
PRACTICING

THANKFULNESS

CULTIVATING

A GRATEFUL HEART

IN ALL

CIRCUMSTANCES

SAM CRABTREE

“After more than fifty years living as a quadriplegic, I can definitely say that godly gratitude is the key to contentment. It’s why I am so excited about Sam Crabtree’s *Practicing Thankfulness*. This remarkable work provides thorough biblical support as to how God-focused gratitude alters a Christian’s orientation to himself, to others, and ultimately to the Lord himself. The pages are filled with practical guidelines to help a believer seize every life situation as a powerful opportunity to cultivate a glad and thankful heart. I give *Practicing Thankfulness* a double thumbs-up!”

Joni Eareckson Tada, Founder and CEO, Joni and Friends International Disability Center; author, *Joni; A Place of Healing*; and *When God Weeps*

“Christians have much to be thankful for—more than we could possibly imagine. But *knowing* we should be thankful isn’t the same thing as *living* a life marked by thankfulness and gratitude. Sam Crabtree provides a helpful and essential book that reminds Christians of what we have received in Christ and in the gospel as well as practical steps to cultivate a thankful heart. We should be thankful for this book.”

R. Albert Mohler Jr., President, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“As I read *Practicing Thankfulness*, I was freshly inspired by the beauty, necessity, and power of a grateful lifestyle and found myself thinking, *Every believer needs to read this book*. Not long ago, my precious husband, Robert, and I were plunged into turbulent waters as he was faced with two back-to-back cancer diagnoses (during a pandemic). Through it all, even in the midst of the most difficult days, gratitude has been a life preserver for our hearts, has transformed our perspective, and has infused us with unexplainable peace and joy. This terrific book will show you how thankfulness can do the same for you.”

Nancy DeMoss Wolgemuth, author; Founder, Revive Our Hearts and True Woman

“What a spiritually refreshing book this is! Reasoning from dozens of passages of Scripture, and showing substantial theological insight, Sam Crabtree explains blessing after blessing that come from a heart filled with continual thanksgiving, even in hardship. This is the best treatment of thanksgiving I have ever read. Highly recommended!”

Wayne Grudem, Distinguished Research Professor of Theology and Biblical Studies, Phoenix Seminary

“With theological precision and pastoral wisdom, Sam Crabtree helps us understand why it matters that our hearts are overflowing with thankfulness to God and how we can cultivate this godly grace in our lives. For many of us, this will be the most important book we read this year.”

Bob Lepine, Cohost, *FamilyLife Today*; Teaching Pastor, Redeemer Community Church, Little Rock, Arkansas

“In the midst of uncertain days we take comfort in the certainty of Christ’s love for us. We have so much to be thankful for! Many of us are asking along with the psalmist: ‘What shall I render to the LORD for all his benefits to me?’ The answer to this question is authoritatively inscribed in Psalm 116 and beautifully illustrated here in *Practicing Thankfulness*. Powerful and practical, this book is an invitation to come and see and enjoy what the Lord has done, lifting up the cup of salvation in response.”

Gloria Furman, author, *Alive in Him* and *Labor with Hope*

“An attitude of gratitude is always in season. And I want to be around anyone who reminds me of this. Sam Crabtree is that guy. In this book, he has given us a well-crafted, engaging, thoughtful, and, most importantly, biblical look into thanksgiving (not the holiday, but the Christian virtue and lifestyle). He reminds us that God is great, and so we worship him. God is good, and so we give thanks. Amen! Not many books are solely designed to encourage thankfulness. This is one, and thus deserves your attention and a place on your bookshelf. But before you put it there, read it. It will remind you of the importance of giving thanks to God for everything, beginning with this book.”

