

Gratitude

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Why would a man go to the end of a pier by the ocean on a regular basis, carrying a bucket of shrimp with which he fed the sea gulls? Why would he be whispering “Thank you” from the depths of his soul as he repeated this ritual over and over again? The man who did this was none other than the famous Eddie Rickenbacker. Rickenbacker was an American fighter pilot in World War I and a recipient of the Medal of Honor. He also received the nickname of “Fast Eddie” due to his possibly being the first man to drive a mile in a minute. He continued these exploits as a race car driver in races like the Indianapolis 500.

After the war Rickenbacker started an automobile company and also owned and managed the Indianapolis Motor Speedway for about fifteen years. In business, though, he is best known for the formation of and his leadership of Eastern Air Lines. When World War II began, he assisted in the war effort as a civilian, especially by touring bases, encouraging public support, giving advice to the military, delivering important messages and gathering information, as he did in his 55,000 mile trip across much of the world including the Soviet Union.

Eddie Rickenbacker and seven other men were lost at sea in 1942 during World War II. Flying on the first leg of a trip from Hawaii to Australia, the tail wind being probably thirty miles-per-hour versus the predicted ten, they had overshot Canton Island. Efforts to determine their location were frustrated by uninstalled equipment on Canton and the great open expanse of the Pacific. Conserving their limited fuel, they began flying in a circle—actually a big box, one hour each direction. Artillery shells were being fired from Canton Island, to an altitude of seven thousand feet, in hopes that Rickenbacker and others would spot them. When fuel was desperately low, they sent out an SOS. There was no response. They were obvi-

ously too far from any listening receivers for their alarm to be heard.

The occupants of the plane collected together what supplies they could and prepared to land in the ocean. Lost at sea, surrounded by sharks and drifting in the current, there was no land in sight anywhere. The limited supplies dwindled quickly and the men were suffering terribly. In order to divert conversation to a more positive channel, one man would occasionally read from his New Testament. Rickenbacker then suggested that they pull the rafts close together and have a prayer meeting, which they did twice a day. “There were some cynics and unbelievers among us,” Rickenbacker writes, “But not after the eighth day” (Edward V. Rickenbacker, *Rickenbacker* [Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1967], p. 317).

On the eighth day adrift in the ocean, shortly after their prayer meeting at which they, once again, asked God for deliverance, Rickenbacker had dozed off with his hat pulled down low over his eyes. Something landed on his head. He knew it must be a sea gull. He looked at the other men and he could tell by the expressions on their faces that it must be a sea gull. “The gull meant food—if I could catch it” (Ibid.). Rickenbacker slowly, very slowly, moved his hand until he believed it was around the gull’s feet. He closed his fingers and they encircled the gull’s feet and legs. Within moments the gull was dressed and divided into eight portions. The intestines were used for bait. First they caught a small mackerel and then a sea bass. “There was not a one of us who was not aware of the fact that our gull had appeared just after we had finished our prayer service. Some may call it a coincidence. I call it a gift from heaven” (p. 318).

Not long after that they enjoyed a great rain storm which gave them fresh drinking water, but soon they were in a

dry spell again. One of the men died and was committed to the deep by his companions. Finally, after being lost at sea for twenty-four days, a plane appeared which engineered their rescue. Without that lone sea gull, all of those men would likely have died at sea. Thus Paul Harvey revealed to the world the rest of the story that explains why the aged Rickenbacker would feed the seagulls at that spot on the Eastern coast of Florida:

*There, on a broken pier reddened by the setting sun, the weekly ritual would be re-enacted. His bucket filled with shrimp to feed the gulls ... to remember that one which, on a day long past, gave itself (Paul Harvey, Jr., *Paul Harvey’s The Rest of the Story*, by Paul Aurandt [1977, 1978], pp. 170-72).*

Rickenbacker’s gesture of gratitude was nice. For those who have been saved by the atoning death of Christ, though, how much more so ought we to be thankful? The death of Jesus was voluntary, unlike that of the death of the seagull (Jn. 10:18). Jesus was and is the Son of God, not a mere animal sacrifice which is unable to save us from our sins (Heb. 10:4). The death of Jesus has the power to save us from the penalties of sin and eternal death. Therefore, we proclaim, “Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (1 Cor. 15:57). Because we have been delivered from the stranglehold of sin, again we declare, “Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (Rom. 7:25).

We ought to “give thanks in all circumstances,” Paul writes, “for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus” (1 Thess. 5:8). Christians are told to “sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (Col. 3:16-17).