

## Captivated By Thanks 2Thessalonians 1:3

By Phillip G. Kayser at DCC on 11-22-09

### Introduction

Years ago I read about Lieutenant General Bruce C. Clarke. I have no way of verifying the story. It's probably made up, but the way Reader's Digest put it, he was deputy commander of the Eighth Army in Korea, was lecturing to some Korean officers. And at one point during the lecture he told his favorite joke. The interpreter then translated, using only seven or eight words. But everyone burst into hearty laughter. After the lecture the general asked the interpreter how he had been able to tell such a long joke so quickly. "Well, sir," the Korean said, "I didn't think everyone would get the point so I just said, "The General has just told a joke. Everyone will please laugh."

These Koreans were very polite. And I think that for the most part, American Christians are a polite people. We laugh at poor jokes because we don't want to hurt people's feelings. We act interested even when we are bored out of our skulls. We expect our children to say thank you even if they don't feel thankful. And that's not necessarily being hypocritical. It is learning to do the right thing even when you don't feel like it. It's honor and respect.

And there is a certain sense in which obligation for thanksgiving is appropriate. This passage speaks of that. But how do you get to the heart, where you really feel thankful, and where we are joyful in our thanksgiving as Paul was? How do we get beyond mere politeness to the place where we are overwhelmed with thankfulness to God for all that He has done?

It has often been pointed out that thinking always precedes thanking. You can't really feel thankful until you have understood the significance of what has been done for you. And the more unworthy we see ourselves or the more significant the gift, or the more loved the giver, the more deeply we feel the thanksgiving. If we are not aware of how much sin we have been saved from, we will not be as thankful as the person who has been overwhelmed with the sense of his own unworthiness. In Luke 7:47 Christ explained why the prostitute loved him more than the Pharisee. He said, "**to whom little is forgiven, the same loves little.**" This morning my goal is not to encourage you just to say the words "Thank you" more often, although that probably needs to be done too. But it is to help you to grow in

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your genuine sense of thankfulness to the Lord. Sometimes we have to start saying thank you before we feel it, but my prayer is that we will develop a profound sense of thankfulness.

## **I. We have a debt of thanks (“We are bound [*opheilo*]”)**

The first thing that Paul says in this passage is, “**We are bound to thank God.**” The word “bound” is the Greek word *opheilo*, which in the world of finances means to have a debt, in the world of social expectations means to have an obligation, and in the physical world means to have a constraint or necessity. Any way you interpret the word, it shows that thanksgiving is obligatory. It is a debt that we owe.

Why would that be? Well, from the time that we come into this world, we receive, and receive, and receive. Children, think of the countless diapers your parents changed when you were kids, the sleepless nights, the bottles, the baby food, the baths, haircuts, and the trips to the zoo. God made us so that we would be on the receiving end from our parents for years. This is why Scripture says that we owe our parents support and encouragement and honor in their old age.

But it isn’t just the things that our parents gave to us. You could not enjoy light from a light bulb without the investment and inheritance of previous generations. We could not have steel, computers, books, or a host of other things that we take for granted without realizing that God set up a covenantal passing-along-of-blessings from the past. So we need to be thankful for compounded covenantal growth.

But think of this: even if you were stripped of all clothing and dumped into a jungle on an island with absolutely none of the blessings that I have mentioned, you would still have the blessing of your education and your experiences. You could do things on that island with your mind’s education that would benefit you and help you to survive. The more you think about it, we are constantly surrounded with blessings that we have not been thankful enough for. I remember at Prairie Bible Institute hearing a missionary thanking God with feeling over a clean glass of water that he was drinking on furlough. He couldn’t take clean water for granted. Do you have salt and pepper for your food, and perhaps other exotic spices? Be thankful. Do you have brothers and sisters? Then be thankful. We really do have a debt, an obligation, or a necessity for thanksgiving.

## II. This debt is primarily to God (“we are bound to thank God”)

The second thing that Paul says in this passage is, “**We are bound to thank God.**” No matter how much man is involved in the equation of blessing, the apostles knew that ultimately every good gift comes from above. If we take seriously the meaning of debt for the Greek word *opheilo*, then it means that we owe thanks to someone; we are indebted to someone. Romans 13 uses the same word when it says, “**Give everyone what you owe him. If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue.**” So Paul is saying that we owe *God* a huge debt of thanks. When we withhold thanks from God we rob Him of what He is due. We are stealing from God His glory and honor just as much as when we fail to pay a monetary debt to someone that we owe.