Anthony J. Carter, Lead Pastor, East Point Church, East Point, Georgia

“Giving thanks is not theoretical for Sam Crabtree. He knows it. He lives it. And now he’s studied it and labored to put one of his life’s works into these pages for you to enjoy. Those of us who have long known Sam and labored with him in pastoral ministry have seen the message of this book in action. And now we get to go behind the curtain and see more of what makes Sam such an example of Christian gratitude. Neither he nor his fellow pastors will pretend that he’s a perfect example, but in a day in which so many seem to be sinking deeper and deeper into cynicism and ingratitude, Sam is a genuine model and gifted teacher of giving thanks.”

David Mathis, Senior Teacher and Executive Editor, desiringGod.org; Pastor, Cities Church, Saint Paul, Minnesota; author, *Habits of Grace*

“I thank God for Sam Crabtree. He is a wise and jovial brother who practices what he preaches in this book: he gives thanks in all circumstances. (Don’t miss the last chapter—a creative list of one hundred practical ways to be thankful.)”

Andy Naselli, Associate Professor of Systematic Theology and New Testament, Bethlehem College & Seminary; Pastor, Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis

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SAM CRABTREE

 **CROSSWAY**[®]
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Practicing Thankfulness: Cultivating a Grateful Heart in All Circumstances

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“The righteous flourish like the palm tree
and grow like a cedar in Lebanon. . . .
They still bear fruit in old age;
they are ever full of sap and green.”

Psalm 92:12, 14

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INTRODUCTION

WHERE LIFE PIVOTS

Thankfulness is neither trivial nor inconsequential. On this one quality pivots the difference between maturity and immaturity.

What do I mean by pivot? A gate pivots on a hinge so that it swings one way to open the path and another way to shut you out. Wars can pivot on a single battle, so that one side decisively takes the upper hand when the outcome previously was in doubt. Ask Napoleon about Wellington at Waterloo, or Hitler about parachutes at Normandy. The war seemed to be going in one direction, then wham!—things took a sudden and decisive turn.

Gratitude is pivotal in whether I'll be given over to folly. It is decisive.

I dread becoming a bitter old sourpuss in old age. How will I escape it?

More than a mere word, *gratitude* reveals each person's core—his priorities, his presuppositions, his understanding of God and his ways. As Al Mohler puts it, how grateful we are is “the key to understanding what we really believe about God, what we really believe about ourselves, and what we really believe about the world

we experience.”¹ Accordingly, between gratefulness to God and indifference toward him lies the distinction between wisdom and folly. The pivot. Everyone’s entire future swings like a hinge on whether thankfulness is lubricated to swing easily—or if it is ignored, becoming encrusted by the rust and corrosion of our heart’s indifference, bitterness, or some self-inflated sense of entitlement.

Thankfulness is not just a religious duty, or a task on a list, or something nice people do, or a simple protocol of good manners to be taught to children. Rather, thankfulness is a powerful force. It wins or loses the war for your future. When practiced, it works toward beauty and produces fruit. When ignored, it works toward ugliness and chokes out life. At stake is the vitality of every human relationship, without exception.

Whether we are aware of it or not, we’re always moving toward either the satisfaction of an ultimately unspeakable joy or the pain of excruciating regret. These are the ultimate consequences of either gratitude or ingratitude. This movement toward one or the other may be swift and unmistakably evident, or it may be slow and incremental, nearly invisible—but it always means (wittingly or unwittingly) heaping up either pleasures or sorrows every step of the way.

These dynamics linked directly to gratitude are not optional. They’re always in play. A person might choose not to give thanks, but he cannot choose the consequences that will inevitably flow from such a choice.

1 Albert Mohler, “Thanksgiving as Theological Act: What Does It Mean to Give Thanks?” AlbertMohler.com, November 23, 2016, <https://albertmohler.com/2016/11/23/thanksgiving-theological-act-mean-give-thanks/>.

The workings of thankfulness we're unpacking in these pages have massively broad implications and profoundly deep roots. I repeat: gratitude is downright life-pivoting.

But (you may be thinking) isn't thankfulness already well understood? Isn't it routinely practiced by practically every civil human person around the world? And especially by Christians?

