

# Remembering and Gratitude: Renewing Mind and Body

## Main Point

Both remembering and gratitude help us flourish in the third third of life. Therefore, we should develop practices that will encourage both recollection and thanksgiving.

## Introduction: The Oddities of Third Third Memory

The other day I was picking up a prescription in Walgreens for my wife Linda. The pharmacist asked me to enter the last four digits of Linda's phone number in the little gizmo on the counter. Instantly, I felt a moment of panic. Would I remember those four familiar digits? Or would I have to pull out my phone to look them up? Thankfully, my brain served me well at that moment and I got those pesky little numbers right.

But it doesn't always work that way for me and perhaps you understand. As we get older, our ability to remember certain kinds of things gets weaker. We think to ourselves for the hundredth time, "Now where did I put my keys?" or "Why did I come into the kitchen?" A name that we know well is on the tip of our tongue, but our tongue just won't spit it out. Experiences like this are common for folks in the third third of life, and generally indicate nothing more serious than a brain growing a little older.

Yet, while our memory for certain things seems to be getting worse, our memory for other things can feel strangely super-powered. We can remember certain experiences from decades ago with stunning clarity. For example, a few months ago I woke up in the middle of the night with a song from *The Wizard of Oz* playing in my head: "We represent the Lollypop Guild, the Lollypop Guide, the Lollypop Guild, and in the name of the Lollypop Guild, we wish to welcome you to Munchkinland." Now, where in the world did that come from? I hadn't thought about *The Wizard of Oz* in years. And I hadn't been snacking on lollypops, either. So why did this song from my childhood wake me up in the middle of the night? It made no sense whatsoever. Was I losing my mind?

## The Nostalgia Factory

No, I wasn't, according to Dutch professor and psychologist Douwe Draaisma. He is a world-renowned scholar of human memory who wrote a book called [\*The Nostalgia Factory\*](#). In this book, Draaisma writes, "This return of old memories, which psychologists call the 'reminiscence effect', is a mysterious phenomenon. . . . Oddly, the reminiscence effect increases at an age when the memory as a faculty is starting to decline." Thus, as a person's brain gets older, it becomes what Draaisma calls a "nostalgia factory." It's perfectly natural, according to Draaisma, for older brains to remember things like a song from a movie I loved as a child.

What are we to make of this? Is it okay to have memories like this? Is it healthy to recollect times from our past and even to savor them? Or is this sort of nostalgia bad for us?

In the seventeenth century a Swiss doctor named Johannes Hoffer coined the term "nostalgia," based on the Greek words, *nostos*, "return home" and *algos*, "pain." Hoffer theorized that nostalgia, a kind of mental illness, was caused by the unrelenting clanging of cowbells in the Swiss Alps. Later, doctors considered nostalgia to be "immigrant psychosis" or "a mentally repressive compulsive disorder."<sup>i</sup> Though more recent analysts have been less extreme, the tendency of psychologists to demonize nostalgia used to be widespread.

Christians have sometimes echoed the psychologists' negative judgment of nostalgic remembering. They have quoted Isaiah 43:18, for example, which says, "Do not remember the former things." Philippians 3:13-14 also appears to provide a biblical critique of nostalgia when it says: "forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on . . . ."

So, how should we regard remembering our past experiences? Should we avoid this kind of nostalgia altogether? Should we shut down our "nostalgia factories"? Or could remembering actually make our lives better somehow? Could it help us to flourish in the third third of life?

## **Remembering in the Bible**

In this talk, I'd like to begin once again with Scripture, looking for what we can learn about remembering in the Bible

It's true that a few verses in Scripture discourage reminiscence that keeps us anchored in the past and resistant to the new things God is doing (Isa 43:18; Phil 3:13). But, in fact, the Bible repeatedly urges us to remember the past. Take Psalm 105 for example:

O give thanks to the LORD, call on his name,  
make known his deeds among the peoples.  
Sing to him, sing praises to him;  
tell of all his wonderful works. . . .  
Remember the wonderful works he has done,  
his miracles, and the judgments he uttered (Psalm 105:1-2, 5).

