

Thanksgiving For Gods Gifts

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[0 : 00] Dear Father, we ask now that you would speak once again by your Holy Spirit through the written words to inspire us and teach us and equip us for your service.

We ask this for Jesus' sake. Amen. I don't know why that just did that, but I'll pay no attention to it. It seems that every time I'm asked to preach, I get an enormous and weighty chunk of Scripture to preach on. Now I have an additional obstacle with these things.

I'm not quite sure what they are. They're lovely, particularly lovely at the back looking forward. Over the summer I was preaching on John 17, the whole chapter, and the last time I was preaching here it was Genesis 6, 7, and 8, together.

The whole flood story. Anyway, so tonight it's Ephesians 2, so I can't begin to do justice to the weight and significance of the passage.

[1 : 08] So I'm not going to even attempt to go through it something like systematically. But I think it has great riches for us tonight as we think about Harvest Thanksgiving. This is our Harvest Thanksgiving occasion, and that's the focus of what we have sung and prayed and will continue to sing and pray.

And that's what all of this, whatever these things are, are meant to remind us of. That this is the harvest time. And I think we can learn quite a lot about Thanksgiving and about gratitude from this passage.

And that's what I want to look at tonight. So I don't think there's any better passage that could have been picked for the Harvest Thanksgiving occasion than this. Of course, it's certainly proper to give thanks for all of the physical and material blessings that God has given, because all of those things do come to us from God's hands.

And as Christian people, we can detect behind those things which we see around us, God's hand providing them, and we can give thanks for those things. But on the other hand, we know, too, that the order of redemption is far greater than any order of creation, that the blessings that God has provided in Christ far outweigh the blessings which he has given us in creation.

So I'm not going to talk about harvests or turkey dinners or anything else. I'm going to talk about salvation, because I think that that's what this chapter is all about. And if ever there was a chapter which told us about salvation and prompted us to gratitude for it, it certainly must be this one.

[2 : 35] So the whole point, I think, of the chapter is to exalt God's grace in salvation, to stir us, to magnify and to praise God. And Paul wants us to remember those things which we are prone to forget.

In verse 11, if you'd take your pew Bible and look at it, it might be helpful. As I move through the text, I really think that verse 11 is the key verse.

Therefore, remember. Remember has got to be the key word. It was also the key word of the last sermon that I preached here. I feel like I'm a broken record. Because back in the flood story, everything was going wrong. The flood waters had risen.

It was absolute chaos. And then in verse 1 of chapter 8 of Genesis, but God remembered Noah. At that point, the whole tide literally turns.

And the whole story changes. The same word is the key word here, the word remember. Because I think we're prone to forget the material, sorry, prone to forget the spiritual blessings which we have been given.

[3 : 36] We're prone to take them for granted. And that's one thing that Paul is trying to combat in the Ephesians. So I want to look at three particular areas for gratitude, three reasons for gratitude that Paul gives us in this passage.

Because it's a passage that carries over the line of thought from chapter 1. In chapter 1, as Harry was preaching a few weeks ago, Paul is virtually ecstatic. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, and so on.

And he heaps up praise, line after line of it. It's all one sentence in the Greek. The same spirit is what's going on here. He's had his ecstatic utterance, and then he has made a prayer that all those things he has uttered will be lived in the lives of these people.

And now he's back to his same theme. Certainly he is teaching doctrine here, and theologians have obviously spent a great deal of time on this chapter. And it's from verse 8 in this chapter that the buzzwords of the Reformation come.

Salvation by grace alone, through faith alone. *Sola fide, sola gratia*. That's all right here. But what I'm saying is it's not just doctrine that's being taught here. It's far more than doctrine.

[4 : 55] And Paul's real intention is for people to lay a hold of this with gratitude and not to forget where they've come from. So there are three reasons, I think, for gratitude in this passage, and we'll look at them.

The first reason why Christians should be grateful for salvation. First, because we've all been rescued from spiritual death. Now this certainly is a heavy one, and it's not a popular thing to say, but it's what the text gives me to say.