To a certain extent, yes. But just as a fire eventually flickers and dies out if left untended, gratitude can easily weaken and fade away if ignored in a world of distractions, busyness, and painful troubles. Daily life throws cold water on the smoldering embers of gratefulness in our hearts. This book seeks to rekindle that fire.

This book is for two kinds of people. It's for those who have doubts about God's goodness, and who therefore don't often feel grateful. And it's for those who believe God is good but want to grow in their faithful expression of appreciation for that goodness; they want to be more earnest and creative in thanking God as well as thanking those who are instruments in his hands. They're dead serious about wanting to produce the fruit that gratefulness can produce. They're hopeful. The aim here is to minimize your future regret and enlarge your future well-being by fostering your appreciation for all that God is doing.

I assume you already know that you *should* give thanks, and also that you know the basics of how to do it. While we'll explore in this book the influences at work in hearts that are grateful, our main purpose here is finding encouragement and guidance to get on with giving thanks. I want to encourage you to do what you already know is good: *practice thankfulness*.

THE RIGHTNESS OF GRATITUDE

Picture yourself in this situation: You've served a long time on death row in a dark and dank medieval dungeon, and your execution is imminent. You smell. No, you stink. It's too dark to see. What must you look like? Your clothing long ago turned to filthy rags, and the slimy stone cell reeks of excrement. A day arrives (remember daylight?) when you hear the footsteps of a guard approaching. A key rattles in the lock, the door swings open, and the guard growls, "Somebody has paid your ransom. You're free."

What?

As you stumble up the steps out of the dungeon, you turn to ask him, "Ransom? What was the ransom price he paid?"

The guard mutters, "Your ransomer had to die in your place."

"When will that happen?" you ask.

"It's done." He waves his hand to keep you climbing the stone stairs.

Stunned, you move toward the last doorway to the outside, where you ask one more question: "How did he die?"

“He died the way he knew he would,” the guard replies. “He was butchered alive.”

What a price to willingly pay! Wouldn't a proper response be thankfulness multiplied exponentially by amazement? And in your freedom and amazement, wouldn't you run to your friends—to everyone—and enthusiastically exclaim how grateful you are?

Christ pays the price, and is the price, as he himself told us: “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matt. 20:28). He paid the debt he didn't owe for captives who owed a debt they couldn't pay. How fitting for thankfulness to erupt from prisoners thus freed!

Paul described his own salvation—his own “prison escape”—in the following words, where his worship of God begins specifically with thanksgiving:

I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service, though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. (1 Tim. 1:12–15)

WE ARE ALWAYS RECIPIENTS

Not only our salvation (which is of incalculable worth, and “deserving of full acceptance”), but *all* that *everyone* has is from the hand of God: “He himself gives to all mankind life and

breath and *everything*” (Acts 17:25). God brings us into existence and sustains us (with or without our awareness)—we are thus recipients twenty-four seven. In every aspect of our lives, we’re beneficiaries. How fitting, then, for beneficiaries to express flabbergasted appreciation to their benefactor. And how wrong-headed to fail to do so! Such appreciation or lack thereof is not benign, like whether you part your hair on the right or left. No. Like a continental divide determining whether adjacent raindrops flow to the Atlantic or the Pacific, gratitude and ingratitude are a dividing line, bringing vastly different outcomes, as we shall see later in this book.

Paul rhetorically asks the Corinthians (and us), “What do you have that you did not receive?” (1 Cor. 4:7), the correct answer being obvious. If everything we have is received, then the giving of thanks for everything is fitting.

God has not only supplied everything we currently have, but in the future he’ll supply everything we will *ever* have. “He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?” (Rom. 8:32). There will never be an end run around his provision. If God doesn’t supply something, we won’t have it. There will never be an occasion when we rightly think, “I don’t need to thank God for *that*, because it didn’t come from him.” The soul that is vibrant and aware will gratefully recognize God’s gifts more and more, as more and more of his grace arrives.

