

Give Thanks for God's Grace

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[0 : 0 0] Well, as I was trying to decide what to speak about this morning, I felt that being Thanksgiving Sunday, I really had a good wrestle with trying to figure that out.

The question that was on my mind was, how can I spur us all on to genuine and heartfelt giving thanks to God this weekend? There's lots of places in God's Word where it says, give thanks, or with thanksgiving, but it got me really thinking, where does real, genuine thanksgiving come from?

What causes it to flow? For many, thanksgiving is not unlike Christmas. It's that time of year that we gather with family and friends, and everything's supposed to be peaceful and wonderful and right.

And I've sat through myself many a let's-go-around-the-table-and-give-thanks kind of moment. And many times what I hear from people is the same.

I'm thankful for my family. I'm thankful for my friends. I'm thankful for my possessions, how my basic needs are always met. I'm thankful that overall we are so blessed.

[1 : 1 4] But I wonder, have our thanksgiving celebrations become more of a glasses-half-full kind of party with a little bit of religious sprinkled on top?

Why is it that so often our thanksgiving often seems more about us and what we have than about the God who has graciously given those things to us?

It's become more about expressing our thankfulness to each other than about expressing our thankfulness to God himself. And for many, it's become more about the blessings of here and now material things than about the eternal and the spiritual blessings that Jesus has won for his people.

And so where does real, genuine, God's kind of thanksgiving come from? Does it come from counting our blessings, our possessions?

If that's what it's all about, how can the poor person give thanks this weekend? How can the person who is alone and doesn't have family to celebrate with give thanks this weekend?

[2 : 3 1] How can the person with critical health issues give thanks this weekend? Perhaps the reason that our thanksgiving doesn't just flow is because we've set our hearts and minds on things that are far too low.

And so my aim this morning is simply to lift your head, to look at God, to look at Christ, to look at his grace and his mercy that he's given to us again.

Because when we see that, we won't have to make a list. Thanksgiving will flow freely and spontaneously.

We've been journeying through the story of Abraham. For those of you who are visiting this morning, we've watched as God has made some great promises to Abraham. We've also watched as Abraham has struggled to trust those promises.

Last Sunday, we saw specifically how Abraham and his wife were getting up there in years, and they decided to try and help God to keep his promise by doing the surrogate motherhood thing with Hagar.

[3 : 43] We saw how the Lord appeared to Abraham at nearly 100 years old, and he had a 13-year-old son at that time named Ishmael through Hagar.

And the Lord said to him that all his great promises would be fulfilled through Isaac, a son who would be born, and not through Ishmael. We began to answer the question last Sunday of how does God keep his promises and his covenant?

And the answer that we came to last Sunday was he keeps his promises, but he does it in his time and in his way. Well, this morning, we're going to look at another answer to that question of how does God keep his covenant?

How does God keep his promises? And we're going to do it through the words of Paul. See it through the words of Paul thousands of years later. If you have your Bibles with you, please open them up to Romans chapter 9.

Romans chapter 9. I want to admit right off the get-go that this is a hotly debated and difficult passage, and we're not going to look at everything here. My aim is to honor what's here, the context, the flow of Paul's thought.

[4 : 56] I don't want to simply cherry-pick out of this passage, but I believe there is an answer here, an important one, to our question of how does God keep his promises and his covenants? And an answer which I hope and pray will cause our hearts to really overflow with thanksgiving as we celebrate this morning and this weekend.

And so Romans chapter 9, verse 1. Paul says, I speak the truth in Christ. I'm not lying. My conscience confirms it through the Holy Spirit.

I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart, for I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my people, those of my own race, the people of Israel.

Theirs is the adoption to sonship. Theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs.

And from them is traced the human ancestry of the Messiah, who is God over all, forever praised. Amen. It is not as though God's word had failed.

[6 : 11] And this is really one of the key phrases for us this morning. It is not as though God's word had failed. Why might we think that God's word had failed?

Well, Paul's explained in the first five verses here how his heart is broken. As he looks around at the people of Israel, which he explains are those of his own race, the Jewish people, by and large, on the whole, they have rejected Jesus, their Messiah, the Christ.

And so it looks as though God's word has failed. He goes on to give a list of all the gifts of God's grace that have been given to them.

He talks about how theirs is the adoption to sonship, the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, temple worship, promises, the patriarchs, and even the ultimate.

From them is traced the human ancestry of Jesus, the Messiah. And yet on the whole, as Paul looks around, it appears that the descendants of Abraham have rejected the Lord.

[7 : 31] Not only Jesus, the Messiah, but all along the way, he has made promises. He has sent prophets. He has made covenants. And they have turned their backs on him.

