

# The Secret of Jim's One Hundred Years: Joyous Gratitude

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## Editor's Note

On November 21, 2022, Professor Jim Houston, Emeritus Board of Governors' Professor of Spiritual Theology, celebrated his one hundredth birthday. Shortly thereafter, Jim's beloved Vancouver Prayer Breakfast organized a get-together in thanksgiving to God for his goodness to Jim—and, through Jim, to the numerous people Jim has touched with this goodness of God. Below follows a meditation that Fr. Hans Boersma presented at the occasion. The meditation is grounded in two passages: Deuteronomy 26:1–11, the famous "Wandering Aramean Creed" that gives thanks for the goodness of God and commands the offering of firstfruits; and Matthew 6:25–33, where Jesus in his Beatitudes cautions against anxiety and urges his followers first to seek the kingdom of God.

**W**hat a great joy it is to be with you today to celebrate Jim's one-hundredth birthday. The joy in celebrating such an occasion for such a man comes naturally. We don't have to artificially work up the emotion of joy. We simply are joyful on this momentous occasion. How could we not be? We celebrate with you, Jim; and with you, we are grateful to our heavenly Father, not just for this joyous occasion, but for the innumerable ways in which you have brought joy through your many friendships—most especially with your dear wife, Rita; your children, Chris, Lydele, Claire, and Penny; and also with your students, colleagues, and many others. Friendship has always been important in your life, and your friendships have

brought joy into many people's lives—for which we give thanks today.

But I don't want to dwell this morning on you, Jim, on your character, your accomplishments, or any of that. My hunch is that you would—rightly, I think—reprimand me for making you the focus of our thanksgiving and joy, which should go to the giver of all good gifts.

So, let us go to the giver of all good gifts by asking the question: How did Jim get as old as he did? How was he able to attain the age of one hundred? If you have been following Jim's "Letters from a Hospital," you know what he himself attributes his long life to. At a conference in Brazil, someone asked him, "To what, Dr. Houston, do you attribute your long life?" Jim simply replied with one word, "Gratitude!"

I have no doubt that Jim is right. The joy of gratitude is lifegiving, whereas the opposite, the sloth of despondency, drains the life out of us.

This raises the question: How was Jim able to live the life of a joyous exile, the life of gratitude? There can be only one answer: Jim took his cue from the Scriptures, which command us to live the life of joyful gratitude. "You shall rejoice in all the good which the Lord your God has given to you," says Moses to the Israelites in Deuteronomy 26 (v. 11).<sup>\*</sup> And, of course, Moses is not the only one uttering such a command to rejoice. Psalm 100 begins with the words, "Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all you lands; serve the Lord with gladness." Saint Paul, steeped in the Scriptures, continues likewise: "Rejoice in

the Lord always; again I will say, *Rejoice*" (Phil. 4:4). Joy is a biblical command, woven through the Scriptures.

Knowing Jim, I suspect that he quite programmatically went about his work of joyous gratitude. Two strategies must have come to his aid: first, remembering good gifts from God; and second, trusting the goodness of God.

Let's turn to the first strategy first, that of remembering the good gifts from God. In Deuteronomy 26, Moses tells the Israelites to call to mind, to remember these good gifts. Six times, Moses uses the verb *give*. God is the giver of good gifts. Remember them, Moses tells the Israelites. By calling them to mind, you will become thankful. And when you are thankful, you will rejoice.

Moses is quite down to earth about the practices that will encourage this kind of mindfulness. He tells the Israelites: arriving at the temple, they are to recite a creed, one that starts with the words, "A wandering Aramean was my father" (Deut. 26:5). It is a famous creed, and rightly so, for it highlights the good gifts from God.

When Jacob, the wandering Aramean, travelled to Egypt, he was but "few in number." But "there he became a nation, great, mighty, and populous" (26:5). God was good. Then, when the Egyptians oppressed them, and they cried to the Lord, Moses says, "The Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression" and "brought us out of Egypt" (26:7-8). Again, God was good. When they arrived in the promised land, it turned out to be flowing with milk and honey, yielding a harvest represented in this one basket, filled with firstfruits (26:9-10). Yet again, God was good. The Wandering Aramean Creed is a lengthy recitation remembering—enumerating one by one—the good gifts from God.

