



Victims in Paradise

A Response of Gratefulness for God's Glory and Grace

By Dr. Gary Rieben (website: [Give Me That Book](http://www.giveme thatbook.com))—Used by Permission *

“The next time you feel like complaining, remember that your garbage disposal probably eats better than 30% of the world’s population does.” Anonymous

Do everything without complaining or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe as you hold out the word of life—in order that I may boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labor for nothing (Philippians 2:14-16).

It is so easy to lose our perspective. We in the United States have more than any other nation in history and still complain that we are not getting what we deserve. We saw this illustrated on the national stage when a Georgetown coed testified to a Congressional committee how she was victimized because her Catholic institution did not provide her with reproductive health care. She, and her other “victimized” students, had to pay \$3,000 dollars a year to enable them to engage in sex without the fear of becoming pregnant. I have no doubt that she actually believed what she was saying. She thought she actually “deserved” to be treated better.

I would like to take this young coed on an “enlightenment trip” to the villages of Malawi. There, she would see ladies shouldering most of the burden of labor. From the time a little girl is born, she is considered a valuable commodity, not because of her personhood but because of the labor she will provide. Soon, she will be carrying water for the household, walking for miles each day. When she is not on that errand, she will have a sibling strapped to her back, since the mother is most likely out in the fields working. She will probably never make it to a “Georgetown like” university and probably never go beyond a sixth grade education . . . there simply is not the money, the time, or the opportunity. The immediate needs of her family prohibit such a luxury. She will probably get married as a teen, have several children, and if she survives the birth problems and the health risks of living without adequate health care, she will spend her days working *hard*. And, she probably will have little time to complain about what life has brought her.

In America, on the other hand, complaining is a national pastime. If you go out to lunch and listen to what is being said by those who surround you, you will often hear others complaining about the boss, their fellow workers, or the unfair conditions in which they work. You may never hear many people express their gratefulness for their job or give thanks for their employer, who trusted them and hired them. Americans seem to be hardwired for complaint, not gratitude.

Christians all over the world can have the same problem with ingratitude. We also lose perspective. We forget where we have come from and what we have received by grace. We look at something that seems to be unfair and react by complaining or arguing with the people whom we perceive to be responsible for our lack. So, we live and operate like the world around us.

The Apostle Paul, however, had much greater expectations for followers of Christ. He was not addressing unbelievers when he wrote to the church at Philippi. He obviously knew that there should be a distinct difference between the redeemed and the depraved. This difference is so dramatic that believers are to shine like stars in a very dark sky. Our normal response should be radically different from our non-believing neighbors because something so fundamental, so life-transforming, so perspective-altering has happened inside us. When we respond in the same way as our unbelieving friends, however, we reveal that we lack the biblical essentials of *gratitude* and *contentment* and *joy*.

A lack of gratitude is a clear indication that we have forgotten what God did *for us* on the cross. When somebody says, “I know that Jesus died for me, but...” it is a clear sign that they have lost sight of the incredible cost that was paid for us to be adopted into the family of God. Although we were sinners running away from God and rebels shaking our fists in His face, He died for us (Romans 5:6-10).

Romans 5:6-10, You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷ Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. ⁸ But God demonstrates

his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.⁹ Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him!¹⁰ For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!

It was a heart overflowing with gratitude that caused Paul to exclaim, "Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!" (2 Corinthians 9:15). The words of that great hymn *At Calvary* capture this awesome truth: "Oh the love that drew salvation's plan; Oh, the love that brought it down to man; Oh, the mighty gulf that God did span at Calvary." When we think of what God has done *for us*, we have no room for complaint, even if He would not do another thing for us. But, of course, He does, for an eternity!

Furthermore, when we are filled with discontent, it is a sign we have lost sight of what God has *given us*. He has promised to meet every need we have (Philippians 4:19). He has a great plan for our lives (Jeremiah 29:11). He has promised to not only save us but give us life more abundantly (John 10:10). We not only have the blessings of knowing Him now, but the unspeakable joy of enjoying Him forever (Psalm 16:11).

Philippians 4:19, And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus.

Jeremiah 29:11, "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."

John 10:10, he thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

Psalm 16:11, You have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.

Our problems come when we listen to the advertisers who continually tell us that we will never be satisfied or happy until we have fame, beauty, power, wealth, intelligence, a new car and a perfect body. To listen to those lies and then complain and be sad because we do not have those things is evidence of our unbelief. To state it bluntly, we are accusing God, the One who promised to meet all of our needs, of holding out on us.

Paul gives us direction and hope when he writes, "I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength" (Philippians 4:12-13). Paul believed in the goodness and greatness of God. He knew that God watched over him and cared about all of his needs. Anxiety and arguing and complaint are not options for the one who really trusts the Lord and His promises.

When our joy is gone and self-pity rules, we are casting a shadow over the glory of Jesus Christ. Nehemiah proclaims, "The joy of the Lord is our strength" (Nehemiah 8:10). Isaiah adds, "I will greatly rejoice in the Lord; my soul shall exult in my God, for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation; he has covered me with the robe of righteousness" (Isaiah 61:10).

Paul gives us further perspective when he commands, "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:4-7).

You probably know how difficult it is to argue and be gentle at the same time. You cannot be thankful and complain at the same time. You cannot rejoice and engage in self-pity at the same time. You have to make a decision. Either you think like the world or you believe God. Arguing, complaining, and sadness have to go when we trust God at all times and in every situation. So, Paul prays, "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit" (Romans 15:13).

Do you not see? This is not just about us and our comfort. It is about the name of God and His glory. Isaiah declares that God will "bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair." And, then he adds, "They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the *display of his splendor*" (Isaiah 61:3). When we are arguing, complaining or pouting, we are declaring to the world that Jesus Christ is *not enough*. May the Lord help us to repent of that terrible sin against his all-sufficient and all-satisfying beauty.

The story is told by Corrie Ten Boom, in the time of the concentration camps of Germany. In their morning devotions, she and her sister Betsy were reminded by 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 to rejoice always, pray constantly and

give thanks in all situations. Betsy suggested that they give thanks for every detail in their crowded, filthy, flea infested barracks. Corrie flatly refused to thank God for the fleas. Betsy persisted and Corrie finally gave in and joined in with the thanks. During the months they spent at that camp, they were surprised that they could openly hold Bible study and prayer meetings without guard interference. It was not till several months had passed that they discovered the reason the guards would not enter their barracks: the fleas! The two sisters, by their trust in God's meticulous care of them, no matter where they were, would never be *victims in paradise*. They were, however, *victors in prison*. May God's ample supply of grace equip us to follow their example so that we can join them in displaying the splendor of our God.

*We in WordTruth thank Dr. Rieben for granting permission to reprint this article.

Dr. Rieben is one of the contributors to *The International Handbook of Protestant Education*, Springer Publishers, London and New York. Some of the 32 contributors to this 39 chapter (709 pages) publication are William Jeynes (Senior Fellows at the Witherspoon Institute, Princeton), Ralph Winter (U.S. Center for World Missions), Elias Malki (founder and president of the Middle East Gospel Outreach), Abiodun A. Adesegun (Head of the Dep't. of History and Internat'l. Studies at Babcock University, Nigeria), Charles L. Glenn (Dean of the Graduate School of Education and professor at Boston University), and Byron R. Johnson (Co-Director of the Institute for Studies of Religion and professor at Baylor University).

Dr. Rieben's own book – *Give Me That Book* – is scheduled for release by Winepress Publishers in late Summer, 2012.