

Grateful for God's Love

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[0 : 0 0] So when you've been through times of trials in our psalm this morning, which seems really apt, it often gives us a heightened perspective about our own character. And so I'm going to ask you the question, in our theme today of being thankful for God's love in our lives, what characteristics are you known for? And I'm not just mean that physical characteristics, when you looked in that mirror this morning, and you saw that amazing vision of beauty and handsomeness when you looked there this morning. It's looking deeper. I mean, your character traits. What would people say of you who know you really well? On the marriage course, if you've been on the marriage course, we often talk about rhinos and hedgehogs. And it comes in two different characteristics of a rhino that suddenly, when it's riled, will go for it. There is no stopping.

But then there's a hedgehog that just gets all prickly. Where do our characteristics reflect in who we are? And how is that working it out in the character of God, of God's love, and giving gratitude for how that works out through our lives, which we capture something in the psalm this morning. And it's about this time of year when I get inundated, and I'm so pleased I do, with references for people who are going off to serve on different Christian camps, or serving with TLG, whatever you are doing to serve. And often the question comes down to the question that I am asked, how do I comment on the person's character? What do I see? What is that outworking of them, of God in their lives? What is it that they portray? There's a famous quote, and I'm not sure who I can attribute it to, because I wrote it some time ago in my prayer journal, but it's there.

Be more concerned with your character than your reputation, because your character is what you really are, while your reputation is merely what others think about you. It's an interesting one, isn't it? As we look across the society at the moment, maybe in the news, of how so quickly people can fall. That suddenly the reputation doesn't match with the character. And I think as Christians, it's very interesting that we should look at that in the context of being grateful, of grateful for all that God does in us and through us. And as we came to our covenant promises this morning, which actually heightens the idea of what does our character measure up against these things that we have committed to, our covenant prayer, that one that always comes back to challenge me is rank me with whom you will. Because that is an opportunity, or is it a challenge?

Because I guess for any of us, if we were choosing our team, who would we choose to be alongside us? But maybe more importantly, within the love of Christ, who might we not be more inclined to have on our team? It's an interesting one when it comes, if you had to choose. But again, I come back again then with those, and look at Jesus's team that he chose. You know, some rough fishermen, a tax collector, people that he gathered around him. And why? Because of God's love.

And that is what we're called to portray. Let's be honest, people aren't always nice. People aren't always kind. People sometimes can be awkward, rebellious, ungrateful, rude, and obnoxious.

[4 : 0 5] And that's just talking about myself sometimes. You know, we're not all perfect. But again, we seek to have that character of God that we aspire to in us and through us.

I think there's none more that we've known people that we know and love that we've nurtured, and yet suddenly there's a change. A bit like adolescence and teenage years.

I don't know if you've travelled that road. Then you will know the cost of loving, and maybe we need to appreciate those that travelled the road with us through those days as well, if you experience that. And for our God, our Heavenly Father, who again and again and again loves us, no matter what we have done, Jesus gave us that representation of that love and of God's character through Jesus in John 3.16. God so loved the world that he gave us his Son. Yet, you see, when I read this psalm, I also grasp the depths of God's love, of God's love, how he loves us with all our faults, with all our frailties, with all the way in which we live out our lives, that we need to be grateful to God for his general, steadfast, and unending love for us in all circumstances and in every part of our lives, no matter what we face.

And the psalmist keeps coming back, no matter what we experience, that God has committed and covenanted with us his love. Why? Because his love transcends all our understanding, waywardness, rebelliousness, everything that we should at all times and all give places, give thanks unto him, for he continues to love us, despite our ungrateful character.

This psalm ignites in me something especially on this Covenant Sunday, and I hope it does for you too, because what I've experienced over these past few weeks, again, when you reflect, you reflect on the graciousness of God, of whatever you're going through, and knowing and relying more and more on the Holy Spirit to point out the things and make your list about the things for which you are thankful for, for his gracious love and his care, often through other people. And on this Covenant Sunday, maybe you've grasped afresh that steadfast love of the Lord for you and the community that we are called to serve, and gratitude for his love. And in doing so, he leads us into more and more, and as Paul in the New Testament implores us again and again in the early church, that we are formed more and more in our character into the likeness of Christ. More and more, there is more in our character that we can do, that we can be more like him in what we do, and what we say, and how we serve, and how we share, and to reflect his love and faithfulness, his presence, power and purpose for a waiting world that longs to see that. Because there's nothing about thankfulness and gratitude that isn't attractive, is there? We all respond to a thank you, we all respond to that. So why on earth do we not give that to the Lord more and more? Thankfulness, yes, because it's warm, it's encouraging, it's good, it honours us, it honours the giver, as well as to the person to whom we give it. Thank you, Lord. And when you see genuine, warm-hearted gratitude, we think, I want to be more like that. So no wonder the psalm opens with this command, oh, give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love ensures, endures forever. And maybe you have heard those words afresh this morning. Maybe as you listen on this podcast or wherever you're listening to this, and you think, I want some more of that. I need to give thanks to you, Lord, for the graciousness in my life, no matter what stage I am at. A grateful character that grows in thankfulness, that people see in me, that warm people to us in a world that so sadly, at the moment, majors on criticism, selfishness, and self-seeking. Giving thanks always and being grateful that God is good and that his love towards us never ends. And that consistency, and that's the thing, is this consistency of the love of God for which we are grateful in gratitude, that isn't just felt in the heart, but you know, and you will know in your life, and maybe being on the receiving end, of how that spills out from people. It doesn't stay, it spills out into the lives around us. My study is literally littered with cards and messages, and I thank you. Verse 2 says, let the redeemed of the Lord say so, whom he has redeemed from trouble. And we need to show and proclaim that gratitude to God. To redeem something means to buy it, to buy it back, to rescue it. And the people who are listening to this psalm knew exactly that. For somebody, if you fell on hard times in a community, what you wanted was for somebody from your extended family to rise up as a kinsman redeemer, and they would rescue you from debt, they would take it upon themselves, they would buy you out of slavery, or lift you out of poverty, and they would be your redeemer, and you would be redeemed, you would be free. The cross is exactly that. We have been bought, as we have shared in communion.

