

The Indescribable Gift

We are rapidly coming upon Thanksgiving, so for the next couple Sundays I would like for us to consider the many things that we should be thankful to God for. Yet, we live in a world that tries to bleed us—and some ***indescribable evil*** tries to sap our joy and thankfulness. Last Sunday, the congregation of First Baptist Church of Sutherland Springs, Texas, had gathered for worship service—husbands and wives and their children, brothers and sisters, grandparents, friends and neighbors. Suddenly, a lone gunman rushed in and started raking those in the pews with gunfire. In all, 26 people were killed and many others wounded. The age of the dead ranged from 18 months old to age 77, including the pastor's 14 year old daughter. And while we are now only 11 days away from Thanksgiving, in Sutherland Springs, Texas, there will be many empty chairs around the Thanksgiving table this year in the wake of this senseless killing. What can account for such deranged wickedness? And what is it about Thanksgiving that begins to offer an answer and gives us hope, even in the face of such "***indescribable evil***"?

Paul offers us the following answer to this question in his letter to the Corinthians—he proclaims: "Thanks be to God for his ***indescribable gift!***" 2 Corinthians 9:15 (NIV) . . . Yes, we need to thank God for this ***indescribable gift*** that frees us from the fear of such ***indescribable evil***. This morning, I want you to think about that "indescribable gift." The truth is that we sometimes treat this unique gift as badly as we treat many other gifts that God grants to us. And because of that we fail to give proper thanks to God because we have a great deal of difficulty recognizing the gifts that God ***does*** provide. The great German theologian, Martin Luther, wrote about this in his book entitled, *Table Talk*: Luther writes: "The greater God's gifts and works, the less they are regarded."¹ Pastor Robert Morgan takes Luther's comments and puts it this way: "We exhibit a degree of thanksgiving in life in reverse proportion to the amount of blessings we've received."² For example, a starving man is more thankful over a few crumbs of bread than a rich man is over a full-course meal. A woman confined to a nursing home appreciates a single visitor more than a socialite does all the guests who come to his or her grand party. A Chinese Christian who is forced to worship secretly in a home church treasures one copy of the Holy Bible more than we do all our Christian books, devotionals and multiple translations of God's Word. Ralph Waldo Emerson summed it up well when he said that if all the constellations of the stars only appeared in the night skies just once every thousand years, everyone would be so excited and appreciative to see them. Yet, all those stars shine so magnificently every cloudless night, but we hardly give them a second thought . . . This week, I met with a man who had to have his toe removed due to

severe diabetes—then his foot and later most of his leg. It reminded me something G. K. Chesterton said many years ago around Christmas when he commented: “If my children wake up on Christmas morning and have somebody to thank for putting candy in their stockings, have I no one to thank for putting two feet in mine?”³ When we fail to give thanks to God for these common everyday gifts of life, that’s a very sad thing.

Of course, God’s Word encourages us not to be like that. We affirm what Paul wrote to the church in Thessalonica when he proclaimed: ¹⁶ “Be joyful always; ¹⁷ pray continually; ¹⁸ **give thanks in all circumstances**, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.” ¹ Thessalonians 5:16-18 (NIV) But why are we to “give thanks in all circumstances”? Well, it is Paul again who gives the answer when he tells us: “We know that all that happens to us is working for our good if we love God and are fitting into his plans.” Romans 8:28 (TLB) That’s why we are to give thanks no matter what may be going on around us—whatever it is, God is using it for a blessing in some way for the furtherance of His Kingdom and for the good of those who are faithful to Him. But the truth is that we sometimes fail to give thanks because we, from our limited perspectives, simply do not perceive a blessing when it’s being given to us.