I noticed this past week that Eyclight Media is trying to raise funds for a documentary on Edward Spencer. The story line is about a steamboat, the *Lady Elgin*, that sank in 1860. And it’s a true story. Only time will tell if the documentary gets off the ground. But let me tell you about the story. The steamboat, *Lady Elgin*, floundered off the shore of Lake Michigan, just above Evanston, Illinois. A crowd had gathered on the beach watching helplessly. Edward W. Spencer, a student at Garret Biblical Institute saw a woman clinging to some wreckage far out in the breakers. He threw off his coat and swam out through the heavy waves, succeeding in bringing her back to land safely. Sixteen more times during that day Spencer braved the waves and rescued 17 people. Then he collapsed in a delirium of exhaustion. He never recovered his health fully, though he lived a long time. He died at the age of 81 in California. But in the notice in the paper at his death, it said that not one of those 17 rescued persons ever bothered to thank him. Perhaps they thought he was a paid rescue worker and didn’t need thanks, though even then it seems inexcusable.

Now you multiply that one unthanked act a million times over and you get a sense of what God must think of us, and how He must feel when we fail to thank Him. He’s given His only Son to die for us, and on top of that He has freely given us all things. Yet many times we take those things for granted. This is why Psalm 107 says over and over “**Oh that men would give thanks to the LORD for His goodness, and for His wonderful works to the children of men.**” That’s telling us not only how the *Psalmist* feels about our lack of thanksgiving, but how *God* feels. We take so much for granted, that the *Psalmist* has to groan over our unthankfulness.

If you were in a desert you would cry out to God for water and be thankful should God provide it, but do you thank Him for the abundance of clean water you drink now? Everything you have is a gift from God. We owe Him for our salvation from hell; for forgiveness of sins and justification; for our sanctification; for food, clothing, rain, sunshine, entertainment and a hundred other perks that we enjoy in America. Since every breath is a gift from God, we owe Him thanks for life and for the degree of health we are enjoying. In fact, at the beginning of the service I listed off many other things that we ought not to take for granted. If everything comes from His hand, then the debt to God indeed is huge. We must not have a humanistic thanksgiving that is only man-centered, but should have a God-centered perspective on this need for thanks.

### **III. This debt of thanks never ends and can be expressed in every circumstance. (“always”)**

Paul goes on to say, “**We are bound to thank God always.**” So we not only have a debt of thanks, and it’s a debt that we owe to God, but this debt of thanks never ends and must be expressed in every circumstance. In 1Thesalonians 5:18 Paul said, “**in everything give thanks.**” No matter what circumstance you may find yourself in, there is something thankworthy that you can offer up to God. Sometimes it is an attitude of thanks that is not expressed, but your heart is open to God in thanks. You can always give thanks. In fact, I really appreciated the prayer that Scott offered up last Sunday, where he quoted Matthew Henry.

Let me give you the full story. Matthew Henry was riding on a horse down a road in England when thieves stepped out into the road and stopped him. They had weapons; he did not. And they rifled through everything he had and took everything of value, including his money purse. When he got home later that day, he wrote in his diary, “Let me be thankful first, because I was never robbed before; second, because although they took my purse, they did not take my life; third, because, although they took my all, it was not very much; and fourth, because it was I who was robbed, not I who robbed.” Apart from Sovereign grace, Matthew Henry knew that *he could have been the robber*. It wasn’t just a joke, though I’m sure he got a chuckle out of writing that. This is taking the perspective that things could have been much worse. That is seeing a silver lining around every dark cloud. When our hearts are prone to grumble it is good therapy to meditate upon the blessings that come with the disaster and to be thankful that things were not worse.

