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Thanking God for the Thorns

Guest: Mary Mohler
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Bob: Do you have a thorn you're dealing with in your life?—something that makes gratitude difficult for you? Mary Mohler says you're not alone—the Apostle Paul had one too.

Mary: If Paul, who was arguably the greatest Christian of his day, and the one who was inspired to write 13 letters that we now read, and pour over, and memorize—since they were given to us through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit—wouldn't it have made sense that he could have functioned better without a thorn in his flesh? Well, apparently not!—because God, who is sovereign, chose to not remove that thorn. If He chose not to remove Paul's thorn, it could very well be that He chooses not to remove ours. We have to be grateful for that.

Bob: This is *FamilyLife Today*. Our host is Dennis Rainey; I'm Bob Lepine. So how can we be thankful in the midst of very difficult life circumstances? We'll talk more about that with our guest today, Mary Mohler. Stay with us.

And welcome to *FamilyLife Today*. Thanks for joining us. We've been getting some time this week with Mary Mohler, talking about the whole issue of gratitude, which is an appropriate subject for us to be discussing in the month of November. For that matter, this is something we should be talking about all the time; because gratitude is not seasonal—it's something that ought to be a part of our lives.

Mary, thanks for being with us again.

Mary: My pleasure. Thank you!

Bob: I have to tell you a story about something that happened to me when I was in high school that came to mind as I was reflecting on your book. When I was senior in high school, my dad was admitted into the hospital and spent three weeks in the hospital, having been diagnosed with bipolar disorder. He's in the psych ward for three weeks. I'm a senior in high school, trying to figure out what all this means: "Is my dad crazy?"

In the middle of that time, I was in a high school student group—I was going to Young Life. Somebody gave me a book that said that, in our circumstances / our hard circumstances, we need to praise God. I thought: "Well, that is counterintuitive. That's

not what you're thinking you should do when you're facing hard circumstances." I read a little bit of the book and I thought, "Okay; it does make sense—that if God is sovereign and if He knows more than we know—the circumstances we are in—God is doing something for His glory / for our good; and by faith, we need to praise Him in those circumstances."

I remember, as a high school student, going: "Okay; this does not make sense to me; but God, I guess I'm supposed to praise You that my dad is in the psych ward." I remember thinking, "That just sounds crazy that I'm doing this."

Mary: It's very unusual that, at that age, you were able to take that advice and to apply it. My goodness—that's tremendous!

Bob: Well, the next day, my mom says, "They are releasing your dad from the hospital."

I thought: "I was just with dad a couple days ago. He's not ready to be released yet." I remember thinking, "No; there's still issues going on." But he came home that day—they had kind of brought him to a place where he was not acting crazy. I just remember walking away and thinking: "Did my coming to a point of praising God—was that a part of the trigger, where God said, " I was waiting for that before I responded"?"

Mary: What a great lesson! That's wonderful.

Dennis: Yes.

Bob: In your book you talk about the fact that God wants us to praise Him in the middle of hard times; doesn't He?

Mary: He does, and it is counterintuitive. People, who are walking through very difficult circumstances, may just think that's insulting—like: "You really want me to thank Him for this thorn in the flesh that I've been given? How do I do that?"

I love this quote from a man—a dear believer—who lived back in the 1800's, named George Matheson.

This man was blind at age 20. He could certainly speak of thorns—he'd been engaged; his wife-to-be dropped him once she found out he was going blind. He just had a miserable life—lived with a sister until she got married. Then, the day she married, he was on his own and wrote the hymn, *Oh Love That Will Not Let Me Go*, which many of your listeners will be familiar with.

I love the quote that is attributed to him—he says: "My God, I have never thanked You for my thorns. I have thanked You a thousand times for the roses but *never* for the thorns. Teach me the glory of the cross I bear; teach me the *value* of my thorns. Show me that I have climbed closer to You along the path of pain; show me that, through the

tears, the colors of Your rainbow look much more brilliant.” I thought it stunning that, a man that’s going blind, is asking to see the colors of the rainbow more brilliantly.

Then, I kind of spring-boarded from that into: “If we are going to thank the Lord for the thorns, how do actually, intentionally, do that?” I came up with ten different ways to thank God when it hurts. One is to thank Him for the thorn when we can resolve that we are not going to let that thorn in the flesh be the hallmark of our life.

As Job said, in Job 2:10: “Shall we receive good from God? Shall we not receive evil from Him?” Then, there are several others, where the Lord is going to use that thorn—either to help us encourage struggling believers / maybe to encourage unbelievers and point them to the Christ when they see that the love we have from the Lord is not dependent on us having an easy life.

