

One Thousand Gifts

✖ In her new book, *One Thousand Gifts*, award-winning blogger Ann Voskamp invites readers into her world. Through sharing her personal moments of grace, we learn how to process loss, embrace a lifestyle of gratitude, and take the time to see God in all the moments of our lives.

“How,” Voskamp wondered, “do we find joy in the midst of deadlines, debt, drama and daily duties? What does a life of gratitude look like when your days are gritty, long and sometimes dark? What is God providing here and now?”

She shares what she learned from asking these questions and offers readers a guide to living a life of joy.

The Buzz features an excerpt from Voskamp’s new book.

An Emptier, Fuller Life

A glowing sun-orb fills an August sky the day
this story begins, the day I am born, the day I begin to live.

And I fill my mother’s tearing ring of
fire with my body emerging, virgin lungs searing with air of
this earth and I
enter the world like every person born enters the world: with
clenched fists.

From the diameter of her fullness, I
empty her out—and she bleeds. Vernix-creased and squalling, I
am held to the
light.

Then they name me.

Could a name be any shorter? Three letters
without even the flourish of an e. Ann, a trio of curves and
lines.

It means "full of grace."

I haven't been.

What does it mean to live full of grace? *To
live fully alive?*

They wash my pasty skin and I breathe and
I flail. I flail.

For decades, a life, I continue to flail
and strive and come up so seemingly ... *empty*. I haven't lived
up to my
christening.

Maybe in those first few years my life
slowly opened, curled like cupped hands, a receptacle open to
the gifts God
gives. But of those years, I have no memories. They say memory
jolts awake with
trauma's electricity. That would be the year I turned four.
The year when blood
pooled and my sister died and I, all of us, snapped shut to
grace.

Standing at the side porch window,
watching my parents' stunned bending, I wonder if my mother
had held me in
those natal moments of naming like she held my sister in
death.

In November light, I see my mother and
father sitting on the back porch step rocking her swaddled
body in their arms.
I press my face to the kitchen window, the cold glass, and

watch them, watch
their lips move, not with sleep prayers, but with pleas for
waking, whole and
miraculous. It does not come. The police do. They fill out
reports. Blood seeps
through that blanket bound. I see that too, even now.

Memory's surge burns deep.

That staining of her blood scorches me,
but less than the blister of seeing her uncovered, lying
there. She had only
toddled into the farm lane, wandering after a cat, and I can
see the delivery
truck driver sitting at the kitchen table, his head in his
hands, and I
remember how he sobbed that he had never seen her. But I still
see her, and I
cannot forget. Her body, fragile and small, crushed by a
truck's load in our
farmyard, blood soaking into the thirsty, track-beaten earth.
That's the moment
the cosmos shifted, shattering any cupping of hands. I can
still hear my
mother's witnessing-scream, see my father's eyes shot white
through.

My parents don't press charges and they
are farmers and they keep trying to breathe, keep the body
moving to keep the
soul from atrophying. Mama cries when she strings out the
laundry. She holds my
youngest baby sister, a mere 3 weeks old, to the breast, and I
can't imagine
how a woman only weeks fragile from the birth of her fourth
child witnesses the
blood-on-gravel death of her third child and she leaks milk
for the babe and

she leaks grief for the buried daughter. Dad tells us a
thousand times the
story after dinner, how her eyes were water-clear and without
shores, how she
held his neck when she hugged him and held on for dear life.
We accept the day
of her death as an accident. But an act allowed by God?

For years, my sister flashes through my
nights, her body crumpled on gravel. Sometimes in dreams, I
cradle her in the
quilt Mama made for her, pale green with the hand-embroidered
Humpty Dumpty and
Little Bo Peep, and she's safely cocooned. I await her
unfurling and the
rebirth. Instead the earth opens wide and swallows her up.

At the grave's precipice, our feet scuff
dirt, and chunks of the firmament fall away. A clod of dirt
hits the casket,
shatters. Shatters over my little sister with the white-blond
hair, the little
sister who teased me and laughed; and the way she'd throw her
head back and
laugh, her milk-white cheeks dimpled right through with
happiness, and I'd
scoop close all her belly-giggling life. They lay her
gravestone flat into the
earth, a black granite slab engraved with no dates, only the
five letters of
her name. Aimee. It means "loved one." How she was. We had
loved her. And with
the laying of her gravestone, the closing up of her deathbed,
so closed our
lives.

