

**Give Life to Your
DREAMS**

Chapter 1

Gratitude

*Gratitude is not only the greatest of virtues,
but the parent of all others.*

—Marcus Tullius Cicero

It was a dark, frigid night in January 2004. I had crossed the border to visit a sick woman, the mother of one of the farmworkers who pick vegetables in Yuma, Arizona. After the visit, I walked to the bus stop to wait for my ride back to the “line” in order to reenter the United States (US). A few minutes after I reached the bus stop, a Volkswagen van pulled over a few yards in front of me and then took off again. It sped around the block and this time hit the brakes right in front of me. Out jumped two hooded men, who grabbed me at gunpoint and without a word shoved me inside the vehicle. In an instant my life drastically changed: I found myself blindfolded, lying on the cold floor of the van, choking on dust in the midst of the most nauseating odors.

Kidnapped. I don’t know whether you have ever had a gun pressed to your temple. It is a moment that escapes time. Everything seems compressed into the swirling present. You feel like a drowning victim flailing in the waves and see your entire life pass by as if in a feature-length film crammed into mere seconds. At that moment I experienced absolute impotence. Someone else was in charge of my body and intended to take charge of my mind as well, intimidating me, evoking fear, perhaps the most destructive of emotions. I was left with my fragmented thoughts; I offered no resistance. I simply could not control the actions for which I was not responsible.

The van shortly left pavement behind and entered a rough dirt road filled with potholes. My body bounced like a sack of potatoes, and I could hardly breathe; the air was thick with dust coming through the slits of the beat-up, old Volkswagen. After traveling what, to my mind, seemed like an interminable distance, the vehicle came to a stop. I could barely hear the men mulling

something over among themselves. Immediately the van was in motion again, and after traveling a relatively short distance, the one guarding me told me to get out, keep my eyes closed, and stand facing a wall. I was not to look one way or the other, or I would be a dead man. Next I heard the squeal of tires as they peeled out, leaving me standing there alone.

I stood still, staring at the wall, for a few tense seconds, and then I looked nervously both ways, seeing nothing more than a dog crossing the dusty street. A block or so away there was a street lamp, so I walked in the direction of the light. My body was shaking, perhaps from the cold but more likely from the emotion and relief of still having a living body! I approached a house and knocked on the door. A man opened the door, and I told him what had just happened to me. The good man apologized to me as if he had been an accomplice to the event. But, of course, he was not; he was simply embarrassed about what had happened to an undeserving stranger visiting his town. He was thoughtful and gracious, as are many folks living along the border. They are honest, hardworking people who look for a better tomorrow and who want to live out their dreams. He offered to take me in his car back to the “line,” and about an hour later I finally crossed back to the US side.

I did not understand at that time what had happened or why. Often, the first question that comes to one’s mind after going through a traumatic experience is, why me? You have to allow time for the answer to unfold. And, even then, some things might never be revealed in this life. At any rate, I continued visiting Yuma during the following years to preach the Word of God to the field-workers and to leave them with that great Book of hope. I always carry a supply of Bibles to offer people. And I continued crossing the border. For more than a quarter of a century I have dedicated time each year to this ministry and frequently cross back and forth over the border.

One early January evening in 2009, when I was finishing my day’s work among the field-workers, a tall, well-built young man approached me and said, “Father, I owe you a debt of gratitude.”

Many people call me “Father,” as if I were a priest; although I have explained many times that I am a father but only to my two daughters. I figured on this occasion that he was simply another person who had ordered a Bible but hadn’t yet gotten around to paying. Then, I sensed that this was something more serious, because the young fellow’s lower lip was trembling; he could barely speak he was so nervous.

“A long time ago, you attended my grandmother’s funeral, and I met you there. I also worked for Oseguera and remember you coming to minister among us workers.”

