

WE MUST ALWAYS THANK GOD FOR ALL THINGS

—by Bishop Nikiforos Theotokis—

God is all-powerful and more than perfect, and He has no need of gratitude and gifts from man: **“for Thou hast no need of my goods” (Ps. 15:2)** declared the prophet David. God has no need of our gratitude and praise, because He is a self-glorified Being. His Divine nature inherently contains infinite and ceaseless glory and praise. He has no need of the gratitude that is expressed through our offerings and gifts. Since He is a completely perfect Spirit, He neither utilizes nor benefits from the physical and material things that are offered to Him. However, because the gratitude that is offered to Him through words and actions is a definite indication of a discerning and good-natured soul, God accepts it with pleasure. He accepts both the words and the gifts of a grateful person on account of the gratitude of the soul—because gratefulness is a paramount virtue. This [gratefulness] is what God seeks from us; this is very acceptable to Him; and on account of this we receive abundant blessings from Him.

The greatest of all virtues is discernment. This is the salt that perfects every virtue; without it, every virtue remains imperfect and deformed. However, wherever there is discernment, there also exists gratitude. No person possessing discernment is ungrateful; similarly, every ungrateful person lacks discernment. Hence, we observe the virtue of gratefulness dwelling in the souls of holy and righteous men.

The first person who thought of a way to express his gratitude to God was the righteous Abel. He realized and correctly discerned that God had given him his very existence and all the things he had on the earth. And since he possessed a good and righteous disposition, he desired to give something back to His benefactor. Hence, he chose from his first-born sheep and offered them as a gift to God. The Holy Scriptures do not mention the manner in which he offered them; however, because holy men who came after him made offerings to God by burning them upon a sacrificial altar which they themselves erected, we can conclude that Abel did the same, and that subsequent people received the example from him. The Holy Scriptures note that **“God looked upon Abel and his gifts” (Gen. 4:4)**. This means that God gladly accepted Abel’s gifts and He blessed him. In this manner, God taught everyone that He accepts the gifts that are offered to Him with faith and reverence, taking into account the discernment, the appreciative disposition, and the grateful heart of the person who offers them. For this reason, when we offer God incense, candles, oil, or something else (in order to thank Him for the good things He has given us), we should not have even the slightest doubt that He will accept our gratitude and that He looks upon us and our gifts favorably, just as he looked upon Abel and his gifts.

After the flood, Noah, who “found grace before the Lord,” was the first to show his gratitude to God for saving him and the entire human race from the demise of the flood. He erected an altar upon which he offered burnt sacrifices “from all the clean animals and all the clean birds.” And in order for God to show that Noah’s gratefulness was very pleasing and acceptable to Him, the Scripture says, **“so the Lord God smelled a sweet aroma” (Gen. 8:21)**, and further adds: **“Thus God blessed Noah and his sons” (Gen. 9:1)**. From the above, we learn that the virtue of gratitude is particularly pleasing to God.

Subsequent to Noah, Abraham erected three sacrificial altars. The first in Shechem; the second in Bethel (Gen. 12:7), in order to thank God Who had pledged to give him the land of Canaan; and the third in Hebron (Gen. 13:18), when he heard God saying: “I will make your seed as the sand of the earth.” Similarly, when God confirmed to Isaac that “I will bless you and multiply your seed on account of Abraham thy father,” just as He had promised Abraham, Isaac immediately offered his thankfulness by erecting an altar in the “valley of Gerar” (Gen 26:24-25). Jacob also did the same when he “acquired a parcel of land from Hamor.” He “set up an altar and called on the God of Israel,” Who had helped him acquire the land and pitch his tent there.

