

Grateful for God's Gifts

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- [0 : 0 0] I'm sure I am not the only one here who's received a gift and had to act really, really grateful whilst inside thinking, why did you think that I would want this?
- But come on, facial muscles, smile, nod, say thank you quickly. This Christmas, my parents over there, they got me a great present and I've got props.
- I've got the presents. They got me a warning triangle for my car. And a high-vis jacket to wear just in case.
- Lovely, thank you mum and dad, it's just what I've always wanted. Of course I am actually really grateful that if I did ever break down in my car, I would have exactly what I need to stay safe.
- Especially after we had to jumpstart my brother's car on the corner of a very busy road in Bath in the dark just before Christmas. But that's the thing, isn't it?
- [1 : 0 9] Sometimes we get given a gift that initially we're not really sure that we want, need or even have space for in our lives or in our homes. But somewhere down the line, we realise that that gift is exactly what we needed for that moment.
- Although hopefully that will be quite long down the line in terms of my new car accessories. Today's theme is grateful for God's gifts. And I wonder if there's a time that you've been especially grateful for the gifts that God has given you.
- When we think about the gifts of God, they really are numerous. We might think of the spiritual gifts of God, like speaking in tongues, prophecy, words of knowledge, encouragement, teaching, preaching, evangelism, hospitality.
- We could go on and on. We might think about the people, the things, the places that God has put in our lives. We might think of his blessing or his favour.
- And actually, the whole of our salvation is pinned on the fact that God so loved the world, he gave as a gift to us, his children, his one and only son, so that whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life with him.
- [2 : 2 7] John 3, 16. And in Matthew 7, Jesus gives us permission to ask, seek and knock. Saying that to the one who asks, it will be given.
- The one who seeks will find. And to the one who knocks, the door will be opened. He continues to say that we know how to give good gifts to those that we love.
- Using the analogy that a father wouldn't give a rock to his son who asks for a piece of bread or a snake to his son who asks for a fish.
- And Jesus says, so if you sinful people know how to give good gifts, how much more will your father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him?
- He's saying we, mere humans, are capable of giving good gifts, even though we're sinful, even though we're imperfect, even though we don't know everything. But God is perfect.
- [3 : 2 6] And he is all-knowing. And he knows us inside and out. He knows the things we need, the things we want, and the desires of our hearts. And so how much more perfect are those gifts that he gives us?

In focus, our Wednesday night youth Bible study group, we've been looking at Psalm 40, in which David, the psalmist, says, Many, my Lord, my God, are the wonders you have done, the things you planned for us.

No one can compare with you. Were I to speak and tell of your deeds, there would be too many to declare. And I love this perspective of looking back at all the things that God has done for us, his wonders, and looking forward to the future and all the things that God has planned for us.

All these things that he's given to us, past, present and future, are so worthy of praise and gratitude. And David, who wrote this song, got the right response.

He praised God for all the good gifts that he had given him. But I think sometimes, in the moment, it can be really difficult to recognise God's gifts, can't it?

[4 : 41] Sometimes, in fact very often, God doesn't answer our prayers in the way that we expect or even that we'd hoped for. We might have prayed and told God exactly what he should do, exactly how he should move, exactly what we need.

And then his answer looks really different. Sometimes God intervenes in a situation and it might not even be obvious straight away that God is even in the situation.

And that's where the Israelites find themselves in our reading this morning that Jim's just read for us. The Israelites have been wandering through the desert for a while now in their exodus from slavery in Egypt.

They'd seen amazing things by the power of God, plagues that they'd been protected from, the softening of Pharaoh's heart so that they could escape Pharaoh, Egypt, slavery.

They'd seen the parting of the Red Sea so that they could walk through on dry ground and the sea that then crushed the enemy as the enemy pursued them.

[5 : 47] They'd been led by a pillar of cloud by day and a fire by night. God had provided them with manna to eat and caused water to come out of a stone so they could drink.

And finally, finally, they are so close to Canaan. In the previous chapter, chapter 13, just before our reading this morning, God commanded Moses, send some men to explore the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the Israelites.

So Moses sends 12 men, one from each of the tribes of Judah, to scope out the land and see what kind of towns they're living in, what the land is like, what the soil's like, what fruits are growing.

And after 40 days, they come back and report that it is, in fact, a land flowing with milk and honey, suggesting that the land is good for livestock, which will produce milk, and various plants and flowers that will produce nectar and pollen for honey.

However, those who'd gone to the land spread a bad report to all the other Israelites that those who are currently occupying Canaan were too strong for the Israelites to defeat.