Paul in verses 1 to 3, talking about the spiritual death that results from man's sin and wickedness. And you he made alive when you were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once walked.

Following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience. Among these, we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of body and mind.

So we were by nature children of wrath like the rest of mankind. And the rest of mankind includes all of us here. He, of course, is referring to the Jew and Gentile problem.

[5 : 59] The you is the Gentiles and the we is the Jews. And what this chapter is trying to say is that the Jews and the Gentiles were very much in the same boat, despite Jewish arrogance about their own spiritual position.

So physically, people can be alive and well, and spiritually they can be a walking corpse. And that's something that we have to wrestle with.

No doubt Paul is teaching a general truth here, but he goes on and then applies it to the Gentiles. And the Ephesians, of course, were pagans. They were Gentiles. So he's applying this general truth in verses 11 and 12.

Therefore, remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called the uncircumcision by what is the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands. That's really just a parenthesis.

Remember that you Gentiles in the flesh, that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.

[7 : 01] What could be more straightforward than that? Hopeless, godless, and Christless. We know from Acts 19 that some of the Ephesian Christians had in fact been pagan magicians.

And one of the things that they did when they were converted to Christ is they made a gigantic bonfire out of all of their papyri and scrolls where their magic spells were written down. That's, I think, part of what Paul is referring to, that these people, many of them had come from that sort of background.

Utterly a pagan background. Hopeless, Christless, godless. A black background. So when Paul came preaching to Ephesus, what happened?

A riot happened. And the depiction of it in the book of Acts is very graphic. The whole city had been the focus of pagan worship. The whole city was known for precisely that.

There was a great big temple. I'll say some more about that in a while. It was the focus of the whole town. And here comes Paul, upsetting the whole apple cart. And he was a very unpopular character.

[8 : 09] They were hopeless. They were spiritually dead. Contrast that with the Jewish position. Over in Romans 9, Paul's talking about the privileges of the Israelites.

And these pagan Ephesians had no part in any of those privileges. They are the Israelites. To them belong the sonship, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. To them belong the patriarchs. And of their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ. All of those things utterly foreign to the Gentiles.

All those things utterly foreign to these Ephesians. Who have been going off regularly to their pagan sacrifices in this magnificent temple. The point that Paul wants to make is he wants these Gentile pagans to remember that.

He wants them to remember their past. So that they'll appreciate where they are now. He doesn't want them to forget about what they were before. He wants them to remember it. How could they forget it? The temple is sitting right there anyway. But he wants them to soak that in.

[9 : 14] To know where they've come from. Because when we know where we've come from, we appreciate all the more where we are now. And I think that that's one of the lessons that Paul is teaching us here.

The greatness of the spiritual life that we've been given can be appreciated when we appreciate the spiritual death from which we've been rescued. It's a matter of light and dark.

And death and life. I became a follower of Christ when I was 22. Which is relatively late in life, I think. So I remember quite well my own past.

My own pagan past. I was a nice guy and I tried to do good things and I had high ideals. But the fact of the matter was that I was spiritually dead.

I was dead to God. I recall doing in my trendy high school, maybe some of you around my age went to a trendy high school as well, values clarification.

[10 : 13] Did you have that? Well, it was in an English class. I don't know if it had anything to do with English. But in a values clarification exercise, we were given a list of 18 values, truth, beauty, happiness, money, success, etc., etc.

Included on the list was salvation. And so out of 18, I put salvation 18. I would have left it off altogether unless you had to rank them.

So that's spiritual death. I know what I was saved from. I'm sure you know what you came from.

And that's what Paul's saying here to these former pagans. Recall your past and give thanks and praise to God who has rescued you from death and delivered you to life.

That's the first reason. Second reason for gratitude and salvation. That salvation is God's gift. This is made very clear as well.

Jews and Gentiles alike have received God's free gift of salvation in Jesus Christ. Paul wants no one to boast. Another thing he's doing here, he's spurring people to gratitude.