Closed to any notion of grace.

Really, when you bury a child—or when you
just simply get up every day and live life raw—you murmur the
question
soundlessly. No one hears. *Can there be a good God?* A God who
graces
with good gifts when a crib lies empty through long nights,
and bugs burrow
through coffins? Where is God, *really*? How can He be good when
babies
die, and marriages implode, and dreams blow away, dust in the
wind? Where is
grace bestowed when cancer gnaws and loneliness aches and
nameless places in us
soundlessly die, break off without reason, erode away. Where
hides this joy of
the Lord, this God who fills the earth with good things, and
how do I fully
live when life is full of hurt ? How do I wake up to joy and
grace and beauty
and all that is the fullest life when I must stay numb to
losses and crushed
dreams and all that empties me out?

My family—my dad, my mama, my brother and
youngest sister—for years, we all silently ask these
questions. For years, we
come up empty. And over the years, we fill again—with
estrangement. We live
with our hands clenched tight. What God once gave us on a day
in November
slashed deep. Who risks again?

Years later, I sit at one end of our
brown plaid couch, my dad stretched out along its length. Worn
from a day
driving tractor, the sun beating and the wind blowing, he asks
me to stroke his

hair. I stroke from that cowlick of his and back, his hair
ringed from the line
of his cap. He closes his eyes. I ask questions that I never
would if looking
into them.

“Did you ever used to go to church? Like
a long time ago, Dad?” Two neighboring families take turns
picking me up, a
Bible in hand and a dress ironed straight, for church services
on Sunday
mornings. Dad works.

“Yeah, as a kid I went. Your grandmother
had us go every Sunday, after milking was done. That was
important to her.”

I keep my eyes on his dark strands of
hair running through my fingers. I knead out tangles.

“But it’s not important to you now?” The
words barely whispered, hang.

He pushes up his plaid sleeves, shifts
his head, his eyes still closed. “Oh ... ”

I wait, hands combing, waiting for him to
find the words for those feelings that don’t fit neatly into
the stiff ties,
the starched collars, of sentences.

“No, I guess not anymore. When Aimee
died, I was done with all of that.”

Scenes blast. I close my eyes; reel.

“And, if there really is anybody up
there, they sure were asleep at the wheel that day.”

I don’t say anything. The lump in my

throat burns, this ember. I just stroke his hair. I try to
sooth his pain. He
finds more feelings. He stuffs them into words.

“Why let a beautiful little girl die such
a senseless, needless death? And she didn’t just die. She was
killed.”

That word twists his face. I want to hold
him till it doesn’t hurt, make it all go away. His eyes remain
closed, but he’s
shaking his head now, remembering all there was to say no to
that hideous
November day that branded our lives.

Dad says nothing more. That shake of the
head says it all, expresses our closed hands, our bruised,
shaking fists. No.
No benevolent Being, no grace, no meaning to it all. My dad, a
good farmer who
loved his daughter the way only eyes can rightly express, he
rarely said all
that; only sometimes, when he’d close his eyes and ask me to
stroke away the
day between the fingers. But these aren’t things you need to
say anyways. Like
all beliefs, you simply live them.

We did.

No, God.

No God.

Is this the toxic air of the world, this
atmosphere we inhale, burning into our lungs, this *No, God?*
No, God,
we won’t take what You give. No, God, Your plans are a gutted,
bleeding mess

*and I didn't sign up for this and You really thought I'd go
for this? No, God,
this is ugly and this is a mess and can't You get anything
right and just haul
all this pain out of here and I'll take it from here, thanks.
And God? Thanks
for nothing. Isn't this the human inheritance, the legacy of
the Garden?*

I wake and put the feet to the plank
floors, and I believe the serpent's hissing lie, the repeating
refrain of his
campaign through the ages: God isn't good. It's the
cornerstone of his
movement. That God withholds good from His children, that God
does not
genuinely, fully, love us.

Doubting God's goodness, distrusting His
intent, discontented with what He's given, we desire ... *I have
desired ... more.*
The fullest life.