One of the most significant Jewish holidays is Passover, which is centered in remembering what God did in the past when setting the Israelites free from slavery in Egypt (Exod 13:3). Similarly, when Christians celebrate communion, we do so “in remembrance of” Jesus and his death for us (1 Cor 11:24-25). Therefore, remembering the past is surely not always wrong for biblically-grounded Christians. In fact, a certain kind of recollection is quite right and beneficial. Why? Because God is revealed to us through God's actions in the past. Remembering what God did in history and in our lives helps us to know, trust, and love God in all seasons of life, including the third third.

## **Remembering and Flourishing**

Let's talk about the relationship between remembering and flourishing, especially in the third third of life.

Remembering certainly helps us flourish when we call to mind the big things God has done in the past. But that's not all. Recalling small, even apparently insignificant events and people from our own past experience can also help us thrive. The “nostalgia factory” functionality of our brains contributes to our living fully and fruitfully, contrary to what was once assumed by doctors, psychologists, and others who took a dim view of nostalgia.

What is nostalgia? According to psychology Professor Krystine Batcho, “Nostalgia is a bittersweet yearning for the past. It's sweet because it allows

us to momentarily relive good times; it's bitter because we recognize that those times can never return. Longing for our own past is referred to as personal nostalgia, and preferring a distant era is termed historical nostalgia" (["The psychological benefits – and trappings – of nostalgia"](#)). Historical nostalgia, glorifying and wishing we were still in "the good ol' days," can keep us from flourishing now. Personal nostalgia, on the contrary, can contribute to our flourishing, even though it has a bittersweet flavor.<sup>ii</sup>

The [Nostalgia Group](#) from the University of Southampton in England has studied nostalgia extensively. No surprise here, given their name! On their website, they summarize some of the benefits of nostalgia in this way: "Importantly, nostalgia, once evoked, re-establishes psychological equanimity. It elevates mood, self-esteem, and a sense of social connectedness; it fosters perceptions of continuity between past and present; it increases meaning in life; and it 'fights off' death cognitions." Now that sounds pretty appealing, don't you think? Who wouldn't want to fight off death cognitions?

A fascinating effect of nostalgia was demonstrated by members of the Nostalgia Group.<sup>iii</sup> They experimented with the impact of nostalgia on goals and motivation. [They found](#), and I quote, "Nostalgia augmented meaning in life, which in turn strengthened motivation for pursuit of one's most important goal" (p. 53). So, though we might fear that nostalgia will get us stuck in the past, personal nostalgia can actually empower us to move forward in what matters most to us.

One of the most astounding demonstrations of the benefits of nostalgia is chronicled in the book [Counterclockwise](#) by Harvard psychology professor Ellen Langer. She reports on an experiment with eight frail, older men who went away on a retreat and were immersed in an intensive nostalgic experience. Before this retreat began, Langer and her team gave these men extensive physical, mental, and emotional tests. They observed that the men were quite stooped and had difficulty walking. Their minds were rather foggy. Then, for five days, the men were immersed in memories from their past, from a time two decades earlier. They ate foods from 1959, listened to music from 1959, read news reports from 1959, and lived in utter nostalgia as if it were 1959.

At the end of the five days, Langer and her team repeated the physical, mental, and emotional tests they had administered earlier. What did they find? It was astonishing. The men did significantly better on hearing and vision tests as well as dexterity and strength tests. They showed 23% improvement on cognition tests. Professor Langer writes, “As the end of the counterclockwise study drew near, I couldn’t help but notice the difference in the participants’ appearance. They stood taller, walked faster, and spoke with more confidence (177).”

As the test subjects were getting ready to leave their retreat setting, one of Langer’s graduate student assistants took out a football and started playing catch with one of the study subjects. Then several others joined in. Soon, men who had had a hard time walking when the study began were playing touch football. In other words, five days of intensive nostalgia rejuvenated the men in extraordinary ways, beyond what anyone would have imagined.

I realize that what I’ve just described sounds suspiciously like the wackiness that fills the internet. But Langer’s experiment and her book, *Counterclockwise*, are anything but wacky. Plus, what she discovered more than forty years ago has now been backed up by lots of additional research from the Nostalgia Group at Southampton and many other scholars.

