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christian
woman

LOVE GOD. LIVE FEARLESS.

Gratitude

Giving thanks in all
circumstances.



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circumstances.



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Introduction

Thank You

By Marian V. Liautaud

One year, just after Christmas, our house caught on fire. Our then preschool-aged son turned on the stove that we thought was broken and had tucked away in the basement. As its burners heated up, so did the box of photos I had set atop them months before. It was this box—all of our family's memories—that ignited the entire basement. My sons, then 3, 4, and 7, and I fled across the street to the safety of our neighbor's home. From her living room we watched as smoke billowed from the windows while firefighters worked to douse the flames. Life as we knew it ended that day.





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With no material possessions (my neighbor literally gave me the coat off her back), we checked into a hotel. At dinner that first night, my husband looked at each one of us. With a catch in his voice, he said, "Everything I ever needed, I still have around this table."

In that moment, I understood what it means to be thankful in all circumstances.

Two weeks later, we moved into a fully-furnished apartment with a short-term lease. All we brought with us—our family of five—was a laundry basket of clothes.

The boys promptly kicked off their shoes and proceeded to run through the apartment, exploring every new nook and cranny. In their bedroom, they discovered three beds lined up in a row. On each one, sat a brand new stuffed animal. The owners of the building knew our boys had lost every toy—even all of the new ones they had just received for Christmas.

"This is the best gift I ever got!" Danny exclaimed, as he hugged the soft bear. Gratitude gushed out of him. This was a boy who now knew the difference between having much and having little, and either way he was thankful.

Our house fire was traumatic and life-changing. I would never wish such an experience on anyone. But I will be eternally grateful that God allowed it to happen to us. In burning away so many of our material possessions, it also destroyed the parts of us that were chaff. I learned to appreciate living simply. I learned that stuff is just



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stuff. I am not bound anymore by a desire to accumulate and hold tightly to the things of this world. I could recount a hundred more gifts we received from the fire. What initially appeared to be a devastating loss has been for our gain.

In many ways, choosing to be grateful in every circumstance is an expression of trust. It means saying thank you before we even know the outcome because we trust that God knows how to give good gifts. And he promises to redeem even the most difficult situations for our good. Being grateful in all circumstances means thanking God for gifts we wouldn't choose. We say thank you because we trust and love the Giver more than the gifts.

Grace,

Marian V. Liautaud

Contributing Editor, TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN downloads
Christianity Today International

Leader's Guide

How to use "Gratitude" for a group study



"Gratitude" can be used for individual or group study. If you intend to lead a group study, some simple suggestions follow.

- 1. Make enough copies for everyone in the group to have her own guide.**
- 2. Depending on the time you have dedicated to the study, you might consider distributing the guides before your group meets so everyone has a chance to read the material. Some articles are quite long and could take a while to get through.**
- 3. Alternately, you might consider reading the articles together as a group—out loud—and plan on meeting multiple times.**
- 4. Make sure your group agrees to complete confidentiality. This is essential to getting women to open up.**
- 5. When working through the "Reflect" questions, be willing to make yourself vulnerable. It's important for women to know that others share their experiences. Make honesty and openness a priority in your group.**
- 6. End the session in prayer.**

An Attitude of Gratitude



I determined never to allow myself
to become discontent again.

By Mayo Mathers

Just outside Kalispell, Montana, where I had a speaking engagement, I pulled my car off the road and turned off the engine. Opening the door, I zipped my coat against the crisp air and stood mesmerized by the autumn beauty surrounding me.

Later I called my husband from my motel room. "Steve! I've found the perfect town! Every street is tree-lined, every church has a steeple, every park has a gazebo. I even spotted the perfect house. And it's for sale!"



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At this, Steve laughed. He's come to expect some version of this conversation every time I visit a new town. As a child, my family moved frequently. My brother, sister, and I joke that although we grew up together, we all have a different answer to the question, "Where are you from?"

Steve's childhood was just the opposite. Born and raised in the same town, he draws great security from his family's roots that burrow back three generations into this central Oregon soil where we live.

I've accepted the fact that marriage to Steve means staying put, but occasionally my wings become entangled in his roots. Then, if I'm not careful, discontentment starts weighing me down. And nothing else so quickly cuts the line of communication between God and me.

One dark autumn afternoon, when life seemed particularly redundant, God showed me just how he felt about these bouts of ingratitude. As angry gusts of wind and rain whipped around my car at a stoplight, I noticed a stooped, old woman hobbling down the sidewalk. She wore no coat, and as she drew closer, I realized her feet were bare. Before I could even register my horror, the light had changed. As I drove away, God withered me with a single thought: *How dare you complain!*

Instantly overwhelmed with guilt for my narrow-sightedness, I pleaded for forgiveness. The specter of the old woman brought my own life into sharp focus! I determined never to allow myself to become discontent again.



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Yet despite my resolve, restlessness still sneaks in uninvited. Before long, discontentment pulls up a chair and settles in for a visit. When this happens, I read Psalm 77. There an anguished David lists his complaints: "Will the Lord . . . never show his favor again? Has his unfailing love vanished forever?"

