

Paul's Thanksgiving

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[0 : 00] that we read. Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians, in chapter 1, reading again at verse 3.

We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing.

Therefore, we ourselves boast about you in the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith in all your persecutions and in the afflictions that you are enduring.

The last time I conducted the prayer meeting here, the English prayer meeting, was over two months ago. It was at the very beginning of February. We read together from the same chapter as we read this evening.

And after giving a brief introductory overview to the letter, a letter that has its overall theme, living in the light of the Lord Jesus Christ's second coming.

[1 : 27] I went on to speak on the opening verses under the title of Pauline Greeting. I had three headings, the sender of the letter, the content of the letter, and the recipients of the letter.

Well, tonight I'd like to consider Paul's thanksgiving as it is set out in these verses we have taken as a text.

First, thanksgiving, and then secondly, thanksgiving for what? And thirdly, reasons for boasting.

Firstly, thanksgiving. Before putting the spotlight on what Paul has written, let's put it on ourselves first.

If I asked you to write a descriptive, biographical paragraph about yourself, would thanksgiving feature largely in your description of yourself?

[2 : 41] And I'd like to pursue that by asking a series of questions. When you awake in the morning, is there thankfulness for a measure of night rest?

Many don't get that, and yet they are still thankful to God. Is there thankfulness for the facilities that you enjoy in the home?

For example, a shower or a bath? There are those in the world who don't have that, and they are still thankful to God.

Is there thankfulness for the measure of health and strength you enjoy? Now, perhaps that question might appear to be addressed to the older age group, but not necessarily so.

Again, there are those who do not enjoy the measure of health and strength that we have this evening, but they are still thankful to God.

[3 : 54] If you are an employee or an employer, is there thankfulness in your heart for employment? Many are neither in employment or an employer, not because they don't want to work, but because of some disability or form of illness, and yet they are still thankful to God.

Is there thankfulness for family? And the circle of friends that you enjoy? There are those who don't have family, or a circle of friends, but they are still thankful to God.

Above all is there thankfulness in your heart that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, and that he saved you.

I could continue. But let's ask the question again, does thanksgiving feature largely in your life?

And the reason I ask is that sin, both original sin and actual sin, have made us, as people, selfish and ungrateful.

[5 : 20] Oh yes, we readily approach the Lord when we are in need. But how often do we approach the Lord to give thanks for his mercies?

Do you remember how David recognized the signs of ingratitude in his own soul? In the psalm that we sang together just now, Psalm 103, he exhorts his inner self to praise the Lord.

Bless the Lord, oh my soul. Heart religion is great. The psalmist wants praise to come from his soul, his inner person.

Not enough for him to praise the Lord with only his feet, by coming to a service, or the prayer meeting, or only by his mouth, by speaking and singing.

Why is it not enough? Because he has learned that God rejects worship. That is, only outward, when our hearts are far from him.

[6 : 32] That is surely why the psalmist implores, bless the Lord, oh my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name.

And in that psalm, he stirs his heart in gratitude by making it remember all that God has done for him. Bless the Lord, oh my soul, and forget not all his benefits.

And you see what the psalmist is saying. He is saying that praise happens when the heart gratefully remembers God's blessings in our salvation.

True gratitude is a powerful motivation to worship the Lord God. It is thanksgiving that causes believers to live in praise of God.

And the psalmist urges us to give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever.

[7 : 35] The psalmist also reminds us it is good to give thanks to the Lord. Thanksgiving, a powerful stimulant to joyful, meaningful worship.

Well, two further questions. Is thanksgiving, in this context, in the chapter that we read, a reluctant, grudging duty?

Or is it a deep expression of Paul's indebtedness and an expression of exuberant joy? What do you think?

And the reason I ask is the way in which the language is phrased. We ought, or we are obliged, says Paul, always to give thanks to God.

Does the way in which the statement is framed, implied some degree of reluctance or hesitancy on the part of the apostle?

[8 : 32] Might be argued from what he has written later on in the letter that some, in Thessalonica, had not made the progress, either hoped for or even anticipated.

For example, in the second chapter, we ask you brothers not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by a spirit or a spoken word or a letter seeming to be from us to the effect that the day of the Lord has come.

In the third chapter, we command you brothers in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us.

And again in that chapter, for even when we were with you, we would give you this command, if anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat. For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busy bodies.