Hopefully, that can be helpful to people; but I’ve started a thorn list next to my blessing list, which is—again, you say, “What are you talking about?” The thorn list is, hopefully, going to be a lot shorter than your blessings list; but it takes some intentionality to actually sit there and say: “Okay; Lord, here is a thorn You’ve given me. I’m going to show gratitude for it, and here’s why...”

Bob: So, can you take us to your thorn list? Is there one you could tell us that’s on your thorn list and tell us how you are processing that thorn and getting to gratitude from that?

Mary: I could say one is that, for right now, our family is separated from us—is a long way away, geographically. You may say, “That’s not a very thorny thorn.” So, the ones that would probably be more personal ones, I wouldn’t share them on the air. But that’s one that is a thorn to me as I have to guard against grumbling—that there are people, who have their children and grandchildren in town, and seem to really take that for granted.

Now, with two little grandsons that are far away, it’s harder for me to accept, sometimes, that my son-in-law is called to do his important work at the State Department right now—that’s where the Lord has him—and He has my husband doing an important job in Louisville, Kentucky, and me serving alongside him with student wives. This is what He has called us to do. But it is very difficult to be missing out on the day-to-day lives of those precious little grandsons.

Bob: When you think about the thorn—

Mary: Yes.

Bob: —and you go, “I’m not happy that I don’t get to see my grandkids as regularly as I’d like to,”—how do you get from there to: “God, You’re good; and I praise You and I thank You”?

Mary: I get to there by starting with who God is—and realizing that He loves me more than I can ever imagine; and that His ways are not my ways; and He has a very good reason for why they are influencing people in Washington, DC, right now; and we're influencing people for the gospel in Louisville.

I get to the point of being very thankful for things like FaceTime and Skype—that our previous generations had *nothing* like that. They could send letters; maybe, they could go have pictures developed. Kids don't know what that means—have a picture developed!—and mail it. By the time you do that, the child has changed. So, things could always be much worse. I need to be sure to check my attitude that, as long as we are seeking to be at the center God's will, there is a reason why we are not together now. They're not on the mission field; because God's not called them to Africa or somewhere—where I have friends, who can see their children maybe only once a year/once every few years. You've just got to trust the Lord in that.

Bob: Apostle Paul had a thorn—

Mary: He did!

Bob: —and found the gratitude in his thorn—in recognizing that, in his weakness, God is made strong; and that there's grace in that moment of weakness.

Mary: He came to that; and three times, he asked the Lord to take it away. I love what Dr. Lampert said in our chapel, one time, that really stuck with me—that if Paul, who was arguably the greatest Christian of his day, and the one who was inspired to write 13 letters that we now read, and pour over, and memorize—since they were given to us through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit—wouldn't it have made sense that he could have functioned better without a thorn in his flesh? Well, apparently not!—because God, who is sovereign, chose to not remove that thorn.

If He chose not to remove Paul's thorn, it could very well be that He chooses not to remove ours. We have to be grateful for that.

Dennis: Bob, we have had guests, other than Mary, who have talked about this principle, who have gone through unspeakable suffering, and they refuse to allow their trial—or their season of trials, or their lifetime of trials—even the quote you had by the gentleman, who was a blind man, around what he could see by faith.

Bob: —the thorns and not the roses.

Dennis: That's exactly right. I think it's important for us to embrace the lessons God has for us—and not let it define everything about our lives—but to continue to trust Him and step out in faith.

Bob: And as Mary was sharing that quote, I was thinking about what you and Barbara read on a headstone in England a decade ago.

Dennis: Yes; we have a granddaughter, Mary, who only lived seven days. I think God had prepared us for her home-going, a year earlier, when we were in England. There was a little graveyard on the grounds of a church. One gravestone bore the names of a mother, and a father, and their son, who were all buried in that one spot. The mother died at age 24; the father at 25; and the little boy, I believe—it was at 16 months.

Here was the inscription on that gravestone: “We cannot, Lord, Thy purpose see; but all is well that’s done by Thee.”

Mary: It’s somewhat Spurgeon’s quote, “When you can’t trace His hand, you trust His heart.” When you make *no sense* out of this, whatsoever—that any good can come from this—you trust His heart.

I don’t know if you read the quote that I gave from the chaplain, when the woman was bedside with her son, dying of brain cancer. The chaplain came up alongside her and said: “Now, just understand God is not in this. He’ll be with you when it’s done, but God is not in this.” She had the fortitude to look him square in the eye and say to him: “God has not blinked; God has not moved; I will trust my God. He will carry me through this.” You can’t trace the Lord’s hand; you trust His heart, and all is well.