I could not remember exactly who he might be, but I listened as he continued: “At that time I was into drugs. At one time several of us set out to get money, and we saw you. When we grabbed you at that bus stop, I did not recognize who you were. But during that ride in the van, I could not help but feel that you were someone I had seen before. Finally it came to me that you were the Father who had officiated at my grandmother’s funeral.”

My mind was racing and spinning like in the van. He continued with his confession: “Two years ago I bought a Bible from you while I was working for the Garcia family, and that was when I started attending a Christian church. They helped me escape from drugs. I attend church every week, and all this time I kept thinking about you. Last year I saw you when you came to bring Bibles to the workers, but I did not have the courage to say anything to you. Today I told myself that I would not wait any longer. I want to apologize to you for what I did and to thank you for officiating at my grandmother’s funeral and especially for selling me that Bible.”

I was stunned, and I only managed to say, “I receive your gratitude as a gift. Your gratitude is worth much more than all your mistakes.”

Life always gives us the opportunity to give and to receive. That was the moment to receive.

What does science say about gratitude?

Science has shown that gratitude is vital to rebuilding life and to being happy.

Gratitude garnered little attention from psychology until investigations during the past decade placed it onstage as one of the most important “strengths of character.”¹ Psychological research has found abundant evidence of the benefits of gratitude upon both physical and mental health.² An investigation found that the most grateful people show higher levels of satisfaction with life, are more outgoing and optimistic, cultivate positive emotions, and report less depression and lower stress levels compared to others.³ In addition, it was found that gratitude raises levels of self-esteem, not only for the short term but also for the long term.⁴ And grateful people have lower levels of neuroticism, or emotional imbalances, because they do not feed on frustrations.⁵ Other studies found that gratitude improves human relationships and generates better social integration and satisfaction with life.⁶

Perhaps the research with the most impact related to gratitude was the research that was carried out by Danner and colleagues,⁷ who studied a group of 678 nuns for more than sixty years, conducting retrospective monitoring and periodic evaluations. They found that the nuns who at the age of twenty revealed gratitude and other positive emotions lived almost ten years longer and did not suffer from Alzheimer’s disease compared to those who were

unhappy and unthankful. This study continued even after the nuns passed away: their brains were examined, and it was found that they contained none of the characteristics related to Alzheimer's, and those who bore a predisposition to the disease never suffered from its symptoms.⁸

Gratitude is the first secret to being happy.

Jesus and gratitude

He was a foreigner. His gaze, like that of every man in a foreign land, always sought permission or perhaps offered apologies. His eyes expressed the debt that one feels within his own soul when he finds himself in an unknown land.

But this man, besides being a stranger, carried on his flesh the marks of death, which drew looks from those who saw him not just as a foreigner but also as a risk to their own lives. He had come to Jerusalem from Samaria with goods to sell. That night he did not know where to go, and like so many who do not know where they are going, he got carried along by winds that too frequently lead to misfortune. So he sought entertainment at one of the hovels in town to also satisfy his sexual desires.*

A few days into that trip to self-destruction, he awoke in a sweat. It was very hot, but he noticed his face and torso were covered with grainy sores, which caused him to itch. And he started to scratch them to calm the itching, but nothing alleviated it. Soon those sores spread all over his body and turned into bleeding ulcers, which acquired a reddish hue. Under these conditions, he could no longer return home to Samaria.

With mounting desperation he asked for help, but no one could help him. Finally, he went to the priest, as instructed in Leviticus chapter 13. The priest determined that the Samaritan had leprosy. He imposed on him a distinctive tunic, gave him a small warning bell, and confined him to the depths of a valley, to some caves where lepers dwelt at a safe distance from the general population. From that moment on, his life changed categorically: the bustle of commerce, the nights of partying—everything came to a stop. He found himself isolated on the outskirts of society.

