

The Secret to Life, the Universe, and Everything

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[0 : 0 0] Again, welcome. I'm going to do a quick review. We're in our third week of a four-week series on Psalm 100. We're looking at verse 4 today, Psalm 100, verse 4.

And we're in the second half of the psalm, so we're halfway there. Next week, Dan will bring us home, looking at the fifth verse. The rhythm of the psalm is really simple. There's a command to worship, and then the reason why we ought to worship.

And then there's a command to worship, and the reason why we ought to worship. But verse 4, the second half, we're given a command. We're to enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise.

We're to give thanks to him and bless his name. The verse here, the language of gates and courts, is just very simply a clear reference to the temple. The temple was the place of God's presence. It's where heaven and earth met.

It's where God was, and that's where God's people were to worship him. And so this verse simply describes where and how God is to be worshipped. If you've worshipped at the Church of Advent for any amount of time, you may have noticed that we talk about the Christian life in terms of becoming fully and truly human.

[1 : 1 3] It's an interesting thing about how we talk about the Christian life. As a church, our aim is to be alive in the way that God intended human beings to be alive.

To be alive in the way that human beings God intended us to be alive. And this isn't just so that we might be fulfilled or self-actualized. It's actually so that God might receive the praise and the honor that's due his name.

Because I think the Bible is pretty clear that God's glory is linked to the creation project. Which is to say that God's glory is linked to the human project.

How we turn out, God's glory is linked to that. Irenaeus, a second century bishop, said this famously. The glory of God is a human being fully alive.

The glory of God is a human being fully alive. When I read this, it reminds me of one of John Piper's famous sayings. I don't know if you've ever heard of John Piper. I'm a fan of his preaching, his theology.

[2 : 1 8] He has a saying or movement called Christian hedonism. And what Christian hedonism says is that God is most glorified when we are most satisfied in him.

So Christian hedonism says God is most glorified when human beings are most satisfied in him. Now I don't disagree with that. I am very sympathetic to that view. But I want to frame it a little bit differently this morning.

Instead of Christian hedonism, I want to talk about things in terms of Christian humanism. And so I would say that God is most glorified when we are most fully alive in him.

Christian humanism. God is most glorified when we are most fully alive in him. And this begs the question, well, what does it mean to be fully alive? And how do we become fully alive?

And that's what I want to talk about this morning. And I want to ask the question, is there something so important? Is there some characteristic or quality of the human being?

[3 : 1 5] Something so foundational to the Christian life, that is to human life, that if we get this one thing, then everything else just kind of falls into place. Like a well-laid cornerstone that's laid such that every single other brick is laid and falls in the right place.

And so the whole building is built together with integrity. So the question is, is there a secret to being fully alive? Asking this question, I sort of laugh at myself in some ways, because it's a big question.

Maybe it's absurd. It reminds me of The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy. I don't know if anyone is a fan of that book or that movie. We have one. There we go. So there's this really hilarious scene. Two of the characters, they go up to a supercomputer. And the supercomputer's name is Deep Thought. And so they go up to the supercomputer and they say, Deep Thought, is there an answer to life and the universe and everything?

And Deep Thought, the supercomputer, says, Interesting question. It's going to take a while to compute that. Come back in seven and a half million years and I'll give you the answer to life, the universe, and everything.

[4 : 26] And so the very next chapter, seven and a half million years later, seven and a half million years of anticipation, they go back to Deep Thought and they say, We're here. Tell us the answer to life, the universe, and everything.

And Deep Thought computes a little bit and says, The answer to life, the universe, and everything is? 42. Which makes no sense.

And the point of that is that this question makes no sense. There is no... Life is absurd. There's no answer to life, the universe, and everything. The answer is 42. And so I hope my answer to the secret to life, the universe, and everything isn't as absurd.

I think I know the secret. So is there a secret to being fully alive? Is there a secret to life, the universe, and everything? I think verse four of Psalm 100 perhaps surprisingly tells us. Can anyone make any guesses from our verse?

What's the secret? Give thanks. Yeah, give thanks. I think it's gratitude. I think that's the answer to life, the universe, and everything.

[5 : 30] And so what I want to do this morning... Right? Is that as absurd as 42? I hope not. What I want to do this morning is make the case why gratitude is so important and then give us some practical ways for how we can cultivate gratitude in our lives so that we can unlock the secret to life, the universe, and everything.

Okay, so why is Thanksgiving such a big deal? Why is this, gratitude, gratefulness, Thanksgiving, the answer to life, the universe, and everything?

Well, in a negative sense, ingratitude is the root of all that's wrong in the world. I don't know if you've ever noticed this in Romans 1, but Paul writes about the cause of universal sinfulness in chapter 1 of Romans, the estrangement of humanity from God, one of the foundational failures, perhaps the foundational failure of human beings, of the human project when it got started, was the failure for human beings to give thanks to God.