They have worshipped other gods. They've disobeyed his commands. They've gone their own way. They've killed his messengers. So it appears as though God's word is in jeopardy.

God's promise is in jeopardy. Paul gives us assurance that it's not. God's word has not failed.

His promises and his covenants will be kept. How? In what way? And really this whole passage is, that's what it's all about.

From 9, 6, all the way to the end of 11. There's a lot here. We're not going to go into all of it. We're just going to look at a few points this morning. And then look at how it pertains to us.

[8 : 37] It is not as though God's word had failed, says Paul. For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel.

Well, that's an interesting answer. What does that mean? In case we're kind of confused by that, Paul throws in another statement right after that's equally confusing.

Nor because they are his descendants, are they all Abraham's children. So just because you're a descendant of Abraham doesn't mean you're his child. That's a strange thing to say.

Kind of seems a little bit of a contradiction. I mean, last time I checked, all who are descended from me are my children. What are you saying here, Paul? He goes on to give his explanation.

On the contrary, it is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned. In other words, it is not the children of physical descent who are God's children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring.

[9 : 49] For this was how the promise was stated. At the appointed time, I will return and Sarah will have a son. The logic here of Paul, we've got to kind of follow this closely.

It's very, there's a lot he's saying here. God's word has not failed. Why? Because not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. And then he kind of gives us this example, this illustration, a real life one from the story of Abraham.

Basically, his point is not all who are descended from Abraham are his children. So how does this work?

He goes on to explain the promise in verse 7, which was made. On the contrary, he says, it is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned. He's quoting right out of the story back in Genesis.

And we haven't got there yet in the story of Abraham, but we've kind of seen how the story is going in that direction. Isaac is born to Sarah in her 90s, just as the Lord had said.

[11 : 02] And after he is, the Lord tells Abraham to go along with what his wife has said and to send Hagar and Ishmael away. Because it is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.

It is through Isaac that my promises, my covenant will be established with you. This land that I've promised, it's for Isaac and his descendants. And it's not for Ishmael.

Paul then goes on to explain, using this example of Abraham, what this means.

He says, in other words, it is not the children by physical descent who are God's children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring.

So Abraham's family is kind of an example here. He had two sons, Isaac and Ishmael. But of those two sons, only one of them God chose to establish his covenant with and to keep all of those promises too.

[12 : 15] Ishmael was not chosen. And so, as we see in verse 8, the children of physical descent.

In other words, it is not the children by physical descent, or literally, children of the flesh, refers to Ishmael. It is not the children by physical descent who are God's children, but it is the children of the promise, Isaac, who is regarded as Abraham's offspring.

And notice those words, God's children, in verse 8. It is not the children by physical descent who are God's children. This covenant signified a very special relationship with Abraham and with Isaac, such that Isaac was considered a child of God.

In a way that Ishmael was not. And so, when Paul says that not all Abraham's offspring are his children, what he means is that not all of Abraham's offspring are children to whom the promises and the covenant applies.

And when we see that with Abraham's family, then we take that back up to the point he's making in verse 6. It's not as though God's word had failed, for not all who are descended from Israel are Israel.

[13 : 49] It's the same thing. Israel is the name that God gave to Jacob. Just as in Abraham's family with Isaac and Ishmael, not all who are descended from Abraham inherit this covenant relationship and the promises, so too is it with Israel.

Not all who are descended from Israel inherit these promises and this covenant relationship. Those who rejected Jesus as their Messiah are not the children of God.

They're not true Israel. They're not the offspring to whom the covenants and promises apply. They're merely children of the flesh. Descended from Israel.

Descended from Abraham. But children of the flesh. Which means that Israel is the name of the true children of God.

The true people of God. The true nation of God. And belonging to Israel means more. What Paul is saying here. It means more than merely having descended physically from him.

[15 : 03] To put it in other words, being ethnically Jewish does not automatically mean that you are a child of God who will inherit all that God has promised. It didn't mean that in the Old Testament.

It didn't mean that when Jesus came. It didn't mean that in Paul's day. And it doesn't mean that today. We want to pause for a moment there and ask ourselves, is that really what Paul is saying here?

Is that what he's teaching? Is this idea taught anywhere else in Scripture? It is. In fact, it's taught by Jesus himself. In John chapter 8, verse 31, Jesus is having a conversation with the Jews.

And I'm just going to read snippets of it. To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples.

Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free. And their answer to him was essentially, What do you mean free? We've never been slaves.

[16 : 08] We're Abraham's descendants. Jesus says to them, in verse 37, I know that you are Abraham's descendants, yet you are looking for a way to kill me, because you have no room for my word.

I am telling you what I have seen in the Father's presence, and you are doing what you have heard from your Father, said Jesus. Abraham is our father, they answered.