God owes us none of this. He never has. Not a thing. All that we have is by grace—undeserved, unearned, and even unsolicited. God has supplied each of us with a zillion things we never requested or had the good sense to order in advance. Did you request two kidneys?

Two? Tear ducts that lubricate your eyeballs? An ozone layer around the planet? Synapses in your brain? No. He just gave them to us.

Such incalculable generosity calls for a response. How are we responding? The right response is gratitude—thankfulness. What is gratitude?

Gratitude is the divinely given spiritual ability to see grace, and the corresponding desire to affirm it and its giver as good.

In fact, the New Testament words we translate as “grace” and “gratitude” have the same Greek root.

GOD WASTES NOTHING

God is always at work for his own glory as well as for our good—everywhere, all the time. And he wastes nothing he does; he’s working everything for our blessing and benefit: “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good” (Rom. 8:28). Paul says we *know* this. Do we? Do we act like we know he’s working all things without exception for the good of those who love him? I’m sobered by the possibility that my grousing about this or that betrays the reality that maybe I don’t love him as much as I claim to. I’m acting like I don’t know what Paul says I know—namely, that God is working everything for my good.

The reason God works all things for the good of those who love him is that he himself is good. Therefore, underlying our true gratitude for God’s gifts is our amazement at God himself. As John Piper says, “If gratitude is not rooted in the beauty of God before the gift, it is probably disguised idolatry.”¹

1 John Piper, *A Godward Life* (Sisters, Oregon: Multnomah, 1997), 213–14.

God is great. God is good. For his greatness we praise him. For his goodness we thank him. His greatness stands alone—he is great whether or not he displays that greatness through any actions we see him take. For his expansive power and wisdom we humbly praise him.

If God were great—awesome in power, mighty in deed—but not kind to us, he would be a monster. He could grind us into a powder and blow us away, and he would be totally just in doing so. He would still be worthy of praise for his terrible powers, but we wouldn't be thankful. But we are thankful, because he applies his unstoppable ability toward accomplishing our everlasting joy in him, confident that even through our affliction he's "preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison" (2 Cor. 4:17). God is good, not just great. Believers fear him *and* like him! We praise him *and* thank him.

In fact, this is what marks the distinction between believers and demons. Demons know theology. They can recite Scripture. They know the claims of Christ, and they know his identity. Sooner or later they will bend the knee. *But they don't like him.* Demons can praise him, and they fear him; they recognize his awesome power. But they take no pleasure in him, and they never thank him.

In contrast, believers enjoy God and they thank him. "The real difference between a Christian and a non-Christian," Tremper Longman writes, "is that the former gives thanks to God."² I recently interviewed a Chinese woman through an interpreter.

2 Tremper Longman, *How to Read the Psalms* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 144.

When she fled China and examined Western culture, trying to understand differences between Buddhism and Christianity, she made this generalization about Westerners: “They don’t practice thanksgiving, so they must not be Christians.” I use her generalization as a mirror; I look in there and wonder if I see myself.

MORE EVERY MOMENT

Because God is always and everywhere at work doing good, there’s never a time when God-honoring hearts are licensed to lapse from the soul-enriching practice of thankfulness. Every moment is another opportunity to observe, embrace, and appreciate with gratefulness the wondrous workings of God, who works wonders even in ordinary things—as in, for example, “the way of an eagle in the sky, / the way of a serpent on a rock, / the way of a ship on the high seas, / and the way of a man with a virgin” things which “are too wonderful” for us to fully comprehend (Prov. 30:18–19).

Since God is working all things together for the good of those who love him, it’s entirely fitting that we be “giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Eph. 5:20). *Always and for everything*—what a sweeping assertion! When it comes to the extent of our gratitude, many people cite only 1 Thessalonians 5:18, “give thanks in all circumstances,” pointing out that it says *in* everything, not *for* everything.

