Overflowing With Thankfulness

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Preacher: Rev. Thomas Hinson

[0:00] So, earlier this summer, I was speaking with a friend of mine who had gone away on a multi-day prayer retreat, and came back and came back.

I was so thankful. Anytime I hear that kind of thing from anybody, especially somebody who's a friend of mine, I was deeply thankful and encouraged to hear that. But if I'm being totally honest, there was also a part of me that was a bit envious.
As he described this spiritual experience, I found myself wondering, why can't I have experiences like that? Sometimes when I go away on a retreat, I just sort of feel like I'm just sort of sitting there in disciplined silence, waiting for something to happen, and I'm not quite sure what it is.
And I wondered, you know, this little voice in my head started to say, does he have something that I don't have? Or is he doing something that I don't know how to do? Or was it the place that he went? Maybe I should ask him where he went so that I could go there, because maybe that's where God is. And maybe if I go there, I will have a similar kind of experience. And I just wonder, you know, for those of us who are Christians, especially if you've been a Christian for a longer amount of time, have you ever had a season or a time where you felt like your faith was missing something?
[1:37] Maybe you heard someone talk about a life-changing experience or hearing God during a time of prayer or some sort of profound mystical experience that they had going to a worship service or something like that.

And you hear that, and you wonder, what am I missing? Why haven't I had an experience like that? The Colossians were asking the very same kinds of questions.
These are mostly new Christians. They're baby believers. This is the first generation of Christians who are learning how to follow Jesus after his ascension.
So these are people who are very similar to us. They've not met Jesus face to face like the apostles had. They had heard about Jesus. They had to rely on the teachings of the apostles and the guidance of the Holy Spirit in order to figure out what it means to follow Jesus.
And so they're asking a lot of questions like this. They're saying, you know, okay, I've become a Christian. I've given my life to Jesus. I've received forgiveness. Now what? What do I do now?
[2:46] What comes next? Is this it? Is there more? And so Paul is speaking in this entire letter. He's speaking to Christians who are asking these kinds of questions. And we're going to be looking at this passage in chapter 2, verses 6 to 15.

And this is really the core of the letter. This is the core of Paul's teaching. And we see in here a warning for people like us and then a way forward.
So let's pray and then we're going to open God's word together. Lord, we thank you for your word and we thank you that it is living and active and powerful. And we need more than anything for you to speak to us.
And we pray that you would. In Jesus' name. Amen. So first of all, Paul issues a warning to people like these Colossians, like us, in verse 8.
He says, See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ.
[3:53] So what's he saying here? If you've ever seen the movie 12 Years a Slave, it's a story about an African-American man named Solomon Northup. He's born free and then he's abducted and he is sold into slavery.

So he's born a free man, but then he's abducted and he is sold into slavery. And just imagining that, I mean, just imagine the horror of that. And that was a fairly common occurrence in this period of history.

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And the problem is that once you were captured and sold as a slave, it was extremely hard to regain your freedom. Paul is essentially saying, you're all in great danger.
You've been born free. You've been born free through putting your faith in Jesus Christ. Through accepting and believing the gospel. You have been born again and you've been born spiritually free from the bondage to sin and death.
You've been born free. And yet you are in danger right now of being abducted and kidnapped and taken captive. Not literally, but in terms of the way you think.
[5:04] Right? And arguably, slavery is really a matter of the mind and heart. Right? That's really where people become slaves is in their minds and in their hearts. They're taken captive by ways of thinking.

What Paul refers to as philosophies or worldviews. Now, this is not anti-intellectual, anti-philosophy. Paul was very well versed in the philosophies of his day. What he means here is ways of thinking and perceiving the world that are empty, that are deceptive, and that will ultimately lead back into slavery of one kind or another.
So, what's he talking about here? There were various, how would you say it? Thought leaders, influencers, spiritual gurus. In Colossae.
And these are people who are gaining money and gaining status by claiming to have secret knowledge or techniques that could take people to the next level spiritually.
In other words, they're selling spiritual upgrades. Want to upgrade your spiritual life? Upgrade your spiritual experience? Come right this way. So, the message was essentially to these Colossian Christians, yes, you're a Christian.
[6:17] You believe in Jesus. Great. Good for you. But if you really want to experience God, if you really want to know the heights and the mysteries of what's possible in human experience, if you really want to reach your full spiritual potential, you need this other thing.