Of course, most of us won’t be able to go on a 5-day intensive nostalgia retreat, though it does sound like fun. But we can enjoy personal nostalgia. We can allow our minds to remember and engage memories from the past. We can enjoy photos or videos that take us back to sweet times. We can savor these memories without getting stuck in them, attending to the bitter as well as the sweet. We can listen to music that has extraordinary power to evoke memories of events, feelings, and people. Certain songs by James Taylor or Carole King, for example, take me back as if I were in a time machine to the days when I fell in love with my wife Linda. I expect you have similar experiences and similar songs. So go ahead and enjoy them. Let them take you back in time, but just don’t live there.

Now, let’s be clear. *Healthy nostalgia is not living in the past. It’s not getting stuck in the “good ol’ days.” Rather, it’s letting the memories of your past thrive beneficially and healthfully in your mind and heart.*

I should add, given all we've learned so far about relationships, that reminiscing is something we can do with lifelong friends and family members. When I get together with my college roommates, for example, I'm always amazed at the things our memories dredge up and how our shared memories bind us together as lifelong friends. Shared reminiscence can nurture relationships that contribute to mutual flourishing.

John Medina in *Brain Rules for Aging Well* encourages us to create what he calls a "reminiscence room" (234). This is a place where we gather mementos from the past: albums of music, collections of photos, videos from long ago, books we used to read, and so forth. Medina urges us to make intentional time to let memories from the past enrich our present-day experience.

After reading Medina's book, I created my own version of a reminiscence room. It's in my garage, which my wife, Linda, has graciously allowed me to take over completely. In my garage, I have lots of my grandfather's tools, including his table saw, jointer/planer, bench grinder, and dozens of hand tools. On my wall are some of the tool racks my grandfather built over 70 years ago, filled with his hand tools. When I'm working in my garage, I have wonderful memories of my grandfather and the times we spent together when I was a boy. Plus, I've added other things to my "reminiscence room" as well, including CDs of albums I loved when I was a teenager and all sorts of college memorabilia. When I go out there, I'm transported back in time.<sup>iv</sup>

You may be wondering why nostalgia has such power to do good things for our brains and even for our bodies. Scholars are working on this question. But it does seem that the "nostalgia factory" functionality of older brains is one way we make sense of our lives. Two members of the Nostalgia Group<sup>v</sup> wrote an article for *Review of General Psychology* called "[Finding Meaning in Nostalgia](#)." They showed that nostalgia "helps people find meaning in their lives, and it does so by augmenting self-continuity (a sense of connectedness between one's past and present)."

So, nostalgia can be a pathway to integrity, to discovering the deeper and longer and wider meaning of our lives. By remembering the past we're able to tie together the disparate parts of our experience, discovering continuities and, crucially, *feeling gratitude*.

## Gratitude and Flourishing

I'd like to turn out attention to the relationship between gratitude and flourishing. Remembering the past, you see, isn't an end in and of itself. It does more than refresh our brains and renew our bodies. Memory is also a gateway into another activity that helps us flourish in the third third of life: giving thanks.

The Bible frequently and understandably connects remembering and gratitude. Psalm 105, for example, begins with "O give thanks to the LORD, call on his name" and moves quickly to "Remember the wonderful works he has done" (105:1, 5). Remembering can stir up gratitude, as in Ephesians 1:16, "I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers."

Like remembering, gratitude enriches and vitalizes our relationship with the Lord. When we remember how God has been gracious to us and thank him for his grace, our hearts are warmed and our spirits rejoice. We see this at the beginning of Psalm 92, for example: "It is good to give thanks to the LORD, to sing praises to your name, O Most High . . . . For you, O LORD, have made me glad by your work; at the works of your hands I sing for joy" (92:1, 4). Recalling God's works leads to thanks, praise, gladness, and joy.

Many recent psychological studies confirm the benefits of gratitude. Dr. Martin Seligman, a psychologist at the University of Pennsylvania, was one of the first academics to study gratitude. In his book [\*Authentic Happiness\*](#), Seligman describes an experiment called "the gratitude visit." It's a pretty simple exercise. Participants write a letter of gratitude to someone who has made a significant difference in their lives. Then they meet with the person, face to face, if possible, and read the letter. That's the whole exercise.