[7 : 01] And the members of the community got worried and upset. And that's where we join the story. The Israelite community members are shouting, crying, grumbling, saying, if only we had died in Egypt or in this wilderness, why is the Lord bringing us to this land only for us to fall by the sword?

Wouldn't it be better for us to go back to Egypt? I mean, this isn't a new complaint for the Israelites. They'd found plenty of other reasons to complain in the past on their exodus.

And times when they tried to take matters into their own hands. For example, when God and Moses had been talking up on the mountain and the Israelites decided they'd been gone too long, so they were going to make a calf to worship instead.

But right now they were so close to Canaan. God had led them all this way and they were still grumbling. They still wanted to go back to this horrendous situation that God had saved them from.

They couldn't fathom why God had brought them so far after such a long journey only to be killed by those who are currently living in Canaan. In that moment, they couldn't see that God had been with them all the way and he wasn't going to just leave them now.

[8 : 22] He would fulfill his promise in giving them the land that he told them about. It wasn't called the promised land for nothing. But the Israelites, they were not grateful.

They were caught up in the anxiety of the unknown and the unseen. They weren't willing to seek God's heart and his purpose. They couldn't see that despite the difficult journey, God had brought them to a thing that was so much better than where they had been.

They might have another battle ahead and it would be a very literal battle as well, but God wasn't going to leave them alone. And so Moses says to the people, do not rebel against the Lord and do not be afraid of the people of the land because we will devour them.

Their protection is gone, but the Lord is with us. Don't be afraid of them. Because Moses knew God. He knew that God would give them everything that they needed.

The gift of his presence, his strength, his protection and his provision. Just as he had every step of the way so far. He knew the truth of the lyrics that we've sung this morning.

[9 : 37] You're a good, good father. You know just what we need before we can say a word. And in death, in life, I'm confident and covered by the power of your great love.

But the rest of the Israelites are less sure. And if we really think about it, isn't that quite relatable? That God does stuff in our lives all the time, but if we don't have our eyes open to see it, we can so easily miss the process or even the end result.

We get impatient and frustrated when we think that God isn't doing anything. But just like we said before, sometimes he moves and answers our prayers in ways that are so different to how we'd have done it if we were in control ourselves.

And thank goodness we are not in control ourselves. For Christmas, my parents didn't just get me a warning triangle and a high-vis jacket.

They were very generous. They gave me some little gold stud earrings. And I was very grateful because I could wear them all day, all night, on a run, in the shower, in bed, and I didn't have to take them out.

[10 : 51] They wouldn't make my ears go green or sore. And this is really good news for me because I'm really rubbish at changing my jewellery. And a few days after Christmas, Mum and I went on a really nice walk.

It was about eight and a half kilometres. It was through bogs, through fields, through mud. It was a bit like going on a bear hunt. And when we got back, I went to the bathroom.

I took my jumper off and I just heard this ding, plop. My earring had fallen in the toilet. And some important information is that it wasn't just water in there.

I'm really sorry if this is too much information, but I'm a youth worker and everyone loves a toilet story. And so I have to put my hand into the toilet.

It was gloved. Don't worry. It was just wee. Don't worry. And I fish around and I pull out my earring. Yes, I've got the earring. But I can't find the earring back.

[11 : 55] So I'm on all fours crawling around the bathroom with my torch, just looking for this tiny little earring back, thinking, oh my goodness. God, why couldn't you have let this fall out somewhere different?

Why can't you just show me where the earring back is? I've already put my hand in my wee. Please, can you just show me where it is? And then I had a thought. Maybe the earring back had fallen out in my bed because that would be so much better than it having fallen off somewhere on this walk.

So I go and I check in my bed and there it is. Yay! I've got the earring in all its parts. And I realised that I'd walked this entire walk through the mud, through the bogs, through the fields in 40 mile an hour winds.

And the earring never had a back on it. It could have fallen out in any of those places and it would have been gone for good. But it wasn't. And that story is nothing like finding the promised land after years of wandering through the desert, after years of slavery.

But it did make me think. Sometimes we can be so, so ungrateful for the situations we find ourselves in. But we have no idea what the situation could have been had it not been for God's gracious intervention.

[13 : 20] And I think that's maybe where the Israelites got it wrong. It seems at least sometimes they just mindlessly followed the leadership of Moses and Aaron and grumbled when it got uncomfortable.

Now something I've been learning over the last year or so, and I'm learning very surely in theory and very slowly in practice, is that it's very biblical in times of uncertainty, insecurity, overwhelm or just pure lament, to call to mind the goodness of God.