[11 : 28] But he's also pounding down on anyone who wants to boast of their salvation. He wants no one to boast of their new life in Christ. In verse 8, For it is by grace that you have been saved through faith.

And this is not your own doing. It is the gift of God. Not because of works, lest any man should boast. The great doctrine of salvation by grace through faith.

And when Paul uses that word grace, It's very helpful to keep in mind the number of occasions upon which he uses that, connected with his own conversion. Because that's really, I think, something that's foremost in his mind.

When he thinks about his experience on the Damascus road as a persecutor, it's grace which saved him, which gripped him. Over in 1 Timothy 1, he's talking about the privilege that is his to be a preacher.

I thank him who has given me strength for this. In other words, for his preaching. Christ Jesus, our Lord. Because he judged me faithful by appointing me to his service. Though I formerly blasphemed and persecuted and insulted him, and I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief.

[12 : 37] And the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. It's grace which had gripped him. Grace is receiving the gift of salvation that was undeserved, unearned, unmerited, unexpected, on everything.

Therefore, no one should boast that somehow they've achieved salvation as their own accomplishment. It's a gift we receive in repentance and faith. And notice that it doesn't say by faith. Faith is not the cause of salvation. You don't cause your salvation by extending faith. No, it's salvation through faith. Through is an important word there.

It's just the means through which we receive that which God has provided. And thereby hangs a great theological tale, but I think it's very clear from our text. The very faith which we receive is God's gift.

God gives us faith, and then that's the faith that we reach out and accept Christ with. And that's the teaching of verse 8. God gives us the faith that he requires of us so that we can reach out to accept Christ who had gone to the cross and by his shed blood made peace between God and man so that we might be reconciled to God.

[13 : 58] We who once were dead could be made alive. So we receive Christ and salvation through faith, which is a free gift of God.

So there's the second reason for gratitude and salvation. It's a free gift. It's unearned. It's undeserved. It's something we've been given. The third and final reason I want to look at in our passage for gratitude as we think tonight is this, that salvation brings immense privileges to believers so that they belong to God's household.

In verses 19 to 22, it's a terrific conclusion to this passage. He's talked about salvation generally in verses 1 to 10.

He's specifically talked about the Gentile situation, verses 11 to 19. In verses 19 to 22, it's a summation about the way in which these Jews and Gentiles are brought together as one.

It's a marvelous passage about what the church is. So then you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow members with the saints, fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are built into it for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.

[15 : 31] So the Gentiles now, and that's most of us, perhaps with a few exceptions, we're Gentiles in our derivation. Gentiles now have all of the privileges of children in God's household, whereas before they were citizens of a foreign country.

They had no claims at all on God's household. They had no right to be there. They weren't even allowed to come. Paul's thinking here, as he talks elsewhere in the passage about the dividing wall being broken down.

He's thinking of the wall between Jews and Gentiles at the temple in Jerusalem, where a Gentile couldn't go past a certain point on the threat of death. And there was a sign in Latin and in Greek which said, anyone who goes, any Gentile who goes beyond this place will be executed.

There was no mixing of Jews and Gentiles. Gentiles had no place in God's house. They weren't allowed beyond a certain court, the court of the Gentiles. And this is what Paul's saying has been broken down entirely.

And Jew and Gentile are now one, and they're one together in a body. And that has a lot to say to us about oneness in this body, oneness in this church, oneness in God's community.

[16 : 37] But the pagan past that the Ephesians had experienced was no doubt the thing Paul's referring to here again. He's got it.

In one side of his brain, he's got the temple of Jerusalem. In the other side of his brain, he's got this Ephesian temple, the temple of Diana, the temple of Artemis, which was probably around the block from wherever he was doing his preaching.

We know he was there for a long stay. One of the seven wonders of the world, in the ancient world, four times as big as the Parthenon in Athens, with a huge statue of this pagan god Artemis, which was said to have fallen from heaven.