But then David abruptly shifts his attitude by forming a different list: "I will remember your miracles of long ago. I will meditate on all your works and consider all your mighty deeds" (verses 11–12).

Contentment has nothing to do with what's going on in my *life*—and everything to do with what's going on in my *mind*. The apostle Paul understood this when he said, "I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want" (Phil. 4:12). Godly contentment is achievable, depending on which mental list I dwell on—what God *hasn't* done, or what he *has* done. The latter reminds me I'm already living in the perfect town and perfect house—because it's right where God wants me to be.

This article first appeared in TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN magazine.



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Reflect

- *What mental list are you dwelling on—what God hasn't done, or what he has done? Take five minutes to thank God for everything he has done for you today.*
- *When do you find yourself growing discontented? What can you do to grow in contentment?*

Radical Gratitude



What a dying friend taught me about being thankful "in all things."

By Mayo Mathers

"**Y**ou need to visit Marcia," said the woman I'd just met after learning we shared a mutual friend. "She's not doing well."

Marcia had moved to a neighboring town a few years earlier, so I no longer saw her as often as I once did. When I finally went to her home, Marcia's skeletal appearance shocked me. A once-gregarious bundle of energy, Marcia came to the door in a slow, excruciating shuffle.



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"I've been diagnosed with systemic Scleroderma," she said, blinking back tears. "It's a fatal disease where your skin and internal organs harden."

On that first visit we mostly cried. On following visits we talked more, stopping frequently to pray. Marcia wanted to respond to her disease in a way that honored God, but forming effective prayers seemed impossible.

"Do I ask God to help me accept my diagnosis, or do I ask for healing?" Marcia wondered aloud one afternoon. I wondered the same thing. One prayer seemed to indicate a lack of faith, the other a lack of trust.

As I read the Bible to Marcia, familiar verses, when held against her bleak future, often brought more questions than comfort. One in particular raised harsh questions: "In everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus" (1 Thessalonians 5:18, NASB). Could it truly be God's will for us to give thanks even for Marcia's terminal disease?

Regardless of how illogical the command seemed, Marcia decided to do it, although she added one condition: "God, I've never lied to you before and I'm not going to start now. There's *no* way I can thank you for this life-robbing, painful disease or for the fact I'm not going to see my grandchildren grow up. But I will thank you for the things for which I'm truly grateful."

With that brutally honest prayer, Marcia began experiencing an intimacy with God she'd never known before. And as I spent time meditating on that verse, I realized Marcia's



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conditional obedience to God's command wasn't presumptuous at all. The verse says *in* everything give thanks, not *for* everything. There's a big difference in those two little words. God would never expect our gratitude toward things he finds repugnant or evil. However, as our Creator, he knows an overall attitude of thankfulness frees us from the grip of fear, worry, or hopelessness.

From Doubt and Fear

Hebrews 13:15 says "let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God" (NASB). Setting aside our deepest emotions and speaking words of praise and trust—especially when we have doubts about what God allows in our life—are sacrificial.

My son has chosen to walk counter to God's call on his life. Despite this excruciating heartbreak, I anticipate the day when he recommits himself fully to God. However, I occasionally succumb to dark times of disillusionment and doubt. The only way I can dispel them is by sacrificing my urge to mourn what isn't and embrace what is: My son is not serving God; God is trustworthy in all things. Speaking words of trust takes an act of sheer will. But the reason God wants me to praise him is because he knows the pattern this forms in me. If I'm praising, I'm not doubting ... if I'm not doubting, I'm trusting ... when I'm trusting, I'm praising ... when I'm praising, I'm not doubting—and so on. A continual attitude of praise protects me against debilitating doubt.



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Attitude Readjustments

Recently my husband, Steve, made a huge career decision that affects us both without discussing it with me beforehand. My immediate desire was to lash out at him, but I managed, barely, to hold my tongue. Yet inwardly I burned with resentment and anger.

"Lord," I pleaded one morning, "take these feelings away. I don't want to wound Steve with my words, but I need relief from these emotions." In the midst of my prayer, God reminded me to "give thanks in everything."

The very thought of being thankful at that moment was galling. It was the *last* thing I wanted to do. But as I begrudgingly thanked my way around the circumstances of Steve's decision, my resentment slowly receded, and I became overwhelmed by a renewed confidence in God. The devastating comments I longed to hurl at Steve dissipated to the point where I actually could view his decision objectively!

Until this incident, I'd thought any time I held my tongue I deserved big pats on the back from God. Now I realized holding my tongue wasn't enough. Destructive emotions still swirled inside me, affecting my attitude. Only by forcing myself to speak words of thankfulness did I find relief from the deep wound Steve's decision had inflicted. Thankfulness changed my perspective so I could discuss our situation rationally and constructively.

Enjoying the Results

The last part of Hebrews 13:15 talks about "the fruit of lips that give thanks to [God's] name." God knows precisely the



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extent of the sacrifice involved in setting aside our natural inclinations, and he's quick to make it worth our while.