We observe the virtue of gratitude not only in people who lived prior to the Law, but also them who lived after the Law. Look at Moses: after he defeated Amalek, he built an altar which he named **“the Lord is my refuge” (Ex. 17:15)**, and thus offered thanks to God. Look at Joshua the son of Nun: after the destruction of Ai, he **“built an altar to the Lord on Mount Ebal”** and thanked God for giving him the strength to defeat his enemies (**Jos. 9:3**). Look at Gideon and Samuel as well. They both erected altars and offered their thanksgiving to God: Gideon, because God sent His angel to him (Jdg. 6:22-24); Samuel, because the Lord helped him build a home in Ramah (1 Kg. 7:17).

If we open the New Testament, we will once again see the virtue of gratitude towering to the perfection befitting God. The leper from Samaria did not erect an altar, or offer burnt animal sacrifices, or present other material gifts to his benefactor and physician Jesus Christ. He offered his heart and his soul. His heart was deeply moved and filled with gratitude toward Christ; thus he **“returned, and with a loud voice glorified God, and fell down on his face at His feet, giving Him thanks” (Lk. 17:15-16)**. His appreciation and sense of obligation opened his mouth and taught him the words of praise. And since **“a sacrifice to God is a broken spirit” (Ps. 50:19)**, the God-man accepted his verbal expression of gratitude as pure incense and as a perfect burnt offering. “Arise,” Christ said to him, “your faith has saved you” (Lk. 17:19).

The divinely inspired Apostle Paul teaches us to thank God in all instances: **“in everything give thanks” (1 Th. 5:18)**. That is, in every situation, whether good or bad, health or illnesses, prosperity or death, we must express our gratitude to Him.

But how, you may ask, can I be grateful to God when I am plagued by a severe illness, or when I am afflicted with devastating misfortune? When I am healthy, when things go well, and when I receive His help, I have every reason to be grateful and to thank God. However, when I suffer, when I am chastised and tormented, where does gratitude fit in? The teaching of the Apostle, “in everything give thanks,” seems unreasonable and extremely difficult.

You are mistaken! God’s discipline is a blessing in itself. When we suffer, we think of God: **“O Lord, in times of sorrow we remembered You” (Isa. 26:16)**. This discipline opens man’s ears and prevents him from disobeying: **“The Lord’s instruction opens my ears, and I am not disobedient nor do I talk back” (Isa. 50:5)**. This is what consoles and encourages sinful people to repent: **“Your rod and Your staff, they have comforted me” (Ps. 22:4)**. This reveals that God loves the righteous, but that He also accepts the repentance of sinners: **“for whom the Lord loves He chastens, and He scourges every son He receives” (Pr. 3:12)**. God’s disciplinary measures serve as instruments, means, and ways through which God firmly establishes the righteous in virtue while calling sinners to repentance. When we were children, our fathers often times disciplined us in order to correct our faults and to make us better people. Shouldn’t we feel indebted to our earthly fathers for the love, care, and concern they had for us? This is what your heavenly Father does as well. He disciplines you so that you become established in virtue like Job; He chastises you in order for you to repent like Manasseh—and you remark that when He disciplines you, you have no reason to thank Him?

When a doctor gives you medicine to take, it tastes bitter, it upsets your stomach, it induces nausea and vomiting. When a surgeon deems it necessary, he cauterizes your infected wounds and resects diseased parts of your body. Yet, you express your heartfelt appreciation to both the physician and the surgeon, and you fill their pockets with gold and silver. And then you ask, “why should I thank God when He allows me to suffer?” He cleans your soul with sorrow; He heals your wounds with lashes; in return for this temporary discipline He gives you the Kingdom of Heaven. And then you claim that the Apostle Paul’s teaching doesn’t make sense? Your way of thinking makes no sense. You will realize this when you examine things correctly.