In the book of Lamentations, in the middle verses of the middle chapter, Lamentations, by the way, is a book that is all about the lament of the woes of life.

And in this verse it says, Yet this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope. Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed. I've lost my place.

Because of the Lord's love we are not consumed. For his compassions never fail, they are new every morning. Great is his faithfulness. I say to myself, the Lord is my portion, therefore I will wait on him.

[14 : 36] And then the writer goes back to lamenting. And what this teaches us is, that when we have those difficult times, we can call to mind the ways that God has been there for us in the past, the gifts that he's given to us then, the ways that he's moved, the things that he's done.

We can call to mind his character, his faithfulness, his love, his compassion, his mercy, his trustworthiness. We can look to the Bible and see how God has been faithful from generation to generation, we can hear the stories and testimonies from our friends and our families and be encouraged by their stories too.

But the Israelites didn't have the Bible, and they didn't have a whole heap of history to learn from. In fact, their most recent history was 430 years of slavery in Egypt, and I'm not really sure that's what they wanted to call to mind and remember.

In short, their lives weren't void of the goodness and faithfulness of God, because they existed in the time of the Exodus, but they didn't have the Psalms and the Proverbs for wisdom.

They didn't have the Gospels for inspiration from Jesus. They didn't have the letters for instruction. They didn't have revelation for the promise of a future free of mourning and pain and sorrow.

[15 : 59] Their own story was going to be one that would be used by New Testament writers to describe the goodness of God, to demonstrate his character.

And it's always my favourite book for teachable moments on how God provides his rescue mission, his faithfulness. But they didn't have that to look for, to look to.

They didn't have Psalm 23 to know that the Lord is their shepherd and they have all they need, that God would provide a table for them in the presence of their enemy, even current occupants of Canaan.

They didn't have Proverbs 3 to tell them to trust in the Lord with all of their heart and lean not on their own understanding, but in all of their ways to submit to him, because he would make their paths straight all the way to Canaan, all the way to the Promised Land.

And isn't it such a gift to be able to lean on God, on his word, on his promise, on his plans and his purposes, rather than trusting our own understanding? Isn't it a gift to be able to say, God, I don't know what you're doing, but I have faith that you're doing something good for your glory.

[17 : 19] And so I'm grateful. Paul says in Philippians 4, verses 6 to 7, He says, He says, Gratitude, thanksgiving, gratefulness, it changes the atmosphere of our hearts, of our minds, of our souls.

It steers us away from an inward focus of anxiety to an upward focus towards God who is in control. An upward trust that God has his hands on the steering wheel.

And so we can have peace, and we can be grateful because his gifts are good. But how do we take a sermon about the grumbling Israelites and gratitude for God's gifts into the coming days, weeks and months?

How do we take it from something that we don't just know in theory, but actually affects the way that we live our daily walks with Jesus? I suppose something that keeps coming back to me as I pondered this subject in preparation is that it's up to us to look.

It's up to us to ask God to move and then let go of the steering wheel so that he can have his way. We have to choose to look for how God is working, how he's answering our prayers, how he's intervening, what gifts he's giving us, and then to take hold of all of that with thanksgiving.

[19 : 22] And that's not to say that it's easy because I know that it's not, but it is true that he is always with us, that he always listens to us. Earlier I read a verse from Psalm 40 and I'd love to read the opening verses of this psalm as we finish.

I waited patiently on the Lord and he turned to me and heard my cry. He lifted me out of the slimy pits, out of the mud and mire.

He set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand. He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God. No matter what the situations we face, whether they feel slimy and muddy, whether they feel sparkly and glorious, or whether they feel somewhere in between, the gifts of God are his presence, his love, his faithfulness, his word, the way that he loves to come into relationship with us.

So why don't we take a leaf out of David's book this week and know that we can wait on him and he will hear our prayers, that he'll fight for us and overcome every battle, that the promises he makes us he will surely fulfill.

Let's choose to look this week and I am so sure that we will be filled with gratitude for the things that he does and the gifts that he gives us.

[21 : 01] Let's pray. Lord God, thank you for the gift of your presence, your compassion, your mercy that is new every morning.

Thank you for the way that you intervene in our lives, the ways that you move and the ways you bless us. We're sorry for the times that we've been blind to the gifts that you give us, for when we've been ungrateful or unthought that we know best.

God, whatever the situations and circumstances of our lives today, whether they feel slimy and muddy or sparkly and glorious, would you help us know that you are with us?

Help us to see what you're doing. Help us to respond with gratefulness and thanksgiving. Would you give us vision to see things like you do? Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen.