

Give Thanks With A Grateful Heart
By Jason Huff
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Ezra 3:10-13; Psalm 100; 2 Corinthians 4

Friends, our final Scripture reading this evening comes from 2 Corinthians 4. May God add His blessing to the reading of His holy Word. “Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart. Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God. And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body. So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you. It is written: "I believed; therefore I have spoken." With that same spirit of faith we also believe and therefore speak, because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you in his presence. All this is for your benefit, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God. Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.”

Traditionally in American culture, New Years is when we take stock of the previous year. We look at the highs and the lows, the good and the bad, and we decide what to do about it. Gym memberships always skyrocket around the beginning of the year – the first week in January is the only week of the year that I have to fight at 5:45 in the morning for a parking spot to play racquetball. Yet by the second week, the parking lot is clear again. We have great hopes and awesome intentions, but we rarely follow through. Giving up on our New Year's resolutions is almost as expected as presents at Christmas.

But maybe we're doing it wrong. Maybe we abandon our goals because we're setting them at the wrong time. Instead of contemplating our lives in the dead of winter when things are at their darkest, perhaps we should just enjoy the season of Christmas instead of worrying about what we did wrong the year before. We can live in the grace that Jesus brings. I think it might be helpful if we do all that at Thanksgiving instead. In their wisdom, those who came before us set aside a day of giving thanks for God's blessings. That might be our best time to reflect on all that we have experienced and all that is to come in the year ahead.

We heard three passages tonight expressing thanksgiving. Psalm 100 is literally a psalm written for giving thanks to God. It's a call to worship, to come and join the celebration. We give thanks, Psalm 100 says, because we belong to God, because He is good, because His love endures forever, and because His faithfulness continues through all generations. There's no question about the psalmist's intent. We are to shout and worship with joy and gladness; we're to enter His presence with praise and thankfulness. It seems very clear.

But then there are times when it's not so clear. We heard from Ezra 3 tonight, a passage that needs some background. Almost 400 years after it was built, the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed in 586 BC by the Babylonians, and most of the people were dragged into exile. When Babylon itself was conquered, the Jewish people were allowed to go home.

Cyrus, the conqueror of Babylon, gave them large amounts of money to rebuild the temple properly. Ezra tells how the project was completed despite opposition from those who'd moved into Israelite territory during the exile. Once the temple was finished, they dedicated it to the LORD, and there's this huge celebration. But there's still a great deal of sadness. The elders of the community wept when they saw the foundation being laid. Weeping for joy? Possibly.

But Scripture informs us that until the time of the Herods, the temple was nowhere near its original grandeur. In Haggai 2, God says through Haggai to the people, "Who of you is left who saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Does it not seem to you like nothing?" Imagine owning a Cadillac and it getting wrecked, and all your insurance would cover as a replacement was a Yugo. Now imagine that this car was supposed to represent the glory of the God you serve! How depressing! (Nobody in here owns a Yugo, right?)

But Haggai 2 doesn't end there. God continues speaking to the people, "But now, take courage...my Spirit is among you." It wasn't the outward glory of the building that mattered. What mattered is that God had restored His people to their homeland, and they once again would have the temple, the place God had promised that His Spirit would live among the Israelites.

We have this juxtaposition – great rejoicing, great sadness and melancholy, all of it part of the praise and thanksgiving to God. It wasn't one or the other, just joy or just sadness. The thanksgiving to God took all of it into account. God was gracious to allow them to return home and worship Him in the place He appointed. God did not grant them the glory of the original temple. God be praised. As the song we often sing says to God, "You give and take away, you give and take away, my heart will choose to say, Lord, blessed be your name."

Then there's our central passage, 2 Corinthians 4. At first, it doesn't sound like it's about thanksgiving at all. It's about hardship and struggle, the difficulty of telling others about Jesus, and just how fragile life is. In the midst of it all, Paul writes, "We know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you in His presence. All this is for your benefit, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God."

Paul is really clear: being a Christian is hard. It's hard being a missionary and hard being a believer, especially when the world around us is filled with unbelief. He says, "Since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart." Sounds cheerful, but he has to encourage the Corinthians – and himself – not to give up hope. The thought of losing heart is on his mind as a real possibility. It is tough!

And what is it that makes life so tough? It's telling the truth – the good news about Jesus Christ as-is. Paul says, "We do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God."

Paul is not using tricks to get people into the Kingdom of God. He is not using high-pressure tactics or promising "your best life now." He is not teaching the minimum one must believe to be saved; he's not promoting some form of cheap grace where you pray a prayer and come to church twice a year and do what you want the rest of the time. Even in his day, less than thirty years after Jesus' death and resurrection, people had already started trying to make money selling what they called the "secret knowledge" of Jesus!

When the masses were told the truth of the gospel – that salvation through Jesus is wonderful, but that it also means a sacrificial life of living for God rather than for yourself, that it required trusting in a risen and living Savior who returned from the dead – people rejected it. They were "blinded" and the gospel was "veiled" to them so they couldn't understand it or believe it. While some preached a false gospel based on their charismatic personalities, Paul said, "We preach [only] Jesus Christ as Lord."

