

Thanksgiving

Let's do something different this year - a thanksgiving service that takes the passages we've been looking at and turns them into praise, to thanksgiving for what God has done for us.

Let's go back to the first century, to an era where the statues of Jupiter and Venus and the other gods of the Roman pantheon were carved into the architecture of the temples of Rome and Corinth and Ephesus. What motivated the people who honoured these gods to worship them, to sacrifice to them?

There's a song that describes the contrast between what it would be like to be worshiping these gods and what it would be like to know the God of love who sent His Son in love and mercy to a broken and hurting world. The song is called "Descent", because it describes how Jesus didn't exalt Himself, but came down to be among us, to show us love. I believe this clip is from Biola University in Los Angeles and features Canadian songwriter Steve Bell and English poet Malcolm Guite.

Descent

"Weak to be with us when we fall and strong to save".

Imagine with me how that message would have fallen on the ears of the god-fearing Gentiles of Galatia, people who were, for the most part, sick and tired of the practices of paganism and the fear and social pressures that went with it. Imagine what it might have been like to be trying to keep the gods at a distance, only to discover that there was one true God who had made you, who loved you and who wanted to be near. When you think about where these people had come from, you can see why they would eagerly embrace the Good News of Jesus.

And you can also see why they would be disturbed by the thought that they could lose the presence of God if they were to overlook the Torah and the customs of the Jews. The issues we've been looking at over these past few weeks were big, scary issues for the Gentile believers in Galatia. It's very fortunate, for them and for us, that they had Paul in their corner and that he was able to counter the claims of their opposition so clearly and powerfully.

What was his answer? In a very small nutshell that doesn't adequately summarize the six chapters of the letter to the Galatians, Paul's answer is God's grace. The grace that God extends to broken, faulty people like ourselves is life-changing, healing, restorative grace. It begins in us when we have the courage to admit to God that we've been wrong, that we've been selfish, that we are sinners and we stand in need of forgiveness. One of my favourite stories of how this grace of forgiveness changes us is told by Steve Bell, who we've just listened to. But Steve is not just a really good songwriter and musician - he's a great story-teller as well. When I listen to this story I think about King David in Psalm 32: "When I refused to confess my sin, I was weak and miserable, and I groaned all day long." Hiding ourselves from those who love us

doesn't do us, or them, any favours. You'll catch that message in this story and song from Steve Bell when he was quite a few years younger:

Fully Forgiven

And so, I will make myself known to you, I will not hide, my shameful soul, my darkest side ... and You hold me, and You forgive my sin. There is something inside us that makes us want to hide those things that we are least proud of - of course, right? We want to be known for the good things, not the bad.

What I love about the story of Steve and his dad is what he says near the end. "My dad knew who he was ... my dad ... and he knew who I was ... his son." He didn't stop loving his son because he wasn't particularly excited about the venues where Steve and his band were playing music. He didn't stop loving his son because his boy had been hiding that life situation from his dad. He didn't stop loving and caring for and showing an interest in his son because that was his boy and he loved him.

The point that Steve makes in his story is that we have a Father in heaven who knows who He is, our eternal and divine Creator and Father ... and He knows who we are as well; His dearly loved children, the objects of His mercy, the desire of His heart, the reward for His suffering. At the core of our being, we need to know His love and acceptance. We can't bring glorious Gospel to the world if we don't know that He loves us and that He is for us and that He has gone to unbelievable lengths to keep the relationship between Him and His children open.

This is Ground Zero for our faith - to trust that God loves us, whether we're doing our very best or struggling along with something less. If we can believe that foundational truth, we will be thankful. If we can learn how to grow in gratitude, our lives can be so much richer. If we can appreciate what we have instead of feeling bitter about what we lack, then we will be closer to the heart of God. I want to share with you a little story that Brennan Manning tells in his book, [The Ragamuffin Gospel](#).

Several years ago, at the end of a parish renewal in Algiers, Louisiana, a man about forty approached me outside the church, muttered "I've prayed about this", slipped an envelope in my pocket and hurried away. I was overdue at a reception in the parish hall, so I jogged over to converse with folks, completely forgetting the envelope. Late that night, in preparing for bed, I emptied my pockets, opened the envelope, and a check for six thousand dollars fell to the floor.

Prior to that renewal, I had lived for a few days at the city garbage dump in Juarez, Mexico, where little children and old men and women literally scavenged food from a mound of refuse more than thirty feet high. Several children died each week because of malnutrition and polluted water. I sent the six thousand dollar check to a man with ten children, three of whom had already died from the grinding poverty and wretched living conditions. Do you know what the man who received the check did?

He wrote me nine letters in two days - letters over-flowing with gratitude describing in detail how he was using the money to help his own family and other neighbours at the dump. That gave me a beautiful insight into what a poor man is like.

When he receives a gift, he first experiences, then expresses, genuine gratitude. Having nothing, he appreciates the slightest gift. I have been given the utterly undeserved gift of salvation in Jesus Christ. Through no merit of mine, I have been given a bona fide invitation to drink new wine forever at the wedding feast in the Kingdom of God . . .

The deeper we grow in the Spirit of Jesus Christ, the poorer we become — the more we realize that everything in life is a gift. The tenor of our lives becomes one of humble and joyful thanksgiving. Awareness of our poverty and ineptitude causes us to rejoice in the gift of being called out of darkness into wondrous light and translated into the Kingdom of God's beloved Son. The poor man and woman write nine letters to the Lord ..."

Thanksgiving. The man who yells at the waitress for bringing the shrimp salad instead of the crab meat salad doesn't know poverty and is therefore not able to express gratitude. The woman who slams her coworker who got the promotion she wanted doesn't know how to be poor in spirit and therefore how to experience gratitude. This is really simple. When we are humble enough to recognize that it is God's grace and love and forgiveness that empowers us and changes us and blesses us and uses us to accomplish good things in this world, then, we will be grateful and our gratitude will turn to praise.

That's what happens with true gratitude - it always turns to praise. When someone does something really special, something that really touches our heart, we thank them, we express our appreciation to them, we praise them. When we truly recognize what God has done for us, our hearts are full. We begin to live gratefully, and praise comes easily. Listen to this song which expresses the root of thanksgiving and then joyful, victorious, confident praise:

Jesus Paid it All

Have a wonderful Thanksgiving and may your hearts be filled with that kind of praise every day, always.