If you were Abraham's children, said Jesus, then you would do what Abraham did. As it is, you are looking for a way to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God.

Abraham did not do such things. You are doing the works of your own father. We are not illegitimate children, they protested. The only father we have is God himself, Jesus said to them, if God were your father, you would love me, for I have come here from God.

Down in verse 47, whoever belongs to God, hears what God says. The reason you do not hear is that you do not belong to God.

[17 : 26] So the message of Jesus is pretty clear in this conversation. He says, I know you are Abraham's descendants in the flesh, that you are physically descended from him, but in the most important sense, in the true sense, you are not Abraham's children.

I have come from God, and your response to me shows that you are not Abraham's children. You have no room for my word.

And this shows the reality. You're not true children of Abraham, and you're not true children of God. Not all who are descended from Israel are Israel, are true children of the living God.

Some of the physical descendants of Israel will inherit all that has been promised through these wonderful covenants, and some will not.

Which means that the promises of the everlasting covenant will be kept to some of the descendants of Abraham and Isaac and Israel, but not to all.

[18 : 39] Not simply on the basis of them being Jewish or circumcised or fill in the blank. Which also means that the land that was promised to Abraham and Isaac and Israel is not the automatic divine birthright of every Jewish person, contrary to popular Christian Zionism, contrary to the thought of many Jewish people today.

Those who reject the Messiah, Jesus, have no covenantal promise basis for a claim to the land that was promised.

They are not children of God. They are not children of Abraham. They are merely children of the flesh, according to the logic of Jesus and Paul.

Where is this all going? The covenant and the promises, and this is where Paul is really going here, they are for those whom God has chosen by grace and not by race.

That's how it was with Isaac and with Ishmael. That's how it was with Jacob and with Esau. And that same principle applies all the way down.

[19 : 56] At the heart of this whole discussion is really this question. What makes the difference between those who are in and those who are out?

If it isn't physical descent or race, what is it? Why do some inherit the promises and the covenant and not others?

Why did God choose Abraham and not others? Why did God choose Isaac and not Ishmael? Why did he choose Jacob and not Esau?

Why not both? Well, it wasn't because Isaac was good. He wasn't even born yet. In the verses which follow, back in Romans 9, verses 10 to 13, we're not going to look at it too closely there, but Paul basically says, look at Jacob and Esau.

Before they had done anything good or bad, it was not based on works. The Lord chose one of them, gave a different promise, the older will serve the younger.

[21 : 06] He chose one of them to receive his covenant of grace and the other was not chosen to receive it. Some will say that that doesn't seem fair.

That doesn't seem just. Why is God treating some with a special favor and not others? Why is he specially blessing Abraham and not others?

Why is he specially blessing Isaac and not Ishmael? Jacob and not Esau? Paul goes on in verse 14 to address this very concern. He says, What then shall we say?

Is God unjust? Not at all. For he says to Moses, I will have mercy on whom I have mercy and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.

Do you hear what the Lord is saying there? When it comes to Abraham, I am free to pour out my special blessing on him, establish my covenant with him and only him if I want to.

[22 : 14] I am free to bless and establish my covenant with Isaac. Show mercy and compassion to him if I want to.

And I am free to bless and not establish it with Ishmael if I want to. This is not unjust.

This is not favoritism because it wasn't based on their works in the first place. It wasn't based on whether they'd done good or bad, says Paul. This is a bit of a limited analogy, but I think we can all relate.

As Christmas comes around, you'll likely be getting some pieces of mail asking for a donation to a number of charities.

Are you not free to give to and to bless some of those charities and not others? Many of them are worthy. Is it unfair that you decide to give 50 to one, 100 to another, and zero to the third?

[23 : 18] Of course it's not unfair. You are not obligated to give them anything. That's what it means to give a gift. Gifts by definition are unobligated and sometimes undeserved.

I think of how things go with our children. I'll tell one of my children up to three times, don't do this. By the third time, if you do this again, there will be a consequence.

Is it right? Is it fair if I give them the consequence when they go and do it again? Yes. But is it in my freedom and right as a parent to watch them do it again and to look at them and out of compassion decide, I'm not going to give you what I said I would.

I'm not going to give you the consequence that I said that I would. Yes. That is in my freedom as a parent. That is right. Right. Right. Now, my other child might come in at that moment and after she does something that she's not supposed to be doing, that she was told that she would be disciplined for if she did, she might say, well, how come you let Callie off the hook last time?

That doesn't seem fair. You should let me off the hook this time too. To which I say, no, that's not how it works. I am not obligated to show mercy.