But Paul takes things one step further. This book indicates that he is thankful for the privilege of suffering for Christ. He's thankful for the affliction of verse 6. In fact, he speaks of the church having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Spirit. In chapter 2 he is able to rejoice when persecuted. But I find the way he words it in Ephesians 5 to be the most remarkable. He says, "**giving thanks always for all things.**" – not just "*in* all things," but "*for* all things." This means that we are not only supposed to thank God for the silver lining all around the dark storm cloud, but for the storm cloud itself. After Scott's quote of Matthew Henry last week, I was reading in Henry's journal, and was amazed at his constant thanksgiving through kidney stones, the death of his children, diabetes, and other painful illnesses and events. He was a man given to thanksgiving. The disciples thanked God that they were counted worthy to suffer persecution. All things work together for the good of those who love Him. Now can you begin to see how great our debt to God really is? Everything is a Romans 8:28 gift. Have you thanked God for the miserable things that have come in your life? In a moment we will see that when we take that step of faith it brings us healing and joy.

#### **IV. This debt of thanks is fitting for the Christian ("as it is fitting")**

Paul gives a fourth dimension to this thanksgiving: Not only is the thanks a kind of debt, but it is fitting that we pay the debt. We aren't paying this debt because our arm is being twisted. When we look around us and meditate deeply on all that God has provided, we see every reason to give thanks. Even when we are sick, we see reasons to give thanks. It's fitting; its worthy; its deserving.

Of course that implies the utter unworthiness and unfittingness of being unthankful. How unfitting is lack of thankfulness? I'm going to read a short section from 2 Chronicles 32; a passage that describes godly king Hezekiah. 2 Chronicles 32:24-26: "**In those days Hezekiah was sick and near to death, and he prayed to the LORD; and He spoke to him and gave him a sign. But Hezekiah did not repay according to the favor shown him, for his heart was lifted up; therefore wrath was looming over him and over Judah and Jerusalem. Then Hezekiah humbled himself for the pride of his heart, he and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that the wrath of the LORD did not come upon them in the days of Hezekiah.**" 2 Kings, which records the same incident, indicates that Hezekiah merely forgot about the incident. He just forgot about it. God had

healed him marvelously and he went on with life without thanking God and giving Him the glory. But 2 Chronicles words it, “**Hezekiah did not repay according to the favor shown him, for his heart was lifted up; therefore wrath was looming over him and over Judah.**” Lack of thankfulness is an evidence of pride in God’s eyes, and James says, “**God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.**” The state of your heart is reflected by the state of your thanksgiving. How much indebtedness do you feel to God? Can you say with Paul, “I am bound to give thanks always, as it is fitting”?

Turn two books forward to 2 Timothy 3. This chapter begins by saying, “**But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come.**” What is it that makes things so perilous in the last times? Is it nuclear weapons; murder in the streets? You might expect Paul to give as his reasons for perilous times a list of the front headlines from our newspapers: war in Iraq; bank robberies; gang slayings; Mafia control, United Nations treaties. But he doesn’t. He goes to heart problems which plague even Christians. Look at his explanation in verse 2: “**For** [here comes the reasons why times will be perilous. “For] **men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving,**” etc. Notice the word “unthankful” in that list. God is describing a time when things are as perilous as they can get and he lists people who are proud, self-centered and unthankful. A truly thankful heart is a heart that is no longer wrapped up in self.

And you will notice in our verse in 2Thessalonians 1 that the reason Paul was thankful was not just what God had done in his own life. It was what God had done in the lives of other people. And I think this fifth point is the neatest one because it shows an approach to life that can free us of bitterness, resentment, isolation, dissatisfaction and envy – if we will be thankful. Thanksgiving is the antidote to many of the problems that plague inter-human relations. Thanksgiving is the opposite of the perilous times that 2 Timothy 3 talks about.

## V. **We should thank God for all the brethren (“for you, brethren.”)**

Notice what he says in 2Thessalonians 1:3: “**We are bound to thank God always for you, brethren, as it is fitting, because your faith grows exceedingly, and the love of every one of you all abounds toward each other, so that we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for**

