Grateful for Salvation

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Preacher: Revd Dr. Russell Herbert

[0:00] So, we think this morning about gratitude and starting with being grateful for the gift of salvation. Something that I encourage others to do, and indeed I try to encourage myself to do, although if I'm honest I don't always remember to do it, is to try and keep a written note of things to be thankful for. And the reason I think particularly that can be helpful, especially at the end of the day, is to have a notebook by the bedside and to jot down up to three things.

It can be any number you like. One would be fine, but I like to think of three things to be thankful for in the course of that day. It can be really ordinary mundane things, but things that can easily be eclipsed in the course of everyday life and all the other things that take over our thinking processes. And the reason I think it can be particularly helpful to do it at the end of the day is it means that no matter what else you might have going on in your head right then, you hit the pillow thinking about those good things to be thankful for. It's about cultivating an attitude of gratitude. That's good for mental health. It's good for the spirit. And I urge us all to do it. Sometimes we have to dig quite deep to do it, but usually if we think hard enough, there is something in the course of that day to be thankful for, even if it is something as basic as I've made it through this day. But what then about the gift of salvation, about one of those things to write down? The reason I ask that question is, is there a sense in which it's such a massive thing? It's so big, it's so all-encompassing, and it doesn't necessarily in an obvious way connect to the events of that particular day. Is there a sense in which it can kind of like be bypassed, and we tend to not think of that?
Is there a sense in which we can think it's too big, it's too abstract, it's too non-specific to the day, that we might not think that that's something at the end of each day to give thanks for? Well, what I want to think about over these next few minutes is actually why it's really important that we do stay close to remembering the gift of salvation and being thankful for it, and also to unpack some of the thinking as to why we might struggle to do that.
You know, one reason why perhaps it can be a challenge is that that theme of salvation, we can perhaps tend to think, well, that's about eternal life. That's about what happens when we die. That's about over there, and it feels so distant that it can seem removed from the right here and the right now. A number of thoughts in response to that one.
[3:16] First is this, I don't know if you're familiar with this phrase, distant elephants. Have you come across that before? It's in time management thinking.

The idea of distant elephants, if you're trying to sort of plan for stuff that's going on in life, to be aware of the danger of approaching big things that need to be undertaken in the same way that you might approach a distant elephant. Let me just explain what I mean.
Or rather, what the theory means. Imagine you're standing on the African plains, and you see some elephants on the distance. They look absolutely tiny when you're a long way off, or they're a long way off. But imagine yourself walking towards those distant elephants, and very, very gradually, not suddenly, but gradually and slowly. They're not quite so distant. And then you get to the point when that elephant's actually looking fairly quite close up. But it happens gradually. And then, you think, actually, that thing's pretty big. The theory goes that in time management, as we face our tasks, there will be things that are actually really big tasks. But as they're distant, we don't deal with them. So they gradually, gradually get closer. And then we realise it's just days away. And that big thing that we should have dealt with, perhaps months ago, or started to deal with months ago, is right there, right before us. And it's huge. Now, it's a time management principle.
But it's something to be aware of when it comes to the reality of our human mortality. And perhaps we are more prone to this the younger that we are. But the reality of dying and death can seem such a distant one, that we just put it on hold. Perhaps we are bury our head in the sand.

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But actually, all the while, we are getting closer to it. We're closer to dying right now than we were 24 hours ago. In fact, sorry to say this, but you're actually closer by a few minutes than you were before I started speaking. That can sound bleak, and I've seen it as the very opposite of bleak thinking.
[5:44] But we have to be real. We have to be real and be conscious of our immortality, of the limited nature of human life. And to know that every single second of every day, we are stepping that bit closer to the reality of death.

And even if we are more advanced in years, there's the sense in which that reality can just be pushed away from, because it doesn't seem to connect, perhaps, perhaps with our everyday lives. Being conscious of the gift of salvation, perhaps in some way starts with being conscious of our need for that gift of salvation.
That life won't go on forever in the way that we know it. We are limited mortal beings. And because of the Christian gospel, that doesn't have to be a bleak message.
In fact, it's a message of good news, because we know that we are saved from that. But let's be really clear. If we're thinking that actually salvation is something that just seems abstract and removed, because it seems distant, then frankly, we're fooling ourselves.
[7:08] But let's just take this a little bit deeper, because life, according to the Old and New Testament, is not actually presented as just in a linear form.