I look across farm fields. The rest of
the garden simply isn't enough. It will never be enough. God
said humanity was not
to eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. And I
moan that God has
ripped away what I wanted. No, what I needed. Though I can
hardly whisper it, I
live as though He stole what I consider rightly mine: happiest
children,
marriage of unending bliss, long, content, death-defying days.
I look in the
mirror, and if I'm fearlessly blunt—what I have, who I am,
where I am, how I
am, what I've got—this simply isn't enough. That forked
tongue darts and daily

I live the doubt, look at my reflection, and ask: Does God really love me? If He truly, deeply loves me, why does He withhold that which I believe will fully nourish me? Why do I live in this sense of rejection, of less than, of pain? Does He not want me to be happy?

From all of our beginnings, we keep reliving the Garden story.

Satan, he wanted more. More power, more glory. Ultimately, in his essence, Satan is an ingrate. And he sinks his venom into the heart of Eden. Satan's sin becomes the first sin of all humanity: *the sin of ingratitude*. Adam and Eve are, simply, painfully, ungrateful for what God gave.

Isn't that the catalyst of all my sins?

Our fall was, has always been, and always will be, that we aren't satisfied in God and what He gives. We hunger for something more, something other.

Standing before that tree, laden with fruit withheld, we listen to Evil's murmur, "In the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened" (Gen. 3:5, NASB). But in the beginning, our eyes were already open. Our sight was perfect. Our vision let us see a world spilling with goodness. Our eyes fell on nothing but the glory of God. We saw God as He truly is: good. But we were lured by the deception that there was more to a

full life, there was more to see. And, true, there was more to see: the ugliness we hadn't beheld, the sinfulness we hadn't witnessed, the loss we hadn't known.

We eat. And, in an instant, we are blind. No longer do we see God as one we can trust. No longer do we perceive Him as wholly good. No longer do we observe all of the remaining paradise.

We eat. And, in an instant, we see. Everywhere we look, we see a world of lack, a universe of loss, a cosmos of scarcity and injustice.

We are hungry. We eat. We are filled ... and emptied.

And still, we look at the fruit and see only the material means to fill our emptiness. We don't see the material world for what it is meant to be: *as the means to communion with God.*

We look and swell with the ache of a broken, battered planet, what we ascribe as the negligent work of an indifferent Creator (if we even think there is one). Do we ever think of this busted-up place as the result of us ingrates, unsatisfied, we who punctured it all with a bite? The fruit's poison has infected the whole of humanity. *Me.*

I say no to what He's given. I thirst for some roborant, some elixir, to

relieve the anguish of what I've believed: God isn't good. God doesn't love me.

If I'm ruthlessly honest, I may have said
yes to God, yes to Christianity, but really, I have lived the
no. I have.

Infected by that Eden mouthful, the retina of my soul develops
macular holes of
blackness. From my own beginning, my sister's death tears a
hole in the canvas
of the world.

Losses do that. One life-loss can infect
the whole of a life. Like a rash that wears through our days,
our sight becomes
peppered with black voids. Now everywhere we look, we only see
all that isn't:
holes, lack, deficiency.

In our plain country church on the edge
of that hayfield enclosed by an old cedar split-rail fence,
once a week on
Sunday, my soul's macular holes spontaneously heal. In that
church with the
wooden cross nailed to the wall facing the country road, there
God seems
obvious. Close. Bibles lie open. The sanctuary fills with the
worship of wives
with babies in arms, farmers done with chores early, their
hair slicked down.
The communion table spread with the emblems, that singular cup
and loaf, that
table that restores relationship. I remember. Here I remember
love and the
cross and a body, and I am grafted in and held and made whole.
All's upright.
There, alongside Claude Martin and Ann Van den Boogaard and
John Weiler and

Marion Schefter and genteel Mrs. Leary, even the likes of me can see.

But the rest of the week, the days I live in the glaring harshness of an abrasive world? Complete loss of central vision.

Everywhere, a world pocked with scarcity.

I hunger for filling in a world that is starved.

But from that Garden beginning, God has had a different purpose for us. His intent, since He bent low and breathed His life into the dust of our lungs, since He kissed us into being, has never been to slyly orchestrate our ruin. And yet, I have found it: He does have surprising, secret purposes. I open a Bible, and His plans, startling, lie there barefaced. It's hard to believe it, when I read it, and I have to come back to it many times, feel long across those words, make sure they are real.