Of course, this experience means a great deal to those who are the recipients of thanks. But it turns out that this exercise also evokes a powerful, positive effect on the letter writers, not just the recipients. And this effect, as measured by psychological testing, does not disappear right away. The benefits of the gratitude visit last for many days and the overall well-being of the letter writer is significantly elevated.



One of the world's leading researchers on gratitude, Dr. Robert Emmons, is the co-editor of the impressive 384-page tome, [\*The Psychology of Gratitude\*](#), published by Oxford University.<sup>vi</sup> The *Harvard Health* newsletter reports on Emmons's research in a recent article called "[Giving thanks can make you happier](#)." This article notes that people who, in a study done by Emmons, wrote down things for which they were grateful were "more optimistic and felt better about their lives. Surprisingly, they also exercised more and had fewer visits to physicians than those who focused on sources of aggravation."

Gratitude is good for people of any age. We know this from common sense as well as extensive psychological research. But it turns out that *gratitude is especially valuable for folks in the third third of life*. We learn this from a variety of research studies, a few of which I'll summarize very briefly:

- In the Netherlands, a study of 163 adults between the ages of 41 and 92 found that grateful older adults experienced less loneliness.
- In China, researchers examined 83 adults with an average age of 62.7. They discovered that those who recorded their gratitude became "less fearful of death due to a sense that life has been well-lived."
- In the United States, multiple studies found that gratitude toward God helps older adults deal with stressful situations, such as physical illness or the death of a loved one.

You can see other research examples in the notes for this talk.<sup>vii</sup>

Each of these studies shows that gratitude among older adults leads to various positive effects. Part of what is striking about these studies is their cultural and geographical diversity. This fact suggests that the pluses of gratitude are not culture-bound, but are common to humanity.

You may wonder if it's harder to feel grateful when aging leads to difficult losses. Can you be thankful even if your health is failing? Can you feel grateful if you lose your spouse? These are important questions for which there are no easy answers. But I will say that I have witnessed profound gratitude in people who have faced many losses and who are coming upon the loss of their own lives.



I think, for example, of Howard E. Butt, Jr., who was my mentor during my years working at Laity Lodge. I would meet with Howard one-on-one every few months for a two or three-hour conversation. During those times Howard had much to share with me. He talked about 90% of the time, maybe more. I loved listening to his stories and drinking in his wisdom. Every time we met, we'd always end with prayer. I'd start and Howard would finish. And, of course, his prayers were always much longer and deeper than mine.

The last time I met with Howard was different, though. He was struggling physically with a condition that limited his ability to speak as well as weakening his body. That meeting was so unlike the others because Howard barely said a word. It was just too hard for him to speak. So I filled the time, telling him all about my life and our common work at Laity Lodge. I asked Howard many times if we should stop, but he wanted to keep on going. Honestly, I wondered if he was tracking with all I was saying. But, out of respect for this wonderful man, I kept on going.

Finally, after a couple of hours, I suggested that we close in prayer. I offered to be the only one to pray, but Howard wanted his turn. So I began and he closed, as usual. I figured his prayer would be very short. How wrong I was! As Howard started to pray, the words flowed smoothly and beautifully. And they were all words of gratitude. He thanked God at length for God's salvation in Scripture and in Jesus Christ. He laid out the whole story of salvation with gratitude! Then he offered thanks for God's grace in his life during this difficult time. He thanked God specifically for his wife, his children, his grandchildren, and his brother and sister. He mentioned by name his various caregivers. Then, to my amazement, he started thanking the Lord for all I had told him during our meeting. I opened my eyes to see if he had taken notes, but there weren't any. Howard had remembered what I had said in great detail, and he offered explicit thanks during many minutes of prayer. This was one of the most moving experiences of prayer I've had in my life.

When Howard finally said "Amen," I told him how much his prayer had meant to me. He tried to respond, but had trouble getting out the words. Nevertheless, we embraced and I left. That was the last time I was ever with Howard.

I've thought many times about that experience, wondering what had happened to Howard that day. The more I've learned about the brain, especially the aging brain, the more I'm convinced that Howard had spent so much of his life expressing his gratitude to God that his "thankfulness network" was still amazingly strong. Somehow, when giving thanks to God, he managed to bypass the part of his brain that limited his speaking. Though Howard could hardly talk in ordinary conversation, when it came to thanking God, he still had his super-hero ability to offer extensive and heartfelt thanks.