And I said that based on these verses, the language here in our text may be understood to imply a reluctance to give thanks.

[9 : 37] However, from the evidence in our Bibles regarding the life and the ministry of Paul the Apostle, I don't believe that Paul ever felt reluctant or hesitant to give thanks.

In my view, you would find it impossible to defend an argument that suggested that Paul was ever reluctant or hesitant to give thanks.

Quite the reverse. You may argue from the words that he has written here that it is a moral duty to give thanks and rightly so, but not a duty in the sense that he had to drag himself or force himself to the throne of grace to express thanks.

It is surely much more than that that Paul feels constrained to express gratitude to God, an expression of joy on the part of the Apostle as he reflects on what God has done.

In fact, as you read his letters, you will notice that all of them, bar one, the letter to the Galatians, that they begin with thanksgiving.

[11 : 05] For example, even the letter to the, first letter to the Corinthians, remember, the church in Corinth was a church that had some very real problems that required addressing on the part of the apostle, and he says, I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus.

Paul then begins this letter, you could say, on a positive note as he does in almost all of his letters. And you know how some speakers wanting to get an audience on their side begin with a form of flattery.

They are using a psychological technique to get the audience on their side. Well, Paul is not doing that. He is not setting them up here and then waiting to hit them with some devastating criticism. And you know, there is a very important principle being enunciated here. In fact, it is a challenging discipline for it prompts the question, what can I thank God about my fellow believers?

Let me put it this way. Let's say a name is mentioned and you say O him or O her. and the first thought that crosses your mind is a negative one.

[12 : 41] Well, I once heard a very prominent Christian minister for whom I have great respect state that such negative thinking is the sign of a badly disciplined Christian mind.

A badly disciplined Christian mind. a mind that does not look at what God in his grace has done for them or in his great mercy has done in them or in his power has done through them.

And it may be that Paul himself felt this very much because of his background and how actively he engaged in persecuting the church of Christ prior to his conversion.

I cannot be sure about that. But he always has something positive to say about the work of God in the lives of deeply flawed men, women, boys, or girls.

And it reminds me of an elder who was once part of this congregation. He has long gone to his eternal rest.

[14 : 02] He always saw good in everyone to such an extent that a former minister of this congregation, also long gone to his rest, used to say of them when applicants were meeting with a kirk session for baptism.

The minister used to say that this elder would give them an enthusiastic, warm, generous welcome, supposing even they were guilty of the act of murder itself.

Such was the way that he looked upon his fellow men. Well, there is much to commend the person who sees good in others, because we are all, without exception, deeply flawed.

we ought always, says the apostle, to give thanks to God. That is a given. We are enormously indebted to God. Our attitude ought to be that of the psalmist when he said, what shall I render to the Lord for all his benefits to me?

Thanksgiving for Paul was not something grudging or something reluctant or hesitant, but a constant refrain in his life.

[15 : 22] he delights to give thanks. And should that not be the same of us? We are obliged to give thanks as the recipients of great blessings and rich gifts from a gracious, loving, and merciful God.

And you note that Paul's Thanksgiving is exclusively addressed to God. Paul sees God as the source of all blessing, and it is to him that he gives thanks.

Thanksgiving. It reminds me of a prayer that was apparently offered by Augustine, and it went something like this, Lord, whatever good there is in me is due to you.

The rest is all my fault. And you know there's a lot of truth in that prayer. Thanksgiving then, an obligation for the wonderful things that God has done in your life.

secondly, thanksgiving for what? And Paul writes, your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing.

[16 : 45] Oh, I think it is worth noting that Paul had been praying for this very thing to happen. If you go back to the first letter to the Thessalonians, we pray most earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith.

Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you, and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all.

So, before examining what is growing and increasing, we can make this deduction. Paul is thanking the Lord for answered prayers.

prayer. We know from the testimony of the Bible that Paul was a man of prayer from the outset of his Christian life.

This is the witness of the Lord himself about this man. Behold, he is praying. It was the assurance that the Lord gave to a skeptical, somewhat dubious and suspicious Ananias, to convince them that Paul's conversion was truly genuine.

[18 : 07] Paul is a man of prayer, and he and his team had been praying to God for believers in Thessalonica, just as they prayed for believers in other places.

They had a deep, genuine, pastoral concern for the spiritual well-being of the church plant there. Answer to prayer, then, is reason for thanksgiving.