**your patience and faith in all your persecutions and tribulations that you endure.”**

Paul was thankful for each one of the people in this congregation. He was thankful for what God’s grace had wrought. In 1Thessalonians 1:2 he says, **“We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you in our prayers.”** Notice the words “for you all.” Here’s the odd thing about that: This was a troubled church that had *hurt* Paul in some ways. On several counts they lacked submission. They didn’t pay him for his labors when he worked hard among them. 1Thessalonians 2 says that he had to be patient with them. He had to warn them against immorality in 1Thessalonians 4, and some of them were not receiving his teaching very well on this, and he had to rebuke them. They were buying into false doctrine. In 2Thessalonians he had to warn them about listening to false teachers rather than listening to what he had brought them. He warns them not to be lazy, saying, **“For even when we were with you, we commanded you this: If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat.”** He was in effect saying, “You guys are disobeying my lawful admonitions.” This could be frustrating, and it would have been easy for Paul to be resentful and negative toward them. He warned them about other disorderly conduct. Yet six times Paul says that he thanks God upon every remembrance of them. Let me read each occurrence to you.

**1Thessalonians 1:2 We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you in our prayers,**

**1Thessalonians 2:13 For this reason we also thank God without ceasing...**

**1Thessalonians 3:9 For what thanks can we render to God for you, for all the joy with which we rejoice for your sake before our God,**

**1Thessalonians 5:18 in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.**

**2Thessalonians 1:3 We are bound to thank God always for you, brethren, as it is fitting, etc**

**2Thessalonians 2:13 But we are bound to give thanks to God always for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God from the beginning chose you for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth,**

Did you get the repetition – that every time Paul thinks about them he thanks God? I think this was Paul’s recipe for not getting bitter. When you have relatives and friends who have hurt your feelings, ignored your advice, and generally been a pain in the neck, it is very easy to distance yourself

from them and to begin to get bitter. Every time you start feeling those negative feelings, deal with it like Paul did. Thank God for them.

When you allow yourself to hold onto bitterness, resentment, isolation, dissatisfaction, envy or constant frustration with other people, they have won the conflict. And the reason they have won is because they are controlling you and keeping you from having the joy and freedom of the Holy Spirit. Every time you think about that person, or that incident, it's like Satan has popped your bubble of pleasure with a pin. And he delights in doing it. He takes the wind out of your sails. You lose joy in ministering every time they are around or every time you think of them; your mind lies awake at night brooding and thinking of ways you could have said things better to put him or her in their place. A thankless person is a person in bondage. Paul told Timothy that the unthankful are living in peril. Hezekiah is an example of a believer living under God's displeasure. That's being in peril. And internally we can feel the stress. Make it your goal to start thanking God for those people every time a bitter thought about them comes up. Say, "Lord, I'm feeling the negativity coming up again, and I reject it. By faith I thank you for these people who test me. Thank you for their salvation; their gifts; their ability to sanctify me even now; thank you for testing the supernatural nature of my love for them; thank you that you are forcing me to grow." Spend time in thanksgiving and you will feel the bitterness depart as God's supernatural joy starts to take over. You may think this is hyperbole. It is not. I have experienced the healing power that comes with thanksgiving over and over again. And I never tire of telling people to thank God always for all things. You will never be the same once you make this a habit.

## **VI. There are compelling reasons to pay this debt ("as it is fitting, because ...") – Your homework is to write down 100 things for which you are thankful.**

But there is one last point that I want to highlight. Paul says, "**We are bound to thank God always for you, brethren, as it is fitting, because your faith grows exceedingly, and the love of every one of you all abounds toward each other,**" etc. There are two words that prove this point. The words "as it is fitting," show there are reasons. In fact, one translation has, "we have good reason for it." Well, what are the good reasons for which Paul thanks God? The second word says, "because," and then he lists them.



I'm not actually going to preach on this point. I want you to do some thinking on it. Paul says that there are compelling reasons to pay this debt of thanks. He lists some of the reasons why he was thankful for the Thessalonians. But I would like you to come up with a list of 100 things that you are thankful of, and when negativity clouds your thinking, start going back to this thank-list and praise God. In fact, if you've got bitterness against someone, make at least 50 of those hundred things be things you are thankful for about that person.

### **Conclusion (Psalm 50:23 in the NIV)**

In conclusion, let me read you a verse from Psalm 50. I'm going to read it from the NIV. God says, "**He who sacrifices thank offerings honors me, and he prepares the way so that I may show him the salvation of God.**" He says first of all that thanksgiving is a sacrifice. It is hard to do. It takes effort. Sometimes it is so hard to thank God for the jerk you want to complain about that it feels like you are yanking your insides out. But make the sacrifice. Put yourself on the altar. Crucify your fleshly desire. Thanksgiving is sometimes simply a sacrifice.