This, I think, was Jim's first strategy for a long life: throughout his one hundred years, Jim has remembered the good gifts from God. Those memories have yielded the joy of his thankfulness.

The second strategy has to do with trust—trusting the goodness of God. This strategy is the more difficult of the two, for it has to do with giving up, with letting go, with heavenly mindedness. The first strategy tells us to remember good gifts. The second tells us not to cling to them. The one receives; the other gives up.

The two may seem to clash, but in truth they complement each other. Both show up in Deuteronomy 26. The chapter goes on at length about remembering the good gifts from God. But it does more: it also talks about giving up our gifts to God. The Israelites must make a journey to Jerusalem, "the place which the Lord your God will choose, to make his name to dwell there" (26:2). There, they give up the firstfruits, offering them to God (26:10). Returning God's good gifts to him requires detachment—*apatheia*, as Jim's beloved desert fathers might have called it—a willingness to give things back to God. The first strategy, that of remembering, has to do with good gifts that come down from above; the second strategy, that of trusting, with sacrifices that go up from below.

It is not easy to give back gifts you have received. Jim knows about that—letting go by way of detachment is a terribly hard thing, much more difficult than remembering the goodness of good gifts. Our Lord tells us clearly in his Beatitudes what makes detachment so hard: it requires trust. To give up, to let go, we need trust. Much of the time, we are far too anxious to trust. Six times Jesus talks of being anxious in Matthew 6. His diagnosis of our spiritual illness is clear: We suffer from anxiety.

Here is what our anxiety looks like. Jesus is asleep in the boat when a massive storm whips up the waves. "Save [us] Lord; we are perishing," cry the disciples. Jesus looks up: "Why are you afraid, O men of little faith?" (Matt. 8:26). "Men of little faith." In Greek, it is just one word—*oligopistoi*. It is a key word. Jesus also uses it in the Beatitudes, to explain what anxiety is. "If God clothes the grass . . . will he not much more clothe you?" (6:30). Then he exclaims,

*"Oligopistoi!"* "O, men of little faith!" And immediately he adds, "Therefore do not be *anxious*, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?'" (6:31). When we are anxious, we are lacking in faith or in trust. We are *oligopistoi*, like the disciples in the boat, afraid of losing control of our lives. We fail to trust the goodness of God.

Jesus doesn't stop at diagnosing our illness. "Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness," he tells us, "and all these things shall be yours as well" (6:33). Skeptics that we are, immediately we raise our eyebrows, looking to Jesus. "Really?" is our perhaps-unspoken question. Really? All these things will be mine as well?

We raise our skeptical question because we do not trust this gift-giving logic. But it is true: A gift given is a gift enjoyed only when it is a gift returned. That is, I think, the key to Jim's one hundred years—he returned to God the gifts he had received, and so he could find joy and gratitude. It is in returning our gifts that we find life.

The paradoxical truth is this: When with heavenly mindedness, we offer back

our gifts to God—in other words, when we seek the kingdom of God—all these earthly gifts will be ours as well.

How so? The goodness of God's gifts is the goodness of God himself. Isn't God the one we remember when we recite the Wandering Aramean Creed? Isn't God himself present in our midst when he blesses us with his gifts? God gives himself, in and through his gifts. I think what Jim experienced is this: Trusting God enough to return these gifts back to him, he received God himself. And when he received God, in him he received all of the goodness of these gifts—plus *infinite* goodness besides.

So, here is the key to the secret of Jim's long life. Jim took seriously the biblical command to rejoice and be thankful. And he set out programmatically to live accordingly: remembering the gifts from God and trusting in the goodness of God.

Let us give thanks to our Lord for Jim's example of joyous gratitude. May the same gratitude give us, too, length of days in the presence of God. **X**

\* All Scripture quotations are taken from the RSV unless otherwise noted.