With the passing of the months, the silence stirred up the memories and remorse: *What will become of my family?*

Nostalgia and tearful sorrow racked his soul. He had heard from his companions in the same misfortune about a Teacher from Nazareth who cured every type of disease. He did not know whether he wanted to be healed from his disease so much as he wanted to receive healing for his soul. When they

* This inference, which is not explicit in the biblical account, arises from the fact that serious scientific studies claim that the "leprosy" of Jesus' time could have been a form of syphilis. Scientists do not confirm as fact that the leprosy known by medical science today in China and India is the same as the one mentioned in the Bible.

spoke to him of the Great Physician, his entire being shuddered with sacred trembling.

One day the ten lepers saw, at a distance, Jesus and His disciples. They shouted in desperate unison: “ ‘Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.’ When he saw them he said, ‘Go and show yourselves to the priests.’ And as they went along, they were cleansed” (Luke 17:13, 14, NET). It was the miracle he had dreamed of! As he ran, the sores began to heal, and his face, hands, and body were covered with soft skin like that of a child. A deep feeling of appreciation filled his soul. As soon as the priest certified his healing, he returned joyfully, shouting to every passerby that Jesus had healed him and glorifying God. And upon arriving where the Master was, “he fell with his face to the ground at Jesus’ feet and thanked him. . . . Then Jesus said, ‘Were not ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Was no one found to turn back and give praise to God except this foreigner?’ Then he said to the man, ‘Get up and go your way. Your faith has made you well’ ” (verses 16–19, NET).

The gratitude felt by this healed leper came from the deepest layers of his soul. He once again thanked and praised God, not so much because the sores on his skin had disappeared but because the wounds deep down in his soul were healed. Gratitude has its firmest foundation in God, who is no respecter of persons. The leper was a foreigner, a man without rights, and therefore he grasped in a way that none of the Jewish lepers could the unprejudiced graciousness of that miracle. In addition to being physically healed of his leprosy, the Samaritan felt fully accepted by God. Gratitude comes from the awareness of such acceptance.

The why and how of practicing gratitude

The writer Otto F. Bollnow says that there is no other indicator so adequate for determining the inner spiritual and moral health of an individual than the ability to feel gratitude.⁹

I have been married to my wife, Florencia, for more than forty years. During all these decades, she has always, without missing a single day, prepared and served me the best food. I remember when we were young newlyweds, she would hurry home from work during her lunchtime to prepare me the most healthy and appetizing food. After eating with me, she would return to her job to finish the day. She did this for many years. Now I must confess something, and I am ashamed to say it: during these forty years I assumed her loving gesture was merely the fulfillment of her marital duty. How horrible! Sometimes I thanked her for her efforts, but I never fully understood the meaning of the words *thank you* until recently, when I started writing this book and began looking more deeply into the value of gratitude. Can you believe this?

Yesterday, as we sat down to the tasty and healthy meal she placed on the table for us, I said, “Thank you, Florencia, thank you very much.” It seems that my “thank you” had a more meaningful impact for her, because she responded, “Thanks be to God and to your work, which make it all possible.” She was really saying, “Your love and recognition are worth more than everything else you can do for me.” We can say that gratitude is the heart’s fond memory. In thinking about the power of this virtue, it occurred to me that it brings into balance our giving and receiving—the balance of love. And I also thought about the power it has to establish or reconcile an emotional relationship. The essence of gratitude is to inaugurate a relationship of love and life.

Gratitude is the mother of all virtues, of all the secrets of happiness, of all the possibilities in human relationship, because in saying “thank you,” we recognize that the *other* has bestowed on us a gift. I recognize my neighbor, but sometimes because of proximity and familiarity I take too much for granted and fail to consider just who my neighbor is! When I say “thank you” to Florencia, I acknowledge that I accept her appetizing creations as a gift of her grace. It is more than the recognition of her marital duty. When I express my gratitude to her for something, I recognize that what I receive has a far greater value than what I can pay. Many times I have told my wife: “This plate of food cannot be paid for with Visa,” recalling the advertising from that credit card that said the card could pay for anything except the most dazzling value of the spirit, which is love.