[10:09] We are the redeemed. If that isn't something to give thanks for, then I don't know what is. So the psalmist is saying, come on, let thankfulness build in your hearts because of his goodness and his steadfast love that God has redeemed you. But what kind of trouble? What kind of trouble could an ancient Israelite have experienced? Well, you won't be surprised that it doesn't change much than it does today, because it's about our character. And so the psalmist, as he speaks, resonates with us today and points out four points. He's reminding us, and that we need to be reminded of this, because in verse 3 it said, God has redeemed his people from the four points of the compass.

He calls us back, and the first one is the wanderer. In verse 4 and 5 it says, Some wandered in desert wastes, finding no way to a city to dwell in. Hungry and thirsting, their soul fainted within them. People knew what it was like to wander. And maybe we resonate with us this morning. For those of us who have wandered, for those of us maybe at the moment who are listening, who have wandered at the moment, far from God's love. Who we believe that we have been some way separated. And yet when God calls us back again and again, the wanderer. People knew what it was like.

The hunger, the thirst, the exhaustion in a desert place. And you may know that today, what that desert place might look like for you. Because there is something more. We wander.

We all like sheep have gone astray. Each of us to his own way. But that's why Jesus came. To bring us back. Jesus emphasized that point so often in stories again and again of the lost, of the wanderer, the sheep, the coin, the son, the child that disappeared, the father that just couldn't wait for the son to come back and was waiting. The love never ended. The redeeming power and character of God is something to be grateful for day in and day out. Because the steadfast love of the Lord is one that recurs in the Bible throughout again and again and again. It defines the person and character of God. And then there's the shadow dweller that he talks about. 10 and 11, some sat in darkness and in the shadow of death, prisoners in affliction and aligns, for they had rebelled against the words of God and spurned the counsel of the Most High. You know, the people hearing this knew the chain of events. They knew because they thought that they could throw off God's promises and everything that he had done. Instead of being grateful for their liberation and being grateful for their freedom, they turned to idols and the culture of the day.

And don't we know that? How people have turned to the culture of the day, their character aligned with secular views rather than God's view and God's way. Does that sound familiar to you? To the people that we seek to reach? Maybe for ourselves at times? Foes that resonate with a community that we are seeking to reach. They thought that throwing off God's law would make them free. To do whatever they wanted and instead they found themselves incarcerated in a Babylonian culture that was more restrictive than the freedom that God was offering them. You see, God's words and his standards are born out of love and as a society, at least in the West, individual freedom and autonomy of become modern day idols. We want to do what we want to do when we want to do it and we don't want to be told what we can do and what we can't do. And to be told otherwise is regarded as bigoted, controlling and constricting. But the irony is when we pursue rampant individualism, we end up in the darkness, which is what this psalm is talking about. Our own prison and our own demise, chained by selfishness, personal preference, self-centeredness and society promises us freedom?

[14 : 40] I don't think so because we end up enslaved. Shadow dwellers. But then the psalmist gives us the third type of person, which is the fool in verses 17 to 18. Some fools through their own sinful ways and because of their iniquities suffered affliction. They loathed any kind of food and they draw near to the gates of death. Now, I don't know you, I've never met anybody who liked being called a fool. It's not very kind, is it really? But the Bible is much more nuanced when it talks of people being a fool because to be a fool is the opposite of wise. And the biblical and godly character gives us wisdom, gives us direction. You know, I struggle being grateful maybe for his guidance day by day, seeking his wisdom, even in the small things of life. Look, what should I do in this? Show me a way forward. Show me a way. It may not be the way in which I'm going, but show me which way to go, will you?

Give me wisdom in this decision or whatever the way I'm living my life. I often struggle at the crematorium when somebody has chosen, as the curtains come around, to play that Frank Sinatra song, I did it my way. You know, I feel it's a bit of an affront really to God, for all of God's graciousness and love to turn at the last moment as the curtains come around to say, well, thank you very much because I've done it my way. Maybe that increases our list in us of the things in which we give thanks for. So whilst we may look like a fool to anyone else, we may not be quite as clever as we think. And we're all in danger of suffering from our own folly.

