

11-17-24

When We're Most Thankful

Isaiah 6: 1- 8

When I was a youngster on the farm back in Wisconsin, I loved the season leading up to Christmas. For me, it meant that my uncle from the North Woods would be visiting.

He was an extremely avid hunter, and I knew he'd be toting a trunk-load of guns. That meant that I'd get my chance to work up a ravenous appetite by tagging along with him while he hunted pheasants, rabbits and squirrels.

Surprisingly, he didn't have a hunting dog, so I was the next best thing. But I didn't mind. I loved those bright, cold, sunny days tramping along cornfields, through meadows, and along the edges of woods.

I recall one time we had hunted for a lengthy time, and by the time we decided to head home we realized we were lost. Later, we found out that we had hiked a good mile across the state line into Illinois. Fortunately, the game warden was probably home having his turkey dinner, and we were able to sneak back across the border unnoticed.

I was so thankful to finally get home. The sun had already set, my toes were completely numb, and my stomach turned inside out from hunger. I couldn't wait to sink my teeth into a big, fat turkey leg.

Which brings me to a question: When are we most thankful?

This is, after all, the season to give thanks. And it's that time of year when we reflect on God's goodness and provision in our lives.

I don't know about you, but I also look forward to watching a few good movies over the holidays, and they need not be new ones. If my brothers and I were together we'd watch a replay of the Packers Superbowl victory in 2011 and probably the Star Wars Trilogy, for starters.

I'm sure you've all noticed that one of the major themes in action movies is the hero saving the day just in the nick of time. The poor victim is just on the verge of falling into the dark abyss, tumbling off a building, or being blown up by some explosive device. But out of nowhere, our hero arrives, making a dramatic rescue.

Where do these movie directors get such crazy ideas?

I dare say, from the Bible! And we thought movie directors were so clever!

In Isaiah chapter 6 we read about Isaiah's brush with death and how he was miraculously pulled back from the precipice of eternal doom.

There is, however, an interesting twist to this plot that is completely different than what you'll find in the movies: In the movies, the victim is typically rescued because of his innocent, noble character.

Isaiah, on the other hand, is rescued despite his guilt, by the One who has every right to kill him! That's right God's holiness demands death of the unrighteous.

Isaiah even admits and confesses his guilt before a holy and righteous God, and this, in part, is what saves Him!

Why would a holy and righteous God spare the life of a sinner?

Well, the answer is right there in verse 7: the angel said, *"your guilt is taken away, your sin atoned for."* "To be atoned for" means someone else paid the penalty, someone else paid the price for the sinner's wrong doing.

There are many things for which I am thankful:

a loving family

supportive friends

a meaningful job

a warm house

plenty to eat

good health

living in a country without the fear of tyranny, anarchy, and lawlessness

but as wonderful as all these blessings are, they pale in comparison to knowing that my sins have been paid for, my conscience is clear, and that my God forgives.

He forgives the things I've done wrong, the things I've failed to do.

He has forgiven me of my selfish, sinful nature that I battle with every day.

God forgives me, because He's a loving and merciful God ... and because by faith, I have chosen to acknowledge and worship the one who has paid for my sins: God's Holy Son, Jesus Christ.

His death on the cross was the payment for my sins.

Nearly every Sunday, I make reference to Christ's sacrifice on the cross to secure our salvation.

Why wouldn't I? it's the most important thing that's happened in the history of the world. It's where we all get second chances, a new lease on life, and meaning and purpose that runs clear into eternity.

I don't know about you, but I don't like to talk about death anytime, especially during the holidays, but the shadows of physical death invade our lives daily.

For example, every morning when I get out of bed, one of the first things I do is pop some vitamins and medication that hopefully helps me delay the inevitable. Every ache and pain, every frailty we experience is a reminder that this earthly life is fleeting.

This death which we all must face is written about in Hebrews 9:27,
“Man is destined to die once, and after that, face judgement.”

Despite all the advancements in medicine, we cannot evade physical death, but praise be to God that we can avoid God’s judgement and spiritual death! The writer in Hebrews continues,

“So, Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people;

and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin

- He has already done that on the cross –

but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for Him.”

This is the atonement the angel refers to in Isaiah 6.

Paul writes about it in the New Testament in 2 Corinthians 5:21:

“God made Him who had no sin

to be sin for us,

so that in Him

we might become the righteousness of God.”

This is the great exchange.

Jesus Christ mysteriously took on our sinfulness, our frailties, our brokenness when he voluntarily went to the cross for our sake.