Dennis: Yes; that’s a great quote.

Bob: You end your book with a lot of practical counsel on how we get to where we need to be with gratitude. So, if we were having coffee together, and somebody said, “I’m struggling with this,” where would you take them?

Mary: I would take them to the fact that gratitude sprouts from the grace that we’ve been given through the Lord. But then, it doesn’t stall there; it spurs us on to be grateful to those around us. Of course, first of all, we are grateful to the Lord; but then, we’re grateful to those He has given to us in our home and also just to people we meet on the street. I don’t know about you, but it seems like “please” and “Thank you,” have just gone away—grunts have replaced those.

It’s very easy to fall into that mindset of: “Well, he knows that I’m thankful,” or “She knows that.” There are many clerks that I feel like—I can tell it in their eyes when I say, “Thank you very much,” or I commend them with some small word of encouragement—they give you a look like: “No one ever says that to me,” or “You’ve just made my day by saying that.”

Not only do we need to be gracious at home and grateful at home—and our children need to see us modeling how we are expressing gratitude to them for small things / how we are expressing gratitude to their father for big things, on a regular basis—that’s

another whole subject—that we don't ever underestimate that he is expecting that from us, and he's very disappointed when it seems that that's being taken for granted.

Dennis: You've got some of the same DNA that I have in my heart. You believe that we need to have a revival of common courtesies.

Mary: Yes, sir!

Dennis: The other day, I was getting on a plane. I was kind of crowding in a line, and the line was not that well-defined. I asked to step in front of a young man, who would have gone in front of me—I said, "Would you mind if I go ahead and step in?" He said: "Not at all. We're both going to end up at the same destination at the same time; it's all good." He said, "You know, I appreciate you asking." He said: "I think this country has become way too uncivilized in how we relate to one another; and we don't have courtesy and being kind to one another." You know, we ended up talking all the way into the plane—

Mary: Oh, wow!

Dennis: —and just talking about how our country is not civil—we are not kind to each other.

I think we need to up our game, as believers, to be known by kindness and to be generous people. In fact, as I was reading your book—your book is not about generosity—but it *is* about generosity.

Mary: It is in the end; right. Again, it goes back to: "You bump into us, gratitude should spill out of us—not grumpiness/not entitlement."

We see that so much with children. I shared the quote in the book about—it's on Twitter—I love this; I laughed out loud when I read this. It dates me a little bit, because you have to know what a crazy straw is—that folded up piece of plastic that kids used to enjoy. [Laughter] It says: "One good thing about five-year-olds is that they're always just a crazy straw and some chocolate milk away from the best day ever!!!!" [Laughter] Isn't that true? I mean, it takes so little to delight a two-year-old, three-year-old, five-year-old.

But then, you fast forward—and those former five-year-olds become teenagers—and they start to, if you're not careful, fall into that whole entitlement trap, where they believe every good thing that is out there should be theirs—they deserve that. So, we have to model against that for sure.

Bob: A few months ago, I finished up having preached my way through the Book of Romans, which took more than a year to do—a great journey in that book.

Mary: So rich!

Bob: The last chapter in that book—as is the case with a lot of Paul’s writings, he begins his letters by expressing his gratitude for the churches he’s writing to in every case, except when he’s writing to the Galatians—

Mary: He’s mad there; yes.

Bob: —and he’s mad because they have lost the gospel.

Mary: They have.

Bob: But even the Corinthians—the immoral Corinthians—get an expression of gratitude; right?

Mary: Yes.

Bob: And then, he ends the letter to the Romans with a whole chapter of: “Greet So-and-so,” and “Greet So-and-so,” “I’m thankful for this person,” “I’m thankful for this person.”

A lot of these are people he’s never *met*—people he’s heard about—he’s never been to Rome. He knows them by name; he’s probably prayed for these people, regularly—even people he’s never met. He’s calling them off by name; and he’s saying: “Greet this person. I’m thankful for what they did. They stuck their neck out for me.” I mean, he takes a lot of parchment and a lot of dictation—

Dennis: Yes.

Mary: He does; he does!

Bob:—to express gratitude at the end of his doctrinal letter. I think there was just something in him, recognizing: “Doctrine without gratitude isn’t going to serve us or serve the Lord well.”

Mary: It’s true! You know, our pastor just preached through that same passage—it was after my book came out. I was taking great notes, thinking: “This is good stuff. I need to incorporate this, because it’s true!” Every jot and tittle that is in that letter is for our good and for His glory. It’s not there by accident.

