

## Your Brain On Gratitude

1. Warm up: We're more than halfway through the summer now. What has been one of your best experiences so far this summer?
2. The word "oxymoron" refers to two seemingly contradictory thoughts scrunched together in a sentence or phrase. Examples include "crash landing," "militant pacifist," and Dolly Parton's famous statement, "You'd be surprised how much it costs to look this cheap." Even the Bible sometimes surprises us with oxymorons. Hebrews 13:15 says, "Let us continually offer a **sacrifice of praise** to God." Likewise, Psalm 116:7 says, "I will offer you, O God, a **sacrifice of thanksgiving**." We normally think of praise and thanksgiving as something that comes easy, but the word "sacrifice" implies something that's costly and hard. So, basically, these Bible verses are telling us to give thanks even when it's really hard to do so. This week we're talking about why that's so important.
  - a. Jennie Allen says that one of the biggest lies that often holds us back in life goes like this: "I am a victim of my circumstances; I am at the mercy of my circumstances." We can all fall into that trap. Looking back over the past week, tell us about a time (large or small) when you felt frustrated or angry about a situation that was thrust upon you. What words best capture the emotions you felt in that situation.
  - b. Have you ever known someone whose life perspective seemed to be dominated by victimhood? Tell us about them and how their victimhood affected their life.
  - c. Jennie Allen suggests that an attitude of gratitude is our most powerful antidote to becoming a victim to our circumstances. Have you ever known someone who had a really hard life, but nevertheless exuded joy and gratitude? Tell us about them and how their attitude of gratitude affected their life.
  - d. We used to refer to "cancer victims," but now we often refer to "cancer survivors." Similarly, we often now refer to "victims of gun violence" as "survivors of gun violence." Why is that shift in terminology important?
3. Scientific studies have documented the profound impact that gratitude has on our physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health. Look at the list of benefits on p. 3.
  - a. Why do you think a spirit of praise and thanksgiving has such a positive impact on our physical health?
  - b. Why do you think a spirit of praise and thanksgiving has such a positive impact on our mental and emotional health?
  - c. Why do you think a spirit of praise and thanksgiving has such a positive impact on our spiritual health?

- d. The Bible says, “Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.” I Thessalonians 5:16. Giving thanks in all circumstances is very counterintuitive, yet has the power to profoundly shift our focus from the negative to the positive. Why is it so hard for us to give thanks in difficult circumstances?
4. The Apostle Paul is a great example of what it looks like to offer up “sacrifices of thanksgiving.” Paul wrote the book of Philippians while he was in a Roman prison facing possible execution. Take a look at the list of hardships Paul experienced during his ministry and at the words he wrote to the Philippian Christians, as printed on p. 3-4.
  - a. If you experienced half of the hardships Paul did, how do you imagine that would affect your perspective on life?
  - b. See if you can identify all the things Paul expresses thanks for in the passage we just read despite his imprisonment? How do you think Paul’s perspective affected his quality of life?
  - c. Having an attitude of gratitude doesn’t mean denying the pain of terrible circumstances. It means balancing that pain by also noticing the beauty that can also be found in, through, or in spite of those circumstances. Think about a really difficult circumstance you’ve faced in your life (past or present). Tell us about the circumstance and name some good things you experienced while going through that circumstance or as a result of that circumstance.
5. Romans 8:28 puts Paul’s experience into words. It says, “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God. . . .” The verse doesn’t say God causes bad things to happen, but it does affirm that God can find ways to bring good out of even bad situations – just as God turned Jesus’ death into our path for redemption, then raised Jesus from the dead. This motif of Redemption and Resurrection forms the very core of our faith as followers of Jesus – and causes us to say, “There is nothing that can happen to me that God can’t find a way to redeem and raise me up from.”
  - a. Read Scott Sauls’ quote found on p. 4. What do you draw from his statement?
  - b. Read the quote from Elizabeth Kubler Ross found on p. 4. What do you draw from her statement?
  - c. In Romans 5:3, Paul says, “We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.” What do you think that verse means?
  - d. What is something practical you are doing, or can start doing, to cultivate an attitude of gratitude within you? How do you think that will affect you?

## Scientific Studies have found that grateful people . . .

Exercise more  
Make better decisions about their health  
Experience fewer aches and pains  
Sleep better  
Experience less jealousy, frustration, anger, and aggression  
Have less stress  
Cope better with trauma  
Have more resilience even during hard times  
Get lots more dopamine hits in their brain

### **Philippians 1:1-25, selected verses**

1 Paul to all the saints in Christ Jesus in Philippi. 3 I thank my God every time I remember you.

7 It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel.

12 I want you to know, beloved, that what has happened to me has actually helped to spread the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to everyone else that my imprisonment is for Christ.

18 Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, 19 for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will result in my deliverance. 20 It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be put to shame in any way, but that by my speaking with all boldness, Christ will be exalted now as always in my body, whether by life or by death. 21 For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. 22 If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which I prefer. 23 I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; 24 but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you. 25 Since I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith.

*See Paul's List of Hardships on next page . . .*

## **All the Hardships Paul Experienced – Paul was . . .**

Threatened with death in Damascus  
Threatened with death in Jerusalem  
Run out of Antioch  
Stoned in Iconium  
Stoned again in Lystra  
Beaten with rods and imprisoned  
Driven out of Philippi and Berea  
Mocked in Athens  
Kidnapped by a mob in Jerusalem  
Arrested by the Romans  
Flogged  
Shipwrecked  
Bitten by a poisonous snake  
Ultimately executed for his faith in Rome

### **Scott Sauls, *Beautiful People***

“Many of the world’s greatest souls became their best selves not in spite of but because of their distress. The great hymn writer Cowper wrote hopeful hymns and the great artist Van Gogh brushed epic paintings while contemplating suicide. Charles Spurgeon preached some of his best sermons while depressed. Abraham Lincoln, Winston Churchill, and Martin Luther King Jr. battled melancholy. The great composer Beethoven went deaf. C.S. Lewis buried his wife after a short, cancer-ridden marriage. Elie Wiesel and Corrie Ten Boom survived the holocaust. Joni Eareckson Tada lost her ability to walk in a tragic accident. John Perkins endured jail, beatings, and death threats from white supremacists.”

### **Elizabeth Kubler Ross**

“The most beautiful people we’ve known are those who have known defeat, known suffering, known struggle, known loss, and have found their way out of the depths. These persons have an appreciation and sensitivity, and an understanding of life that fills them with compassion, gentleness, and a deep love and concern. Beautiful people don’t just happen.”