

Thanksgiving 11-18-01

Romans 1:8-12, John 13:34,35

Thanksgiving – the giving of thanks, what a great holiday to remember all the goodness of God in our lives. It became an official holiday about 140 years ago when Americans still believed that God was the Provider of all good things. We desired a special day, after harvests were in, to thank God for His abundant provision. As Christians, we are most grateful for Jesus, who died in our place, so that we could exchange our sins for His righteousness and live in Eternal Life. When you realize what a precious price was paid for you when you could have cared less, it overwhelms the heart with thanksgiving.

We have a family tradition of going around the table and telling one thing you are thankful to God for. Let's start today by giving you a chance to share. What would you share? I'd like to read you Spurgeon's devotional for the morning of May 14th as he summed up so eloquently what I would try to say.

"Joint heirs with Christ. Romans 8:17

The boundless realms of His Father's universe are Christ's by prescriptive right. As "heir of all things," He is the sole proprietor of the vast creation of God, and He has admitted us to claim the whole as ours, by virtue of that deed of joint-heir-ship, which the Lord hath ratified with His chosen people. The golden streets of paradise, the pearly gates, the river of life, the transcendent bliss, and the unutterable glory, are, by our blessed Lord, made over to us for our everlasting possession. All that He has He shares with His people. The crown royal He has placed upon the head of His Church, appointing her a kingdom, and calling her sons, a royal priesthood, a generation of priests and kings. He uncrowned Himself that we might have a coronation of glory; He would not sit upon His own throne until He had procured a place upon it for all who overcome by His blood. Crown the head and the whole body shares the honor. Behold here the reward of every Christian conqueror! Christ's throne, crown, scepter, palace, treasure, robes, heritage, are yours.

Far superior to the jealousy, selfishness, and greed, which admit of no participation of their advantages, Christ deems His happiness completed by His people sharing it. "The glory which thou gavest me have I given them." "These things have I spoken unto you, that My joy might remain in you, and that your joy might be full." The smiles of His Father are all the sweeter to Him, because His people share them. The honors of His kingdom are more pleasing, because His people appear with Him in glory. More valuable to Him are His conquests, since they have taught His people to overcome. He delights in His throne, because on it there is a place for them. He rejoices in His royal robes, since over

them His skirts are spread. He delights the more in His joy, because He calls them to enter into it.”

We are forever grateful for who Christ is and all that His loving heart shares with us. I want to ask though, how grateful you are for His body, believers throughout the world? We are studying Romans in our weekly Bible study, and in the first chapter we find what the Apostle Paul declares is his first reason for thanks to God. I don't think he is saying – first – as in priority, but first in a list he is going to tell them about. That list continues in chapter 8. He just wants to list this reason first because it is an introduction to the reason he is writing them. He'll get to the thanks for all that we have received in Jesus in the 8th chapter, but he wants to let the recipients know he is thankful for them. Lets read it in verses 8-12.

Romans 1:8-12(NIV)⁸ First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is being reported all over the world.⁹ God, whom I serve with my whole heart in preaching the gospel of his Son, is my witness how constantly I remember you¹⁰ in my prayers at all times; and I pray that now at last by God's will the way may be opened for me to come to you.¹¹ I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong--¹² that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith.

Paul held a profound attitude of thanks for brothers and sisters he'd never seen. I got a little feeling of that when I heard the 16 Afghan Christians had escaped. I thought they had already been murdered. I thought about them in the great cloud of witnesses cheering us believers, still here in this battle, onward. But thanks be to God, they escaped. It would only be a few years after Paul wrote the Romans that Nero would use these saints in Rome as scapegoats for his fire. Some of them probably joined the crowd of witnesses before Paul did. Some escaped, and others gave their lives.

Paul is thankful for their faith, because their testimonies are traveling throughout the Roman Empire. Wow! Paul had started most of the Gentile churches but here is this one he didn't start, and they are so strong in faith that the world is hearing about it. I hear the testimonies of other churches in the world. Wouldn't it be wonderful if one day the world heard of the faith of the church in Sedona? I would like you to consider why this was a cause of rejoicing for Paul. Here is this man who lives in a heart of gratitude. He was persecuting believers (the body of Christ) and Jesus shows up on the road to Damascus to ask him why? He surrenders himself as a servant, "Lord, what would you have me to do?" He finds God has not only redeemed him through the blood of the very One he is persecuting, but he is being called be His messenger. If someone beat you up, would you make him your right hand man? Paul knew where he came from and with how great a love he was forgiven and called. Some of us don't realize it,

but the journey from where we were to where He is taking us, is just as far for us. The redemption is just as great, for we deserved as much wrath as Paul did.

Now what is driving this man onward through all kinds of sacrifices and difficulties is the hope of seeing others come to know the love of God he knows to be real. He longs for the advancement of the Kingdom of God. When he hears of these brothers' faith in Rome and sees how their testimonies are spreading, he's thinking about people freed from sin and brought into a loving relationship with Jesus. The Kingdom of God is growing, and that is a wonderful thing to the Apostle. That is what he lives to see happen. So, of course, when he thinks of them he is thankful. It is like having a life goal to see something achieved and learning about a group working on the same goal, and you never even met them.

I am sure he is thankful for their lives, turned from darkness to light, right in the capital of the world. A few chapters later he will thank God for the transformation of their lives. Romans 6:17 (NIV)¹⁷ *But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which you were entrusted.* He knows they were once in slavery to sin. They were mastered by their sinful nature, destroying themselves through their seeking of pleasure. But they have been set free to obey with their whole heart, the teaching entrusted to them. Everyone you share the word of God with is entrusted with truth. What they do with it, what we do with it, is up to each individual. But these Romans received and obeyed, not just out of obligation, but wholeheartedly. Remember the parable of the stewards. Are you making the most out of what God has entrusted to you, or have you buried it?

I'm thankful for every brother and sister but I'm especially thankful for every wholehearted Christian I meet. There are enough half-hearted Christians that give the world a bad impression of what it means to belong to Jesus. When I meet someone overflowing with the fruits of the Spirit, I thank God. The world needs to see those who wholeheartedly obey the teaching of the Word.

Then he says that upon remembering them he prays for them. The stories of prayer for those 8 aid workers are amazing. Some churches were fasting. The Americans' home church was praying round the clock. People took shifts to pray so that prayer could go up 24 hours a day for over 100 days until they were freed. I was more concerned for the Afghani's. I knew the 8 aid workers were being prayed for and had a political chance to be released, but the 16 Afghani's – they were almost certain to be executed. Oh, me of little faith. I prayed for them, but I didn't have much faith.

The Apostle Paul longed to see the Roman church. He was hoping God would make a way for him to get there to share his gift with them. He wanted to teach

them the things he had learned of Christ, to see they were solid in their faith, ready for the days to come, instructed and prepared. But then in the last verse we read (1:12) I see the heart of a real son of God. He knew that when he got there and shared with them, they would have something to share with him, too. He knows the living Lord Jesus is in these people, because he has heard the testimonies of their faith. When he meets them he will hear their testimonies and see Jesus in them. He will be encouraged even as he encourages them.

This great leader of the Christian faith is not a pompous leader who is arrogant and considers everyone beneath him. No! He is a humble servant of God and considers everyone else his equal. That is what Jesus taught. That is what Paul lived.

The Lord has been increasing in us a realization of this wonderful thing we have in each other. It is not about position or organization, but relationship. We really are a family, and we really do meet Jesus in each other. Oh, sometimes we get tweaked by some little issue, but we know the main thing is the Man we all worship and adore, Christ Jesus. He is in you, and you, and you. How grateful we should be! Not only does Jesus walk through the storms of life with us, but He walks with us in one another also.

I passed on to you Charles Shultz philosophy of life. Without going over it all again, it just reminded us that we soon forget the names of past heroes and victors, but we don't forget the names of the people who touch our lives deeply. I would add to that, can we be touched any more deeply by another than when we meet Jesus in them? His love and gentleness, patience and peace are unsurpassed.

Love one another! When you realize Christ is in your brother and sister you certainly should love them. Love covers a multitude of sins. That is real love. As Paul wrote in the Love chapter, love keeps no record of wrongs. We have this huge family that we share our very heart of hearts with, our love for our Redeemer. Many of them are already with Him, some are yet to be born, but there have never been more believers alive than there are today. How grateful we should be! Because they all love you! Did you ever think of that? If they are all walking in Christ, and obeying His command to love you, then you have millions of people around the world, most of whom you haven't met, that love you. You can go almost anywhere in the world and find a brother or sister in Christ who loves you because you are in Him.

That love works itself out in ministry. As each of us is a part of the body, we all have something to share. We can all help and encourage and be a blessing to our brothers and sisters we come in contact with. Paul wanted to share his gift and be encouraged by theirs. You all have a gift and a role in the body. Do you

long to share it? As you realize the love of God for your brothers and sisters you will. And you will want to receive their gifts and their love.

That doesn't mean they are always lovable. We can all testify to the truth of that. We haven't always been lovable. Realize that in Christ they are forgiven even when they did not realize the hurt they caused you, and love them with the love that keeps no record of wrongs. I heard a great testimony from Corrie Ten Boom. She had some people in ministry really hurt her, intentionally deceived and knowingly wronged her. The wound was very deep because she was so close to them. She could forgive her Nazi captors for their crimes against her and she thought she had forgiven this couple. Many years later talking to a friend, he asked her about the issue. She pulled out some documents that proved that they were wrong and showed the truth of the matter. "Why have you kept those?" he asked her. Then she knew she had not really forgiven. That night she took those documents to the fireplace and asked God to forgive her, and them, and to heal her heart.

I can't talk about gratitude for our brothers and sisters in Christ without speaking on forgiveness. We can't really thank God for them, as we should, unless we forgive those who trespass against us.

This Thanksgiving would you consider your brothers and sisters around the world. Maybe you will feel led to a particular group you have heard about, like the Afghanis that escaped, or some other group you have heard about. Paul said he prayed for the Roman church constantly. Maybe you will find a burden from the Holy Spirit for a particular church or people and lift them up in prayer. I want to encourage you to be thankful for the wonderful body of Christ, and to love them, to forgive, to lift them up in prayer. Get to know others outside our little fellowship and pray. Discover what God has gifted you with to edify the body and share it. Then be encouraged by their faith and gifts. Let them minister to you. Have a blessed Thanksgiving!