Marcia is incredible evidence of this. She began pursuing an attitude of thankfulness while I was out of town for several weeks. When I visited her on my return, I couldn't believe the difference. Physically Marcia hadn't changed—still emaciated, the hardened skin on her hands stretched so tightly it pulled her fingers in toward her palms. She was on heavy doses of pain medication and rarely got out of bed. Emotionally, however, she was a woman transformed.

"What's happened?" I asked, scarcely believing the sparkle in her eyes.

Marcia smiled. "I've been thanking God!" she explained. First, she said, she'd begun with little things: the blue sky outside her window, the roof over her head, her wonderful husband. Every day she persevered in this task regardless of how much pain she was in. "It's the most astonishing thing," she said. "The more I praise God, the more aware of his presence I become. In fact," she continued, "one morning as I was thinking of things I was thankful for, without even realizing it I heard myself say, 'God, thank you for this disease that's brought me so much closer to you!'"

I could only stare in astonishment. In her determination to be thankful, regardless of how illogical it seemed, Marcia had loosened the chokehold of terror in which the disease had held her. Marcia had switched her focus from her helplessness to God's holiness. No wonder God tells us to cultivate thankfulness in our lives! It's an attitude that empowers rather than debilitates.



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I saw it in the sparkle of Marcia's eyes. I felt it when my son called recently and made plans to meet us at church. Such tasty fruit has made me an avid believer in this illogical command that wields such power. And I will continue, *in everything*, to give thanks.

Mayo Mathers, was a regular contributor to TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN. This article originally appeared in TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN magazine, 2006.

Reflect

- *Is there (or has there ever been) a circumstance in your life that you could not thank God for? Have you come to a point where your perspective changed and you were able to give thanks? What changed?*

A Door to the Heart of the Father



Acknowledging everyday
gifts from God.

By Diane Eble

Many people know the value of gratitude, and some even keep a gratitude journal as a way of acknowledging God's daily gifts. While simply recognizing and being grateful for the blessings in your life will make you feel happier, I think there is a deeper element to recounting all the ways God blesses us.



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What if every good thing in your life is not just a wonderful blessing that happens to come your way, but a specific gift from a personal God who longs to have you know him as a generous Father? What if every gift is meant to be a door to the heart of your heavenly Father?

When I began to take this view, it led to an amazing process of transformation. As I began to write down the things that felt like gifts in any given day, I saw more of them.

Not only did this simple practice open my eyes to the gifts that were no doubt there all along, but ignored in my self-absorption. It also precipitated a complete change in perspective.

A Whole New Focus

I found that when you look for the gifts the gracious heavenly Father bestows, it's like being given a certain kind of spectacles for viewing the world—like those 3-D glasses you get when you go to certain movies. Keeping a "gifts journal" focuses me more on God and his character—goodness, grace, generosity, mercy, kindness, wisdom—and less on my own problems.

Some people believe that what you focus on expands in your life. I would take it a step further: What you focus on is what you *become*. Paul the Apostle exhorted his readers to dwell on whatever is positive and true (Philippians 4:8), promising that if we do that, the God of peace will be with us.

The Value of Remembering

In the Old Testament, God repeatedly tells his people to "remember." Remember his wonderful deeds, his kindnesses,



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his miracles. When they remembered, they were blessed. When they did not remember, they fell into sin and often judgment followed.

In fact, the entire Bible is a history of how God acted in the lives of his people as a whole. When you keep a gifts journal, you begin the record of how God works in your life as an individual.

When you remember and record God's goodness in your life, you can go back to it later, during the times when God doesn't feel so near or active or real. At those times, reading your own history of God's goodness to you personally will bolster you. It will be easier to believe that he is with you even now, though at the moment a cloud might block his warmth and light from reaching you.

How to Keep a Gifts Journal

It's not difficult to keep a gifts journal. Here's what I suggest.

Choose a format. Use a blank book, 3-hole binder, spiral notebook—anything that will make it easy to record your history of God's goodness. (I provide a ready-made gifts journal in two different formats at AbundantGiftsBook.com.)

Take the time. At the end of the day, take five to seven minutes of quiet time to reflect back over the day. Jot down the date, and think: What was difficult? Did God help you with that difficult situation in any way? What joys pop out at you? Was there anything that had seemed difficult at one point, but now you see that it was really a gift in disguise? Were there any simple pleasures you savored? Any gift you gave another person that brought joy to their heart and yours? Was there



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something you heard, or read, or something someone said to you that seemed especially meant for you at that moment?

Whatever blessed you, jot down the kind of gift it was, and describe it in just enough words that you will remember it later. This is totally subjective—that's okay. We're talking about your heart and your personal relationship with God, your loving, heavenly Father.

I promise you that if you do this for even one week straight, that will be enough to change your perspective. Once you begin to look for God's gifts, his tokens of that generous spirit that loves to bless his beloved children, you will begin to feel loved unconditionally.