I want to read the verses, Romans 1, 21 to 23. Paul writes this, So what Paul is saying, and this is surprising, I don't know if you've ever noticed that before, but giving thanks is, Paul describes it sort of like the Jenga piece, that once you remove this, the whole tower comes collapsing.

Why is it such a big deal? Well, if we're not grateful to God, we become, that's a reflection of our being disoriented towards God, and ourselves, and all of creation. And this leads to foolish thinking, and to foolish living, and ultimately this leads to dethroning God, and putting other things, and ourselves in God's place.

[7 : 28] It's what I call the Dudley Dursley effect. I don't know if any of you know who Dudley Dursley is. He's the bully cousin of Harry Potter. And I don't frequent the Harry Potter fan websites, but I went there this week, because I googled Dudley Dursley ungrateful, and the fan website came up, and this is how they describe him.

This is official Harry Potter fandom stuff. Dudley is a bully. He's unpleasant, spoiled, demanding, selfish, manipulative, and I quote, most of all, extremely ungrateful.

You might recall the scene from Dudley's 11th birthday, if you've seen the movie, or if you've read the books, he just opened all of his presents, and then he causes a scene. He was very upset.

He says, 36? That's two less than last year. So he got 36 presents. He was very upset that he got 36 presents, because last year he got actually 37.

He miscounted a little bit, but he was very angry, so he calls the scene, and he forces his parents to buy more. And that kind of makes me think about Adam and Eve being ungrateful in the garden, and them saying something like, all but one?

[8 : 36] We can eat everything here, except from this one tree? Ungratitude. They were ungrateful. And I think Paul argues, when humans fail to give thanks to God, we become like Dudley Dursley.

And it might manifest itself in our lives a little bit differently than Dudley, but we become little dictators, entitled to things that haven't been given to us, and then we demand them. And sometimes we don't just demand, but we take what we want, because we deserve it. And I think this is how the human story has played itself out. I know for a fact that this is how every morning, this is how our little family plays itself out. I read the news, and this is how the world plays itself out, sometimes in just a little bit more sophisticated of a way. But really, I think it's all stemming back to a lack of gratitude. This is the poisoned root that corrupts life, the universe, and everything. And on the flip side, in a more positive sense, it's not just lack of gratitude that's the problem, but gratitude is the solution. Gratitude is perhaps the most becoming quality of a human being. The most becoming quality of a fully alive human being. Gratitude becomes us as creatures created by grace. [9 : 48] Gratitude becomes us as sinners saved by grace. And gratitude becomes us as saints sanctified by grace. It's grace and a gift through and through, and the most appropriate response for a human being is gratitude for the gifts that God has given to us. And this is why our verse tells us right worship is marked, perhaps most of all, by gratitude. We are to enter his gates into God's presence with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise. We are to give thanks to him. And by giving thanks to him, we bless his name. Thomas Merton, a Trappist monk, one of our core groups in the church this past semester, read, I think it was *No Man is an Island* this semester. They inspired me to read a little Merton. I've been blessed by him this past week. He's an American Trappist monk, and he articulates how gratitude is the heart of the Christian life, and because it's the heart of the Christian life, it's the heart of the human life, and he describes gratitude in this way, and it's just a really great quote, so I'm going to read it in full for us. Merton writes this, To be grateful is to recognize the love of God in everything, in everything that he has given us, and he has given us everything. [11 : 03] Every breath we draw is a gift of his love. Every moment of existence is a grace, for it brings with it immense graces from him. Gratitude, therefore, takes nothing for granted, is never unresponsive, is constantly awakening to new wonder, and to praise of the goodness of God. For the grateful person knows that God is good, not by hearsay, but by experience. And that is what makes all the difference. You know, as I was reflecting and contemplating that quote, that could be a commentary on Psalm 100, which is very interesting. So I want to talk about how we are to cultivate gratitude in our lives. In order to recognize the love of God in everything, in order to see that every breath we draw is a gift of God's love, in order to appreciate that every moment of existence is a grace, in order to not take anything for granted, to always respond in the right way, to be awakened to new wonder, and to praise to the goodness of God, in order to really know that God is good, not secondhand, but from experience, in order to be grateful, in other words, we need to be paying attention. It's as simple as that. It's not so simple as it turns out in practice, but we just need to be paying attention. If we're paying attention, we can't help but be grateful. And attention is simply the convergence of our concentration on a particular point. Attention consists of being right here, right now, of attending to a particular thing at a particular time and at a particular place. [12 : 44] Attention is listening to your friend without looking at your phone. And it's a faculty, like all of our other faculties, that is strengthened like a muscle through practice, through repetition. And it really, really, really matters what we focus on. Developing our attention and attending to the right things, I would say, is perhaps the most important thing you can do to grow in your walk with the Lord, to grow as a human being. And it's not hard to waste your life if you think about it. You just have to pay attention to the wrong things. And I'm not just talking about Netflix. You know, you can waste an hour looking at cat videos, but you can waste an entire life living for retirement. Or dwelling on the thing that didn't go well five years ago. Or obsessing over what other people think about you. You can waste your life by paying attention to the wrong things. There was an article in the New York Times this past week on attention. It was interesting. It had a horrible title. I forget what the title was. But I don't know if that was intentional. It wasn't a click-bait title.