But 1 Thessalonians 5:18 isn’t the only verse in the Bible about giving thanks. The Bible has much more to say. Ephesians 5:20 *does* say “for everything.” Thankful for what? Everything. And when? Always.

So the thankfulness of Ephesians 5:20 expands that of 1 Thessalonians 5:18 into something far bigger—not just *in* everything, but *for* everything.

Ponder “*in* everything give thanks.” A Hungarian proverb says, “When the bridge is gone, the narrowest plank becomes precious.” I suppose that’s one way to embrace a 1 Thessalonians 5:18 approach to life; in the collapse of the bridge, we express gratefulness for the part of the bridge that remains. But are we also thankful for the part that collapsed?

Likewise, in cold Minnesota winters folks jest about how the mosquitoes aren’t bad. Okay, but can the same folks also thank God for the mosquitoes when they’re thick?

From Ephesians 5, we’re instructed to give thanks when the mosquitoes are thick and also for the part of the bridge that collapsed. God is at work in both the presence and the absence of mosquitoes, and he’s at work not only in the bridge portion that survives but also in the collapse of the rest. He’s working *all* things for our good.

This is a difficult doctrine, cutting across our natural impulses. It requires faith in the completely sovereign God who isn’t done working all things, including mosquitoes and collapsed bridges, for the good of those who love him.

I don’t speak of collapsed bridges lightly. From my kitchen window I can see a ten-lane interstate highway bridge that crosses the Mississippi River. It replaces a bridge in that same location that collapsed in 2007, killing thirteen and injuring 145 others, many seriously. Are we to give thanks for *that*?

We need to understand that God is always working. Even the things that grieve God, the events that threaten to crush us, the

things that elicit his compassion and comfort for his people—those things are not accidents or flaws in the plan. They come from the same God who loved us enough to send his Son to die, the same God who says he will never leave us or forsake us. In the deepest pain, we can still give thanks because our God is still here with us and he is working all things for our good, even if it is difficult for us to see how on this side of eternity.

This kind of radical thankfulness simply isn't possible unless we are convinced that God is always working and that he is always good. Everything that afflicts or wounds and traumatizes us—including a collapsed bridge, your cancer, your miscarriage, your spouse's adultery, the death of your child, the loss of your job, or the collapse of the economy—is under the total control of a God who is unchangeably *for* all who are in Christ.

Paul Eickstadt, a fifty-one-year-old trucker, was on that bridge when it collapsed and killed him. Was that the end of his life? Yes, but only in a narrow sense. In another sense, that death was not the end of his life. On the banks above the river where his truck fell amid the rubble is a memorial with these words:

I was a traveler
 Across the country far and wide.
 I heard the mountain's testimony
 And saw the skies declare His glory.

Along the highways I traveled
 Till concrete and steel collapsed.
 Though crushed and buried
 I am still alive!

As man's work failed me
My Savior stood by me.
Consider the work of Jesus Christ
For his love endures forever

To conclude that when Paul Eickstadt died God had failed him is to conclude that God was finished with Paul. No way. God was not and is not finished. Ingratitude prejudges God before more of the story is revealed. God is not done. He never is.

AS NATURAL AS BREATHING

If we're to be thankful "always and for everything," then we're to be thankful for every breath, since God himself "gives to all mankind life and breath and everything" (as we saw in Acts 17:25). Oh, that gratitude would come as naturally to me as breathing!

It's not that we need more for which to be thankful. Rather, we should naturally be more thankful for what we already have. God serves us with every breath we take—which is about twenty thousand times per day. And that's just breathing. He also serves us with every blink of the eye, every beat of the heart, every multiplication of every cell, every brain wave, and every subatomic particle zooming around in our bodies countless times each millisecond.

