

(View the online sermon to see a photo from a recent week of high school students praying after service. Celebrate the great work that God is doing in the life of the young people at our church!)

I always thank my God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. For in him you have been enriched in every way—with all kinds of speech and with all knowledge— God thus confirming our testimony about Christ among you. Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. He will also keep you firm to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, who has called you into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. (1 Corinthians 1:4-9)

When we read this passage there are two things that jump out right away: thankfulness and Jesus. If you are taking notes, write those two words down. Paul begins the letter by saying in 1:4, “I always thank my God for you.” One thing that is helpful to know about 1 Corinthians, and really all of the letters Paul wrote, is that they follow the expectation for ancient rhetoric flawlessly. In ancient rhetoric, you would always begin a letter by introducing yourself, addressing your audience, wishing them well, and then you were expected to give them thanks, to express your gratitude to them for the nice person they are or the kind things they’ve done. What’s so interesting about this introduction is that, while Paul does express gratitude as you’d expect, who does he express gratitude to? Not to the people he’s writing to, but rather to God for the people he’s writing to. Paul doesn’t try to butter them up and get in their good graces by saying: “I just want to thank you so much for all the wonderful things you’ve done.” Rather he says, “I thank God for you, and for all the wonderful things he’s done for you.” He is deeply grateful, but instead of looking on the surface and thanking them, he looks beneath the surface and thanks God *for them*. What a powerful paradigm to keep in perspective: when we are thankful for our parents, when we are thankful for our spouse, when we are thankful for our kids, when we are thankful for our friends, and our church and our coworkers and our neighbors who lend us a hand when we need, we should of course express our gratitude to them, but the ultimate and most important thing we can do is to look to God who graciously put them in our lives and say thank you to him! It’s wonderful to say, “Thank you mom for loving me so much.” But we should also say, “Thank you God for giving me a mom who loves me so much.” Yes, “Thank you Keren for being such an incredible wife.” But also, “Thank you God, for giving me such an incredible wife.”

Every day when I drive home from church, I drive by the house of someone in our life group. This family has served and blessed my family and me in countless ways: they have been incredible friends to us from basically the moment we moved in, they have prayed for us, they have dropped by meals, they have baby sat for us countless times, they have given us thoughtful and heart-warming gifts. On a regular basis Keren and I tell them how thankful we are for them, but when I drive by their house, I tell God how thankful I am for them. I thank God over and over for putting them in our lives and us in their lives and allowing us to have this deep bond with Christ at the absolute center of it all. That’s what Paul does to kick things off: an expression of deep thankfulness to God for the Corinthians.

The second thing we see right away is his focus on Jesus. In fact, it’s not only in verses 4-9 that we read today. It’s the first nine verses as a whole. In the first nine verses of this letter how many times does Paul mention Jesus? Nine different times—and it’s not like he’s a teenager who has fallen in love! He is a grown man in his 50s. He has known and followed Jesus for at least fifteen years of his life at this point. This isn’t a honeymoon phase, this isn’t youthful zeal and exuberance—this is a man for whom Christ has

become everything, integrated into every decision, exalted in every interaction, central to every relationship. Jesus is everywhere!

Jesus is:

- the one who called Paul to be an apostle;
- the one who makes us holy;
- the one upon whose name we call;
- the giver of grace;
- the source of all riches;
- the subject of Paul's preaching;
- the basis for Christian hope;
- the climax and pinnacle of all history;
- the God we experience intimate fellowship with; and
- our Lord.

In other words, to Paul, Jesus is everything! He saw the entire world through the lens of Jesus. Later on in his letter he wrote in 2:2, "For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." Jesus was his hope, his focus, his goal, the dynamic center of *the* world and *his* world around which everything else revolved.

Let me ask you to stop and think: is that who Jesus is to you? How frequently is Jesus brought up in your conversations? How central is Jesus to your worldview, your identity, your relationships, your plans for this week, your hopes and dreams for the future? When you think about a new job, is the first question that you ask, "Is this move good for my career?" Or, "Is this move good for my bank account?" Or is it, "Is this a move that Jesus is calling me to make?" Jesus is not a convenient ornament to be added onto our lives—he is the dominant reality that shapes and defines our entire lives, the filter through which every thought is evaluated, the authority before whom every decision is submitted. He is our all in all.

