

From thanksgiving to *thanksgiving*

BY DAVID B. CRABTREE

The Roman orator Cicero said, "Gratitude is not only the greatest of virtues, but the parent of all the others." Twenty-six years of pastoral ministry have convinced me that gratitude is the ultimate guardian of mental health and spiritual vitality. God is rich in mercy and grace. The only reasonable response to divine grace is human gratitude. I've seen thanksgiving vividly displayed in the lives of my parishioners. Here are three of their stories.

Thanks in death's shadow

December 5, 2005: One of my heroes was dying. Siblings, children, grandchildren and friends gathered in the hospital waiting room. As his pastor, I was invited to the intensive care unit to pray with and for the man who had played such a vital role in the history of our church.

Always so strong, I had never known him in weakness. Two brain surgeries and a stroke within 30 days brought him down. He was weakened, speechless, helpless ... and bleeding again.

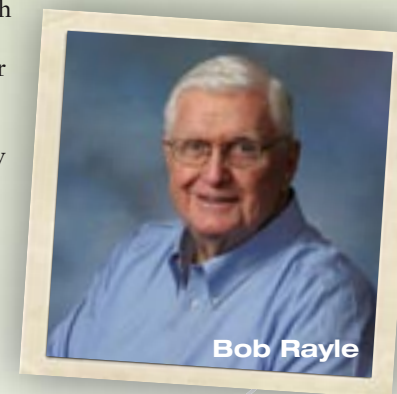
I hoped I was not faithless, but the unspoken message hanging in the air said, *He probably won't make it.*

Fervent prayer, falling tears, his sons, his wife, the assurances of "We love you, Bob," and they wheeled him into the operating room. I sat with the family and listened to their language of love, of hope, of faith, as they encouraged each other. I struggled to shake the shroud of doubt. All of the signs were clear and ominous. One of my heroes was dying. But God ignored the signs.

Last night I sat in the sanctuary with Bob Rayle a few hours before his 80th birthday. His recovery has been nothing short of amazing. I wanted his thoughts on thankfulness — the thoughts of a man who had been to the brink.

He smiled and said, "Every day is a gift. Sure, I'm grateful. I'm going to be 80 tomorrow."

Then he told me about friends from the church who came to see him in the midst of his crisis. One of the ladies had



Bob Rayle

thanksgiving

knitted a beautiful prayer shawl and laid it over his shoulders as they prayed. For those moments, Bob is eternally grateful. In his earlier years he had served as a bivocational church planter. As a pastor he had laid hands on hundreds of people and prayed for them.

"I prayed for so many people, and in most cases I never knew what happened," he told me. "Now they were praying for me. It was wonderful. What am I thankful for? I'm thankful someone was praying for me. I never realized how powerful it is to have someone pray for you."

I've thought a lot about my conversation with Bob. I've tried to imagine how many prayers have been prayed over my life. I thought about the prayers of my preaching grandfathers, my parents, my teachers and a hundred other saints I might have brushed past in my race through adolescence.

I thought about the prayers offered for me by parishioners over the past 25 years. I thought of the hundreds of times I know that Bob Rayle prayed for me. In that alone, I am compelled to offer thanksgiving and ashamed of any ingratitude that has ever found expression in my life.

Thanks on a financial edge

April 30, 2005: "We're outsourcing your job." It's a common business decision in our times but it is anything but common for those who find themselves suddenly unemployed. If only we could "outsource" the mortgage or school bills or car payments.



Mitchell Smith

Mitchell Smith had just enrolled in "Financial Peace University," a course that

was helping him get a handle on family spending habits. Then the warning was sounded that job cuts were coming. Mitchell needed financial peace! His position as a computer systems engineer was on the block. Although his company was "more than fair" and the severance package was substantial, Mitchell faced a midlife job change. Opportunities were few, but Mitchell and his wife, Cindy, kept their heads up, buckled their spending tight, and wrote a new chapter on trusting the Lord.

After a couple of months without a job, money was tight. When a job finally opened, the salary was substantially less than what they had been receiving. Mitchell wondered if they might have to write letters to three missionaries they had supported for years and cut back on their missions support at church as well.

"That's where a good marriage partner can save you," said Mitchell.

Cindy felt that missions-giving cuts must come last. She and Mitchell agreed they would cut everything else back, and missions would be the last thing to go. While financial pressure often tears couples apart, financial pressure served to confirm the Smiths' spiritual priorities.