No matter the explanation for what happened that day, I know I want to be like Howard. I want to express gratitude to God so regularly and deeply that, when my brain begins to shut down, I am still able to offer thanks to God with an overflowing heart.

## **Why Be Grateful?**

I'd like to sum up this discussion of gratitude by asking a simple question: Why be grateful? Based on the research I've reviewed here, you could answer this question by saying, "Because gratitude will help me be healthier and happier. It will help me to flourish in life, especially in the third third of life." This is a truthful and important answer to the "Why be grateful?" question. But I'd suggest that this isn't the whole answer. It's right as far as it goes, but it isn't enough.

For one thing, it would seem rather odd to practice gratitude merely to improve your own well-being. There's something about real thankfulness that is necessarily not self-centered. It recognizes goodness outside of yourself. Authentic gratitude is other-directed.

Another compelling reason to be grateful recognizes that Scripture calls us to gratitude. We have already seen that Scripture, in Psalms 92 and 105, calls us to give thanks. There are many other similar passages, such as Psalm 107:1, "O give thanks to the LORD for he is good" and Colossians 3:15, "And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful." So, another reason for gratitude is the mere fact that God's Word teaches us to give thanks.

The Bible also models for us the communication of gratitude, not just to God, but also to people. The Apostle Paul, in almost every one of his letters, opens with an expression of thanks for the letter recipients.<sup>viii</sup> God is the primary recipient of Paul's thanksgiving, but Paul makes sure to let his readers know about it. Such communication of gratitude may have improved Paul's well-being, as we have seen. But it surely was meant to encourage the recipients of Paul's letters and to nurture Paul's relationship with them.

Thus, the expression of gratitude is also crucial for building deep, lasting relationships, the kind of relationships which, ironically, are essential for third third flourishing. Yet, when we thank people for their goodness to us, we aren't calculating how this will help us live better. Rather, we're expressing genuine gratitude in the hope of building up the other person. And when it comes to God, who needs no building up, thanks is a matter of acknowledging God's grace as a way to love God with heart, soul, mind, and strength.<sup>ix</sup>

## **Conclusions**

Friends, as I wrap up this talk, let me review several key points and suggest some practical implications.

### **1. Enjoy your "nostalgia factory."**

We have seen that personal nostalgia, not yearning to live in the past, but bittersweet remembrance of your own past can bring a wide range of mental and emotional benefits. So, don't shut down your "nostalgia factory." On the contrary, find time to remember things from your past, savoring them, allowing them to help you find meaning and purpose in the present. In the "Personal Study Guide" portion of the workbook for this section there is one possible nostalgia exercise you might want to try.

### **2. Remember the big things and the little things.**

Scripture teaches us to remember the big things in life, like God's grace in Jesus Christ. The Bible also invites us to remember the ways we have experienced God's grace in our own lives. Such remembrance leads straightaway into gratitude.

Thus, we need to develop practices that help us to feel and express our thanks to God. Whether you record your thanks on a daily or weekly basis in your journal, or set aside special times during the year to thank the Lord, giving thanks to God is not only obedient to Scripture, but also it increases your well-being. You'll find a suggested gratitude exercise in the "Personal Study Guide."

### 3. Share your gratitude with others.

Feeling thankful and telling God about it are both wonderful, of course. But let me encourage you also to share your gratitude with others. Such good things follow from telling someone "thank you," blessings for that person, for your relationship, and even for your personal flourishing.

### 4. Experiment with a reminiscence and gratitude exercise.

Finally, I'd like to encourage you to check out an exercise that combines reminiscence and gratitude. Once again, you'll find it in the workbook. I made up this exercise and have tested it with small groups. The results have been gratifying.

The exercise is simple. Basically, set aside an hour for remembering things from your first 20 or so years of life, asking the Holy Spirit to help you. As you recall events, people, places, and so forth, thank the Lord for these gifts. If you remember hard things, thank God for helping you get through them. If your experience is like most who have participated in this exercise, you'll find yourself remembering and thanking God for many things from your youth that you haven't thought of for decades. Your heart will be filled with a fresh experience of God's love and grace as you give thanks.