Moreover, people who know how to receive the words *thank you* from another broaden their spirit, because they feed on that recognition and have the energy to keep giving. The exchange relationship is not severed. In contrast, an indifferent, self-centered person cuts short the cycle of life. The self-centered person does not understand that “none of us lives to himself, and none dies to himself” (Romans 14:7, WEB). Remember that life is a great chain of mutual aid. Notice how the sun invigorates at its rising and the streams of water refresh at their passing; and we have fresh air to breathe. The wife helps when she prepares the bread, the husband when he works, or vice versa. As friends we lend each other a hand; on the job we team up for mutual benefit at our various posts of service and responsibility. We all help in the chain of life. He who knows how to give will receive. And he who knows how to receive will give.

Gratitude is not a simple act fulfilled with a verbalized “thank you”; it is a way of being, an attitude of life. Therefore, gratitude must begin with God, the Giver of life. When we get up in the morning with health and express in our hearts and on our lips a word of gratitude to the Creator, the darkness

dissipates as the wind carries the dark clouds away. In his exhortation to gratitude, the psalmist David says: “Make a joyful noise unto the LORD, all the earth” (Psalm 100:1, MEV).

Every day we should thank our parents, who gave us life. In giving us life, they essentially gave us everything. From our birth we are ultimately responsible for our destiny. People who do not have a word of appreciation for their parents, despite what type of parents they might have been, are bound to their past. Failure feeds off frustration, and frustration feeds on the inability to grasp that we are the builders of our own destiny. Out of ungratefulness to their parents, many do not mature or find meaning in their own lives. They live as neurotic people.

Gratitude makes us historians of the benignity of the past; not of the misfortunes.

We should express gratitude to our spouse every day to preserve that delicate balance between giving and receiving. We receive love in order to give love. If we do not give, we will not receive, and the exchange is severed. Only if this balance is achieved will there be any possibility of delving deeper into the cycle of life. Therefore, the word of the wise to spouses is: “May you be captivated by her love always” (Proverbs 5:19, NET). Gratitude re-creates the relationship between giving and receiving.

There can be no peace in the married life if the one receiving does not give something in return that goes beyond the mere “fulfillment of duty.” He who loves gives much more than what simple reciprocity demands.

In like manner, when one demands more than what the other can give, the exchange wears out. For example, think about this: when someone has been unfaithful to their spouse, and the latter plants themselves in their innocence, they prevent their partner from bringing remedy the situation. If the victim considers themselves too noble and does not accept their own dark and evil side, there can be no amends. So then, the relationship is destroyed. For there to be a deep relationship of exchange, we need to come out of even what we consider just. But everything has a limit. This introduces us to the theme of forgiveness, which we will discuss in the next chapter.

Give thanks for everything. For bright days and for dark days. For adversities and for adversaries. Because they also teach us.

The Bible Teaching: Jesus and Gratitude (Luke 17:11–19)

Introduction

Why did Jesus heal the ten lepers when He knew that only one would return to thank Him? In the Bible, the number ten is a symbol of completeness. Jesus healed ten as an expression of His love for humanity and His power to save all sinners who come to Him, as did those lepers (John 3:16). Have you ever felt lost? Do you remember how you felt? What were your thoughts? How did you feel when you found the way? What relationship exists between being lost and leprosy?

Let's study what the Bible says about sin and salvation:

What does God compare leprosy to? (*Isaiah 1:4–6*)

The Bible compares leprosy to sin, which casts us away from the glory of God. That is to say, without God, we are lost (see Romans 3:23).

What can we do to solve our problem of sin? (*Jeremiah 2:22*)

We can do nothing, which means we are in need of a Savior.

What was Jesus' mission on earth? (*Luke 19:10*)

Jesus is our Savior. He cleanses us from the leprosy of sin.

What did Jesus do to save us? (*Romans 3:24, 25*)

The life and death of Jesus guarantees our salvation and our cleansing. That blessing is available to us all.

How can I receive that cleansing and forgiveness? (*1 John 1:9*)

“To confess our sins” means to give ourselves to God, to accept our condition, and to recognize His power to save and redeem us.