And that, my friend, is what God intends: that you know just how generous your heavenly Father is, and how much he loves you.

Remember, and be blessed.

*Diane Eble is the author of **Abundant Gifts: A Daybook of Grace-Filled Devotions** and a book publishing coach and consultant. For a free daily devotional sent via email, go to AbundantGiftsFromTheWord.com.*



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Reflect

- *What do you think is the value of keeping a "gifts journal"?*
- *Author Diane Eble says, "Keeping a 'gifts journal' focuses me more on God and his character—goodness, grace, generosity, mercy, kindness, wisdom—and less on my own problems." What attributes of God have you discovered by reviewing daily gifts?*

The Gift of Gratitude



TV news anchor Deborah Norville on some surprising benefits of saying "thank you."

By Dawn Zemke

It's one of the phrases you use most often, usually without thought. But just speaking two simple words can actually make you happier, healthier, and more energetic. In her new book, **Thank You Power**, Deborah Norville explains how saying "thank you" can yield those benefits—and many others.



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Deborah has reason to be grateful. The two-time Emmy winner and anchor of the television news magazine *Inside Edition* has achieved that elusive balance between a thriving career and a rich family life with her husband, Karl Wellner, and their three children.

But Deborah's also had plenty of opportunities to practice gratitude during tough times. Her parents divorced when she was young, and her mother suffered from rheumatoid arthritis. Despite Deborah's difficult childhood, she graduated from college with a journalism degree and became the anchor of *NBC News at Sunrise* and a frequent substitute for hosts Bryant Gumbel and Jane Pauley on the *Today* show. But when NBC replaced Pauley with Deborah, viewers blamed her for destroying the beloved Gumbel/Pauley partnership. Ratings declined, and Deborah lost her position.

Looking back, Deborah's thankful she doesn't hold a demanding job and has had time to host a radio program, act as a correspondent for a CBS newsmagazine, anchor *Inside Edition*, spend time with her family, and research and write *Thank You Power*. She credits her Christian faith for always helping her find reasons to be grateful. Deborah spoke with TCW about how gratitude has changed her life.

What inspired you to write *Thank You Power*?

I'd always felt life went better when I focused consciously on the positive. But I wondered if I was just faking myself out like a kid who insists on wearing a certain jersey because he's always managed to score in it. So I decided to explore the simple question: Does counting your blessings have any quantifiable benefits?



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What answers did you find?

One study, by Professor Robert Emmons from the University of California Davis, involved three test groups. One group focused on their blessings, another focused on negative events, and the third just focused on neutral facts such as "Today I washed the car."

Participants kept track of factors such as how much they exercised, how often they suffered from headaches or allergies, how well they slept. The results showed those who focused on blessings were more optimistic, more social, and more apt to help others. They even averaged an hour and a half more exercise each week than participants in the other two groups.

Do these results have a scientific explanation?

When you're feeling positive, dopamine—the feel-good neurotransmitter responsible for happiness—activates the cerebral cortex, the part of your brain where cognitive thinking happens. So not only will you feel good, but you'll be smarter, do better on tests, and improve your ability to negotiate and resolve the disputes you face daily with your spouse and children over doing homework or taking out the trash.

How have you implemented Thank You Power into your daily life?

I keep a notebook in my purse, and almost every day I write down three moments I can revisit later and say, "That was cool!" Right now I've been looking back on an entry about an elderly friend who died this past June. As I listened to the tributes people gave at her standing-room-only memorial



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service, I thought, *How fortunate I am to have been friends with a woman of such character and strength! To honor her, what can I take from her life and inject into mine?*

Or I look at a notation about my daughter, who's incredibly generous with hugs. She doesn't care if my boss yells at me or I get scooped on a story. I'm her mommy, and she loves me. Those reminders deflect my attention from the momentary goofiness that brings me down.

Do you have to work at being thankful?

My natural tendency to be grateful is a reflection of my childhood. Since my mother was physically unable to do what my friends' moms could, I was always intensely thankful when she participated in something. She couldn't always pick us up from school, so if I saw her green station wagon, I said, "Yay! Mom's here!" When she had her hair fixed and lipstick on, that was even cooler, because it meant she was feeling good. So I developed this knack of finding something to celebrate.

How is Thank You Power especially helpful during difficult times?

Thank You Power encourages you to look at life through a different lens. People whom life has tested or shortchanged develop an inner resilience. My mom's health problems were actually a blessing, because they forced me to become far more capable than most other 11-year-olds, running the household with my sisters for my mom. Consequently, I easily negotiated temptations and mistakes that tripped up my friends in their early 20s. I wouldn't have seen that blessing if I hadn't changed how I viewed my childhood.



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I could've just said, "God's mean and unfair to me," and hardened my heart in anger toward him. Instead, I made that hurt part of a reservoir of strength.

So Thank You Power is consistent with your Christian faith?

