



To Whom Thanks Belongs

Even ordinary moments of gratitude denote the existence of Him from whom all blessings flow.

By Caleb Rivas

FAITH

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The first time I really noticed it, I wasn't in a chapel or a chemistry class or even a quiet moment. I was just thinking about clapping.

Picture someone standing in the middle of an empty room, alone, with no music playing, and no performance ending. And they start applauding. Not once, not as a joke, but like it means something.

It's wrong, and you know it's wrong. Not *morally* wrong in the "someone needs to be punished" sense. More like, wrong in the way a sentence feels wrong when it's missing a

subject. The rhythm might be there, the hands might be moving, but the action is looking for a receiver.

Applause is built for an audience. It's shaped like a response. **Gratitude** is like that, too.

I've been thinking about this because of a conversation I had with a friend at school. He is the smart, calm type—and an atheist. He doesn't believe. Not in a rebellious way, not in a "look at me" way. He just doesn't see it.

I was driving him to campus as we scanned the rows for a parking spot. When we finally saw an open one, my friend laughed and said, "I'm grateful there's such a good spot."

It was such a small moment that it almost slipped past, but I felt something in me pause. Not because he said "grateful"—people say that all the time—but because he said it like he meant it. So I asked him, half curious, half teasing, "Grateful to who?"

He looked at me like I was insane. "What do you mean?" he said.

"I mean," I said, "you don't believe in God. So when you say you're grateful... who is that *for*?"

He shrugged, "It's just... a feeling, don't overthink it."

After all, he knows I wish he would become a Christian. And the thing is, I don't think he was being internally inconsistent when he said he was "grateful." I think he was being deeply human.

Because even if we pretend otherwise, we all know gratitude has a direction. When we observe the good in the world, good that bends toward us, we feel that **gratitude**, even if we don't know which direction it should go.

By gratitude, I don't mean general happiness, or being in a good mood, or the vague sense that life isn't terrible today. I mean that specific, tender pressure in your chest when something good lands in your life and you feel, quietly, maybe even unexpectedly, that you didn't manufacture it.

It's the feeling you get when someone holds the door. When your mom texts you at the exact moment you need it. When you pass a test you were sure you failed. When you find the open parking spot after circling like an exhausted shark. It's not just "nice." It's receiving something. And receiving automatically raises a question: from where? That question doesn't always show up as words. Sometimes it's just a little inward tilt, like your soul is **turning its face** toward something. Sometimes it's only a breath: *thank you*. Sometimes you don't even say it out loud, because saying it out loud would make you feel exposed. But you still feel it. That's what's interesting to me: how natural it is.

We all know gratitude has a direction.

We can be cynical about almost anything, but we still get grateful by accident. We still feel it leak out of us in moments we didn't plan. My friend didn't "choose" gratitude as a philosophical statement. He didn't sit there and decide, "I will now experience an emotion that implies a giver." He just felt what a human being feels when a small mercy appears.

If you want to argue about God, you can start with the usual categories: cosmology, morality, suffering, science, history. People do. And sometimes those arguments help, and sometimes they just create arguments.

But gratitude is different. Gratitude is not a debate tactic. It's an emotion that shows up uninvited. It's one of the ways reality touches us from the inside. So what do we do with that?

One answer is that we do nothing special. Some people explain gratitude through developmental psychology: we learn it from parents and culture, the way we learn to say "please" and "sorry." Other people explain it through evolutionary psychology: gratitude strengthens social bonds, motivates reciprocity, and helps communities survive. I can grant both stories—and yet I still think they miss the most stubborn detail: gratitude isn't merely a

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pleasant mood. It's a thank you. It arrives pre-cooked, even if we don't know its aim. And neither psychological explanation can explain that.

Gratitude is not just a social lubricant. It's not just an "adaptive behavior." Gratitude has an object built into it. It reaches outward. It points. And when you try to keep it strictly impersonal, you run into what I can only describe as a missing target problem.

It's like shooting a basketball without even imagining a hoop you're aiming for. Your body still knows the ball is supposed to be aimed. Your muscles still commit to a direction. But there's no place for it to land. Try it. Seriously. Try being intensely grateful and keeping it strictly impersonal. Imagine the thing you are grateful for. Now say: "I'm grateful to... nobody." It feels off in the same way applauding to an empty room feels off. The motion exists, the emotion exists, but the relational shape has nowhere to go.

Some people solve that discomfort by refusing to feel gratitude at all. They turn it into entitlement, or into a kind of numb self-protection: "I earned everything I have. Nothing was given. Nobody helped. I don't owe anything."

The other option is to let gratitude be what it is: a signal.

When you're thirsty in the desert, your thirst is not an argument in a debate. It's not "evidence" in the courtroom sense. It's a clue about your body and your environment. It suggests you were made for water. It nudges you to look for a source.

Gratitude feels like that to me.

It's an inward thirst that says, "Something good happened, and it wasn't just me." It doesn't always tell you the whole story. It doesn't automatically answer every question about suffering or silence. But it does carry a kind of pointed direction to something that I don't think is accidental.

I'm not saying that if you feel grateful, you secretly believe in God. My friend's gratitude wasn't a trapdoor to make him lose an argument. But maybe the better question about gratitude and God isn't "Does gratitude prove God?" Maybe the question is: "What kind of universe produces creatures who keep wanting to say thank you to someone?"

A universe where gratitude is purely accidental is possible, I guess. You could argue it's just neurons doing neuron things. But then you still have to account for why the feeling is shaped like a response. Why it wants to land somewhere. Why, in our best moments, gratitude doesn't just make us happy, it makes us humble. Why it makes us want to be gentler. Why it makes us want to share. That moral effect matters.

My friend might not have had a name for the "who" of his gratitude, but he still felt the pull. And I think that pull is one of those small invitations that shows up in ordinary places, parking lots, hallways, and text messages.

So what do we do with that? Try this the next time you feel genuine gratitude: don't rush past it. Don't immediately turn it into a joke. Don't file it away as random luck and move on. Pause. Name it: I'm grateful for this. Then, just for five seconds, let it have a direction. If you believe in God, aim it there. If you don't know where to aim it, use it as an urge to begin looking, thinking. Just one small step.

Maybe gratitude is more than a pleasant emotion. Maybe it's a compass. And even if it doesn't hand you certainty on a silver platter, it can still tell you something true: that you were made to receive goodness, and be grateful to someone.

I can't prove that with a parking spot. But I'm convinced gratitude is one of the quiet clues that reality is personal at the deepest level. And if that's true, then the most honest thing we can do with gratitude is not to silence it or flatten it into impersonal randomness, but to follow it.

About the author

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