



December 1, 2012

Dear Ministry Prayer Partner,

It is our heartfelt prayer that you had a wonderful Thanksgiving celebration with your loved ones. The Lord is good all the time and His mercies are new every morning!

I am shocked at the speed with which life takes sudden turns.

A little more than a week ago I was busy, full of activity and enthusiastic about the progress we were making and what it means for the great growth of the ministry.

Then, suddenly—my stomach shut down.

I had to go to the emergency room. After major surgery, I ended up on my back for a week in the hospital!

We had been out with Porfirio, my Cuban pastor friend who is planting a church with us in the Dallas area. We had a quick, late dinner, some roasted chicken, coleslaw and Coke. Within half an hour my stomach started to hurt and kept getting progressively worse. Every five minutes or so, it felt like someone was punching me in the stomach, knocking the wind out of me.

We were an hour west of Fort Worth, a hundred miles away from home. Thank God it wasn't 36 hours later—when I was due to depart for Cuba! As we headed toward home, it became clear—soon, crystal clear—that I should drop off my pastor friend and head straight for the hospital.

The medical team was amazingly quick. Within ten minutes they began working on me. “Never mind your belly aching,” one said, “your blood pressure is 243 over 110!” They knew something was way off. I could have had a stroke and any number of consequences.

X-rays, CAT scans, upper GI. Nothing showed up. The symptoms were getting worse. I was admitted to the hospital well after midnight for follow-up with a bigger medical team and another battery of tests. Friday and Saturday were a kaleidoscope of doctors, nurses, IVs, tests, and more! Scans showed that my small intestine was now twice as dilated as when I was admitted.

On Sunday morning the surgeon announced, “We will have to pop the hood.” Translation: exploratory surgery.

When I regained consciousness, I was greeted by strange news: “It was scar tissue from a former operation.” (I had that operation *20 years before*. The scar tissue had grown, completely shutting off the entrance into the small intestine. According to the doctors, it was



something *20 years in the making*. By God's grace, it reached its damaging climax 36 hours short of my trip to Cuba!)

The doctors were happy; they were confident that the operation was successful. But for me, the lesson was far from over.

I'd had nothing to eat or drink since Thursday. I was placed under a restriction signified as "NPO"—the initials are from the Latin *nil per os*: "nothing by mouth." The more emphatic definition is "nihil/non/nulla per os." In Spanish: *NADA!*

Which is where the spiritual school was in session for me. My mouth was shoe-leather-dry. On my tongue there was not even a hint of moisture.

And every time I "swallowed"—difficult enough with a leather-dry tongue—there was a terrible pain, as my dry tongue, like rough sandpaper, scraped the walls of my throat. With every tortuous swallow, there was the sickening taste of blood. The dried-out little papillae on my tongue felt like spikes and hooks.

**My strength is dried out like a potsherd
And my tongue cleaves to my jaws. —Psalm 22:15**

As Psalm 22 came to mind, I was amazed by a fresh realization: Of the many times I have preached or taught on the sufferings of Christ, as graphic and explicit as I have tried to be, it felt now that I had never really known anything close to this powerful reality ... thanks to this relatively "little" I was experiencing in my own flesh!

Tears rolled out of my eyes. I felt like a paper theologian!

The nurses tried to help. Someone brought a bag of green moistened swabs that were supposed to have a minty flavor. I swabbed, but it was pointless. Without real water—which was forbidden—it was as if the swabs were mocking my pain!

Our bodies are endowed with a system known as *water homeostasis*: it regulates our internal water levels. When we're thirsty, the dry mouth triggers nerve impulses to our brain, sending a stimulating message about the need for nice, refreshing liquid.

In that hospital bed, I couldn't help but think of the Lord, thirsty on the Cross, knowing His own power, knowing He was capable of slaking his thirst—yet for our sake He disciplined Himself to "NPO"—*nil per os*.

A full five days after my Thursday meal, the doctor finally decided to allow "occasional ice chips." *Ice chips!* I literally felt I was going to cry with joy over ice chips! I became PROFOUNDLY grateful for ice chips. I was thanking God for whomever invented ice chip machines. I felt my suffering had been relieved a hundred times.