[24 : 47] It's the same with God. He is not obligated to show mercy and grace to sinners like you and me. We may not like that, but that's what the Lord claims for himself.

Freedom to choose to bless or not to bless. To give one what they deserve and to another to show grace and mercy.

Verse 16. It does not therefore depend on human desire or effort, but on God's mercy.

So this morning, we've already seen how God will keep his promises in his time and his way. This morning, we see another facet of it. God will keep his promises, but he will do it to those whom he has chosen by grace to keep them to.

Paul's going to go on to explain how this applies to ethnic Israel. He's going to talk about the remnant. That's all for another time. But his point here is that those people who belong to true Israel, who truly are Israel, they're chosen not by race, not by works, not by what they've done, good or bad, but by grace as an unobligated gift.

[26 : 21] Now, we've been talking a lot about Abraham and Israel and the Jewish people, but how does that all connect to us here this morning? I'm assuming most of us, if not all of us, are not Jewish.

Skip down to verse 23. We're kind of entering mid-argument into what Paul is saying, but for the sake of time, we don't have time to look at it all. Paul says, what if God did this?

What if he chose to show mercy to some and not to others? What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory?

Would that be just? Would that be right? Would that be fair? I think the answer is implied. It's yes. Would it be fair if he chose to do that to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy?

Who are the objects of his mercy? Verse 24. Even us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews, but also from the Gentiles.

[27 : 28] in God's mercy, he has chosen to show, to show grace, not just to the descendants physically of Abraham, but also to people who are not, to the Gentiles, to the non-Jewish people, to all the families of the earth, to the world.

And the way that's made possible is through Christ. And we're going to be looking at that in some of the weeks ahead, how that works.

But Paul will go on to say in this chapter 11 that the Gentiles, those who are not Jewish, are by God's grace grafted into the Israel tree as a gift of grace.

so that we too might inherit this great kingdom of God and be participants in what he has promised. But for this morning, that's a much bigger story, a much bigger discussion.

This morning, what I want us to see is that anyone who comes to share in all that God has promised, in all his blessings, does so not by works, not because of the good or bad that they have done, not because of their ethnic background, but because of the free, unobligated choice of God to give grace to them.

[29 : 10] Ephesians 2, verses 8 and 9. Most of you probably know this verse, for it is by grace. It is by the unobligated gift of God that you are saved, not by works, so that no one can boast.

God will keep his promises and his covenants, but he will do so as a gift of grace and mercy through his son Jesus to those he chooses to be gracious and merciful to.

even us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews, but also from the Gentiles. And so how should all of this shape our thanksgiving?

We're kind of just kicking off the celebrations. How does this all apply here? Well, this morning, if you are here and Jesus is your Lord and your Savior, if you have a precious, personal relationship with him, then you're in.

You too are a child of God. Just as Isaac couldn't take a lick of credit for God's choosing him, neither can you. Is this not reason to give thanks on thanksgiving?

[30 : 30] My encouragement this weekend is that we would not merely or mostly focus and give thanks for the material blessings that we enjoy.

Let's give thanks for God's grace, for God's mercy, without which we'd be hopeless, we'd be lost. Let's give thanks for the spiritual blessings that have been won for us through Christ, the things that will last forever into eternity, things that we did nothing to deserve, forgiveness that we could never earn, citizenship in a kingdom that we are not worthy of being a part of, eternal life, though we were promised death.

These things are just the tip of the iceberg of all that comes and is promised to those who believe, to those who belong to Jesus, and none of this would be ours without him.

There would be no salvation, no forgiveness, except because of what he did at the cross as a gift of grace and mercy to us.

And so what are you thankful for this morning? As you gather with friends and family, I encourage you to turn your eyes to the God of grace who has done so much for you, so much that wasn't owed, so much that wasn't earned, so much that wasn't deserved in the least.

[32 : 05] May our expression of gratitude around the table be to him and about him. And if you want to have a more practical way of bringing this to your dinner table, when you go around the dinner table this afternoon, may I suggest that we add a new word to our thanksgiving.

The word despite. Instead of saying, I'm thankful for, fill in the blank, I encourage you to say, I thank you God that despite, fill in the blank, you have given fill in the blank to me.

Instead of saying, I'm thankful for fill in the blank, say, I thank you God that despite, fill in the blank, you have done fill in the blank for me.

And there are so many different things that we can put in those blanks as Christians, as people who belong to the Lord Jesus. Let's pray.

Amen. Lord Jesus, we know that it is only by your grace that we have come into this wonderful family that you've brought us into, that we have come into this inheritance that is mind-blowing.

[33 : 45] It's huge, it's glorious, it's amazing. Thank you that you have set your free choice to give mercy and grace upon us who believe.

We say this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.