"We learned to trust the Lord," said Mitchell.

Two and a half months into their odyssey the phone rang.

"Mitchell, what will it take to get you back here. We need you," said his former employer. Outsourcing had failed to deliver. Mitchell had left on the best of terms. He found himself back in the job he enjoyed, with people he enjoyed, and with a raise to boot. Looking back, Mitchell was thankful for God's full provision.

Who is truly secure in this volatile job market? Outsourcing or downsizing is to be expected in this economy. We must not make the mistake of trusting in our labors more than trusting in

the Lord. God is our "very present help in trouble" (Psalm 46:1, NKJV).

Man-made safety nets are prone to fail. Paul writes to the Philippians, faithful supporters of his missionary enterprise, with a wonderful promise: "And my God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:19). We should give thanks for the jobs we have. Thanksgiving is not merely a response after a rescue; it is an attitude that invites God's presence, extends our faith and releases His power.

Thanks when no end is in sight

October 2003: A wife and mother of two, talented in performing arts, having 20 years invested in a career in insurance, Kim Starkey's life was a rocket on rails. Nobody knew in 2003, but her rocket ride was almost over.

Those of us who served with her on a missions team began to sense something was desperately wrong with Kim. We didn't know she was in the midst of an intense struggle with a chronic autoimmune disease. We only knew that one of our key team members on a short-term missions trip to Siberia was constantly exhausted.

True to her character, Kim gave her all in our Siberian missions effort, returning home fully spent. In her vulnerable condition Kim was exposed to deadly bacteria. That exposure sent her battered immune system into a severe downward spiral.

She struggled to keep up at work. She visited a long line of doctors and specialists. She went out on short-term disability and ultimately had to shelve her career.

I called to check on her last week. In the past three years her kidneys have been damaged, her nervous system ravaged, and a fever is her daily companion. We talked about the doctors, setbacks and a dark medical prognosis. The hits just keep on coming.



Kim Starkey

Yet Kim says she has never known "such confidence, such peace, such freedom or such liberty. I know that God has it all in control." No doctor has offered an encouraging prognosis, yet Kim is full of thanksgiving. She is no longer looking for light at the end of the tunnel. She has found light in the midst of her tunnel!

"I am so thankful," she said. "My valley has been my mountaintop."

Thanksgiving

Why are we so quick to find God in the end product and so blind to His presence in the process? How is it we find glory only in the victorious finish on the mountaintop, ignoring the wonder of divine presence and provision in the fight?

I marvel at Kim's strength, at Mitchell's commitment, at Bob's assurance. I think I see in them the embodiment of Paul's declaration in 2 Corinthians 12:10: "Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong."

Kim's weakened body houses an incredible spiritual powerhouse. Bob's age is no match for his faith. Mitchell's needs will always

have the promise of a Heavenly Father's daily bread. Such strength is demonstrated most in their undaunted thankfulness.

We need a new take on Thanksgiving. We would do well to celebrate the virtue rather than the day. A single day of thanksgiving misses the point altogether. What if we were to use the day to rejoice in God's goodness, enjoy His abundance, and commit ourselves to the elevation of thanksgiving to a Christian cultural norm? What if thanksgiving became a daily habit?

I'd sure like to live in that world. **tpe**

DAVID B. CRABTREE is senior pastor of Calvary Church (Assemblies of God) in Greensboro, N.C.

E-mail your comments to tpe@ag.org.

SHE WAS BORN INTO A BROTHEL IN MUMBAI. HER MOTHER WAS SOLD AT 15. TODAY, THEY ARE SAFE WITH US.



PROJECT RESCUE

HOPE STARTS HERE >>

Rescuing today's young sexual slavery victims is nothing short of a miracle. The pain and trauma a victim has faced is so horrible, one can hardly imagine. Yet our determination to right this horrific wrong remains unshakable. Our joy is in seeing the miracle of restoration reflected in a young woman's eyes—from sad darkness to exuberant light. This provides our singular focus—giving hope in Christ.

Go to ProjectRescue.com to learn more about the ministry and how you can get involved.

P.O. Box 9901 Springfield, MO, 65801 | Phone 417.833.5584 | Toll Free 866.862.0919 | Fax 417.833.5568