Friends, as I have studied this material over the last couple of years, I have made more room in my life for nostalgic remembering and gratitude. Whether my brain and body are stronger now because of it, I don't know for sure. But I do know that my heart is more tender toward others and my love for the Lord is deeper. If those were the only results of remembering and gratitude, they would be more than enough for me to keep on engaging in these practices.

I hope this talk encourages you to try some new things when it comes to remembering and gratitude. As you do, by God's grace, you'll find that you are flourishing in new and unexpected ways.

## Full Links from Talk

Douwe Draaisma, [\*The Nostalgia Factory\*](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B00EZ22C64/)  
(<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B00EZ22C64/>)

Kristine Batchko, ["The psychological benefits – and trappings – of nostalgia"](https://theconversation.com/the-psychological-benefits-and-trappings-of-nostalgia-77766)  
(<https://theconversation.com/the-psychological-benefits-and-trappings-of-nostalgia-77766>)

[Nostalgia Group](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0028M9EZK/) (<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0028M9EZK/>)

Ellen Langer, [\*Counter Clockwise\*](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0028M9EZK/)  
(<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0028M9EZK/>)

John Medina, [\*Brain Rules for Aging Well\*](https://www.amazon.com/Brain-Rules-Ageing-Well-Principles/dp/1925322904/) (<https://www.amazon.com/Brain-Rules-Ageing-Well-Principles/dp/1925322904/>)

Martin Seligman, [\*Authentic Happiness\*](https://www.amazon.com/Authentic-Happiness-Psychology-Potential-Fulfillment/dp/0743222989/) (<https://www.amazon.com/Authentic-Happiness-Psychology-Potential-Fulfillment/dp/0743222989/>)

Robert Emmons and Michael McCullough, editors, [\*The Psychology of Gratitude\*](https://www.amazon.com/Psychology-Gratitude-Affective-Science/dp/0195150104/) (<https://www.amazon.com/Psychology-Gratitude-Affective-Science/dp/0195150104/>)

Roberts Emmons, ["Why Gratitude is Good,"](https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/why_gratitude_is_good)  
([https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/why\\_gratitude\\_is\\_good](https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/why_gratitude_is_good))

["Giving thanks can make you happier,"](https://www.health.harvard.edu/healthbeat/giving-thanks-can-make-you-happier) in The *Harvard Health* newsletter,  
(<https://www.health.harvard.edu/healthbeat/giving-thanks-can-make-you-happier>)

Mark D. Roberts, ["Gratitude and Lifelong Flourishing,"](https://depree.org/gratitude-and-lifelong-flourishing/)  
(<https://depree.org/gratitude-and-lifelong-flourishing/>)

Mark D. Roberts, “[Gratitude and Third Third Flourishing: New Studies and Striking Implications](https://depre.org/gratitude-and-third-third-flourishing-new-studies-and-striking-implications/)” (<https://depre.org/gratitude-and-third-third-flourishing-new-studies-and-striking-implications/>)

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<sup>i</sup> (See “[What Is Nostalgia Good For? Quite a Bit, Research Shows](#)” by John Tierney.)

<sup>ii</sup> The bittersweet quality of remembering is found in Scripture, by the way. Take Psalm 42:4-6, for example:

These things I remember,  
as I pour out my soul:  
how I went with the throng,  
and led them in procession to the house of  
God,  
with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving,  
a multitude keeping festival.  
Why are you cast down, O my soul,  
and why are you disquieted within me?  
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,  
my help and my God. (Psalm 42:4-6)

The psalm writer remembers with gladness and sadness how he led God’s people in joyful worship. But now his soul is cast down, yet also searching for hope. (See also Psalm 77:4-7, 137: 1-6.)

<sup>iii</sup> Constantine Sedikides and Tim Wildschut

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Whether or not you create some sort of “reminiscence room” for yourself, let me encourage you to give yourself the gift of nostalgia. As memories come, even in the middle of the night, take time to relish them. Let both the bitter and the sweet stir your heart. Look at photos from the past. Listen to the music you once loved. Let certain smells take you back. Talk with an old friend and see what you can remember together about your youth. Then, enrich your intergenerational relationships by sharing some of your most powerful memories with your grandchildren, nieces, or nephews . . . not too much to bore them, but just enough to strengthen those key relationships.