We, by faith, receive his righteousness, wholeness, and eternal life into our lives.

But many will cry, “Unfair! This would never happen in a court of law where someone would receive another’s sentence unless a horrendous mistake occurred.”

I couldn't agree more, but thankfully we're in God's Court Room, not man's, and what we think is fair or not fair is based on our limited and finite minds. God's verdicts are rendered from His all-seeing, and all-knowing, all-wise perspective and nature.

God reminds us of this fact in Isaiah 55:8 where it is written

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,

as the heavens are higher than the earth,

so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts."

One of God's many thoughts is that mercy and grace are to be fully dispensed upon those who've put their trust in His most precious gift, His Son Jesus Christ.

The Apostle Paul writes in Romans 5:8,

"But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

I suppose that in a group this size there are many among us that have been to the edge, looked over, and not liked what they've seen.

Perhaps you personally have been rescued from drugs, alcohol, depression, chronic pain, cancer, a broken relationship, thoughts of suicide.

If you have, I'm sure your return from the edge has made you a more thankful person.

That's how I feel about God's grace in my life. I was at the edge and under God's judgement

This is what the Bible tells me. Jesus' own words from John 3:18 says that *"whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son."*

But now I've been saved by God's grace. My prayer is that each one here would experience this salvation as well.

I believe we are most thankful when we experience God's loving presence and provision in our lives.

This can happen in many ways:

we are the recipient of an act of kindness or compassionate words of understanding.

Many of us are drawn to nature -God's creation- in an attempt to unwind, regain new perspective, or draw inspiration.

I felt a flood of thankfulness and gratitude quite strongly when I snuggled up to my children to read them a bed-time story.

Whether you believe it or not, the Bible states that

"every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights."

It's only fitting, then, that as recipients of these blessings, we acknowledge the Giver.

When we do, we find ourselves on the doorsteps of the Infinite and Eternal One.

In Luke 17, we read about Jesus healing the ten lepers, but sadly only one returns to thank him.

Why only one? Jesus asks, were they not all healed? But then he answers his own question when he responds to the one grateful individual:

"Your faith has made you well."

You see, these ten lepers didn't need faith to be physically healed, but they did need faith to see reality: That God had come to earth in the form of Jesus to save and seek the lost.

His nearness to us is an amazing truth in itself: God's nature is holy and pure and cannot tolerate evil and unrighteousness, yet he chooses to be intimately involved in our lives whether we acknowledge Him or not.

This is why we Christians observe and celebrate Christmas: God humbling himself to be a man, to draw near to us, becoming like us in every way -except for sin- so that he can open the way for our salvation.

The Author of Hebrews puts it this way:

"We do not have a great high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are, yet without sin."

The writer of Hebrews goes on:

"Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence."

In other words, God is near, ready to save, but we must come to him in faith.

Finally, I believe we are at our most thankful when we finally resolve to live for something greater than ourselves. At its core, thankfulness involves an action like giving.

Isaiah, spared after his brush with a holy and righteous God, vowed to sharing God's messages of hope and forgiveness to the world.

The leper, after being healed, by faith recognized Jesus for who he really was -God in the flesh- and gave himself to worshipping Him.

Consider the Apostle Paul, one of the most thankful man in the Bible, and probably one of the most persecuted, wrote,

"I thank my God every time I remember you," and, "I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage, so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death."

Paul could pray this prayer because he understood what God had done for him, and his heart was now full of thankfulness for his Lord and Savior and for the other believers who held firm to Christ.

And it turns out, Paul's thankfulness motivated and energized his sacrificial life.

So, when are you most thankful?

When you narrowly escape a life-threatening situation?

Perhaps, but how about when you look around your house and see your loved ones getting along and making choices that honor God?

This makes me extremely thankful, because these actions have everlasting consequences.

Have you been pulled back from the edge?

Who did that for you?

Did you thank him or her?

Have you thanked God for bringing this person into your life?

Have you sensed God's nearness?

If not, I hope that during this holy season you will take time to rest in God's presence, and in the quietness of the moment, hear God's whisper: I love you, you're forgiven, your sins are atoned for, and you're my child forever. You are completely safe and secure with me.

Have you given yourself to something greater than yourself?

When Peter stated to Jesus that he and the disciples had left everything to follow Him, Jesus replied, *"No one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or Father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age (homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields – and with the persecutions) and in the age to come, eternal life."*

I don't think we can do any of these actions without a heart filled with thankfulness and faith and a love for God's Son.

May thankfulness not only be a song on our lips, but the energizing force of our lives.

Amen!