That's apparently such a glorious thing that they thought the only way it could be such a spectacular object is if it came from heaven itself. So how daring it is for Paul to go around preaching.

And he says, phooey to all of this pagan temple stuff. No wonder that there was a riot. But Paul's point is that the Gentiles now have full membership in the house of the living and the true God, a temple made of human hearts, with Christ himself as the chief cornerstone.

[17 : 49] And a cornerstone is a very interesting Old Testament image Paul's using, as Christ is the one who gives completeness and unity. It's the final stone that you put up at the top of the corner.

It's not the foundation. In other passages, Christ is called the foundation of the church. Here, he's the crowning bit which goes on last and gives completeness and unity and wholeness to the whole structure.

That's an exalted view of Christ if there ever was one. And the witness of the apostles and the prophets is the foundation. And all this is by God's gift. All this is a consequence of the grace which has been given and which is received in faith.

So now Gentiles can roam around as children beloved by God. They can roam around God's house. They now have a right to be there. They're his.

They belong to him. And they belong with him. Once they were far off, once they were strangers and sojourners, they had no right. And now they're home in God's house.

[18 : 52] Marvelous, isn't it? From death to life, through a free gift, offered, received through faith, brought into a marvelous privilege of stomping around with full rights and privileges in God's household.

So there's the third reason for gratitude and salvation. And Paul wants us, as I said before, to remember these things. It's very easy.

Maybe I'm the only one here. It's very easy to become ho-hum. It's very easy to become materialistic. It's very easy to forget where you have come from. It's very easy to just sort of get on with doing all the things and getting up and, well, I don't shave in the morning, but getting up and going through your routine and going to work and forgetting the greatness of the privilege, which is ours as Christians.

Forgetting the difference between death and life. And if you're like me and you're a seminary student, you spend 98% of your time with fellow Christians. I'm probably the only one who is saddled with the burden of doing that.

And in some ways, it's hysterically artificial, I want to tell you. Some of you know this. But you no longer are you, am I in contact with enough people who are spiritually dead.

[20 : 05] So I tend to forget. I become ho-hum. So this passage has been a wonderful reminder for me of where I have come from. I had the privilege a few weeks ago of giving my testimony in an evangelistic event.

And that was marvelous for me to think back about where I've come from. And I think that's part of what Paul wants to say here, too, to these Ephesians. Don't forget. Be grateful for where you've come from. And I think, in conclusion, that we tend to remember best when we put our gratitude into action.

And that's what I want to close by saying. And this is precisely what we want to do in two weeks' time. Two weeks from tonight, it'll be Pat Patterson standing here and not me. Many of you will be relieved to hear that, I'm sure.

And Pat is going to be coming to speak very clearly about this free gift. He's going to be speaking on the significance of the cross and what it means for us today. And we're going to be reaching out through you and through me to bring people here who are hungry and have hungry hearts and want to hear or are interested in learning about what it is that Christianity offers and what it is that the cross means.

And I want to say that it's out of gratitude that we offer people this gift. That gratitude is really the best motivation for reaching out with the gospel, the best motivation for evangelism.

[21 : 30] And it's no doubt true that we have a duty to be witnesses, every one of us. We have a duty to proclaim the gospel. Christians are ambassadors for Christ. They're entrusted with a ministry of reconciliation.

There's no shirking the task. I don't want to deny that there's a very clear calling and a challenge and a responsibility to do this. But I think that if we look at it solely as a duty to be born with a stiff upper lip, we're not going to get very far.

I've recently been to the dentist. And those of you who know me know how much I hate going to the dentist. I went last Tuesday and I went as a matter of duty. It is a solemn duty that I go to the dentist twice a year.

And I hate it, but I do it anyway. And I'm afraid if I don't go, my teeth are going to rot. And it turns out that when I go, my teeth are rotten anyway, so I don't really know why I went anyhow.

But such is the state of my teeth. But what I want to say is that evangelism shouldn't be like going to the dentist. It shouldn't just be a matter of duty.