<sup>v</sup> Constantine Sedikides and Tim Wildschut,

<sup>vi</sup> He has written (or co-written) over 200 articles in peer-reviewed journals and chapters in academic books. Dr. Emmons is also a prolific popular writer, which is good news for those of us who are not research psychologists. In his fascinating article, “[Why Gratitude is Good](#),” Emmons cites research that shows that people who practice gratitude experience many benefits, including: stronger immune systems, lower blood pressure, better sleep, more joy and pleasure, more optimism and happiness, more compassion and generosity, and less loneliness.

<sup>vii</sup> • In Sweden, a study of 24 adults with a mean age of 81 found that those who chose “gratitude instead of worries” had measurably less fear of frailty, a common fear of later life.

• In England, 88 people between the ages of 60 and 91 were given a baseline questionnaire. Then they kept a “three good things” diary for 14 days. Then they retook the questionnaire. Researchers concluded: “The findings of this study suggest that the three good things gratitude diary can enhance eudemonic wellbeing and reduce perceived stress in a population of older adults.” “Eudemonic wellbeing,” by the way, is a scholarly way of referring to what we would call personal or psychological flourishing.

• In Spain, a study focused on 46 people with an average age of 71. They engaged in a program that guided them through experiences of memory, forgiveness, and gratitude. Researchers found that “participants who followed the program (experimental group) showed a significant decrease in state anxiety and depression as well as an increase in specific memories, life satisfaction and subjective happiness . . . .”

To learn more about the studies I’ve noted here and to find links to the original reports, see my articles in the De Pree Center’s *Third Third Journal*: “[Gratitude and Lifelong Flourishing](#)” and “[Gratitude and Third Third Flourishing: New Studies and Striking Implications](#).”)

<sup>viii</sup> • For example, to the Romans he writes, “First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed throughout the world” (Rom 1:8).



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<sup>ix</sup> Still, when it comes to giving thanks to God, we benefit from this practice. This has been demonstrated by academic studies (see my article, [“Gratitude and Third Third Flourishing: New Studies and Striking Implications”](#)), and it is something we know from personal experience.

We’re coming up on the Thanksgiving holiday in the United States, a time when, at least officially, we should be devoting ourselves to being thankful. I realize that, for many of us, family, football, and feasting might get more attention than gratitude. Though I love sharing a Thanksgiving meal with my family and close friends, a few years ago I decided I needed more thanks in my Thanksgiving. So I adopted a special practice for Thanksgiving Day. Each year now, I get up early on Thursday morning so I can be alone with the Lord. I take out my journal and begin to write down everything in the last year for which I am thankful. I start with obvious things, like my wife, children, family, and friends. I jot down many specifics related to each of them. Then I remember experiences from the past year. I thank God for my work and my colleagues, once again being specific in my gratitude. I go on for quite a while, usually around an hour. (By the way, I guarantee you that y’all will be on my list this year. It’s been such a gift to me to get to know Steve and through him to partner with your church on this project. You folks have been a great encouragement to me, so thanking God for you will be high on my list.)

I engage in my Thanksgiving morning practice primarily as an act of worship. I want to thank God for as much of God’s goodness to me as I can remember. But I find that when I do, I benefit greatly even though my intent is God-focused.

First, as I write out my thanks, I begin to think of all sorts of ways God has blessed me in the past year, ways I had overlooked or taken for granted. I see more clearly than before the immensity and generosity of God’s grace in my life.

Second, as I jot down my reasons for gratitude, I find my heart stirred up with love for God. Recognizing just how much God loves me and how God has expressed that love touches me deeply. So, though I intend to worship God through thanking him, I find that I receive so much more of God’s grace even while giving thanks for grace already given.

I realize that for many of you, Thanksgiving morning won’t be the best time to enumerate your reasons for gratitude. You may be busy in the kitchen or driving to visit your children and grandchildren. It isn’t necessary to do what I’ve described on Thanksgiving Day. But I would encourage you to set aside an hour sometime around the holiday to tell the Lord just how thankful you are.