You are benefitting equally both when He gives you wealth and when He allows you to be poor; both when He raises you up and when He brings you down; both when He sustains you in health and when you are scourged by illness. Always and everywhere He pours upon you His Divine blessings. Hence, it is proper and appropriate for you to thank Him always and for all things. Many righteous and holy men verified that this is not a difficult thing to do. But more than anyone else, Job demonstrated this. He showed his gratitude to God not only when he enjoyed prosperity (by offering sacrifices to the Lord every day), but even when he experienced dreadful adversities. When he lost all his children,

when he lost all his possessions and became poor, when he became sick, when his body was filled with wounds and he was experiencing excruciating pain, he cried out in a loud voice: **“the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away. As it seemed good to the Lord, so also it came to pass” (Job 1:21)**. During such unexpected, repeated, and successive sorrows and tribulations, he thanked, praised, and glorified God by exclaiming: **“Blessed be the name of the Lord” (Job 1:21)**. He was equally thankful to God both when he was the father of many children and when he was left childless; both when he was wealthy and when he became a pauper; both when he was perfectly healthy and when he became ill; both when he was enjoying happiness and when he was beset by sorrow; both when he lived in prosperity and when he endured misfortune.

St. John Chrysostom would repeatedly voice the following noteworthy phrase: “Glory to God for all things. I will never cease repeating this always for all the things that happen to me.”

St. Gregory Palamas, mimicking the divine Chrysostom, would express the same thought with his grace-filled tongue in the following manner: “Let us be grateful for everything, no matter what happens—this is gratitude! If you are thankful when everything goes smoothly, it is no great accomplishment because the events themselves prompt you to do so. If, however, we thank God when we find ourselves in the depth of difficulties, this is marvelous. Indeed! When we thank God for things which others blaspheme and become disheartened, look at the beautiful results: first, you have given delight to God; second, you have put the devil to shame; third, you have demonstrated that the misfortune is insignificant. Simultaneously you thank God; God distances the sorrow [from your heart]; and the devil retreats.

There is nothing more holy than the tongue that thanks God during difficult times. It is in no way inferior to the tongue of a martyr, and it will also be crowned like a martyr. It also has an executioner present who pressures it to curse and deny God; it has the devil who uses murderous thoughts to cut it to pieces and drown it in sorrow. If, therefore, someone patiently endures adversities and thanks God for them, he has received the crown of a martyr.”

St. Basil the Great also says: “it is a disgrace for us to, on the one hand, bless God when things go our way, while, on the other hand, to remain silent [and not thank Him] when we experience difficulties and sorrows. In these instances we should thank God more, because we know that: **‘whom the Lord loves He chastens, and He scourges every son He receives’**” (Pr. 3:12).

St. Isaac the Syrian stated: “the person who offers thanks impels the giver to bestow newer and greater gifts than before.” The same holy father asserted: “whoever does not thank for the small things will also remain a liar and unjust if he receives greater things.” And somewhere else he says: “what conveys God’s gifts to man is the heart that ceaselessly thanks and glorifies [Him].”

Beloved Christians: **“whatever has been written in the past was written for our instruction” (Rom. 15:4)**. Therefore, O man, become grateful to God and thank Him for every single thing: **“I will bless the Lord at all times, His praise shall continually be in my mouth” (Ps. 33:1)**.

If you are healthy, health is a gift from God. Acknowledge this blessing and repeat the words of David: **“and I am helped and my flesh hath flourished again, and with my own desire I will praise Him” (Ps. 27:7)**.

If you are sick, this physical illness will become salvation for your soul. Hence, say along with Job: **“blessed be the name of the Lord” (Job 1:21)**.

If you are wealthy and live in prosperity, thank like David **“Him Who fulfillleth thy desire with good things” (Ps. 102:5)**, and declare with him: **“bless the Lord, O my soul, and do not forget all that He hath done for thee” (Ps. 102:1)**.

If you are poor and live in misfortune, patiently glorify Him Who cares for you, Who is preparing Heavenly riches for you instead of earthly ones, and say with Job: **“as it seemed good to the Lord, so also it came to pass” (Job 1:21)**.

At all times and for all things (that is in every situation, circumstance, and condition) continuously thank God. Your mouth should never stop glorifying and praising God. Your lips should never cease saying, “Glory to Thee O Lord.”

“In everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you” (1 Th. 5:18). To Him belongs glory and power unto the ages of ages. Amen.