His love letter forever silences any doubts: "His secret purpose framed from the very beginning [is] to bring us to our full glory" (1 Cor. 2:7, NEB).

He means to rename us—to return us to our true names, our truest selves. He means to heal our soul holes. From the very beginning, that Eden beginning, that has always been and always is, to this day, His secret purpose—our return to *our full glory*. *Appalling*—that He would! Us, unworthy. And yet since we took a bite out of the fruit and tore into our own souls, that drain

hole where joy seeps away, God's had this wild secretive plan.
He means to
fill us with glory again. With glory and grace.

Grace,
it means "favor," from the Latin *gratia*. It connotes a free
readiness. A
free and ready favor. That's grace. It is one thing to choose
to take the grace
offered at the cross. But to choose to live as one *filling*
with His
grace? Choosing to *fill* with *all* that He freely gives and
fully
live—with glory and grace and God?

I know it but I don't want to: It is a
choice. Living with losses, I may choose to still say yes.
Choose to say yes to
what He freely gives. Could I *live* that—the choice to open the
hands to
freely receive whatever God gives? If I don't, I am still
making a choice.

The choice not to.

The day I met my brother-in-law at the
back door, looking for his brother, looking like his brother,
is the day I see
it clear as a full moon rising bright over January snow, that
choice, saying
yes or no to God's graces, is the linchpin of it all, of
everything.

My brother-in-law, he's just marking
time, since Farmer Husband's made a quick run to the hardware
store. He's
talking about soil temperature and weather forecasts. I lean
up against the

door frame. The dog lies down at my feet.

John shrugs his
shoulders, looks out across our wheat field. "Farmers, we
think we control so
much, do so much right to make a crop. And when you are
farming," he turns back
toward me, "you are faced with it every day. You control so
little. Really.
It's God who decides it all. Not us." He slips his big Dutch
hands into frayed
pockets, smiles easily. "It's all good."

I nod, almost say something about him
just leaving that new water tank in the back shed for now
instead of waiting
any longer for Farmer Husband to show up. But I catch his eyes
and I know I
have to ask. Tentatively, eyes fixed on his, I venture back
into that place I
rarely go.

"How do you know that, John? Deep down,
how do you *know* that it really is all good? That *God* is good?
That you can say yes—to whatever He gives?" I know the story
of the man I am
asking, and he knows mine. His eyes linger. I know he's
remembering the story
too.

New Year's Day. He asks us to come. Only
if we want. I don't want to think why, but we know. "Already?"
I search my
husband's face. "Today?" He takes my hand and doesn't let go.
Not when we slide
into the truck, not when we drive the back roads, not when we
climb the empty
stairwell to the hospital room lit only by a dim lamp. John

meets us at the
door. He nods. His eyes smile brave. The singular tear that
slips down his
cheek carves something out of me.

"Tiff just noticed Dietrich had started
breathing a bit heavier this afternoon. And yeah, when we
brought him in, they
said his lung had collapsed. It will just be a matter of
hours. Like it was at
the end for Austin." His firstborn, Austin, had died of the
same genetic
disease only 18 months prior. He was about to bury his second
son in less than
two years.

I can't look into
that sadness wearing a smile anymore. I look at the floor,
polished tiles
blurring, running. It had only been a year and six months
before that. The
peonies had been in full bloom when we had stood in a country
cemetery watching
a cloud of balloons float up and into clear blue over
pastures. All the
bobbing, buoyant hopes for Austin?—floating away. Austin had
hardly been 4
months old. I had been there on that muggy June afternoon. I
had stood by the
fan humming in their farm kitchen. The fan stirred a happy-
face balloon over
Austin's placid body. I remember the blue of his eyes, mirrors
of heaven. He
never moved. His eyes moved me. I had caressed my nephew's
bare little tummy.
His chest had heaved for the air. And heaved less ... and less.

How do you keep breathing when the lungs

under your fingers are slowly atrophying?

I had stumbled out their back steps, laid down on the grass. I had cried at the sky. It was our wedding anniversary. I always remember the date, his eyes.

And now, New Year's Day, again with John, Tiffany, but now with their second-born son, Dietrich. He's only 5 months old. He was born to hope and prayers—and the exact same terminal diagnosis as his brother, Austin.

