

Grace note: Gratitude and prayer

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [September 7, 2004](#) issue

In his compact book *Before God*, George Stroup observes that we live in a time when many people no longer understand that their lives are lived *coram Deo*, before God. Stroup is particularly good in talking about gratitude as the essence of Christian practice. On that topic he quotes Karl Barth: “Gratitude is the precise creaturely counterpart to the grace of God.” He also observes about prayer that “if one wants to know what a person truly believes about God, it is not so much what he or she says *about* God as what he or she says *to* God.”

I tucked those comments in my sermon file just before heading to Northwestern Memorial Hospital to wait for my daughter-in-law to deliver a child. Tests had revealed a hole in the infant’s heart, but the doctors couldn’t predict how that tiny heart would perform. There was a fair chance that immediate surgical intervention would be required.

We sat and waited, drank coffee and read every newspaper in sight. I tried to remember what Stroup and Barth had said about gratitude and prayer, but found it difficult. What I felt was numbness and helplessness.

My son appeared. The baby had arrived and was breathing smoothly. Still, she needed the specialists’ attention. Gabriella Grace was carefully bundled into a plastic travel crib and placed in an ambulance as her parents watched, stunned. In 24 hours she was sent back by ambulance to rejoin her mother. The pediatricians were satisfied that she was not in imminent danger, and they decided that the surgery to repair her heart could be safely postponed several months.

I was still numb. As we reassembled in a hospital room, with Gabriella Grace the center of attention, my spouse suggested that I should pray. “You’re the minister here, after all.” Minister, yes, but even more, father, father-in-law, grandfather—and numb. Just then a colleague appeared, a good pastor. I asked her to say thanks for us, to express the gratitude for which I did not yet have words. She did so, simply and eloquently. We held hands. And I remembered what I had read the day before: “Gratitude is the precise creaturely counterpart to the grace of God.”