It's the essence of Christianity. Countless places in the Bible, through good times and bad, Jesus and the prophets teach gratitude. Even at Lazarus's death, Jesus gave thanks—at first glance, a very strange thing to do. But God's children are meant to learn from all experiences. Lazarus's death was a blessing because it was one of Jesus' first opportunities to work a dramatic miracle. So this book was really written 2,000 years ago. I'm just giving it a modern spin.

How does your book's philosophy differ from the teaching of *The Power of Positive Thinking* or *The Secret*?

It's proactive. The others' teachings are passive. I've positively thought I could lose 20 pounds, but I didn't see the needle on the scale budge. Losing weight requires doing something active. And take *The Secret's* idea, "If you see it, you can be it," to its logical conclusion. If I develop terminal cancer, did I get it because I had a bad attitude? No. *Thank You Power* is cause and effect. It's like putting treasures into a box, then opening it and looking at your possessions—your experiences, skills, loved ones—and noting how each has given your life meaning.

How would you answer those who say, "Being thankful is easy for her, but my life's a mess"?

Everyone's life is messy. In difficulties, you need *Thank You Power* the most. When I was anchor of the *Today* show, I got run out of town unfairly. I could easily focus on all the



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slights, perceived and real, I experienced professionally and personally. But doing so would be useless.

If you're feeling depressed, overwhelmed, or cheated, you're most likely focusing on what you *don't* have. You can grow gratitude by recognizing blessings you *do* have, no matter how insignificant they seem. You'll see life in a different way and may find yourself going down a different path.

Dawn Zemke is a freelance editor and writer

Reflect

- *What challenging experiences have you had in your life that you now view as gifts?*
- *Do you have to work at being grateful, or does gratitude come naturally to you? How will you cultivate a grateful heart?*

The Secret of a Grateful Heart



The practice that released my
bitterness and restored my joy.

By Karen O'Connor

I jumped out of bed one morning, committed to jogging before my day began—and before anyone I knew saw me in shorts. Halfway down the block, a teenage boy zipped by on his bike, looked me over, gave a "thumbs up," and shouted, "Go, Grandma, go!"

At first I was insulted. The way he said the word "grandma" made me feel so *old*, even though I was only in my 40s at the time (OK, *late 40s*).



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Before I could shout back, he was out of sight. I finished my run, then sat on a bench overlooking the ocean and burst out laughing. *At least he noticed me*, I thought. That's something for which I could be thankful.

Later, as I stepped off a curb to cross the street near my home, a car whizzed by and nearly clipped my toes. I jumped back in shock and anger, then realized I had more reasons for gratitude than anger. I was alive—and unhurt.

And so it continues, day after day. I'm paying attention. I'm watching my attitude. I'm saying "thank you" more often. And the more I do, the more grateful and joyful I become.

No Thanks

I haven't always been a grateful person. For years I focused on what I didn't have—in my marriage, in friendships, within myself—instead of looking at what I *did* have and being thankful for it.

I'd married a man I was crazy about, but we were never as close as I wanted. I worked hard at becoming what I thought he wanted instead of becoming the woman I was created to be. He was committed to his law practice and I busied myself with our children. We began drifting apart. We forgot how to laugh with one another. We made small talk instead of truly communicating. We stopped making love.

Then one day, after nearly 20 years of marriage, I noticed him smiling and talking with a single woman who belonged to our tennis club. I confronted him, but he denied his contact with her.



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I started doubting myself, and tried again to be the woman I thought he wanted—but nothing changed. He'd given his heart to her, and eventually he moved out. A friend encouraged me to see a counselor. I took her advice—reluctantly. I remember walking into Dr. Brady's office and telling him my problem: "My husband's going to leave," I sobbed. "How can I make him stay?"

"You may not be able to," he said. "But you can discover what's right for you and your children. Focus on that." Dr. Brady asked about my spiritual life. I didn't see what that had to do with my troubled marriage. "I believe in God," I said. "I even go to church sometimes." But during this crisis in my life, I was convinced *I* had to do something concrete for my children and I would lose the only security we had.

Over time, however, Dr. Brady showed me the emptiness in my heart had been there all along—even before I married my husband. I was still looking for recognition from a human being, and my discontent stemmed from my longing for acceptance.

When my husband left, I finally realized I couldn't keep going on my own power. *Maybe Dr. Brady is right*, I thought. I needed to learn about God and his place in my life. For two years I visited churches, read inspirational books, listened to tapes, and attended seminars in my search for God. During that time I met a man named Charles, who later became my husband. He was on the same spiritual quest. We became friends and started attending church together. I met a woman there who invited me to join a Bible study.



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Through a study of John's gospel, I developed a true relationship with Jesus Christ. Weeks later, I finally surrendered to God and received Christ as my Savior.

My new life began that day in December. As my relationship with Jesus grew, I finally found the fulfillment I'd longed for all my life. I noticed I didn't worry as much and I complained less as I focused on God instead of me. I made decisions without fretting. I felt more peaceful. In early January, Charles committed his life to Christ, and we decided to get married the following April.

