

“My desire and hope is that Spiritual Gold will reach our world with the positive message that God is alive and has the answers for the problems facing us today. In his messages on the Spiritual Gold website, my husband, Richard, takes the Scriptures and breaks them down so that we can understand and receive practical advice as we live one day at a time.” —Mary Strauss



A Thanksgiving List

We popped in an old video tape and there he was, with his bald head and a big smile. The congregation enthusiastically welcomed him back after a six-week absence while he pursued treatment in Little Rock.

Dr. Strauss’ message was more personal than usual—he listed many things for which he was very thankful. We want to share that message with you in its entirety, so this newsletter is taking a different format than in past years.

Nothing But Manna?

I would like you to put yourself in the sandals of an ancient Israelite in Egyptian bondage for a few minutes. For years you had been nothing more than a slave in a foreign land, hated and despised by your masters, abused and overworked. The Pharaoh had even decreed that every male child born to your people should be killed; it had been going on for years.

Suddenly there appeared on the scene a man who claimed to have been sent by God to deliver you. God used him in a miraculous way to pour out ten awful plagues on the Egyptians until the Pharaoh was battered into submission and let your people go. Your deliverance was an exciting experience, followed by one thrilling experience after another. First, God provided a cloud to direct you by day and a pillar of fire to lead you at night. Then He miraculously dried up the waters of the Red Sea so you could cross, later drowning the Egyptian armies in those same waters when the Pharaoh decided to pursue you.

That miracle was followed by a miraculous provision of water, and then a miraculous victory of the Amalekites who tried to stop you.

And now you are experiencing the most amazing miracle of all: God’s provision of food. Incredible! There it is on the ground, every morning. It has a fine flake-like consistency (Exodus 16:14, NASB), with a pearl-like color (Numbers 11:7, “bdellium”). You can boil it and prepare a kind of porridge, or you can bake it and make a kind of pastry that tasted like a wafer baked with honey and olive oil (Exodus 16:23, 31; Numbers 11:18).

continued

Dear Spiritual Gold,

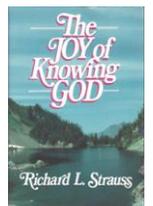
“Whenever I get hungry for seriously great Biblical exposition, this is where I come. Spiritual Gold is a like hitting the mother lode of truth. Love the site and the Godly ministry of Doc. Shining for Jesus from the streets of gold!”

—J.B., via Facebook

“I accepted the Lord sitting in the balcony of EFCC during Pastor Strauss’ invitation in 1978! Praise God for Pastor Strauss and Mary!”

—N.S., via Facebook

“The Attributes of God are beautifully described in Dr. Strauss’ book, *The Joy of Knowing God*. It’s in my Top Ten must read books.”



—R.H., via Facebook

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Nothing But Manna? (*continued*)

You don't know what it is, so you call it *manna*, which means "What is it?" But oh, how wonderful it is for God to provide it for you every day and miraculously meet your needs for daily sustenance. You are part of an ongoing bona fide *miracle*. What a fantastic blessing!

But like any blessing of life, you are beginning to get accustomed to your manna and take it for granted. It doesn't excite you as it once did. In fact, you're getting kind of tired of it. Ralph Waldo Emerson once said that if the stars appeared one night every thousand years, everybody would stay up to look at them and would tell the generations of them. But we have seen the stars so often that most of us don't even bother to look at them anymore. That's the way it is with all our blessings. We have a tendency to grow accustomed to our blessings and take them for granted.

Let's read about this in Numbers 11.

"The rabble with them began to crave other food, and again the Israelites started wailing and said, 'If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost—also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic. But now we have lost our appetite; we never see anything but this manna!'" (Numbers 11:4-6).

"Nothing but manna!" Amazing, isn't it? Here those children of God were, part of a wonderful miracle that provided their daily needs, and they're complaining about it. "Nothing but manna!"

Three things usually happen when we grow accustomed to our blessings and begin to take them for granted.

The first is that we become critical and complaining, just like those Israelites. Some Christians in local churches get that way. Seldom do they ever express appreciation for the blessings they receive, but they are quick to grumble about the things they don't like. The sermon is too long, or it's too short. We sing too much or we don't sing enough. Some churches are like that. God has done so many wonderful things for them and given so many wonderful things to them, but all they can do is find fault. We become accustomed to our blessings and begin to take them for granted.

The second is that we envy others. "We wish we were back in Egypt so we could have things like the Egyptians have." They're complaining about the food and wishing they could have variety like other people do. "Oh, for some Mexican food!" Or Italian food, or whatever—anything with a little zing to it. And some Christians do that, too. Why can't we do things like such and such a church does? We become envious of others.

The third is that we cause others to get discouraged.

