 pray continually; 18 give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you.²

Thankfulness grows our relationship with God, it grows a greater dependency on God. It helps us fix our eyes on our Creator, Father God, our Saviour and our Redeemer. It moves us away from the sort of shopping list of prayers, though they have their place, but it moves us to focusing on the glory and omnipotence of God: God, who knows the solution before we even know the problem, who knows the end from the beginning, and who knows us intimately. God knows what He's doing when we face hard situations. Being thankful and fixing our eye on God and not the problem can and does change situations.

Thankfulness is part of our worship. It's a demonstration of our love to our most high God in whom we trust, the author and perfecter of our faith. In Him, we have a Father who loves each one of us deeply, more than we can ever imagine. But like any relationship, we have to play our part. He calls us to such an intense relationship that we can't help but pray ceaselessly, be joyful when humanly it's the last thing we want to do, and thank Him in everything, because He is who He says He is: He is God. Through sacrificial worship (for this is what thanksgiving in all circumstances is) God notices, and He hears us. Rejoicing, praying without ceasing, and thankfulness in the midst of a crisis are sacrificial and honouring to God, they go against the human spirit, they go against human nature.

2 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 [NIVUK1984]

Not only is it a powerful form of worship to God, but it also unseats the devil in his attempts to weaken our relationship with God. We have to remember that there is a battle for our souls. And if we're silenced in our praise of God, we can so easily give the devil a foothold.

Joyce Meyer writes, "When we maintain an attitude of thanksgiving, we close the door to grumbling and complaining. Thanksgiving is a lifestyle attitude."

Pete Greig, author of *Dirty Glory*³ and *God on Mute*⁴, says,

We give thanks because the Lord understands and feels what we're feeling. He's not aloof, not unconcerned or emotionally disconnected. We give thanks *in* all circumstances because He promised that He will never leave us nor forsake us. And He's given us the Holy Spirit as a comforter and a teacher. The Holy Spirit is incredibly active in ministering to our pain and loss.

So thankfulness stretches and deepens our relationship with God. It disarms the enemy, and it helps us to see beyond the circumstances around us, and fix our eyes on the promises and hope of the World to Come. Tim Keller says,

It's one thing to be grateful. It's another thing to give thanks. Gratitude is what you feel. Thanksgiving is what you do.

So let us give thanks and praise, and praise His name. For the Lord is good and His love endures forever.

Prayerful Reflection

[Andrew:]

Thank you Jane, that was such a clear and helpful message. I just want to give you a minute or two of quiet to just reflect on that and then we will respond. So let's be quiet.

This is the moment where you need to have pen and paper to hand. What Jane was encouraging us to do was to take seriously the task of being thankful, on purpose, in all circumstances. Just in a short moment we're going to play another two-minute video which is just a reflective video that helps you meditate: it will have streams and forest images. But I want you to use these two minutes to take a piece of paper, and maybe to get to at least 10 significant things that you're not just grateful for, but you're giving thanks for. This is a way of turning our eyes to God and turning our focus on the One who we live for. So let me just pray and then we will have that video. And I will give you those minutes to form reasons to be thankful.

Father God, would You kindle in our own memories now reasons to be thankful in our own lives and help us to record them. In Jesus' name, Amen.

So two minutes.

[video with music]

If you're anything like me, those two minutes must have flown by, I think I got up to seven things. So again, just a brief moment of quiet to just reflect on what you've written already, even if it's not up to ten. Just reflect on it, good things to say thank-You to God for, for His provision, for His grace, that covers weakness, for my family, for my church friends, for the life-giving things that I can do, hobbies or interests, for the promise of His provision in all circumstances. Vocalise it as I pray in your own words out loud: give thanks, give thanks with me now.

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4 ISBN 978-0830780716

We thank You Father, we thank You Father for the many good things that You have done, and the many good things that You help us with, and carry us through. We thank You for who You are. We thank You, perhaps more than anything, for the gift of Jesus Christ, who over all circumstances is worthy of praise and lifts our heads, even in times of pain. We thank You. We thank You. And, Lord, for all that has happened in the last 12 months, for the good that has come out of it, rather than just focus on the negatives, for the good that has come out of it, we praise You, we pray that that good would not be lost, and that we would treasure it and go forward with it. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

[Transcribed by Hamish Blair with help from <https://otter.ai>]

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