Not only that, but Paul recognizes the difficulties of the Christian life. Jesus' strength is made perfect in our weakness – which means that Christians often suffer difficulties that display God's work in our lives, whether that's sickness or hard times, situations that show our only way through is in relying on Jesus. It is always more than we can handle. As Job said after losing everything he owned and all his children, "Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?"

And yet Paul says that while it is far more than we can handle, it is not beyond God's ability to see us through: "We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed." And as "death is at work in us" – as we face the trials of this life that come from our sin nature – "life is at work in you." God is remaking us, remolding us, shaping us into beings that can be in His presence for all eternity, particularly through the tough stuff.

Paul says that "all this" is "for your benefit." All those difficult things, all the death we carry around, whether in suffering or disease or frustrated plans or heartaches, are there so that grace may abound in and through us and others may see it, that we might be made more like our Savior, and that praise would overflow to the Father who raised Jesus from the dead, who will raise us from the dead, and bring us all together, all believers, at the resurrection. All of it is worthy of praise. Romans 8:28 tells us, "We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." We give thanks for everything because God is working for our good.

I say all of this tonight because I want us all to experience a great Thanksgiving. And God gives us reason to rejoice. But our God doesn't call suffering an illusion or dismiss it out of hand. No, we turn to Him in contentment and joy in all things because in His Son, He became like us, suffered as we do, went through the ups and downs, the wonders and calamities of life, and in the final measure, gave His very self for us. The man of sorrows who was acquainted with grief, as Isaiah 53 describes Jesus, gave thanks in the midst of it all.

As a church family, it's safe to say we've had a hard year. Many of us have faced significant health problems, illnesses of one form or another, and most of those are ongoing. We've faced job losses, job changes, jobs that didn't pan out and jobs that have turned out less than what we expected. We've seen church friends move out of state, and others who needed something less challenging than a Saturday night service where a lot is expected out of everyone. We saw a significant amount of money that was promised to CrossWay fall through. And as our elders can tell you, we spent a lot of time investigating places to move to be inviting to our neighbors, but none have panned out. We are still waiting for any word about a proposal submitted a month ago to a local school.

These are all real issues, very close to home. Some of them make us question if we're on the right path, if we're being punished, even if there's a God who cares. And that doesn't bring in the larger issues only slightly removed from us, the issues in the news – the fears of terrorism, the concerns about refugees we aren't certain about, that on one hand we want to embrace as God said to embrace the foreigner and stranger in our midst, and on the other hand we worry about our safety and the safety of our loved ones in the light of radical Islam.

We have fears about the economy and the government, whether we'll have enough money in retirement, or enough money to retire, enough money to keep the family fed and the mortgage paid. And our culture pushes a hundred other issues on us as well, in debates that often make us despair that we can still be nice to each other when we disagree. We can admit without shame that there is much that grieves us in this world, much as it grieves God Himself.

And yet...and yet...there is far more good in our lives that gives us genuine joy. We have seen folks come back with amazing stories of healing, both those inside our church and those we have prayed for. We have seen financial support pop up at just the right time – when we were most in need, that's when a check would appear in the post office box. We have seen people touched through our outreach, Meal and a Movie, Operation Christmas Child boxes, Military Avenue, and our youth mission trips. We have been blessed to see God working through us.

We've seen spiritual growth as well. I have been so blessed to see many of you growing as you've come to Bible study and grappled with really hard issues. God has been working to help us understand our faith and come to rest on Him in every part of life. I've seen our kids get the big ideas in Genesis over the past several months and watched them as they've started to mature in their faith.

And while they may not be attending church, we are making inroads in the community. Several of us have had conversations with people who are not believers or are not regularly attending a church, and they are producing fruit. We may not see them here at CrossWay; we may have a long road of dialogue ahead of us. But God is working!

We are hard pressed, but not destroyed; perplexed, but not in despair. Yes, difficult, painful things have happened, but God is good! Great and wonderful things, godly things, things we can only explain by the hand of God, because God is good! In them all, in joy and in sorrow, we give thanks with a grateful heart. God is watching over us. Even in the hardships, His loving hand is upon us.

And that makes Thanksgiving easier for us as well. We often see relatives we don't like, or who we do like except when they pick fights with us over the dinner table. We have to wait for dinner until everyone is beyond hungry. Parts of our Thanksgiving traditions are just plain weird. But Thanksgiving isn't about that. It's about God – all that He's done and continued to do in our lives, the good and the difficult.

There is always room for thanksgiving in our lives. This year, let's not make Thanksgiving just a day for turkey and football, as good as those things can be. Let's not just make it about time with family and friends and loved ones. Let's not make it a day where we acknowledge God once before dinner and leave it at that. Let's take the time to pray to God, to praise God, wherever you are, and thank Him for all that you have, whatever it is God has given to you. Even praise Him for the emergencies and catastrophes, knowing that He can use those to reform your heart closer to His. And may the peace of God be yours not just at Thanksgiving but always as you find your security and grace in His Son Jesus Christ.