"Moses asked the Lord, 'Why have you brought this trouble on Your servant? What have I done to displease You that You put the burden of all these people on me? ...I cannot carry all these people by myself; the burden is too heavy for me. If this is how you are going to treat me, please go ahead and kill me—if I have found favor in Your eyes—and do not let me face my own ruin'" (Numbers 11:11, 14-15).

He knows his attitude is wrong but can you believe this? He's saying, "God, if I've found favor in Your sight, kill me. I can't handle these people anymore."

I wonder how many men have left the ministry discouraged and disillusioned because of the petty complaining of people in their congregations. Let me tell you, there have been many. The pastors are responsible for the way they have responded to their criticism. But those people are also going to answer to God for their critical attitude, just like the people in Numbers 11 answered to God for their critical spirit.

I'm so thankful—and I mean this sincerely. I'm so thankful that there have been very few critical and complaining people at Emmanuel

Faith Community Church throughout the years. God has graciously protected us. I am especially thankful for your patience and tolerance through this difficult time of my illness and the uncertainty that goes with it. You have been a great inspiration to me! You challenge me.

But I have to tell you, nothing can challenge a person to appreciate his blessings quite like a terminal illness. I still have a lot of learning and growing to do, but I thought I would use this passage in Numbers as a springboard to share with you some of the blessings I am learning to appreciate—blessings I might otherwise tend to become accustomed to and take for granted, causing me to become critical, envious, and discouraging to others.

Here are some things I'm learning to take out of the "Nothing but Manna" classification. This list is *my* thanksgiving list, but these are things we all should be thankful for and should not take for granted.

1. Life and Breath

What more obvious blessing can there be than life and breath? It was the Apostle Paul standing in the Aroepagus in Athens who reminded us that God gives us "life and breath and all things" (Acts 17:25). They are a gracious gift from God, a blessing from His generous hand. When was the last time you thanked God simply for the privilege of being alive? Can you remember?

None of us knows how long we have to live, and any of us could be swept off this earth before the day is over. But it's still a little different when one doctor after another makes it clear to you that you have an illness for which medical science has no cure. It makes you appreciate each day a little more. You wake up in the morning and say, "Thank You, Lord, for the privilege of living one more day."

As you know, when I was first diagnosed with multiple myeloma, I was told that the average life expectancy was between two and four years. I passed my third anniversary in August. And now the doctors are hoping to give me two more after this treatment is completed.

I'm not clinging to life as if death were a terrible thing. I genuinely agree with Paul when he said he had a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better (Philippians 1:21). I want what God knows is best. But I still enjoy life and all that it holds—especially my family, friends, and my ministry. I'm grateful for the privilege of being alive. And when life hangs by such a tenuous thread, you become even more thankful for it. You don't take it for granted anymore.

You don't say, "What? Nothing but life, is that all I have?"

"Nothing but manna?"

Add that to your thanksgiving list this year: life and breath. Thank Him for it this week, will you?

2. Freedom from Pain

If you live your life with relative freedom from pain, except for a minor headache once in a while, it might be a good idea to thank God for it. It may have never occurred to you to thank God for it; you may have become accustomed to a life that is relatively free from pain.

I can't ever remember saying, "Lord, I want to thank You that I can get up in the morning and move around throughout the day without feeling pain." It was a blessing I grew accustomed to and took for granted. But I have to tell you, if I ever get to that place again where I do not feel pain in some part of my body, I intend to thank God for it regularly.

Pain is a good thing. I think you know that. Our lives would be miserable without it, because it signals that something is wrong in our bodies and alerts us to do something to remedy the problem. Furthermore, it reminds us of how dependent we are on the Lord and drives us to lean on Him. I try to remember to thank God for my pain, since the Spirit-filled believer is thankful *for* all things (Ephesians 5:20). But I have to admit that pain has a tendency to wear on me and get me down.

During my first trip to Little Rock I was told by the doctor that the program I am in, if successful, would eliminate all of my pain. That was before I developed compression fractures in my back—fractures which, incidentally, have caused me to lose nearly three inches in height. As you know, I don't have three inches to lose!

During this latest trip the doctor indicated that the majority of people with compression fractures are never fully free of pain. That wasn't too exciting to hear, believe me. I know God's grace will enable me to bear it. That is His promise. But if the Lord in His grace allows me to be among the minority who lose their pain even with compression fractures, you can be sure I intend to say "Thank You" on a regular basis.

"Nothing but freedom from pain?" Let me tell you, that is a great blessing.

3. Ability to Enjoy Food

One day when we on the pastoral staff were eating lunch together, I asked Joe Silvey to say thanks for the food. And in his prayer he said, “Lord, thanks for our taste buds that enable us to enjoy this food.”