And that other thing would differ from one influencer and guru to the next, but the message underneath was always the same. Yes, you believe in Jesus. That's fine.
But if you really want to be spiritual, you need this other thing. And this is what has come to be known as the Colossian heresy. It's whenever we take Christ away from the center of our faith and make it about something other than him.
So, you become a Christian, you receive Christ, and then slowly but surely, subtly, sometimes, often without our knowledge, without our awareness, Christ slips away from the center and something else comes in and displaces him.
This is the Colossian heresy. And it most often happens when other popular ideas that are circulating in the culture get blended in with our Christian faith and diluted.
[7:25] So, it's not as though there are ideas, it's not the ideas that are completely antithetical to the Christian message. It's ideas that sound very similar, sound very compatible with Christ and the Christian worldview that slip in and subtly take over and become central in the way we go about our spiritual lives.

This is the Colossian heresy. And now, there are tons of examples we could give. I want to give you a few because I want you to understand what we're talking about here. When I first came to faith years ago, there was a book that everybody was reading called The Prayer of Jabez.
And the author, who I think in other regards, I sort of, I think was regarded pretty highly, but the author takes a prayer, this obscure prayer out of 1 Chronicles 4, where Jabez asks God to bless him and enlarge his territory.
And then that author turns that prayer into a kind of repeatable spiritual formula for blessing and breakthrough in your life. So, let me ask you this, is it wrong to pray a prayer out of 1 Chronicles 4 that Jabez prayed?
Absolutely not. All the prayers in the Bible are worth praying to learn more about how to pray. So, it's technically nothing wrong with that. The problem is that when you take a prayer like that out of context and you turn it into kind of a spiritual life hack, a formula for success, that's where it begins to become problematic because the message is this.
[8:55] Yes, you're a Christian on a basic level. You have access to Jesus. But if you do this other thing, then that will really lead to the spiritual breakthroughs that you're looking for.

And that's when it becomes very similar to what was happening in the Colossian world. The thing is, it's very rarely clear whether or not you're dealing with the Colossian heresy.

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It's not like we're just going along and you're immediately spotting it here and there. Often, this for Christians requires an enormous amount of careful discernment. Because often, it's a matter of degrees.
Something can be good and fine and acceptable until it's not. And so, it requires ongoing discernment by those of us who are Christians. As new books, as new movements, as new influential teachers and preachers and gurus and thought leaders come along within the broader Christian world, we should constantly be asking ourselves questions like this.
Does this thing make Christ the center? Or does it imply that a relationship with Christ is insufficient? We should be asking that constantly.
[10:07] Does this book or idea or person emphasize long-term transformation? Or is this an offer of a quick-fix technique or solution?

Because in our country, in our culture, we love a silver bullet. We love a get shredded in 30 days kind of plan. We don't necessarily like the idea that change is going to be long and slow and take the rest of our lives.
So, what are they offering? Does it encourage cruciformity? Or does it encourage consumerism? Cruciformity is the call to self-donation, to lay our lives down in love and service to God and others. Consumerism heightens the focus on us. It spotlights our needs, our preferences, our experiences, our desires. So, is this an offer of a spirituality that calls me to cruciformity?
Or does it stoke the consumerism inside me? Let's consider some more examples just to sort of flesh this out. The prosperity gospel movement, right?
[11:18] Teaching that faith guarantees health and wealth and success if you use the right words or the right prayer techniques. Now, is it okay to pray to God and ask for the things that we need?