Sometimes the answer to prayer may surprise us. I think of the early church who were gathered to pray for the release of Peter when he was in prison, and when the Lord marvelously answered their prayer, even Peter thought he was seeing a vision.

But more when he arrived and knocked at the door of the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark, and you remember a woman by the name of Rhoda came to answer, recognizing Peter's voice. In her joy, she didn't open the gate, but ran in and reported that Peter was standing at the gate, and they said to her, you're out of your mind. But she kept insisting that it was so, and they kept saying it is his angel.

[19 : 29] Peter continued knocking, and when they opened, they saw and were amazed. The very people who had been praying for the release of the apostle, they found it staggering to see their prayer answered in this way.

So, Paul is giving thanks for answered prayer, but more specifically, he is giving thanks for the evidence of Christian graces among believers in the Thessalonian church.

Not just the evidence of Christian graces, but the fact that they're actually growing, they are maturing, in these Christian graces.

He gives thanks for two specific areas of development, their faith and their love. Your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing.

And the verb that Paul uses, translated growing abundantly, means literally to super abound. your faith is super abounding.

[20 : 48] Now, I am quite sure that there would have been some who did not attain to the same level of development, but Paul here is majoring on the positive.

His description gives you the impression that a revival took place in that area. were not given minute detail of every believer who was there.

For those who may be familiar with John Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress, you may remember that Bunyan uses many descriptions, not so much to describe strong faith, but weak faith.

Bunyan seemed to have this marvelous gift of thinking up names to portray very vividly the various characters who make up the church of Christ in the world.

And for forms of weak faith, he used some of these names. Must have ready to halt. You don't need great powers of imagination to recognize what is implied.

[22 : 11] Mr. Ready to halt, he hobbled on crutches to the celestial city. Mr. Feuding, who shrank back at the first appearance of trouble. Mr. Despondency and Miss Much Afraid were locked up in the dungeon of giant despair.

Mr. Feeble Mind was held in the cave of giant sleigh good. And so as you read of these different characters, immediately a picture is formed in your mind.

The names are so apt. And Spurgeon makes the observation that Bunyan left us with these graphic descriptions because Bunyan himself had been one another of them, one or another of them, and he had known many others who walked in the same path.

Well, how does little or weak faith grow strong? I would suggest that it needs to be well fed. It requires a regular diet of the Word of God.

Do you remember the description that the psalmist gives us of a believer in Psalm 1? His delight is in the law of the Lord.

[23 : 33] And on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season and his leaf does not wither. On God's law he meditates day and night.

Now, that doesn't mean that this person is obsessed with a study of the Ten Commandments, but that he meditates on the whole revelation that God has given of himself in his truth.

And the impression is created that such a person is blessed with growing faith. For our faith to be like a strong tree that grows and is fruitful, we must have elbows in the water of life.

I would also suggest that faith grows through prayer in response to God's word. It grows through godly fellowship, through association with other believers.

And that is, I believe, a two-way benefit here. When we are young, we tend to think that perhaps we know everything and older believers, they don't really know anything.

[24 : 51] But you see, there is a dual benefit in old and young believers meeting with old believers and vice versa. Young believers can be helped by dialogue with older believers.

And older believers are rejuvenated in the company of younger believers. And it ought to be a continuous feature of church life.

writer to the Hebrews puts it like this, exhort one another every day, as long as it is called today, that none of you be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. Your faith is growing abundantly.

And now Paul says, the love of every one of you for one another is increasing. Don't you just love what the apostle has written there. What a testimony to the work of grace in the lives of those believers in Thessalonica.

The word that is used in the context here, love increasing, is a word that speaks of a diffusive or expansive character.

[26 : 08] I suppose one example would be of a flood going over a large area. And the emphasis here is on the wide distribution of their love.

The love of every one of you for one another is increasing. And it seems to me that this is the kind of love that Jesus spoke of the night of his arrest.

Remember what he said to his disciples, a new commandment I give to you. What was the new commandment? That you love one another.

Just as I have loved you, you also, he says, are to love one another. And you know, increased knowledge of the Bible is very important.

But important as it is, it is not the primary mark of a growing Christian. Increased knowledge of the word will be tested by whether or not our love for our fellow believers is growing.

