

Marcos Paulo Reis
“Thanksgiving”, October 11, 2015

Good morning everyone. The notion of thanksgiving shows up early on in the Bible, starts in Leviticus, Chronicles, it reaches the Psalms and goes on all the way to Revelations.

“I will praise the name of God with a song, I will magnify him with thanksgiving” reads Psalm 69. In Psalm 147 we are encouraged to *“sing to the Lord with thanksgiving ... The Lord takes pleasure in those who hope in his steadfast love.”*

When thinking about thanksgiving, what first comes to your mind?

I guess this is a loaded question, assuming there is delicious food waiting for us. Maybe you think about good food, maybe Fall's colours, maybe the retreat that happens around this time. But surely at some point your thoughts will turn to friends and family.

Of the Canadian traditions, thanksgiving is one that I quite enjoy. In Brazil, we celebrate Christmas and Easter. We have Carnival, which is not in Winter. We have father's day and mother's day. But there is no thanksgiving day. I found that odd, since we Brazilians love to celebrate and what better reason to celebrate than to give thanks.

If you are a bit like me there are different situations that prompt you to give thanks. In my case, my natural response is to give thanks when something good happens. Sometimes is something that I did not really plan for, that literally “fell on my lap”. Free Tickets for a Canadian Hockey game at the Bell Centre. Wow, Thank You Lord much appreciated. Just to be clear, those are rare occasions.

Oftentimes though, I give thanks when something that I put effort into, materializes. A great evaluation at work for instance, or a home project that comes to completion. It used to be a good grade on one of my McGill courses.

Because I suffer from anxiety, it gives me great pleasure to plan, to execute and to see the result. "Yes, Lord" I think to myself. "Thank you for that".

I started my process to immigrate to Canada back in 1998. That was the year I came to Montréal for the very first time. I travelled around with a friend, I visited places and I got charmed by Canada. It took me five years, to move from a “thinking about leaving my home country”, to be a landed immigrant in Canada on May 19th, 2003. On that day, imagine my satisfaction.

A curious thing happens during the immigration process. You see, you have to send your passport to the Canadian Embassy with all your papers, and wait, and wait, and wait a bit, and wait again.

They have to analyze, process, cross check, verify, and if you are selected to immigrate, they send you back your passport with the visa saying “Landed Immigrant”. When my passport arrived, I was at home with my parents. My mother was the one that received it. I was in my room and when my Mother saw the envelope with the Government of Canada logo she called my name. Needless to say I jumped at it.

What seemed curious to me at the time was that before giving the package to me, my Mother sat me down, looked at me and said. “*Give thanks to God, regardless of what is inside.*” Mind you, the only answer that interested me was the passport with the stamp. I held the envelope in my hands, I thanked God for the opportunity and opened it. There it was. Bless the Lord, I got in. Canada, here I come.

Of course, it is easy to give thanks when things go your way, as it was in my case. However, sometimes I give thanks when I am spared from trouble. Maybe you do that too. Maybe you had a car accident, but you are thankful nobody got hurt. Maybe you contracted some kind of illness, but you are thankful, because it could have been much worse. Maybe you did not get that A that you wanted so much, but hey, you did not fail the class either. So, in these situations you are also thankful. God, in his infinite wisdom has protected you from a greater harm.

When I was about 13, I had an accident. Back then, soft drinks came in glass bottles and on the weekends at my home we would have some soft drinks. I usually was the one sent to buy Coca-Cola for the family.

One day, walking back home the bottle slipped from my hand. I don’t know if I was running with it, I don’t know if my hands were sweaty, it really does not matter. The fact is that the bottle fell and broke and I, by trying to prevent it from falling ended up cutting one of my fingers badly.

You cannot tell today that I had an accident on my right hand. I have 90% of movement on my finger and aside from very cold days, I don’t even feel any difference. Throughout my ordeal my Mother worked ceaselessly toward my full recovery. And once it became clear that surgery was the only option for me, she made sure that I was treated by the best hand specialist her insurance could get.

In my case, I was not aware how difficult my situation was. The only thing I had in mind was that I would skip the entire exam season because I would not be able to write for at least two months. Ignorance is bliss.

Well, there are many things in this episode to be thankful for. But primarily I am very thankful that my cut was not worse. No amount of determination from my Mother would have compensated if my finger had been completely severed or if something more serious had happened. So after a long journey I was able to recover most of the movement of my hand. Great harm was avoided, Bless the Lord.