Absolutely. Jesus says in our gospel reading, we should pray and ask our Father for our daily bread. Give me what I need for the day. Provide for me. But the problem here is that instead of union with Christ, the prosperity gospel focuses on using Christ to get what we want.
Instead of seeing Christ as the blessing, it treats Christ as a tool, as a way to get blessing. And often it's financial blessing.
So, that's a more obvious example of how the Colossian heresy might manifest today. I'll give you another example. Purity culture. Purity culture is a very clear example.
Again, are Christians called to chastity and sexual faithfulness? Absolutely. Of course. But the purity culture movement, at least parts of it for sure, went way too far.
[12:26] Instead of seeing Christ as the only way to become holy by grace through faith, in a way that deals with all of our sin, it overemphasized sexual purity as the path to holiness.

Right? It overstigmatized sexual sin. And because it did that, it did massive harm to a whole generation of people, particularly women, who felt enormous amounts of shame and self-hatred and guilt, which was the legacy of that kind of emphasis.
So, again, you see something that starts out within the Christian world looking like we're aiming at something that is Christ-honoring, and then slowly but surely Christ slips out of the center, and it becomes about something else.
It becomes about us. It becomes about works. It becomes about behavior. It becomes about earning our way into holiness and cleanliness. It becomes a way to stigmatize and make certain people feel irreparably harmed or dirty or tainted.
It does enormous harm. Right? That is an example of how people can so easily slip back into the chains of slavery in their minds and in their hearts, and they lose the freedom that the gospel provides.
[13:39] Now, I want to give a couple of more subtle examples, and I think it's important to give lots of examples because it's important to see how this shows up in lots of different kinds of ways. Now, here's one that hits a little close to home for me.

The Enneagram. Okay? Now, I love the Enneagram. If you don't know what it is, it's essentially a personality tool, kind of like the Myers-Briggs, although people who like the Enneagram kind of, you know, get tweaked out when you compare it to the Myers-Briggs.
I've found it very helpful. I've incorporated it into counseling. I've taught other pastors and people how to use the Enneagram. At best, the Enneagram, this kind of personality index, can be a helpful tool.

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It can help you understand yourself a little better. It can help you understand other people better. It can help put language to your differences. Right? So that's very helpful. It's extremely helpful in marriage.
Laura and I have really benefited from the wisdom of the Enneagram. So at best, it can be used in that way. But it's very easy, and we've seen this happen as we kind of hit peak Enneagram over the last, you know, five or ten years in our culture.
[14:50] At some point, it seems everybody was talking about it. It's easy in that context to get over-fixated on the Enneagram. Because let's be honest, it inflames that part of us that loves to talk about us.

Right? It stokes that thing in me that, if I'm honest, I would say my favorite topic of conversation is me. Right? It stokes that in us.
And so it can subtly shift the focus away from Christ onto us. And it's easy to start to begin to see our spiritual formation through the lens of the Enneagram rather than through the Scriptures and through the person of Jesus Christ.
And so subtly but clearly, the focus shifts. Christ is de-centered, and the Enneagram becomes more and more central to our spiritual pilgrimage.
Right? So very close to home for me. Let me give you another one. Politically aligned churches. And we see this on the right and the left. Churches whose vision, over time, the vision of that church becomes less and less a reflection of the kingdom.
[16:00] Which, by the way, I don't think fits neatly into any political category. It sort of crosses a lot of boundaries and ticks a lot of people off in different ways depending on your politics.

Right? But more and more and more, you see some churches whose vision is less a reflection of the kingdom, and they become more and more a reflection of a certain political ideology. That's another example of the Colossian heresy at work.
Another example, emotionally manipulative worship services. Now, this is subtle, and it really does require careful discernment. Because, again, having great music as a part of your gathered corporate worship is wonderful.
It's a blessing. It's something we should seek after and be thankful for when we have it. But in some churches or communities, you find that this particular expression of worship, and I think this shows up a lot, frankly, within the evangelical world, goes far beyond just having good music.
And if you talk to people who have been on worship teams or pastors who have come out of churches like this, you realize that the whole service is sort of, it becomes an exercise in emotional manipulation.
[17:12] The goal becomes more and more to curate a certain kind of emotional experience for people, where you can almost predict when people are going to start crying. The problem with that is that it shifts the focus away from Christ and away from the work of God in our lives and onto our own emotional experience.

And what I would say is that over time, that really results in malformation for people. Because people begin to confuse the work of the Holy Spirit in them for emotional manipulation.
And they begin to think, well, if I'm not hitting this spiritual peak, this spiritual high, every week, if I'm not weeping, then the Holy Spirit must not be at work. And I must not be connected to God.
And they begin to believe that the only way to truly worship Christ is to get whipped up into an emotional frenzy. And so the many centuries of tradition we have of quiet, contemplative, reflective, relating and opening and listening to God gets replaced by essentially an experience in emotional manipulation.
And so we have to be discerning about this because there's no clear line, right? To a certain point, great music is wonderful and it's a blessing, but at some point, if it starts to become manipulative, we've got problems, right?
[18:39] One more example, self-help Christianity. You know, there's a lot of Instagram gurus and self-help influencers who effectively have turned Christianity into a tool to help us live our best life now.

So instead of self-donation, they teach a version of the Christian life that is more about self-optimization. Right? So there are lots of examples that we could give.
And I'm trying to give a broad array because my sense is that some of these are going to resonate more with us than others. But this kind of thinking can show up anywhere.

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It can even show up in the form of relationships that we have. If you're dating somebody and that person is really strong in their faith and you're sort of coming along in your faith, you know, is your relationship with God centered on Christ or is it centered on making it work with the person that you're with?
Right? It can be that way with your parents. It can be that way with your best friend. So there's all of these. The point is we need to constantly be asking ourselves, what is at the center of my Christian faith?
[19:43] Is it Christ or is it something or someone else? Paul is warning us how easy it is to get deceived. And then he offers the way forward. So the way forward we see actually a couple of verses up in the passage starting in verse 6.

He says, therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him. And friends, this sums up the entire teaching of Paul's letter to the church in Colossae.
As you received Christ, so walk in him. If you had to summarize it in one sentence, that's what it is. As you received Christ, so walk in him. Keep going. In other words, let's unpack that. Live your daily life according to everything that you've been taught and come to believe about who Christ is, what he has done, and what he continues to do in the world.
That's a longer, less elegant way of saying what Paul just said. Live your daily life, walk. That's what in the Jewish context, walking meant ethical living.
How do you live your daily life? Live your daily life according to everything you've been taught, come to believe about who Christ is, what he has done, and what he continues to do in the world. This requires extraordinary intentionality.
[21:05] And Paul gives us several images to flesh out what this means. So imagine, again, you're a baby Colossian Christian. You're like, I've received Christ. I've been baptized. Now what do I do? Paul says, okay, the first thing you need to do, live life starting today.

Live life as though you are rooted in Christ. So the image he gives us is of a tree. Imagine a large, old, you know, several hundred-year-old oak tree with its roots sunk deep down into the soil.
The kind of tree you look at and you're like, you know, if the world ends and everything collapses, this tree's still going to be standing because it's withstood so much because the roots go so deep. You know, the roots are sunk deep into the soil. And Paul's saying, when you received Christ, when you put your faith in him, maybe you didn't feel anything. Maybe it just felt like a normal day, normal Tuesday.
But when you did that, you were planted in him. In other words, your life was joined to his life once and for all. And so he's saying, you don't need to uproot yourself and go looking for somewhere else or someone else.
[22:14] You don't need anything else. You need to focus on growing where you've been planted. You need to focus on deepening those roots.

So it's a way of saying, you don't need anything more than Christ. You simply need more of Christ. That's what you're missing. The roots need to go deeper.
And then he adds a second image to that. Being built up. Seek to be built up. Now, rooted is passive. That's a past tense. It happened. It's not going to change. You were rooted.
You are rooted. Built up implies ongoing action. This verb is, this is the thing that we're focusing on doing. So you're rooted, but we also need to seek to be built up.
He's mixing metaphors. I know. But it's his prerogative. He's an apostle. Seek to be built up. We should regularly find ways to grow in our faith.
[23:12] Right? Now, what does this mean? It's the well-worn, well-trodden paths of discipleship and spiritual formation that Christians have been relying on for 2,000 years.

Right? It's prayer. It's daily prayer. It's the liturgies that we inhabit that shape us.
It's opening God's word with a group of people and discerning together how God is speaking to you. It's joining together for worship.
Not necessarily getting whipped up into any kind of frenzy. Although, when we get emotional, that's beautiful. We love when that happens. But it's about spending an hour or two in a kind of blessedly self-forgetful state.
Where for just a little while my focus isn't on me and my insecurities and my grievances and my anxieties. It's on the people sitting to my right and to my left. It's on the God who is with us.

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[24:18] And for just that little while, I'm turned outward. And I'm reminded once again how beautiful and magnificent Jesus is. And it's doing that regularly.

It's the spiritual disciplines. It's leaning into and resting into the rhythms that have guided and shaped the church for centuries upon centuries upon centuries. It's knowing that there are times to fast and focus on our need for Christ.
And there are times to feast and to celebrate all of God's blessing and goodness in our lives. It's knowing that there are times to focus on repentance. On our sin.
Times for memento mori to remember that we're dust. And one day we will be dust once more. And then there are times to celebrate and focus on the hope of the resurrection. And that one day death will be eradicated.
All tears will be wiped away. And beauty will come out of ashes. This is what he has in mind. Seek to be built up.
[25:25] Through the quiet, small, often unseen acts of daily obedience. Where we are choosing Christ. Choosing Christ.

Choosing Christ. And then he says on top of that, seek to be established in the faith. Another way to understand that word. Be strengthened in the faith. And I believe what he's talking about here is all of the truth that they have been taught.
Regarding who Christ is. What he has done and what he continues to do. Which is summarized in this passage. He's saying Jesus isn't just the doorway into salvation.
Jesus is the whole house. Jesus is the whole house. If you have him, you have everything. And he goes on to describe this. In Christ, we have access to God in his entirety.
If you're in relationship with Christ, the full presence, glory, deity of God is with you in that. And then he says, if you have access to Christ in him, you're made alive.
[26:34] You're forgiven. You are victorious. Through his death and resurrection. And it's a way of saying the entire Christian life is about union with Christ.

It's about sharing in his life. It's about sharing in his victory over sin and death. It's why this act that takes place at this table is the central thing that we do every Sunday when we gather.
Because this is a picture of the entire Christian life. Reenacted every week as we receive his life into ourselves. So, then he goes on.
And his fourth word here, his fourth verb, how do we know that we are walking in Christ as we received him? How do we know that we are rooted, being built up, established in our faith?
The one surefire sign is gratitude. Gratitude. And this is a theme that we see recur in Colossians. It's gratitude. It is the litmus test.
[27:35] And he gives us the image of a church. He's talking to the church here. So filled with gratitude toward God that they are constantly overflowing like a jug of wine that has been overfilled.

And the wine is just pouring out of the top. He gives us an image of a church that is so filled with gratitude that the wine is just pouring over the edges. The thanksgiving is just pouring out spontaneously.
In his commentary on this verse, N.T. Wright says, Gratitude to God is to be the main characteristic of God's people. A sign that they are indeed living in the new age.
Just think about that for a second. The single most compelling indicator that you are talking to a person or engaging with a community that is living as a part of the in-breaking new creation inaugurated by Jesus Christ is that they're overflowing with gratitude.
Now that really struck me when I was studying this passage. Because I know that often when we look around, I believe the norm in our culture, the norm in a lot of our social circles, is that there is a kind of continual low-grade hum of complaining, grumbling, and gossiping, and triangulation, and unresolved conflict.
[29:02] If we look at our families, if we look at our friend groups, and what Paul is saying sort of indirectly is that when that's the reality, which I think that's the norm in our culture, what you're seeing is that people are being discipled more by the world than they are by apprenticing themselves to Christ.

So that kind of low-grade hum of negativity is the fruit of the influence of the world, the flesh, and the devil on our hearts.
And he's saying, by contrast, the surest sign of growth and maturity is that you experience the opposite. That there is a low-grade hum of gratitude. Where people are spontaneously just giving

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thanks for ways that God is at work in their life.
They're spontaneously telling stories about how God is blessing them. You know, when people get together and they have coffee, when they get together for lunch or dinner, when they're hanging out with one another in their homes, the normal topics of conversations just naturally center around the goodness and provision of God in their life.
And they're like, I can't wait to get together tomorrow night, not because I just, I really got to tell you about this thing that happened that really ticked me off, and I got to process it with somebody. But you're getting together and you're saying, God did the most amazing thing last week, and I'm dying to tell somebody about it.
[30:18] Now, that's not to say that there's not a place for negative emotion. That's not to say there's not a time to be angry. Paul's concern here is, what is the focus?

What's at the center? If somebody had to sum up in one word, what is the thing that really distinguishes this person's life? Or what is the one thing I could say about this kind of how this community feels, how this friend group feels, how this workplace feels?
He would say, you know, if I could sum it up in one word, it would be that they're thankful. And this has really struck me this week. Because he's saying that the degree to which that is not true is the degree to which Christ is not the center of my life.
If we want to grow as individuals, if we want to grow as a community, it requires an intentional commitment to follow Christ together. And it requires recognizing that I think the default for most of us is what I would call discipleship by algorithm.
It's discipleship by algorithm. I think in our age, our beliefs, habits, identity, and worldview are shaped more by the curated inputs of digital platforms, such as social media, YouTube, all that, than by intentional apprenticeship to Jesus.
[31:39] And the problem is that those algorithms appeal to and stoke the worst tendencies in us. So is it any wonder that I naturally gravitate toward complaint and criticism and assuming the worst, rather than toward joy and gratitude?

What is the primary formative influence on my heart and in my life? And Paul is saying nothing in the world compares to the joy of knowing Christ. And when Christ is at the center of your life, you're going to overflow like a jug of wine with gratitude.
Now, there may be times, just to pull all this together, there may be times when you do feel uninspired or stagnant or frustrated in your faith. And let me be the first to say that is normal. Anybody who's been a Christian for any amount of time will tell you that's normal. And you can read extraordinary descriptions of this written by the saints across the centuries who faced the very same thing.
But that does not mean, and here's the warning, that does not mean that you are missing something. If you have Jesus, you have everything. And the Christian life is about discovering and experiencing the truth of that.
[32:52] It's about learning how to inhabit the new identity and freedom that you gain through Christ. It's about learning how to live your daily life in union with Him. It's about learning how to participate and share in the life of the Trinity.

Let's pray. Our Father, for this to be true, it must come from you. If there's anything we learn here, it's that we cannot engineer a spiritual reality in our lives.
We are ultimately here at your invitation, hoping, praying, asking for you to do what we cannot do. And so I believe the proper response to this truth from the Apostle Paul is simply to cry out to you. To ask that you would, in your grace, displace whatever may sit at the center. Replace it and fill us with yourself. Lord, may we experience and know and feel in our hearts the truth of our union with you.
Lord, may these become our guiding star, that by which we live. And we do pray that we as individuals in our lives and that we as a community, that more and more and more that you being at the center would overflow with a spirit of gratitude.
[34:16] Lord, I long for that to be true in my life. We long for that to be true in our community. We pray this in Jesus' holy name. Amen.

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