[22 : 34] It shouldn't just be a matter of fear for any of us. It really should be no unpleasant task at all, but rather out of gratitude and fueled with that gratitude that we have, knowing where we've come from and knowing this free gift that we have to offer, that we reach out to others.

I think children are very good at this. I think if you give a child a new bike or a new game or a new toy or something like this, as soon as their friends come around, they're going to say, oh, do you want to see my this?

Oh, do you want to play with my that? They can't keep it down. They can't keep it quiet. Everybody knows about it, whether they want to know about it or not. They know that the kid got this gift, got this present. I think that's a lesson for us.

I think that's what we should be like. I think that's what this passage is saying to us. That it's not of our, the gratitude of our hearts on a harvest Thanksgiving occasion like this, that we should reach out to others.

Sure, it's our responsibility, but it's a joyful responsibility. There's nothing arrogant about urging others to consider accepting a gift which is undeserved. So that's what we want to be doing in two weeks from tonight.

[23 : 43] And that's what the yellow flyer in your bulletin is all about. So that that is really an invitation you can give to somebody as you have a cup of tea with them or talk to them over the back fence or whatever it is.

And invite them to come and hear what Pat has to say and what the rest of the evening will be about and making clear what this free gift is and how through faith it can be accepted.

Let's pause for a moment and then I'll pray. Let's pray. Dear Father, we praise you for this glorious privilege that you have given us in Christ to belong to him and to know you to be a rightful member of your family and household.

and so we ask that you would give us ever more grateful hearts as we contemplate your goodness towards us so that we might reach out to others with that love and grace which we have received. For Christ's sake. Amen. Some of you will want to sit and some of you will want to kneel but let's continue in prayer.

[25 : 08] Our intercession time tonight we'll pray for the Holy Catholic Church we'll pray for the mission in two weeks we'll pray for those we know who are suffering in any way we'll pray a general intercession prayer and we'll close with a prayer of thanksgiving.

So we begin by praying for the church. Most gracious God we humbly beseech you for the Holy Catholic Church fill it with all truth in all truth with all peace where it is corrupt purify it where it is in air direct it where anything is amiss reform it where it is right strengthen and confirm it where it is in want furnish it where it is divided and rent asunder make it whole again Lord in your mercy hear our prayer.

we are thinking these days about our special evangelism service coming up in just two weeks now when Pat Patterson will speak on the meaning of the cross for us today.

we know that a lot of people in the next couple of weeks will be in a lot of prayer about that event thinking about who they might invite to that event praying that the Holy Spirit will move in hearts that hearts will be open to hear the gospel and so we want to pray tonight about that event as well.

O God our Heavenly Father we humbly pray you to bless abundantly the efforts that are now being made to turn people we know to sincere repentance and a lively faith in Jesus Christ.

[27 : 42] We pray that you'll prepare hearts to receive the seed of thy word and we would ask that it might take deep root in our hearts and bring forth fruit to your glory.

Lord in your mercy hear our prayer. we all know some who are suffering perhaps someone in your family is hurting right now perhaps someone at work someone at school God who has loved us so much in Jesus Christ asks us to love those around us and especially those who are who are suffering so let's pray for them Almighty God who art afflicted in the afflictions of thy people regard with thy tender compassion those in anxiety and distress and we remember them in our hearts now or perhaps by saying a name and allow Lord we ask you to bear their sorrows and their care we ask you to supply all of their many needs and help both them and us to put our whole trust and confidence in you

Lord in your mercy be mindful oh Lord of thy people bowed before you and of those who are absent through age sickness or infirmity care for the infants guide the young support the aged encourage the faint hearted collect the scattered bring the wandering to thy fold travel with the voyagers defend the widows shield the orphans deliver the captives heal the sick succor all who are in tribulation necessity or distress remember for good all those that love us and those that hate us and those that have desired us unworthy as we are to pray for them and those whom we have forgotten do thou oh Lord remember for you are the helper of the helpless the savior of the lost the refuge of

the wanderer the healer of the sick thou who knowest each person's need yes you you