Lessons in Gratitude

During the next year, the Lord continued to teach Charles and me the importance of giving thanks—and how to focus on the good things in life rather than on the hardships. Still, I found myself falling into old patterns when money was scarce or when I had a disagreement with one of my children or my parents.

One year, just before Christmas, Charles and I were flat broke. The company he worked for had collapsed. My freelance projects dried up. The small savings we had were soon gone.

We prayed for wisdom, grace, and a job for at least one of us. The next week Charles received a money order for \$500 from an anonymous donor. "I know you're having a rough time," read the note affixed to the check. "I want to share my blessings with you."

Months later, a woman from my church approached me. She'd heard me share some of my life story at a ladies'



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prayer event. "My first husband left me many years ago," she said, "so I understand some of the pain and anger you feel over the loss of your first marriage."

Then she offered some needed advice: "If you want to find real contentment, stop looking at the past. Focus on today and start giving thanks for its unique blessings. Write your blessings on slips of paper and put them in a bag. From time to time, look at what you wrote. You'll be amazed at how God has been with you every step of the way."

I was so inspired by her advice, I went home and immediately found a gift bag and labeled it "Our Blessings." Charles and I set it on our dresser and placed a pen and pad of paper beside it.

Counting Our Blessings

We began recording our blessings that day. I jotted down my thanks for the little bird in the tree outside our bedroom window, the fragrance of fresh-baked bread, spring rain, laughter, sunshine. My husband recorded his appreciation for a quick resolution to a family dilemma. And he was truly grateful when he was offered a new job with benefits. I even wrote my thanks that through an illness God taught me to take better care of myself. And I thanked him for restoring my children after the pain of my divorce from their father.

One morning, several months after we started this daily practice, we emptied the bag. It was time to reread all the scraps of paper we'd accumulated. What a joy it was to be reminded of these gifts all over again: a special walk and talk we'd shared on the beach one morning, topped off with



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hot tea and our favorite muffins. The safe arrival of our first grandchild. A wonderful backpack trip in the Sierra Mountains. An old hurt healed. On and on I read.

Then my husband grabbed a handful and continued. By the time we got to the last bit of paper, tears trickled down our faces. How could we ever again doubt that God provides for our needs and that he protects us no matter what?

Giving thanks in this tangible way changed my life. I began paying more attention to the people I loved. I appreciated my husband in a new way. I realized how blessed I was that my elderly parents were still alive and well. I gave thanks for the joy my three children and two stepchildren bring me. Through each one, I saw how the Lord is present to me every day, down to the smallest detail.

Since the day I dropped my first slip of paper into our blessing bag, God's taught me to give thanks for everything—*regardless of the circumstances*—which I've discovered is the true secret of a grateful heart.

The more I thank him, the more I learn to trust him—with my health, my husband, my children and grandchildren, my neighbors and friends, my money and possessions, my decisions.

Theologian Henri Nouwen says in his book *The Return of the Prodigal Son* that gratitude is more than a mere "thank you." It is a *discipline* to be practiced each day in a conscious way. The apostle Paul reminds us in his first letter to the Thessalonians, "Be joyful always; pray continually; give



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thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus" (5:16–18).

The benefits of giving thanks are many. The Lord has freed me from bitterness and discontentment. I've put the divorce and financial worry behind me. He's renewed a sense of humility. I know I'm where I am today by God's grace. He's rekindled a heart of joy in me. I now view all of life as a gift to be cherished and shared with others. Most important, I know the God of my salvation lives within me. And for that, above all else, I'm most thankful.

Karen O'Connor is an author, retreat speaker, and writing instructor who lives in California. Visit her at: www.karenocconnor.com. This article first appeared in TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN magazine.

7 Secrets to a Happy Heart

Why gratitude is key to
cultivating true joy.

By Annette LaPlaca

Have you ever seen the 1960 movie *Pollyanna*? Child actress Hayley Mills starred as the orphaned daughter of missionaries who becomes the ward of her rich, embittered aunt. Pollyanna's infectious habit of being thankful transforms the crabby aunt, the crotchety household staff, and the whole town.





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These days, people use the label "Pollyanna" to suggest someone childishly naive in her ability to look on the bright side. But being happy doesn't require us to turn a blind eye to troubles such as gangs and crime and Columbine. Neither does it mean we chant shallow platitudes such as "Don't worry, be happy."

Like most attributes we long for (peace, patience, goodness), a happy heart takes root in the discipline of giving thanks. It's the secret weapon of the joyous Christian. But what is it about gratitude that creates a happy heart?

Happy in the Lord

Of course I was madly in love with my husband, David, when we got engaged. But that's nothing compared to the love I have for him now after nearly 11 years of marriage. The difference? Gratitude! I'm thankful for the hundreds of times David's scrubbed the pots after dinner, for the times he's instantly forgiven my crabbiness, for the willing spirit he shows about helping my single-parent friend, for the amazing enthusiasm he brings to parenting our kids. As I think about the multitude of actions that prove David's love for me over the years, I'm filled with joy.