That stunned me. I had never heard anyone thank God for their taste buds before. I had never thought to thank God for my taste buds. But I have on many occasions since, you can be sure, and I am grateful to Joe for teaching me that they are something to be thankful for.

As you know, you become even more thankful for a blessing like that when you lose it. Much of the time during my treatment I have had no desire for food. It just doesn’t taste good to me. Mary would ask me what I want to eat, and my answer has been, “Actually, I don’t want anything. Nothing sounds good to me.”

I have tried to force some food down during those times because I know that I need it, but I didn’t enjoy it at all. Only those who have been in that situation can understand what I’m saying, and can fully appreciate the ability to enjoy food.

When you sit down to Thanksgiving dinner this year, thank God for the ability to enjoy it. Don’t take that blessing for granted.

“What? Turkey again this year?”

“Nothing but manna?”

Be thankful for your ability to enjoy a meal.

4. Ability to Provide for My Family

Some of you have learned the hard way that a job and the ability to perform it are a matter for genuine thanksgiving. You have become a victim of this nagging recession and are out of work. The rest of us need to be praying for you regularly. And we also need to be careful not to take our own jobs for granted.

I never really gave much thought to that before this illness. I have no idea what the future holds, but there is the possibility that the morphine I need to take in order to keep the pain under control will hinder my ability to carry out my responsibilities. I don’t know that; only God knows. But the thought has entered my mind, and has made me a whole lot more thankful for the ministry He has entrusted to me, and the ability it has afforded me to provide for my family through these years.

It’s a blessing I don’t think I will ever take for granted again. And I hope you won’t either. Maybe your job isn’t all you’d like it to be, but I hope you’re not complaining, “What? This crummy job and this measly little paycheck?”

“What? Nothing but manna?”

Don’t take your job for granted. Thank God for it.

5. Circumstances That are Not as Bad as They Could Be

When you visit a facility like the Arkansas Cancer Research Center, you meet a lot of people in the same boat as you are. While multiple myeloma is a rare form of cancer, the fact that they major on it at ACRC draws people with the disease from all over the country. And there is lots of time to talk to them and get to know them. One thing that impressed Mary and me in our conversations with others with this disease is that no matter how bad things are, they could always be worse. In fact, they *are* worse for many others. No matter how bad we have it, there are some who have it worse.

I’ve met others in more pain than I have. Some were much younger than I, with young children. Our hearts really went out to them. Our children are all grown and responsible for themselves. But here were couples with three and four children under ten, and the father is disabled with this debilitating disease that literally consumes their lives. We prayed for them. We wept for them. And we thanked God that our circumstances are not as bad as they could be.

I don’t know what difficulties you are facing this Thanksgiving season. Some of you are going through some very deep waters or some very hot fires. You’re facing trials and problems that are big deals. But I can assure you, they could be worse. We don’t like to acknowledge that, but it’s true.

Whatever else you give thanks for, include that, will you? Let it be a blessing for which you are genuinely thankful.

6. Doctors and Nurses with God-Imparted Wisdom

Five years ago, there was no hope of extending the life of a person my age with this disease. This stem cell transplant is a relatively new procedure that God in His grace has made known to medical science only recently. And I thank God for leading me in a very unusual way to the people who seem to be on the cutting edge, who have chosen to major on this disease even though it accounts for less than 1% of all cancers.

They have treated hundreds of cases, and I don't know how many are in treatment presently, but I can tell you, there are a whole lot. There's a constant cycle of people coming in and out. There were times when we were waiting as long as 2-1/2 hours to see the doctor for five minutes. And the reason I cannot go back for my first stem cell transplant until mid- to late-January is the heavy backlog of transplant patients.

But even though there are so many, and quite honestly there have been moments when I felt as though I was on an assembly line at times, it became apparent that they were treating me individually and tailoring their protocol to my particular needs. Almost every day there was some indication that they were evaluating my situation personally and suiting the treatment to my needs. That's something I've begun to thank God for.

It's easy to take our doctors for granted, and even to become a little critical of them when they don't perform just as we think they should. I admit to you that when I had to wait 2-1/2 hours, I didn't handle it very well. But I did learn that in spite of my feelings at times, these people do care about me and my needs.

Resist that temptation to get irritable with them; don't take your doctors for granted, and add them to your thanksgiving list this year. They might even be encouraged to know that you are thanking God for them.

7. People Who Pray for Us

If there is one thing that has become clear to us through this experience, it is that there are people praying for us all over the world. It has been truly humbling. I feel so unworthy of so much love and concern.

We would get word of people praying for us whom we never met, in the most unlikely places. There are churches I never heard of that put my name on their prayer list every week. It's hard to take something like that for granted.