[27 : 21] In writing to the Galatians, Paul speaks of faith working through love. Now, that doesn't mean that teaching and doctrine is unimportant. Of course, it isn't.

The New Testament places a high priority on teaching. But true teaching or true doctrine breeds love. love and you know the standard that Christ demands.

Just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. How humbling that is, because the truth is that none, but none of us, love us.

Christ loved us. if we seek to grow in love through God's word, and if we pray for God to give us the love of Christ, then our capacity to love will grow as we become more and more Christ-like in our lives.

And Jesus adds this comment, by this, by this mark. In other words, all people will know that you are my disciples if you have love for one another.

[28 : 44] Francis Schaeffer, some of you may be familiar with his writings, in an essay on the mark of a Christian, he wrote something like this, through the centuries, people have displayed many different symbols to show that they are Christians.

They have worn badges or chains around their neck. Not so long ago, I saw in the press somebody in difficulty at their work because they were wearing a chain that indicated that they were Christians. And even some went to the extent of having special haircuts. But Schaeffer says, there is a much better sign. It's a universal mark that is to last through all the ages of the church until Christ returns. It is love. Love to one another. It is the mark that impressed the pagan world of old. In the days of the early New Testament church, see how they love one another was the comment that was passed.

See how they are ready to die for one another. Little wonder then that the apostle gives thanks for these two specific developments in the life of believers in Thessalonica.

[30 : 12] Marks that testify to what grace has done for them and to the power of grace working through them. Thanksgiving for what?

Thanksgiving for answered prayer, but primarily for growth and grace. Thanksgiving and obligation and finally reasons for boasting.

Time is going. You know that Paul has written of faith and love and your natural inclination would be to expect something about hope.

After all, faith, hope, and love are the primary great graces. hope. And yet, there is no mention of hope, the actual word hope, in the context.

I'm going to suggest to you that it is implied. for does Paul not write about the means through which hope develops.

[31 : 15] Therefore, he says, we ourselves boast about you in the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith and all your persecutions and in the afflictions that you are enduring.

If I can momentarily direct your attention to what Paul has written in the fifth chapter of his letter to the Romans, suffering produces endurance.

Endurance produces character and character produces hope. Hope in the Bible often refers to certainty, to some assurance of what one day will be the person of the believer, that which has been won by Christ and promised by a God who cannot lie.

Character means tested or approved and leads to a more resilient hope. Here then is character being produced in Thessalonica and character as Paul has written in the letter to the Romans, produces hope.

For when believers share in Christ's sufferings, it is further evidence of our security in Christ.

[32 : 31] hope is implied. And the strange thing is, where you might expect persecution and affliction to suppress the work of the gospel, it is quite the reverse.

Not just true of the early New Testament churches, but a feature of church life throughout history. The gospel tends to flourish, times of affliction and persecution.

No, no one in his right mind wants affliction and persecution. But very often, that is the condition in which the gospel flourishes.

A careful reading of Paul's letters will tell you that the greatest threat to vibrant life in the church is not affliction or persecution, but false teaching.

And it is still the greatest threat to the present hour. Paul here is boasting of their resolute stand in the face of trial.

[33 : 43] The Lord has not abandoned them, but was proving to them what the apostle had himself come to increasingly value.

And what had the apostle come to increasingly value? My grace, says the Lord, is sufficient for you, and my power is made perfect in weakness.

Now, the apostle is not so much boasting in them, but in what God has done for them, in them, and through them. These believers were like the man who built his house on the rock.

In the parable that Jesus tells, they stood firm in the time of testing. And it seems to me that their example is a real challenge to ourselves, ought to make us ask ourselves, where are we tonight spiritually?

Thanksgiving in our life, it is an obligation. thanksgiving for what? For answered prayers, primarily for growth in grace, reason for boasting, resolute in affliction and persecution, as a result of what God has done for them, in them, and through them.

[35 : 12] Let us pray. O eternal God, thou art the God of miracle, the God of great grace, the God who transforms barren, unfruitful lives, and makes them productive through the introduction of thy grace into their hearts and lives, through the ministry of thy Holy spirit, in applying the truth of the word to them.

O grant, most gracious God, that we might be encouraged from thy truth. So often, perhaps, we may feel discouraged, may feel so unproductive, so lacking in growth and in maturity.

help us, O Lord, to see growth in all of our lives, and the glory shall be thine. In Jesus' name we ask it. Amen.

Amen.