John hands me a Kleenex, and I try to wipe away all this gut-wrenching pain. He tries too, with words soft and steady, "We're just blessed. Up until today Dietrich's had no pain. We have good memories of a happy Christmas. That's more than we had with Austin." All the tiles on the floor run fluid. My chest hurts. "Tiffany's got lots and lots of pictures. And we had five months with him."

I shouldn't, but I do. I look up. Into all his hardly tamed grief. I feel wild. His eyes shimmer tears, this dazed bewilderment, and his stoic smile cuts me right through. I see his chin quiver. In that moment I forget the rules of this Dutch family of reserved emotion. I grab him by the shoulders and I look straight into those eyes, brimming. And in this scratchy half whisper, these ragged words choke—and wail. "If it were up to me" and then the words pound, desperate and hard, "*I'd write this*

story differently."

I regret the words as soon as they leave
me. They seem so un-Christian, so unaccepting—?so *No, God!* I
wish I
could take them back, comb out their tangled madness, dress
them in their calm
Sunday best. But there they are, released and naked, raw and
real, stripped of
any theological cliché, my exposed, serrated howl to the
throne room.

"You know" John's voice breaks into my
memory and his gaze lingers, then turns again toward the
waving wheat field.

"Well, even with our boys ... I don't know why that all
happened." He shrugs
again. "But do I have to? ... Who knows? I don't mention it
often, but sometimes
I think of that story in the Old Testament. Can't remember
what book, but you
know—when God gave King Hezekiah 15 more years of life?
Because he prayed for
it? But if Hezekiah had died when God first intended, Manasseh
would never have
been born. And what does the Bible say about Manasseh?
Something to the effect
that Manasseh had led the Israelites to do even more evil than
all the heathen
nations around Israel. Think of all the evil that would have
been avoided if
Hezekiah had died earlier, before Manasseh was born. I am not
saying anything,
either way, about anything."

He's watching that sea of green rolling
in winds. Then it comes slow, in a low, quiet voice that I
have to strain to

hear.

“Just that maybe ... maybe you don’t want to change the story, because you don’t know what a different ending holds.”

The words I choked out that dying, ending day, echo. Pierce. There’s a reason I am not writing the story and God is. He knows how it all works out, where it all leads, what it all means.

I don’t.

His eyes return, knowing the past I’ve lived, a bit of my nightmares. “Maybe ... I guess ... it’s accepting there are things we simply don’t understand. But He does.”

And I see. At least a bit more. When we find ourselves groping along, famished for more, we can choose. When we are despairing, we can choose to live as Israelites gathering manna. For 40 long years, God’s people daily eat manna—a substance whose name literally means “What is it?” Hungry, they choose to gather up that which is baffling. They fill on that which has no meaning. More than 14,600 days they take their daily nourishment from that which they don’t comprehend. They find soul-filling in the inexplicable.

They eat the mystery.

They eat the mystery.

And the mystery, that which made no

sense, is "like wafers of honey" on the lips.

A pickup drives into the lane. I watch
from the window, two brothers meeting, talking, then hand
gestures mirroring
each other. I think of buried babies and broken, weeping
fathers over graves,
and a world pocked with pain, and all the mysteries I have
refused, *refused*,
to let nourish me. If it were my daughter, my son? Would I
really choose the manna?
I only tremble, wonder. With memories of gravestones, of
combing fingers
through tangled hair, I wonder too ... if the rent in the canvas
of our life
backdrop, the losses that puncture our world, our own
emptiness, might actually
become places to see.

To see through to God.

That that which tears open our souls,
those holes that splatter our sight, may actually become the
thin, open places
to see through the mess of this place to the heart-aching
beauty beyond. To
Him. To the God whom we endlessly crave.

Maybe so.

But how? How do we choose to allow the
holes to become seeing-through-to-God places? To more-God
places?

How do I give up resentment for
gratitude, gnawing anger for spilling joy? Self-focus for God-
communion.

To fully live—to live full of grace and

joy and all that is beauty eternal. It is possible, wildly.

I now see and testify.

So this story—my story.

A dare to an emptier, fuller life.

Click here to purchase *One Thousand Gifts*.