

Thanks for What?

Ephesians 1:3-8a; 2:1-9

Some days it's just plain *hard* to be thankful. I remember one day in particular when my kids were young, when I decided to mow the grass. I yanked and yanked on the starter but couldn't get it to start. I was so upset I felt like crying. Then my eight-year-old son called out the window, "hey Mom, is there gas in it?" He was just trying to be helpful, so why did it make me so mad when he was right? Funny how a little thing like gas can make the mower start right up. Then I *really* felt sorry for myself. I went back and forth for an hour, mowing my half-acre, thinking about all the things I didn't have and couldn't afford, until the tears trickled down my checks. Somehow my grandmother's favorite hymn came into my mind and I began to hum

***"When upon life's billows you are tempest-tossed, when you are discouraged thinking all is lost,
Count your many blessings, name them one by one, and it will surprise you what the Lord has done."***

Then I realized I was thankful that I even had a yard to mow. I'm thankful I have arms and legs to push the mower, and ears to hear the noise it makes. I am glad we have clean running water to drink. I am thankful that I don't have to fear bombs or war while I am mowing. I went on and on, praising and thanking God for all my blessings, and then I didn't feel so discouraged any longer.

October 31st marked the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. Church of the Covenant had two special celebration services with glorious music, a brass quintet, theologically profound hymns, bagpipe and drum corps, and a sermon that included stories of the men who started the Reformation, and taught us about the essential tenets that the Reformers proclaimed. That day I was filled with gratitude for the courage of Martin Luther, John Knox, John Calvin, and all the others who preached, and taught and even gave their lives to proclaim the Scriptural message that **we are saved from condemnation because of God's grace alone, through faith alone in Christ alone, according to the scriptures alone, for the glory of God alone.** Those five essential tenets of the Reformed Faith are known as the Five Solas, because Sola means "alone" in Latin.

As my faith has deepened and matured over the years, I am realizing that my answer to the question "What are you thankful for?" has gradually been transformed from a focus on material things, to a deep gratitude for the work of Jesus Christ and the grace of God in forgiving my sins, redeeming me, and blessing me with a new life and a fresh start.

This morning I am focusing on the first two chapters from the Apostle Paul's letter to the Christians in the young church in Ephesus. If you study this letter closely, you will discover verification for those Five Solas, the blessings we are most thankful for. The Apostle Paul expresses his thankfulness in his very first sentence: *"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ."* Paul uses the phrase *"in Christ"* nine times in Ephesians 1, and 164 times in all of his writings together. *"In Christ"* means *"being joined to Christ in one spiritual body so that what is true about Christ is also true for us."* In the original Greek, verses 3 through 14 are actually one continuous run-on sentence praising God for all these blessings. Take a closer look just at verse 4: *"God chose us in Christ before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight."* God does not choose us because we are good enough, or have completed enough good works. God does not choose us because we are already holy and blameless; he does not love us because we are perfect. Only Jesus Christ is without sin. But God in his grace, through the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ, considers all who believe in Christ to be holy and blameless, just as He was. Holiness is the *result* of being chosen by God; it is not the *basis* of God's choosing. God's love is unconditional, and salvation is by God's grace. Just as it says in Eph 2:8 – *"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith, and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast."* Thank you, God, for your gracious gift of salvation.

Paul continues by saying, (vs 7a) *“In Christ we have redemption through his blood.”* We are redeemed from Satan’s grasp by the death of Christ on the cross. Have you ever seen those warning signs that say, “Cars parked here illegally without a permit will be towed.”? If you want to get your car back, you must “redeem” it by paying an exorbitant fine. The Ephesians were familiar with the Roman practice of redeeming slaves by paying a ransom so that the slaves would be set free. Paul wrote that humans would be set free from the bondage of sin because Christ paid the penalty for their failure to obey all of God’s laws. Jesus Christ has redeemed all who believe in Him, and nothing can take us away from him: no one can snatch us from his hands. Give thanks! Jesus set us free! Praise his holy name! In addition to being redeemed by the blood of Christ, we are blessed by the forgiveness of our sins. By the grace of God, when you believe in Jesus Christ, you are forgiven for all the wrong you have done, forgiven for all the ways you let God down and did not do what God wanted you to do, forgiven for all the things you did that hurt others, forgiven for your pride, your greed, your anger, your selfishness, forgiven for sexual impurities. I can still vividly remember when I put my faith in Jesus Christ when I was a freshman in college. I was very aware of being washed clean by His blood! The heavy weight of guilt, the burden of knowing I was wrong but unable to change – all of that was lifted! God forgave me! Instead of seeing my sinful self, now when God looks at me he sees the righteousness of Christ! The record of all my sins has been wiped clean. I’ve been set free! Thank you, Lord, with all of my heart, for your merciful forgiveness of all our sins. In chapter two of this letter to the Ephesians, Paul describes in more detail what separates the Ephesians (and all humanity) from God:

“as for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air [meaning Satan], the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of God’s wrath.” – Eph 2:1-3

Spiritual death means being separated from the Holy and Righteous God, the only source of light and all that is good and loving. John Stott gives a very helpful explanation of the phrase “the wrath of God.” God’s wrath is not bad temper. “It is neither spite, nor malice, nor animosity nor revenge. God’s wrath is his “personal, righteous, constant hostility to evil; his ... refusal to compromise with it, and his resolve instead to condemn evil.” Paul’s depressing description of the human condition is followed by the glorious proclamation of God’s grace in verse 4,5! *“But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved.”* God expresses wrath against evil, but He loves his people! That fact should fill your heart with praise and thanksgiving! God loves you! God forgives you! You are saved from spiritual death by the grace of God! He knew you could never accumulate enough good works, you could never spend enough centuries in purgatory, he knew you could never do enough acts of penance to earn or deserve eternal life in God’s Kingdom of Heaven. But do not despair! Instead, memorize Ephesians 2:8

“It is by grace you have been saved through faith – and this is not from yourselves; it is the gift of God – not by works so that no one can boast.”

John Stott wrote: In the letter to the Ephesians, “here are three foundation words of the Christian good news – salvation, grace, faith.

Salvation is more than forgiveness. It is deliverance from the death, slavery and wrath described in verses 1-3. Indeed, [salvation] includes the totality of our new life in Christ ...

Grace is God’s free and undeserved mercy towards us, and

Faith is the humble trust with which we receive it for ourselves.”

Ephesians 2:4-5 sums up what I am most thankful for, most grateful for this Thanksgiving weekend! That is what the Protestant Reformation fought and died for – the Biblical answer to life’s ultimate question: *How can I, an unjust sinner, stand before our infinitely righteous and holy God at the final judgement?* The answer is those 5 “sola’s” – *Sola Gratia; Sola Fide; Solus Christus; Sola Scriptura; Soli Deo Gloria* – We are saved by grace alone, through faith alone in Christ alone according to the scriptures alone – to the glory of God alone!

THAT is what we are thankful for! *Amen.*