When you read this first paragraph, there is no mistaking the two themes—thankful and Jesus—but when you go a bit deeper, the most natural thing we could do is make one small addition: thankfulness for Jesus. Paul's not only thankful and he's not only focused on Jesus, he is specifically thankful for Jesus. If we dive a bit deeper, we'll see that Paul gives three specific reasons we should be thankful for Jesus, from the past, the present, and the future.

In the past the Corinthians received God's grace in Christ Jesus, were enriched in every way and had the gospel confirmed among them (1:4-6).

Let's talk about each of those. First Paul said we receive God's grace in Christ Jesus. When we accepted Jesus Christ, God's grace came to us, like an avalanche; his grace rushed down and surrounded us. Instead of wrath and punishment for our sins, we received love and mercy. We have a new identity as children in God's family, we are citizens in heaven, and it all comes through Jesus. John 1:12-13 says, "Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God." When we accept, Jesus we come into God's family. We are adopted. I saw this video a few days ago of a Christian family adopting a little girl. The dad flew to China to rescue her from an orphanage, and as she came down the escalator, she was welcomed by her mother for the very first time, she was hugged and embraced by her new sisters and brother. She was engulfed in a family of love and grace— from abandoned in an orphanage to embraced in a family because of the power of adoption. That's what has happened to every one of us who has believe in the name of Jesus. (Go to <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-hi9GCdqXzQ> to view the video.

We weren't adopted into any random family—we were brought into the family of God which means we were enriched in every way. We weren't adopted by paupers who live hand to mouth; we were adopted by royalty and given all the privileges that come with it. Most of you would recognize Shaquille O'Neal, NBA hall of famer and very accomplished investor and business owner. He has an estimated net worth of nearly ½ a billion dollars. A couple years ago, as one of his kids came to realize how much his dad is worth, he asked him, "Dad, are we rich?" And Shaq said, "No, we aren't rich. I'm rich." I'm sure he was just having fun. Fortunately for us, that is not the heart of our Father. We were brought into the family, and God has lavished countless blessings on us as an expression of his love for us and our identity as his sons and daughters.

There's one more thing that happened in the past: they had the gospel confirmed among them, which is Paul's way of saying, "The gospel we preached didn't just come with words, it was confirmed among you; there was irrefutable evidence and proof that it was true." I have been to Corinth four times on different Bible land trips that I have led. Each time I go I like to buy a souvenir from an art gallery run by a family in modern day Corinth who has been making replica pottery from actual vases that have been found in archeological digs (View the online sermon to see a photo of one of the vases.) I go on the trip, I come back, and I have this to commemorate my trip, to remind me of it, in a way: to prove that I was there. Sometimes people get a t-shirt. Sometimes they get a tattoo. There are different things we can do to prove that we went somewhere or did something. Paul says that God has proved, God has given irrefutable evidence to the Corinthians about the fact that the gospel is real. What is that evidence? Transformed lives. God moved powerfully in their midst. He changed them. Later in this letter Paul will say:

Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men who have sex with men nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. (1 Corinthians 6:9-11)

In other words: like the rest of us, your lives were really messed up. You were a trainwreck, sinful, selfish, hopeless—but God came in and changed your lives. Give thanks to Jesus Christ! All glory and praise to him.

Those are the things Paul thanks Jesus for doing in the past, but Jesus' work isn't only in the past, it's alive and active right now. In the present they are amply supplied with gifts of grace and live in eager expectation of the revelation of Jesus Christ.

Paul says that they are amply supplied with gifts of grace. It's not only that God met their needs abundantly when they came into his family; he continued to give them all they needed. The same is true for us. We know what it's like to have plenty as well as to live in want. We might appreciate that a bit more today than we used to. For a long time in America, you could go to the store and get anything you wanted. But when COVID was at its peak two years ago, you couldn't find toilet paper, couldn't find diapers. It hit home for me when I went to Kroger every day for four straight days and couldn't find any bacon. Come on! These days it's baby formula. We never like to be unable to acquire what we need. Paul says that because of Jesus, we never have to worry about that. He literally says in 1:7, "You do not lack any spiritual gifts." He has provided for us above and beyond!

I think about all the ways God has provided for us as a church family through spiritual gifts:

- We needed more volunteers for our kids and Jessica Surface signed up.
- We needed more people to greet our guests and the Shore family signed up.
- We needed more people to help us lead worship and Kelsey signed up.
- We needed a high school pastor and God brought us the Grubbs family.
- We needed more male leaders to help disciple our high school aged young men and Mike Dwiggins signed up.
- We needed more elders to help shepherd and guide our church and in the last year Rick, Mark, Mike, and Mike have all stepped up!
- We needed people to give generously to fund the ministry of this church. Last year we set a budget for The Creek of \$6.5 million. We were two weeks from completion and we were \$70,000 over budget, which means we were able to say yes to every single ministry initiative we had planned as a church!

God amply, generously, graciously, abundantly supplies his people with gifts of grace. In 2 Corinthians 9:8 Paul says: “And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.” That is what God does. In Christ, God gave us not just what we need, but more than we need—one blessing after another.

Paul also says that presently they “live in eager expectation of the revelation of Jesus Christ,” which is a way of saying that right now, we look forward to and anticipate the day when Jesus Christ returns to redeem humanity and bring history to its culmination. We all know what it’s like to have eager expectation for a special day or event: the last day of school, the first day of a new job, the last day of your job, kickoff of football season, your marriage, the birth of a child. We know what it’s like to live in expectation, but our ultimate expectation is to see Jesus!

Paul describes what this day will be like in 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17. He says, “

For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever.

That is the day of the Lord, and now, as we wait, we live in expectation of that day.

Jesus told a story about this in Matthew 24.

“Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom the master has put in charge of the servants in his household to give them their food at the proper time? It will be good for that servant whose master finds him doing so when he returns. Truly I tell you, he will put him in charge of all his possessions. But suppose that servant is wicked and says to himself, ‘My master is staying away a long time,’ and he then begins to beat his fellow servants and to eat and drink with drunkards. The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he is not aware of. He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” (Matthew 24:45-51)

Jesus is telling us we don’t know the exact hour when he is going to return, so we have to always live in anticipation of that day. We can’t get lazy. We can’t say, “Jesus has waited 2,000 years already so maybe he’ll wait 2,000 more.” We have to live every day as if Jesus might return and be ready to make the most

of every day, point as many people as possible to Jesus, and be prepared to give an account for the way we are living our lives.

One of the reasons we can look forward eagerly to that day is because of what Paul tells us Jesus will do for us in the future. We've talked about what he has done for us in the past, and in the present, but Paul also says that in the future the Corinthians will be kept blameless on the day of Christ, which means that when judgment day comes, we have nothing to fear. We aren't going into that day confident based upon our righteous deeds or our good life or our moral purity; we are confident because of the perfect life Jesus lived on our behalf and the power of his sacrifice to cover over our sins. I don't know about you, but that is good news for me. I know the wrongs I've committed. I know the people I've hurt. I know how many times I have spoken out of turn, mistreated someone, acted in selfishness and pride. If I'm on my own on judgment day, I am doomed. I have no hope at all. But the Bible says that when that day comes, I will be blameless because Jesus paid the price for my sins and imparted his righteousness to me. That is the power of the gospel! The Bible says that we will be given white robes which is a sign that Jesus has washed away the stain of all our sins. The Bible says that God writes our name in the Lamb's book of life and it will never be erased. When that day comes, we can have complete confidence—you can have complete confidence of standing blameless before God.

That is a transforming reality that brings so much confidence and security. If we don't know the outcome of an important decision it can eat us up and tear holes in our stomach until we get clarity. Are the test results going to be good? Am I going to get the job? Is she going to say yes? There are so many things we understandably have anxiety over when the outcome is undecided. Think about the last few months in the Johnny Depp / Amber Heard litigation case. He sued her for \$50 million. She turned around and sued him for \$100 million. They spent six solid weeks filing their complaints against one another in court, and then the jury went to deliberate for three straight days while Depp and Heard waited. And waited. And waited. Uncertainty. Anxiety. Who is going to be vindicated in the public's eyes? Who is going to go bankrupt and who can comfortably live in wealth for the rest of their life? Imagine what waiting for those several days must have been like for each of them, because the outcome of the trial was uncertain.

I have good news for you: if you have placed your faith in Jesus, the outcome of your case is not uncertain. Because of what Jesus has done for you, the price he paid for you, the life he sacrificed on your behalf, you will be declared not guilty. His faithful love will keep you blameless on that day!

Without any doubt or question, we have so much to be thankful for! And more than anything else, we are thankful for Jesus.