Other times I am just thankful. This is weird to say it, but sometimes it is not because I have been spared some dreadful thing, nor because something I have worked to accomplished has finally come to fruition. Sometimes, it is just like “*Yeah, thanks Lord, life is good*”. Gratitude is the word that usually comes to my mind when that happens. In those occasions you just feel *contentment*.

No, the Canadians did not win the Stanley Cup. No, Brazil did not beat Germany at the world cup. No, you did get a full scholarship to go to England. But, you know, life is good.

If you lived in my house when I was growing up in Brazil you would have noticed that out of the blue, without any prompting, my Mother would from time to time hum a song. On some occasions she would do it when she was combing her hair. Other times when she was in the kitchen cooking, or, say, chopping vegetables. Or maybe when she was just sitting in the living room resting.

It will be impossible for me to sing the song in Portuguese without breaking down, so I’m going to do it in English in order to be able to carry through. The lyrics would loosely be translated like this:

“Eu sei que eu sou fraco Jesus é forte Mesmo eu caindo Jesus me levanta Jesus é o amor E o amor é mais forte Mais forte que a morte Jesus é o amor	“I know I am weak Jesus is strong Even if I fall, Jesus will lift me up. Jesus loves me, and love is powerful. Love is more powerful than death. Jesus is love”
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So much for saying it in English.

Anyway, let me change gears a bit.

In psychology there is a concept called the Big Five Traits. I guess Mary Dean is not here to keep me honest so you will have to trust me on this one. They are basically different facets or dimensions of a person's personality.

The five relevant traits according to Psychology are:

[Openness to Experience] How do you deal with new experiences? Are you curious?

[Conscientiousness] How well organized are you? Are you a disciplined person?

[Extroversion] How sociable are you? Are you able to interact with people you meet for the first time?

[Agreeableness] How compassionate are you? Do you connect with other people's suffering and hardship?

[Neuroticism] How do you deal with unpleasant emotions? How do you behave when you are angry, or fearful, or sad?

In psychology, they put the focus on these five traits because they believe that if individuals master them, they have a greater chance to feel *contentment* in life. Since scholars seem never to be able to agree on anything, there is some debate if two additional traits should be added to complement the first five.

One is Grit, which is the ability to carry on an activity or goal even if it takes a long period of time to accomplish it.

The other one is Gratitude. Gratitude. How deeply do you appreciate life?

Mother would make a concerted effort to express gratitude. You see, my mom did not have her Mother. My maternal grandmother died due to child birth complications when my Mom was around four. She had no recollection of her mother, no photograph.

From time to time she would bug me when I would come home late, super tired after having worked all day and having attended school at night, to pray before going to sleep. "Have you thanked God for your day Marcos?" She would say. "Mom, nothing particular happened today, it was a long, boring, exhausting day". I would grumpily reply. "Thank the Lord for the day before you go to bed Marcos". Often I did not do it. Too tired.

The odd weekend morning she would come by my bedroom. You have to understand, I am a morning person. When I wake, I am ready to go. Let's face the day. My mother would hold me back and ask "*Have you thanked the Lord for your night of sleep?*". Night of sleep? What do you mean? Nothing happened, I don't even remember if I dreamt or not. "*Thank the Lord for your night of sleep Marcos*". I often do.

Gratitude. Are you thankful for your journey so far? Are you thankful regardless of the situation? "*In everything and always*" Paul wrote in Ephesians 5:20 "*give thanks to God in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ*". In everything and always.

I was not able to talk to my Mother after she was admitted into hospital. Most times she was sedated; when she was alert I was busy at work. Then we thought she would be leaving the hospital. Then the heart attack happened.

It is a cliché to say that children tend to idealize their parents. And you will be forgiven if you think I am romanticizing my experience with my Mother.

Or maybe I am trying to fulfill the commandment that tells me to honour my parents for the good things they have done for me.

I miss my Mother dearly. Her phone calls; her singing; her words of wisdom; her words towards me. But I am thankful to God that I had a loving Mother.

What does Gratitude do to us you may wonder? Why give thanks? Because gratitude reminds us of blessings and goodness we have received. It establishes the right relationship between us and God. Who is the source of goodness.

As we enjoy our meal together, let's remember the goodness of the Lord towards us. The great things he has done in our lives, let's praise Him with our whole hearts.

Blessing and Glory and Wisdom and Thanksgiving ... be to our God, forever and ever!
Amém."