We’ve got to be more intentional about this at home and, also, when we’re out. Unbelievers are watching—you know, they’re seeing if we really practice what we preach and teach. You can’t put a value on this.

Bob: You could walk around our office here—and if you were to go into different cubicles or offices, you would see, pinned on a lot of bulletin boards or over a lot of desks—you would see people, who have notes that have been there for *years*. The notes that have been there for years are notes that Dennis wrote to them—

Mary: Precious; those are precious!

Bob:—where he just said: “Good job on this,” “I’m grateful for you and your service.” Those notes don’t get thrown away.

Mary: They don’t! Sometimes, those are found in the Bibles of dear saints after they have gone on. Those notes have been in there for *years*—and they go back to whoever wrote—and they don’t even remember writing it. But it was so dear to that person—maybe so rare—to receive something that just simply put into words, not some perfunctory thing, but just to express profound gratitude. That’s just priceless.

Bob: So where did that habit get cultivated in *you* to where you take the time/the effort to express gratitude to people who have done a good job at FamilyLife®?

Dennis: I don’t know; I’d like to be able to nail it down. Maybe it’s because I received notes.

Bob: —and they encouraged you?

Dennis: They did! And I’m thinking of something else Paul said—that, maybe, it came from this—I don’t know—but this is what he is talking about here. In Romans, Chapter 12—earlier in this same book you two have been quoting here—verse 10—it says, “Love one another with brotherly affection.” And then, it talks about what we’re discussing here: “Outdo one another in showing honor.”

Mary: “Outdo—

Bob: Yes; right.

Dennis: What if we started our days?—if we said: “You know, I am going to try to outdo. I’m going to compete with everybody else to show honor to other people through common courtesies, with kind words, with a note of appreciation.”

We need to be showing honor, and love, and appreciation—and expressing that in various ways to one another—beginning with your spouse; how about your kids? Don’t look outward to other people—start at home. Leave your wife a note, guys; stick a sweet note in your husband’s backpack before he heads out the door. An email—yes, that’s okay; you can send one of those. I think handwritten notes are going to be incredibly valuable in 100 years, because very few people are practicing—

Mary: You're singing my song!! [Laughter] There's a whole section on that in here! There's a good way to write a note and even a bad way to write a bad thank-you note—I'll even go that far.

Dennis: I believe that.

Bob: I have one of those notes in a drawer—that when I got it, it was jaw-dropping for me. I had been invited to be an emcee at an event—loved doing it / enjoyed the experience. One of the speakers at this event, who was very moving in her presentation, was Joni Erikson Tada.

Mary: Oh, yes!

Bob: If there's anybody who has modeled for us gratitude in the face of adversity, it's Joni.

Mary: Nobody like her; yes.

Bob: She spoke, and the audience was moved. I was moved; I was humbled. I got home; and a few weeks later, I got a note at home from Joni, saying: "Loved being with you. You did a great job emceeing." I'm like: "Are you kidding me?! Are you kidding?" I mean, I was fine as an emcee; she was *masterful* in what she shared. And then, for her to write a note—she's a quadriplegic; she's in a wheelchair—to write a note; and by the way, it was in her hand, or her pen, that this note came. I looked at that and I thought: "What a slacker I am! I should have written her a treatise on how what she shared moved me."

And just to get that note, it's like: "Lord, I've got a lot to learn. I've got a ways to go."

Mary: It's a wake-up call.

Bob: Yes.

Dennis: And I have to share this story, because I saw Joni at Billy Graham's funeral. She had just written Barbara a note, because Barbara had struggled for over eight weeks with hives. Frankly, a number of different things had taken place in Barbara's life. Joni's note said, "Barbara I don't know of anyone who has suffered as well as you." I went up to Joni—I put my hand over my heart and I said, "Joni, your statement is incredibly humbling for Barbara to receive that you would write that to her." Wow!

Mary: Profound. She is an *amazing* servant of the Lord; isn't she? I mention her in my book, as well, where she's going through a particularly horrible chemo treatment. She looked at Ken and she said, "It's like a splash over of hell to go through this."

Then, she waited a moment—she said, “Well, wait a minute; that’s wrong.” She said, “It’s like a splash over of heaven that the Lord is holding my hand while I *do go through this!*” Now, I can’t get that word picture out of my mind.

She was on our campus, as well, for a visit and just blesses every audience that has the privilege of hearing her. She’s not going to let this define her.

Bob: Yes; I think all of us can probably say: “Is there somebody we ought to write a thank-you note to today?”—express some gratitude. Getting in that habit is a good habit to get into.

Mary: If the Lord brings someone to mind for that reason, act on it.

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