That's the way I feel in my relationship with God, too—and the reason I believe the Old Testament is loaded with verses that instruct God's people to "remember" his goodness, such as 1 Samuel 12:24: "Be sure to fear the Lord and serve him faithfully with all your heart; consider what great things he has done for you."

Whenever I struggle to feel joyful, I choose to reflect on how God always meets my needs. Time after time, I've seen God



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put forgiving love in me right where angry resentment had been half an hour before, simply because I asked him to.

As my relationship with God grows, my love for him becomes more deeply entwined with my gratitude to him. The more I remember his goodness, the closer I feel to his comfort, peace, and presence.

Happy with Others

It's easy to recognize how integral gratitude is to experiencing joy in God. It's less obvious to see how it affects my other relationships—but it does!

When I'm tempted to keep score with others, or resent a friend who talks more about herself than listens to me, gratitude helps me remember how "full" my cup is—how well God's caring for me. Then I'm better able to reach out to my friend without becoming bitter.

I once had a coworker—a woman I considered a friend—who unintentionally dragged me into her troubles with management. The result was a difficult annual review for me, and the postponement of a promotion I'd expected. Preoccupied with her own misery, she didn't realize what she'd done, so I couldn't expect her to apologize. I had to forgive her, of course—as a believer, I don't have a choice. But it helped me to look around at my other positive work relationships, at my marriage and beautiful kids, and realize God had given me so much. I was able to consider that whole episode a bump on the road and let go of my resentment against her.



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Surefire Strategies

If developing an "attitude of gratitude" is difficult for you, take heart! You'll be surprised how a little bit of discipline goes a long way toward giving you a joyful spirit. Try these action steps:

1. Start a joy journal. Keep a small notebook by your bed, just for jotting down a few good things God's done for you that day. This doesn't take long—especially if you use one or two key reminder words. At the beginning, or on a day when your heart's heavy, this may take some work. But even on those days, try to come up with three items, minimum. It may help to look back over the other days' entries to spark "happy thoughts" of God's faithfulness to you. As your thankfulness "skill" develops, this exercise becomes a pleasure.

2. Play Pollyanna's "Glad Game." In the movie, Pollyanna plays a game her father taught her. He told her that in every situation, there is something to be thankful for, if only you look for it (1 Thessalonians 5:18). One time, when the little girl had been hoping for a doll to come in a supply shipment, she received a pair of crutches instead. Pollyanna chose to be thankful she didn't need them!

A few months ago, my father was diagnosed with the worst kind of leukemia a person can get. It's been rough sailing—with aggressive chemotherapy and infection setbacks—ever since. Of course I'm pounding the gates of heaven with my requests for his healing, but at the same time I've found some things for which to be thankful. I'm glad my father's a passionate Christian. I'm grateful we've had a good relationship, and that my husband and kids love him and



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know him well. He's good at Pollyanna's game himself. He may be suffering, but his attitude of gratitude comes through loud and clear during these tough times.

3. Look for the silver lining. My former coworker really seemed to loathe working in our office. Day after day, her list of verbal gripes grew longer, which didn't do much for my morale. Finally, I suggested she list what she *did* like about her job. The next day she surprised me by showing me her list. She admitted she'd been so busy focusing on her grievances, she'd forgotten to notice the good things in the office.

All-or-nothing thinking is common when you feel discouraged, but don't fall into that trap. There usually are a few times, at least, when things go right. So look for the silver lining.

4. Say "thank you" before "please." When it comes to prayer, don't jump directly into your list of wants and needs, no matter how pressing those may seem. God loves to hear us appreciate him! Start by praying the way Jesus taught his disciples in Matthew 6:9–13, by honoring God ("Hallowed be your name"). Your praise will naturally include thankfulness for his faithful love, the daily help of his Holy Spirit, and his provision for you.

5. Remember the "Thanksgiving Special." For years I assigned myself the annual Thanksgiving task of making a list of "100 things to be thankful for." Why not compose your own year's list? I typically find the first 20–30 easy to come up with, then get bogged down in the middle. But all of a sudden I find myself remembering little things that have built my trust and confidence in God. I always manage to come up with 100. Give it a try.



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6. Try a Scripture search. Remind yourself of the importance of "rejoicing" by searching the Bible—both Old and New Testaments—for God's instructions in this area. (Pollyanna says there are at least 800 "happy texts" in the Bible. I'll have to take her word for it.) It will spur you on to "consider what great things [God] has done for you."

I love 1 Thessalonians 5:16–18 because it reminds me it's God's will that I be "joyful always" and "give thanks in all circumstances." God wants me to have a happy heart as much as I long to be joyful. It's not all up to me; God's there, waiting to give me joy.

7. Just ask. When you struggle to obey God in the area of giving thanks, don't hesitate to ask him to show you how. He's longing to draw you close, to give you strength for the challenges of every day. So ask for his help.

What begins as an awkward discipline of thankfulness can end as a habit of happiness. Gratitude's been my secret weapon for finding contentment and joy; put it to work in *your* life!

Annette LaPlaca, a former TCW regular contributor and freelance contributor to several magazines, lives with her family in the Chicago area. This article originally appeared in TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN magazine, 2000.