[13 : 44] So it's like, if you really want to pay attention, you really have to go looking for it, something like that. But basically, in the title, it's just some really practical wisdom for how to notice the world around you. And there were two things about the article that stood out to me.

One was what they called attention management. Attention management is simply being self-conscious about the things that you're focusing on. So we need to pay attention to what we care about and actually care about the things that we pay attention to.

So think about, one thing you could do is just think about the past week or the past day. And like, what did I focus on today? Maybe it was what was trending on Twitter. Just ask yourself, was it worth paying attention to that thing?

Giving that much of my time and energy to the Face app. I don't know if anyone spent some time looking at Face app. Or then, after you did, worrying about the Russians having your information. Is it worth paying attention to those things? I don't know. Maybe, maybe not. The second thing that the article talked about was the art of noticing. The art of noticing. And that basically is just setting aside moments to stop and reflect and to pay attention to the things that are most important.

[14 : 54] To notice God's gifts that he gives to us every single day. God's gifts big and small. There are a couple things I did this week to practice. I knew that I'd be preaching on Thanksgiving and I assumed that attention would play a factor into it.

So, I did a little experiment this week to see how things would go to see if practicing gratitude had any impact on my life. So, here are a few of the things that I did. On Monday, I went to the National Gallery of Art Monday afternoon and there's a great exhibit there right now that is showcasing art from the American pre-Raphaelites.

It's always a word that's hard to say. Pre-Raphaelites. It's an art movement of the mid-19th century that started in England and made its way to America. And what this art movement is particularly known for is extreme realism.

So, the artists that are the pre-Raphaelites pay intense attention to detail and then they try to replicate the detail that they see in the things that they paint. And so, if you go to the exhibit, which I encourage you to do, a lot of the paintings just look like photographs.

It's really quite impressive. They have this incredible discipline of attention and noticing and then reproducing that on canvas.

[16 : 10] And so, I wanted to learn from how they did that. And so, I wanted to learn from their discipline of attention to see if I could train my eyes in the way that they paint the intricate details of minerals and the colors of minerals on a rock or tree bark or peach blossoms and to see if I could train my eyes the way that they do to paint to see the gifts of God all around me.

And the second thing that I did was that every single day I carved out time to write things that I was grateful for. So, I had a goal of writing 30 things a day. That was in my little moleskin the number of lines I had per page.

Some days I only got 20, not because there wasn't enough stuff I just didn't pay enough attention. But I wrote down every single day the things that I was grateful for. And, you know, I'm not going to lie and say that my entire life was transformed this week because I don't think that's how God transforms us.

I don't think it's as radical as that. I think God's formation of us is less like a chisel and more like small drops of water slowly smoothing out the rough edges.

I have to say it was a really good week. It wasn't an easy week by any stretch but being grateful changed me. It changed how I related to God. I felt closer and more intimate to God.

[17 : 27] And when things didn't go my way I was a much more enjoyable person to be around. At least I think I was. You can ask Susan after the service. But it was awesome.

I have to say even though there weren't lightning bolts it was an amazing week. I feel much closer to the Lord. and I feel grateful. I just feel happier.

I felt like a really good Christian this past week in a lot of ways because God has given I'm not perfect right but I realized that everything that God has given to me every interaction I had was a gift and I was grateful for it.

And it just was a joy to be alive this week. And I think a lot of that is just because I stopped to notice the gifts that God had given to me. So I want to end with a challenge and with a poem that I've found to be helpful to lead me into a place of prayer and gratitude.

So the challenge is this. Do what I did this past week. Maybe go to the National Gallery of Art if you can. But everyone can make a list of things that you're grateful for. And so I challenge you this week to commit to writing at least ten things down.

[18 : 33] Notice ten gifts that God has given you that day that you're grateful for. And be specific. As I went through the week I first started off saying something like my kids or Susan or Grace.

And then the more I paid attention the more I saw the details and got really specific and it got richer and deeper and more transformative. So stop, reflect, pay attention, notice, listen, see, acknowledge, name, and then celebrate.

And ultimately thank God for those things. Let these things lead you into prayer and to communion with God. Allow these gifts from God, these things for which you are grateful to be the doorway into prayer this week and in the weeks to come.

And I encourage you just to test the Lord. See how this might impact your prayer life, the way that you connect with God, the generosity with which you treat other people. Test and see if this helps you become more fully alive in Christ.

Now I want to end with a poem that has been a real guide to me these past few weeks in attention and in gratitude. And in prayer. It's a prayer poem by Mary Oliver and it's entitled Praying.

[19 : 44] This is what she writes. It doesn't have to be the blue iris. It could be weeds in a vacant lot or a few small stones. Just pay attention and then patch a few words together and don't try to make them elaborate.

This isn't a contest, but the doorway into thanks, into silence in which another voice father.