

The other night I heard an interview on the radio. A innocent man who had been wrongly convicted of murder was the subject. After nearly twenty years in jail, a witness was found, a governor convinced, a pardon granted.

"What was it like to go back to your neighborhood after so long?" he was asked.

The neighborhood had changed. Buildings were abandoned. Torn down. Lots were not being cared for. But more than the physical changes were the changes I saw in the people. They were disheartened, discouraged, despairing. I had been in prison all those years, yet people I knew twenty years ago, free all those years, were now the ones without hope.

The subject of that interview might well have chosen the path of hopelessness. His whole life taken away by false witnesses. Marriage, children denied him by the prison walls. *But he was the one with hope.*

How many times we might think to ourself, If only this one piece of my life could be changed. If only..... You fill in the blank. What might it be? If only I had my health? If only the people around me understood me better? If only there were more money? If only things were going better at work, or for my children? If only....

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is ~~at hand~~ <sup>near</sup>. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

A different prisoner wrote these words. Arrested for no crime but the crime of confessing the name of Jesus Christ, Paul wrote about rejoicing.

Sometimes we may foolishly think, Easy for him to say. He didn't have it like me. But Paul who may have been executed soon after this letter was

written knew that joy and gratitude are in no way related to the material blessings of our lives.

Think of Jesus' experience with the ten lepers. Nine did not return glorifying and thanking God. Only one of the ten did. Why was that one grateful? All had received the same healing, but only one was truly blessed.

I was blessed like that some weeks ago.

Normally I am not a grateful person. God has <sup>piled</sup> ~~given~~ blessings like mountains in every part of my life, yet most all the time my heart dwells in the land of the "if onlys."

But for a moment that night everything was changed.

The temperature was thirty-two degrees. My tire was flat, the lug nuts on the wheel were so tight that the wrench I was using stripping the edges of the nuts. A light rain was falling.

Saturday night. We were stranded on the Pennsylvania-Ohio border. I had to get home for Sunday morning. We were in a construction zone, there was little space for another car to pull off. I tried to flag someone down. I waved my arms until they were tired. No one would stop. I begged God's help. No one would stop.

Around us all was darkness.

I was shivering, wet, weary.

A man in a pick-up stopped. He helped, and he helped and he helped some more. For the next hour many times I said, Thanks I'll take it from here but he gently stayed. *Thanks - he to whom I could get what I needed - returned me to my car, ~~helped~~ stayed with me until I was on my way.* I offered him nothing except my need. I was a begger, he a donar.

When it was over, I was grateful. Thankful to a man named Bill Atwood and thankful to God who had sent him to me.

On Thanksgiving my uncle who was mentally ill trapped all of his neices and nephews in the living room of my grandparents house. You can't

go until you say a prayer of thanks he demanded. I mumbled the words <sup>but</sup> ~~there~~  
there was no thanks in my heart.

Sometimes thanksgiving is like that. A mumbling of the words, but no  
real gratitude.

But when we are privileged to really need God, privileged to need the  
love and forgiveness of Christ, privileged to really depend on someone whom  
we can in no way repay, ~~then~~ true gratitude is born in us.

Paul knew just how much of a beggar he was. He had been an enemy of  
Christ. A persecutor of the church.

But Christ rescued him from the wrong road, and Paul was forever  
grateful.

And so he sang his prison song: Rejoice in the Lord always, again I  
will say: Rejoice.

Pray that God will give to me and to you also, a truly thankful heart,  
*even if God has to strand us on the road to do it.*