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THE GIFT OF CHOOSING GRATITUDE

By Erin Burkhardt

"Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures forever." (Psalm 107:1)

In A Christmas Carol by Charles Dickens, the miserable miser Ebenezer Scrooge spends the story evaluating his past, present, and future, ultimately seeking repentance for his selfish ways and committing to a life of generosity and gratitude.

However, there is another character who quietly embodies the theme of the novel without fanfare: Scrooge's faithful bookkeeper, Bob Cratchit. While Scrooge takes the main stage, this humble man is truly the hero of the story. Living in poverty with a terrible boss, a sick child, and an uncertain future, his circumstances are bleak. Yet, through all his trials and without the promise of a better life, he is kind, he is hopeful, and he is grateful.

We do not choose the circumstances into which we are born. It does not seem fair that some are born into privilege with health, while others are born with disease and limited prospects. Sometimes we find ourselves looking to the heavens, pleading with God, asking why He allows such hardship. It's difficult to look at our pain and fulfill the command (woven throughout the entire Bible) to be grateful:

"Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 NIV)

When life is crumbling, when our health is failing, when our hearts are breaking, how can we be grateful? We can choose to be grateful because gratitude is not based on circumstances.

The warm fuzzies you get when you receive a gift is an emotion -- and emotions are fleeting. They make us laugh and cry, yell and sulk. They can hang around for a second or drag on for days, but eventually they will pass. Emotions are not bad, but they can help us or harm us depending on how we use them. When all we strive for are positive feelings, thinking they are the ultimate goal, we will always find ourselves disappointed and frustrated.

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If we choose to take our emotions and give them to God, however, He does something incredible. He gives us what the world never could:

"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." (Galatians 5:22-23a NIV)

Every single one of these "fruits" grow from "roots" of gratitude. You cannot have one without the other.

For Scrooge, it took almost an entire lifetime to choose a life of gratitude, even though he always had abundant means for "happiness." After finally choosing repentance, he was blessed -- but how much more meaningful and purposeful could his life have been had he lived like this from the very beginning?

Bob Cratchit had very few worldly pleasures, but he chose gratitude whether it changed his circumstances or not. Yes, he was blessed handsomely in the end, but his life clearly showed how he was rewarded all along.

True gratitude is faith in God's love, trusting that His promises run deeper than anything this world can offer us. It surpasses circumstances and frees us to live in abundance, full of the fruit of the Spirit -- and to one day enjoy the eternal rewards that surpass our greatest desires.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER

1. Does your life more closely reflect that of Ebenezer Scrooge or Bob Cratchit?
2. Do you cling to your pain and fear, putting off until tomorrow what God wants you to surrender today?
3. How can you choose gratitude right now despite your circumstances? Find time to pray and accept the thankful heart God wants to give you!

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, thank you that your promises are not fleeting like our emotions. Thank you that, if we ask, you will be our solid ground. Help us to live our lives in light of eternity and not in reaction to our pain or worldly desires. You tell us to give thanks in everything and we acknowledge that is only possible through your power and love. Please cultivate in us every fruit of the Spirit that we might have a truly thankful heart. Amen.

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