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Reflect

- *Start your own "100 Things to Be Thankful For" list. What are the first things that come to mind?*
- *Are you more likely to say 'please' or 'thank you' first when praying? How does expressing gratitude first help refine our prayer requests?*

Additional Resources

Books to help you further.



Radical Gratitude: Discovering Joy Through Everyday Thankfulness by Ellen Vaughn (Zondervan, 2005).

Gratitude is easy when things are going well.

But how are we to be thankful during our darkest hours? Vaughn shows how powerful, life-changing gratitude can be the key to daily joy. Embrace these unforgettable stories and share them with others as their messages lighten your load—and light your path—with God's inextinguishable love.



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Additional Resources

The Attitude of Gratitude: Developing a Thankful Heart by Nancy Leigh DeMoss (Revive Our Hearts, 2000). Are you a grateful person? What difference does it make? In this penetrating booklet, Nancy Leigh De Moss explains how our physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being, and our relationships, are all affected by whether or not we have a grateful heart. Nancy explores the contrasts between a grateful heart and an ungrateful heart and suggests the grateful people are full, contented, and truly blessed regardless of their circumstances. A "Making It Personal" section provides practical suggestions for cultivating a grateful heart, through "a week of giving thanks."

Abundant Gifts: A Daybook of Grace-Filled Devotions by Diane Eble. Inspiring stories that open your soul to grace. 260 true stories that focus your eyes on the lavish gifts of God.

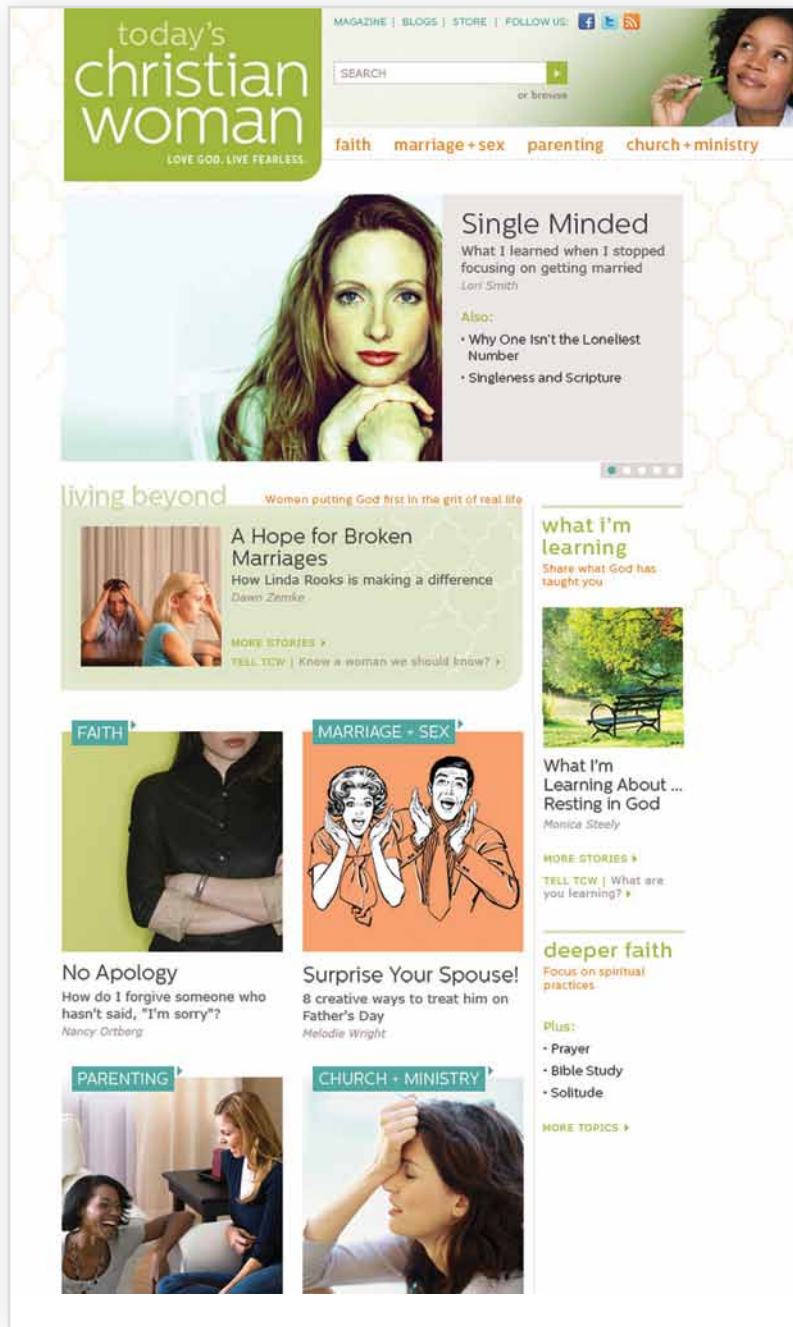
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