And that's just our bodies. He's also holding our massive sun in its position at the just-right distance from the earth to give us weather that's livable for us and suitable for producing our food. Meanwhile he's stirring and cleaning the oceans and the atmosphere with lunar tides and wind currents. He's sweeping dangerous asteroids out of their supersonic earthbound trajectories

by having them absorbed by our atmosphere or by the moon's nearby gravity field.

He gives the capacity to reason, to recall, to relate, and—thank God—to repent. He gives us our frame, our forefathers, our fingerprints, our sex chromosomes, and the wombs in which he knits us. And he so loves us that he gives us his Son, that whoever believes in him would not perish but have everlasting life (John 3:16). He gives us promises, hope, adversity (more on that later), and faith.

There are plenty of blessings to go around—more than we could ever imagine. The human population, no matter how large, will never run out of material for which to give thanks.

There's no stealing of gratitude; it's impossible. Just because one person has given thanks for something doesn't mean another person can't give thanks for the same thing—over and over. One person's gratitude can never diminish the gratitude of others. In fact, it works the other way around. Gratitude tends to spread, multiply, and intensify like a contagion. Covet gratitude, earnestly desire to get good at it. Then spread it.



It is fitting—morally appropriate, as well as emotionally joyful—to thank God: “It is good to give thanks to the LORD” (Ps. 92:1). Thankfulness to God is *good*. It suits God, and it outfits the worshiper for relating rightly to God and to all of life.

Thankfulness doesn't earn us any favor with God, but is evidence that his favor is already being enjoyed. Accordingly, giving thanks is not a religious “work” that piles up merit in our account. Gratitude springs from faith, and faith is a gift (Eph. 2:8–9).

Therefore, if we're grateful, we should be grateful for being grateful. A heart of gratitude was given to us as a gift. Thank the giver.

Practicing thankfulness is not just a matter of mustering up the good manners at Christmas to thank Grandma for that new sweater you'll never wear in public. Thankfulness is all about the absolute and total lordship of God, his sovereignty over all things, and his kindness in using his almighty power to work all things for our good—while our enlivened hearts gratefully recognize him as the source of it all.

I've attended thousands of prayer meetings over the years, and our prayers can tend to gravitate toward petitions. Petitions are not wrong; God invites them. But the giving of thanks can easily get edged to the margins. Thanksgiving deserves a proportionately weighty place in our prayer lives. Giving glad-hearted thanks fuels confidence that God is caring for us right now, and it enlarges our hope that he will keep on carrying us to completion. "Hope grows in the soil of gratitude."³

3 David Little, *Imago Hearts* newsletter, August 7, 2019.

CHRISTIANS ARE CALLED TO BE THANKFUL.

What we believe about God is evident in how we exhibit thankfulness for all he has done. In this book, pastor Sam Crabtree encourages us to express glad-hearted thankfulness for God's unending provision in all circumstances. Through the daily practices of expressing gratitude—saying “thank you” to a neighbor, serving others in practical ways, or simply thanking God for his many gifts—we recognize the absolute and total lordship of God and his sovereignty over all things.

“After more than fifty years living as a quadriplegic, I can definitely say that godly gratitude is the key to contentment. This remarkable work provides thorough biblical support as to how God-focused gratitude alters a Christian's orientation to himself, to others, and ultimately to the Lord himself.”

JONI EARECKSON TADA

Founder and CEO, Joni and Friends
International Disability Center

“Reasoning from dozens of passages of Scripture, and showing substantial theological insight, Sam Crabtree explains blessing after blessing that come from a heart filled with continual thanksgiving, even in hardship. This is the best treatment of thanksgiving I have ever read.”

WAYNE GRUDEM

Distinguished Research Professor of Theology
and Biblical Studies, Phoenix Seminary

SAM CRABTREE is a pastor at Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota, where he has served for over twenty years. He is a former public school teacher, the chairman of the board of Bethlehem College & Seminary, and the author of *Practicing Affirmation*. Sam and his wife, Vicki, live in Minneapolis and have two daughters and six grandchildren.

CHRISTIAN LIVING

