



Unexpected Gifts Guide



SANCTUARY
Mental Health Ministries

At Sanctuary, we believe that the practice of remembering gifts that we've received in the past can increase our hope that there will be good gifts in the future, too. One way for us to practice this belief is by looking at the unexpected gifts that come up in our own lives, whether we're in a season of flourishing or languishing. Our invitation to you is to look for gifts like these over the past year. We've included a template for you to use and fill in, if that's helpful for you.

Before you engage in this kind of reflection, here are a few things we'd ask you to keep in mind:

- a. This reflection is designed for the purpose of encouragement. For this reason, we recommend reflecting on memories and events that no longer cause deep distress.
- b. Pay attention to any feelings of overwhelm that arise, and step away from the guide if necessary.
- c. You may want to engage with a grounding or container exercise if this practice proves difficult for you. One option could be to use or adapt the following text from *The Sanctuary Course Facilitation Guide*:
 - Imagine a container that is strong and sturdy enough to hold any heaviness or burden you are feeling in this moment.
 - What size is your container? What shape is it? What color is it? You might imagine a mason jar, a gift box, a suitcase, a vault, or any other container that comes to mind.
 - Imagine that you are placing any distressing thoughts or feelings or burdens into the container. Take your time. (Pause.)
 - When you are ready, imagine closing the container tightly. Lock it if you would like.
 - Imagine placing your container into God's hands and leaving it there for now.

One more note: if you find that there are no gifts that come to mind within a particular season, it may be helpful to reflect on a different period of time. Unexpected gifts can sometimes reveal themselves slowly, and it may take months or years before you recognize the gifts that were present in a recent season. It is also possible that you may need time to name and process hard things before you are ready to reflect on gifts. If this is where you find yourself, we encourage you to be as gentle with yourself as you can and perhaps consider reaching out to a loved one. At the end of this guide, you'll find a few recommended resources for grief and lament, in case they are useful for you in this season.

1. Starting with Seasons

When you look back on the last year, were there any notable changes in how you felt or functioned throughout the year? Are there any significant events that stand out? Noticing these types of things can help us recognize different seasons we may have experienced. This can be at a macro or micro level. If it feels difficult, perhaps stay at a macro level for now and look for one to two shifts, though more may come up for you.

What about starting right where you are in your current season—however you've defined that—and then working your way backward through the last year?

If you'd like, write these seasons down so that they're easier to see (feel free to use the template below).

2. Looking at Layers

We introduce the bio/psycho/social/spiritual model in Session 1 of *The Sanctuary Course*. It represents the idea that mental health challenges involve many different aspects of our lives. They are

- biological, affecting our brains and bodies;
- psychological, involving thoughts, feelings, and behaviors;
- social, impacting relationships;
- spiritual, affecting the way people perceive God and engage in their faith.

These “layers” are present in all experiences of mental health challenges, no matter how different those experiences may be. Of course, they are part of all of our life’s experiences, not only in mental health challenges. As such, these four layers can provide a lens through which to look for unexpected gifts. While the layers are not completely separable—you may find that they are quite connected to each other—it can be an insightful exercise to focus on one layer at a time to see what unexpected gifts may arise in each area. As mentioned above, we recommend reflecting on memories and events that no longer cause deep distress and suggest stepping away from the guide if necessary.

If you’d like, consider looking at each of the seasons you’ve identified through each of these four layers. For example, if you start with one of the seasons that you’ve identified, is there an unexpected gift in that season that arises in the biological aspect of your life? What about the social aspect?

Are there additional aspects of your life where you can see unexpected gifts?

You can write these unexpected gifts down in the template and, as you’re ready, move to the next step for further reflection.

3. Unwrapping Your Unexpected Gifts

It's possible that there are aspects to the unexpected gifts you received that may need a bit of unwrapping to see or understand.

If you'd like, consider writing two to three sentences to deepen your understanding of the unexpected gift and what it means to you. In case it's helpful, here are some prompts:

- What is unexpected about this gift?
- What makes it a gift?
- What is an emotion that arises when you think about it? What do you notice in your body when you focus on the emotion?
- Who or what does this gift connect you to more deeply?

4. And Finally...

If you'd like, you can finish by praying the following brief prayer:

Lord, you are the giver of gifts.
I am grateful to receive from you.

These particular gifts that you gave were so unexpected.
I am grateful to receive from you.

Thank you for the eyes to see what you give.
I am grateful to receive from you.

Amen.

Additional Resources For Grief, Lament, and Hope

- [*Sanctuary Songs*](#), an album that centers around the experiences of people living with mental health challenges created by Sanctuary and The Porter's Gate.
- Timothy Keller, [*Walking with God through Pain and Suffering*](#) (New York: Viking, 2013).
- [*GriefShare*](#) - GriefShare is a friendly, caring group of people who will walk alongside you through one of life's most difficult experiences. You don't have to go through the grieving process alone.



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