So there's the wanderer, the shadow dweller, and the fool. And then we come to the final one that the psalmist talks about, which is the overwhelmed. And some went down to the sea in ships doing business in great waters. They commanded and raised the stormy wind which lifted up the waves of the sea.

They mounted up to heaven. They went down to the depths. Their courage melted away in their evil plight. They reeled and staggered like drunken men. They were at their wits end. Have you ever been in the perfect storm? Perhaps you're there at the moment. There's times in our lives, which you will know as well as I do, where you have faced the storm. And then the next wave comes. And you think, wasn't that enough? And then the next wave comes. And it's the perfect storm. And you think, where is this coming from?

Where is this? And then another one comes on top of that again, plunging you down. And I can't take this anymore, Lord. The psalmist relates the sea as an almost physical embodiment of their chaos.

[17 : 39] And at times when you and I feel overwhelmed by the chaos of life, you desperately search for order in it. For someone to plant your feet in the storm, there seems no respite. The rescuer comes.

Because God isn't separate. God is there with you in the storm. Maybe it was a bit of a revelation to me from story of days in Sunday school, where we hear that really nice little story of the man who built his house on the rock and the man who built his house on the sand. It's very nice, isn't it? I don't know about you, I've often felt as though I'm very smug, because it's very nice being in the house on the rock, isn't it? But what I realise so often is the storm was exactly the same. The storm wasn't any different for the person on the rock or the man on the sand. It was the same storm. It's who you trust in when the storm comes, and who is with you in the storm. The psalmist, the wanderer, the shadow dweller, the fool and the overwhelmed acknowledges that God's love never gives up on you, is alongside you, who will lift you up, who will hold you, who will embrace you wherever you are. And we give thanks to that, as hard as that might be at times, but Lord, I know that you are with me in each and every part of my life, and as much as I struggle to articulate it, as often as I should, I give you thanks, and I give you gratitude, because I know that you will never leave me or forsake me.

One of the good things about having a patch on your eye for so long is that you can't read, or at least you struggle. You will know that. So I caught up with some films, and Evan Almighty is one of my favourite films. And if you don't know the story of Evan Almighty, you will know that in all things he seemed to be extremely successful, when like our covenant story today, God asked him to do something which clearly Evan didn't want to do, which was to build an ark in the middle of the desert. Seems bizarre and seems strange. And yet through that, Evan learnt in his character to trust more and more, step by step, in God, and to be grateful for what he was doing. However, his wife didn't quite see that at the time, and it's hard for people who were alongside and alongside us in suffering sometimes to give thanks.

I think it's an opportunity this morning, as we've heard God's word, maybe already in your mind as you're listening to this, that you're thinking of the things for which you are grateful, that you are grateful for God's love. Maybe you are grateful for somebody who brought you to Christ.

Maybe you're grateful for somebody who has supported you through a tough time. Maybe you're grateful that God has been with you in your rebellion as you've wandered. Maybe you are grateful because God has called you back from a place from which you wandered. Maybe you are grateful for the way in which God is speaking to you this morning and giving you the opportunity to be courageous, the opportunity to love afresh. Things that we can thank God for his graciousness, for a loved one that he's brought alongside us in our marriage and in our relationship. Being grateful for maybe our children, maybe grateful the way God's working on our own character. So many things, the list goes on and on and on.

[21 : 32] So on this morning, as we think about graciousness and the graciousness of God's love, I'm just going to do something which is totally un-Anglican and more lending, more towards my Pentecostal side. And I'm going to invite you to stand. And the bands were just in a noodle along in the background. And in our thankfulness, it said that they cried out to the Lord. And all the things in this room, of all these people, of the things that we have to give thanks for, I am going to invite you to cry that out to the Lord in gratitude for the things that he has shown you, for the things that he is doing, for the things that he has done in your life. And we're going to fill this place. And we're going to be bold here and just cry out to the Lord to give thanks. It might well be that you want to give thanks for one thing. If you'd like me, it's going to be a whole list of things.

To be, thank the Lord for our graciousness of God, for our kids, for our family, for our provision, that we even at this morning, which is a large part, is that those who have been to Uganda and those that have just come back will tell you what a gracious thing that is to even be fed and to be clothed. So much that we have to give that we can take to a waiting world.

So as I pray, we're just going to, in our own mind, I'm just going to give you a moment and then we are going to speak out those things to the Lord as one. Holy Spirit, would you come? We thank you, Lord, for that you are a gracious God. And we thank you. We thank you beyond our understanding of the things that you do and can do in our lives. So Lord, we thank you. Let's just speak out those words.

Speak them out loud. Speak them out. Thank you, Lord, for this. Thank you, Lord. Thank you for your graciousness. Thank you for my children. Lord, thank you that I had this morning. Let's do that together now. Be spontaneous. Let go. Be free of freedom. Thank you, Lord. Thank you, Lord.