And at the end of that linear sequence towards our death, then that's it. And then we have eternal life beyond that. If we think that in our heads that's what it's like, we're probably missing the point. Because in Scripture, it's more of a sense of that we are continually in the presence of God, and in the presence of God's eternity. Think of it like this. Go right the way back to the very opening of what we refer to as the Old Testament, the Hebrew Scriptures, the book of Genesis, as it narrates the story of the creation of the world.
And we're told how, in very rich imagery and poetic form, how God creates the world and brings life, the universe and everything, into being, and sustains it in being.
And we're told how God speaks to things and brings forth life. So he speaks to the water that he has created, and says, let there be fish, and brings forth fish.
[8:21] He speaks to the earth and to the soil and says, let there be trees and plants and flowers, and things that grow, and brings them forth. When it comes to the bit of the climax of the creation, where you and I are created, human beings, mysteriously, it says that God speaks to himself.

God the Trinity, Father, Son, and Spirit, and says, let us create human beings in our own image. So we are created through God speaking to God's self, and bringing us forth from God's self in God's image.
Now think of it like this. God speaks into the environment that life depends.
So when God speaks into the water, let there be fish. If you take a fish out of water, it dies. If you extract a tree from the soil, the very thing from which it was called forth, it dies.
Why? Because those are the environments in which life flourishes for those things. In the same way, if a human being is not in God, if we are disconnected from God, we are removed from that environment within which we need to flourish to live and to grow.
[9:48] And so the human being in the scriptures is described, sorry, the human condition is described as a life where we are broken, where we are fragile, and where ultimately we will die because we are not in God as we were created.

Of course, that is not the end of the story. And the gospel says that in fact we are planted back into God, we are in Christ, we are saved, we are set free to live. But when we understand it in those terms, we can understand how actually what salvation therefore looks like is not just the end point, the end of a trajectory of living and dying, and as though that's where it really begins.
But rather salvation is something that is right now in our lives. And when you are in Christ, when you know that you are saved, when you know that death is actually nothing to be frightened of because God is there and he has set you free because of the cross, the death and the resurrection of Jesus, you may know that right now, every breath that you take is there in Christ and in God.
So salvation, far from being the end point of a process, is actually right here and right now. Let's be thankful for it. But you know another reason why perhaps we might struggle to see the obvious nature of salvation and the reason why to give thanks in our everyday lives, and this is perhaps a danger for the longer you may have been a Christian believer, but the danger is that we become so

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familiar with the message.
You know, the more times we've read the Bible, the more times we've listened to sermons proclaiming the good news of Jesus, the more songs that we've sung, the more times we've heard that message, the more immersed we become within that theme of good news, such that we can get used to it.
[11:54] And this is why I think it's a great idea, the longer you've been a believer, to hang out with somebody who's new to faith, because they are a continual reminder, lest you forget, of just how stark the contrast is between not knowing Jesus and knowing Jesus.

Let's tell you a story. Two friends. They meet up and one of them's looking really, really, really, really fed up. So the other friend says, what's wrong? I says, well, it's a long story.
He said, try me. Well, he said, two weeks ago, on a Tuesday morning, I get a letter. I open it up. It's a letter from a solicitor I've never heard of, telling me about a relative, a very distant one that I've never heard of, who's just died.
He said, I'm sorry to hear that. He said, well, that's no big deal, because I've never heard of them. He said, well, why are you looking so fed up? He said, the great news is that they've left me quite a lot of money.
He said, how much money? He said, £20,000. Well, he said, that's good news, isn't it? He said, yeah, but I haven't finished telling you this story yet. He said, okay, a week later, following Tuesday, how coincidental is that?
[12:59] I get another letter from the same solicitor. He said, yeah. He said, well, telling me that another, believe it or not, another relative that I've never heard of has died.

He said, well, I suppose I'm not really meant to say sorry about that, because he said, exactly, I never knew them, so it doesn't really mean anything to me. He said, so why is the solicitor writing to you? He said, believe it or not, this solicitor's writing to me because this other relative that I've never met has died, and they've left me an even bigger sum of money.
He said, what? He said, £100,000. He said, so you tell me two consecutive Tuesday mornings, you've received a letter from a solicitor telling you, first of all, you've been left £10,000, then you've been left £100,000.
Why are you looking so miserable? He said, well, the week has passed, yeah, Tuesday morning, yeah, postman came this morning, no letter from the solicitor. The danger is, we get so immersed in that message of good news.
Jesus is alive, he's died for you, death has been broken, the cross has set you free, you have nothing to fear. We hear it over and over and over again, as we should, and we should tell, and we should rejoice in, but we hear it so much, we get used to it.
[14:13] The author Garrison Kyler tells a story about his childhood, Thanksgiving dinners that he grew up with in America, and he describes a relative of his, an Uncle John, who used to pray the prayers at the Thanksgiving dinner at the start.