Next came “sips of apple juice.” I could not believe the power of a sip of apple juice! I was told not to “gulp it,” but the nurse’s caution was unnecessary. I wanted this precious half-cup allotment of juice to last me all night if possible. I wanted it to roll slowly over every fiber of my tongue.

I would take a tiny sip, enough to create a tiny “wave” that would be able to roll over my tongue and reach the back of my throat. The experience of each sipping exercise was exhilarating!

Then, joy of joys, I received a half cup of orange Jell-O. With the spoon, I would take a small portion, swirl it around my tongue, back and forth until it would liquefy, ending the experience with a tiny, grateful gulp. I now feel like doing commercials for ice chips, apple juice, and Jell-O.

When they gave me beef bouillon broth, I felt I was having steak!

From these tiny components—ice chips, apple juice, Jell-O, and bouillon—a BIG thesis began to emerge! *I could not remember when I was this grateful for something so seemingly unimportant.*

From the Lord, throughout the experience, I never felt rebuke. It was more of Fatherly lesson, as if He were saying, “Come with Me; I want to show you something.” I began to see how aware we are—or unaware—of the “mountains of blessings” that He bestows upon us. We’re oblivious to the great majority of them!

I know we give thanks at every meal, and we say “thank God” quite often. I have preached with conviction about the grace of gratitude. Psalm 50 tells us that gratitude is a hallmark of our relationship with God. Still, the Lord is pointing out to me how many times we say “thank you,” yet fail to live out the true gratitude that He wants from us.

Over the years, I have observed that many folks, due to awkwardness or timidity, find it hard to say “thank you.” Others want to get it over with and use a facile approach—a sweeping statement which seems comprehensive, but doesn’t acknowledge the complexities: “*God, thanks for everything, and please bless those who are without.*”

The Lord wants us to **BE** grateful, more than to merely say “thank you.” The facile way is, according to the dictionary, “arrived at without due care or effort ... lacking in depth.” The life of gratitude is one that lives ***indebted*** to the One who blesses us!

As I lay in that hospital bed, a text came from our daughter Elizabeth, a medical doctor. She was keeping track of the proceedings from afar—and checking my “spiritual pulse.” She was interested in what I was garnering from this unique time with the Lord ...

I reported to her that I was learning just how many things we take for granted from the Lord. God is THE great Colossus of giving. Our normal mindset is to throw out a quick “thank you” and keep our focus on what we want to get next, or what we feel we “need.”



But without the contentment of true gratitude, we will always feel we are “NEEDY”—we “NEED” more **before** we are able to help others, or **before** we are **adequately** equipped to tackle the commission He has set before us.

The fact of the matter is that God is very good to us. We have far more than the vast majority of the world

You may recall the testimony of one of our workers in Cuba: Norma felt she only needed her Bible and a flashlight to reach the nine villages. The flashlight only came to her mind because she was asked to think how we could help her!

As we move from Thanksgiving to the climactic season of God’s greatest gift to us, please consider **true gratitude** as your strong finish to this year, which we shall soon dismiss for eternity.

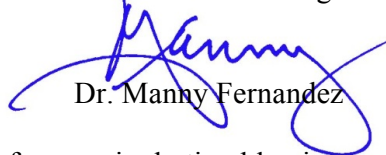
He gave us His Son, and along with Him, He graciously gives us all things. We have been blessed—we are blessed way beyond ice chips, apple juice, and Jell-O He has given us so much!

We have been blessed to be a blessing, that the ends of the Earth may hear of the gift of His Son (Psalm 67). Please let your debt of gratitude be discharged as a blessing to share God’s gift in a powerful way. Help us to finish 2012 strong, and start 2013 strong bearing the Good News of the Gospel.

With your generous help today, we will fan the flames into a full blaze—so that the Light may be seen to far corners of the Earth ... for “God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ ... has given us the ministry of reconciliation Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ’s behalf, be reconciled to God”! (2 Corinthians 5:18-20).

May God give you and your loved ones a blissful Christmas season.

With a heart full of gratitude,



Dr. Manny Fernandez

PS. I am learning to be grateful for seemingly tiny blessings—ice chips, Jell-O! Jesus said the Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, the smallest seed which becomes the largest tree of the garden. The seed you plant today, large or small, will be multiplied by a loving God to become a mighty trophy of eternity!

Please let me hear from you today with your sincere gratitude to the One who blesses us to be a blessing.