But then he goes on to say that thanks prepares the way to victory over sin; thanks prepares the way to salvation from whatever it is that grips us and controls us. "**He who sacrifices thank offerings honors me** [he's paying his debt of thanks], **and he prepares the way so that I may show him the salvation of God.**" Thanks is a powerful tool of victory.

And for my final homework, I would like to ask you to think about the person or persons who are the most difficult for you to give thanks over. Secondly, I would like you to think of what you need deliverance from. Then claim this verse – "Lord, I need deliverance from such and such, and you have promised that when I start being thankful in all circumstances and for all circumstances, that I will prepare the way for my deliverance. I ask you to deliver me from this, and by faith I thank you for this promise. Be glorified in this whole situation." Let the Holy Spirit deal with your heart on those two items, and claim the victory through Jesus Christ. Let's pray.

Father, may each one here experience the reality of Paul's joy and thankfulness in all circumstances and for all circumstances. We desire to keep pressing into the upward calling that you have given to us in Christ Jesus. Please forgive us for those times that we have gotten angry and bitter and been unthankful. Help us to trust You in this critical area of life. Cleanse all grumbling, complaining, bitterness, evil thinking, envy, frustration, and dissatisfaction from our lives as we commit ourselves to a lifetime of thanksgiving. Show us your salvation from all the things that burden us

down and cause us to enter into the joy of the Lord, which is our strength.  
We pray this in the strong name of Jesus Christ's our Lord and Savior.  
Amen.

## Captivated By Thanks

### 2Thessalonians 1:3

By Phillip G. Kayser at DCC on 11-22-09

#### Introduction:

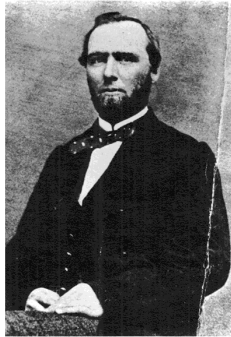
- How does verbalizing thanksgiving often help you to begin feeling thankful?

#### I. We have a debt of thanks (“We are bound” Greek = *opheilo*)

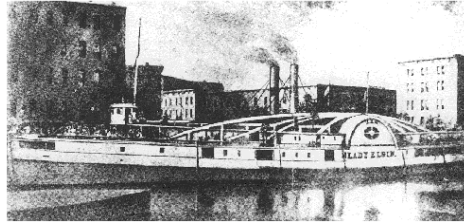
- Do you feel your debt is little or great? Why?

#### II. The debt is primarily to God (“thank God”)

- Describe the following event and how it relates to our thankfulness to God.



Edward Spencer



The Lady

#### Elgin

#### III. This debt of thanks never ends and can be expressed in every circumstance (“always”)

- What’s the difference between thanking God for the “silver lining of the cloud” and thanking God for the cloud itself? Which one is 1Thessalonians 5:18 and which one is Ephesians 5:20?

#### IV. This debt of thanks is worthy or fitting of the Christian (“as it is fitting”)

- How did 2Chronicles 32:24-26 show how unfitting lack of thankfulness is?
- What about 2 Timothy 3:2?

#### V. We should thank God for all the brethren (“for you, brethren” with 1Thes. 1:2)

- What made it hard for Paul to thank God for some of the Thessalonians?
- Who wins the conflict when you hold on to bitterness, resentment, isolation, dissatisfaction, envy, and frustration?
- Thanksgiving brings h \_\_\_\_\_ to the troubled heart.

#### VI. There are compelling reasons to pay this debt (“as it is fitting, because...”)

- Your homework: On a separate piece of paper write down 100 things for which you are thankful. Make this a “thank list” that you can keep adding to in the coming year.

#### Conclusion: Psalm 50:23 in the NIV says, “He who sacrifices thank offerings honors me, and he prepares the way so that I may show him the salvation of God.”

- For whom do you find it most difficult to give thanks?
- From what do you need deliverance (“salvation”)?
- Let the Holy Spirit deal with your heart on these two items