But he didn't just say, Lord, thank you for this food, amen, and so everyone could get on and eat. He used to pray about the whole of the Christian gospel message, and at length, he would pray for minutes, and minutes, and minutes, and minutes, and minutes, and minutes, and stomachs were rumbling, and food was going cold.
He would pray about the good news of Jesus. Garrison Kyler describes it like this, everybody in the family knew that Uncle John could not pray without talking about the cross and crying.
Sure enough, Uncle John prayed, talked about the cross, and cried. Meanwhile, the rest of us shifted nervously from one foot to the other and longed for the prayer to end.
Now get this, all of us knew that Jesus died on the cross for us, but Uncle John had never gotten over it.
[15:30] Thanksgiving for salvation is never getting over the cross. Thanksgiving for salvation is knowing that this has happened. It was a long time ago in a place far, far away from here, but it happened.

And it happened for you as much as it happened for anybody else. And being mindful of that and being thankful of that makes all the difference in the way that we face our daily challenges.
When we remember that this is not some abstract, remote, distant theme. This is something that we need to be remembering and being thankful for every single day of our lives.

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So let me share with you one more image before we come to pray. And it's an image that I picked up. You may have heard me share before.
You may have come across it before. Shared by a speaker called Francis Chan. And I wanted to imagine it this way.
[16:32] I've got here, I'll tell you there's a piece of rope. There's a piece of rope here on the floor. And, oh, it's got a knot in it there. That wasn't made up. It's not a magic trick, by the way, so don't get excited.

I'm just going to see if I can just disentangle this bit here. But, basically, it's just an illustration to, I want you to imagine that this piece of rope, this piece of rope goes on forever and ever and ever. There's no end to this. It just is a beginning here, but it doesn't end. It just goes on and on and out through that door, round the building, down the street, right the way down to the coast, across the channel, right around the world.
There's no end to it, okay? Just imagine that that piece of rope goes on forever. And what that rope represents is eternity. Now, we find this so hard to get our heads around because we only know realities that have a beginning and an end.
So the thought of something that doesn't run out is so hard for us to imagine. But try. I want you to imagine that that is eternity. And this little red bit, if you really observe it, on the end of the piece of rope is your life, which did have a beginning.
[17:45] And when I say your life, what I mean by that is your life here on earth, in this mortal physical body.

That's when you were born. And that bit where the white begins, where the red finishes, is the day that you die. Now, I know I said earlier on all this stuff about how actually salvation is not just to be understood as a linear progression to the end.
But the reality is our lives, the history of our lives in this world is a linear one in that we have a sequence of days and we don't know how many of those they will be, but the time will come when they will come to an end.
So the purposes of this illustration, this image, which you imagine that where the red bit stops and the white bit starts, is the day your life on earth ends and then we have eternity.
Why is it that we invest our time and our energy in worrying about all the stuff that goes on here and yet not thinking about all of this stuff going on here because this is so much bigger than this.
[19:05] And without suggesting for one moment that that means that eternity is some kind of abstraction, just the opposite. Because this is so huge, because this just goes on and on and on and on and never ever stops, it impacts every single day or at least should impact every day of our thinking during this bit here and yet it tends to not.

As we come to give thanks, when we think about the importance of having that attitude of gratitude, yes, it is important that we are thankful for all the stuff that happens in a single day of our lives, the mundane stuff, the ordinary stuff, we need to do that.
But you know, because all of this stuff is taken care of, because of Christ's death and his resurrection that sets us free for all this, it means that this bit here is transformed.
You know, Karl Marx and classic Marxist thinking would say that, well, you know, that message of eternity is just a distraction. It's pie in the sky when you die and it just distracts us from the here and now.
I would actually say the very opposite. It is precisely because of eternity and the difference it means that our time here on earth is radically transformed. And the way that we approach time and space now is different because we know that we have all of this ahead.
[20:36] Let's give thanks not just for this but for all of this which is to come and to know that that begins right now.

Let's pray together. Lord, we thank you that the message of salvation is not just some kind of abstract idea that starts when we die but it's a message for all eternity which means it affects our whole lives now.
Lord, forgive us for those times when we almost perhaps pretend it doesn't happen or we bury our heads in our sand because it just seems so distant. Lord, help us to remember that we are forgiven and that we are set free and we can dare to think about mortality and death and dying and the reason we can do so is because you set us free from it in Jesus.

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So Lord, thank you that we are forgiven. Thank you that we are set free. help us to remember the importance of being thankful and grateful not just when we go to bed at night but throughout each day.
Thank you. Amen.

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