This week I received a bundle of letters from the first grade class of Bingham Academy in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. My grandson is in that class. And those first graders said, "Pastor Strauss, we just want you to know that we are praying for you." First graders from all over Africa—Zimbabwe, Ghana, Mozambique—praying for me.

I'm so thankful for you, a congregation who prays for us. I appreciate the fact that you heeded Jim's advice and refrained from overwhelming me with indications of your concern. That was important, really. We needed time for quiet rest without pressures. But he has kept us informed of your prayers on our behalf, and it's been a moving experience to know how faithful you've been in upholding us.

I can remember waking up in the middle of the night and thanking God for the people who were praying for me at that very moment. I felt confident that even if it was two o'clock in the morning, there was someone in the world praying for me right then.

I don't know how I could ever take these prayers for granted. And yet I suppose it is possible. I know I have taken people's prayers for me for granted in the past. I know there are people who have prayed for me every day by name, but I have taken them for granted and not thanked God for them and their prayer support. But I don't ever want to do it again. I value them highly, and I want to thank God for them regularly.

How about you? It's likely that everyone sitting in this service this morning has somebody who is praying for them—somebody who cares enough to remember them regularly in prayer. Have you ever thanked God for the people who pray for you?

"That's all I have? People who care enough to pray for me?"

"Nothing but manna?"

Please add those people to your thanksgiving list this year and be thankful for them.

8. A God Who Answers Prayer

In addition to those people who pray for us, I've become even more thankful for a God who answers prayer.

There are so many examples of answered prayer during our time in Little Rock. One that comes to mind was after the high dosage chemo. Not only does it destroy cancer cells, but it also destroys red blood cells and white blood cells, and platelets. It can take days or sometimes weeks for them to come back. They finally got the red cells and white cells turned around and on the increase after two blood transfusions, but they couldn't get the platelets going—even with two platelet transfusions. I could see the concern on the faces of the doctors and nurses when we talked about it.

I remember sharing that need with Jim when he called one Saturday afternoon, and he, in turn, shared it with the Saturday night congregation and with the first service on Sunday morning. The nurse drew blood that Sunday morning, took it back to the lab, then called very shortly after that to tell us that the platelets were finally on the move. So I called the church and got Molly at the reception desk, and she buzzed Jim on the platform here in time to tell the last two services that the prayers of the first two were heard and answered. God answered prayer, and He continues to do so.

We were disappointed when we learned that the cancer in the bone marrow was too high to warrant harvesting the marrow, and that they were only going to harvest and transplant stem cells alone. And it was something we took to the Lord in prayer. God answered, not in the way we thought He would, but in His own way. They told me I set all kinds of records in the number of stem cells they were able to harvest, and the speed with which they harvested them. They got more in 5 days than they're able to get with most people in 10 to 14 days. While the quality of the cells was not all they would have liked, they felt the quantity would make up for it. And they assured us that they are having good results with stem cell transplants alone, apart from transplanting the bone marrow. The final chapter is yet to be written, but how grateful we are for a God who has it all under control and One who answers prayer. He gives only good things—they may not be the things we expect, but they are always good.

I don't ever want to take for granted a God who answers prayer. Add that to your thanksgiving list, won't you?

Conclusion

What's the cure for the sin of becoming accustomed to our blessings and taking them for granted, with the unpleasant side effects of criticizing and complaining, envying others, and causing others to become discouraged? What's the antidote? It's giving thanks. It's constantly thanking God for all that He gives and all that He does. "A thankful heart, lost in the wonder of God's grace and goodness, will never take God's blessings for granted" (Wiersbe, "Nothing But Manna," *Good News Broadcaster*, February 1982, p. 5).

So cultivate a thankful spirit, and you will never get caught in that trap of saying, "What, is there nothing to eat but this manna?" You'll be a Christian who praises God, who gives constant gratitude and thanksgiving to Him. You'll have a joy in living like you've never known.

Trusting Jesus as Your Savior

The one thing we can be most thankful for is God's provision of eternal salvation. There's more than just so many years on this planet, sometimes filled with struggle, sadness, and sorrow. There is an eternity to come, and God has made a provision so that we can spend that eternity in His presence, even though we are sinful people. He did it by sending His sinless Son to this earth; He lived a sinless life and died a sacrificial death in our place and for our sins. He asks us to acknowledge our sinfulness and our need of a Savior, and put our trust and faith in the Lord Jesus as Savior from sin. When we do that, He forgives us and accepts us, and gives us the gift of eternal life. "The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord" (Romans 6:23).

What do you do with a gift? You thank the giver, don't you? The gift of salvation is something we need to thank God for above all else.

from MS-320, Richard L. Strauss, *Nothing But Manna?*, November 22, 1992

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