What is God's attitude toward us? (*Matthew 11:28; Isaiah 1:18*)

God invites us to come to Him just as we are so that He can cleanse us completely. We must go to Him with our burden of sin, because only in Him can we find redemption.

Why did Christ relate the gratitude of the leper to his faith?*(Ephesians 2:8)*

When we understand that God has saved us by His grace through faith, which is a gift from Him, we cannot but acknowledge it with praise and worship to Him (see Psalm 100:1).

Conclusion

Jesus healed the lepers to show His power to cleanse our lives from sin. By His blood we are forgiven, cleansed, saved, restored, and at peace with God. A Chinese proverb says: “When you drink water, remember its source.”

An appeal

Will you accept God’s invitation to come to Jesus and receive His forgiveness and the cleansing He offers you?

Resolution

I accept Jesus and His grace in my heart in order to be saved through Him.

I sign this in acceptance: _____.

How Grateful Am I? Evaluation of Gratitude

Place an *X* in the column that best expresses your personal gratitude beside each one of the statements, specifying the degree of agreement or application to your case with the corresponding number, according to the explanation below.

1. *Absolutely agree.* It applies fully to my way of thinking.
2. *Agree.* It applies for the most part to my way of thinking.
3. *Slightly agree.* It only partially applies to my way of thinking.
4. *Neutral.* I am neither for nor against this way of thinking.
5. *Slightly disagree.* It barely applies to my way of thinking.
6. *Disagree.* It does not generally apply to my way of thinking.
7. *Strongly disagree.* It does not apply at all to my way of thinking.

Statements	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. I have much to be grateful for in life.							
2. If I were to make a list of all the things and people that I am thankful for, the list would be very long.							
3. When I see the world in which I live, I do not see much to be grateful for.							
4. I am grateful to many people.							
5. As I mature, I value more the people, events, and situations that have formed part of the story of my life.							
6. I can go for long periods of time without feeling that I need to be thankful to someone about something.							

Interpretation for the evaluation of gratitude

1. For questions 1, 2, 4, and 5, score your answer according to this scale: If you answered 1, it is worth 7 points; and subsequently 2 = 6; 3 = 5; 4 = 4; 5 = 3; 6 = 2; and 7 = 1.

2. For questions 3 and 6, the scores correspond to the numbers above the columns.

3. Add up the results of the six answers. The results are as follows:

Results

7–24 points: very ungrateful

25–33 points: ungrateful

34–39 points: average

40, 41 points: very grateful

42 points: completely grateful

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4. Joshua A. Rash, M. Kyle Matsuba, and Kenneth M. Prkachin, “Gratitude and Well-Being: Who Benefits the Most From a Gratitude Intervention?” *Applied Psychology: Health and Well-Being* 3, no. 3 (November 2011): 350–369, doi: 10.1111/j.1758-0854.2011.01058.x.

5. Peterson and Seligman, *Character Strengths and Virtues*.

6. Jeffrey J. Froh, Giacomo Bono, and Robert Emmons, “Being Grateful Is Beyond Good Manners: Gratitude and Motivation to Contribute to Society Among Early Adolescents,” *Motivation and Emotion* 34, no. 2 (June 2010): 144–157, doi: 10.1007/s11031-010-9163-z.

7. Deborah D. Danner, David A. Snowdon, and Wallace V. Friesen, “Positive Emotions in Early Life and Longevity: Findings From the Nun Study,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 80, no. 5 (May 2001): 804–813, doi: 10.1037/0022-3514.80.5.504.

8. Gary R. Collins, “Revisiting the Nun Study,” People Builder’s Blog, May 4, 2010, <https://peoplebuilder.wordpress.com/2010/05/04/382-revisiting-the-nun-study/>.

9. Otto Friedrich Bollnow, *Filosofía de la esperanza: El problema de la superación del existencialismo* (Buenos Aires: Compañía General Fabril Editora, 1962).