Think about a story that Corrie ten Boom tells us about from WWII. In her book, *The Hiding Place*, she tells about a time when she and her sister had been hiding members of the Jewish faith in their home. And this was a dangerous thing to do because if the Nazis caught you hiding Jews, they would stoop you right up with the Jews and throw out into a concentration camp. And, eventually that is exactly what happened to Corrie and her sister. The Nazis discovered what they were doing and arrested them and threw them into the Ravensbruck concentration camp. The conditions in the camp were absolutely horrible, and their barracks were over-infested with fleas. One morning, during their secretly held Bible study, they read those very same verses that Paul wrote telling them to “give thanks in all circumstances.” So, her sister turned to Corrie and insisted: “We've got to give thanks for this barracks and even for these fleas.” But Corrie refused and countered, “No way am I going to thank God for fleas.” But sister persisted in her request and eventually they both prayed to God—thanking Him for all in their tragic surroundings, including those itchy, scratchy, pesky fleas. One of the things that the Nazis had frowned upon were those Bible studies the prisoners were conducting there in the barracks. And it was hard to conduct these little Bible studies because the Nazis loved to burst in the barracks, purportedly to do inspections, but in reality all they were doing was breaking up their prayer meetings. But they started to notice something different not long after they had prayed that prayer of thanks—the one that included thankfulness even for the fleas. During the months that followed, they noticed a real difference—those Nazi inspections no longer occurred. Rather, they were left virtually free to worship

God and study his Word and openly pray right there in the barracks—completely unmolested by their captors. Why? Months later they learned the answer: Their barracks were so flea-infested that the Nazi guards refused to enter in.⁴ Yes, sometimes we need to be thankful even for fleas—for, indeed, “we know that all that happens to us is working for our good if we love God.” In those dark times when madmen slaughter innocent people and when the fleas of life are biting so unmercifully into your skin, even then God will eventually work for good things for those who trust in Him. That is indeed something to be thankful for! That is such a wonderful gift! And that certainly points to the **“indescribable gift”** that Paul wrote about.

So, what is this “indescribable gift”? . . . **It is Jesus Christ!** And because of this, Christians have many things for which we must give thanks:

- Through the indescribable gift of Jesus Christ, God provides healing to those whose lives have become torn and broken. In Luke’s Gospel, one of the ten lepers that Jesus healed shows us an example as to how we are to response to such healing. Luke tells us: “He threw himself at Jesus’ feet and **thanked Him.**”⁵
- Through the indescribable gift of Jesus Christ, we have been freed from the chains of sin. And because of that Paul tells us: ²¹ “I have discovered this principle of life—that when I want to do what is right, I inevitably do what is wrong. ²² I love God’s law with all my heart. ²³ But there is another power within me that is at war with my mind. This power makes me a slave to the sin that is still within me. ²⁴ Oh, what a miserable person I am! Who will free me from this life that is dominated by sin and death? ²⁵ Thank God! The answer is in Jesus Christ our Lord.” Romans 7:21-25 (NLT)
- Through the indescribable gift of Jesus Christ, we have been changed from being **“self-centered”** people into **“other-centered”** people—i. e. we begin to see that any philosophy of life that encourages us to “look out for number one” is a false philosophy. We begin to see through the eyes of Christ that generosity **to others** is one of the hallmarks of our faith. We begin to give not to merely “make ourselves feel good,” but that through our giving others will begin to thank and praise God for such assistance as we may be able to offer. I love the way that Paul expresses this: ¹¹ “Yes, God will give you much so that you can give away much, and when we take your gifts to those who need them they will break out into thanksgiving and praise to God for your help. ¹² So two good things happen as a result of your gifts—(#1) those in need are helped, and (#2) they overflow with thanks to God. ¹³ Those you help will be glad not only because of your generous gifts to themselves and to others, but they will praise God for this proof that your deeds are as good as your doctrine. ¹⁴ And they will pray for you with deep fervor and feeling because of the wonderful grace of God

shown through you.¹⁵ Thank God for his Son—his Gift too wonderful for words.” 2 Corinthians 9:11-15

(TLB) Indeed, thank God for the indescribable gift to us of Jesus Christ, who transforms His people from misers to faithful, generous givers. (And I might add that this Church has been faithful in those efforts with all the many things that we have turned over to the Louisa Food Bank throughout the year, and just as recently as a couple of weeks ago—193 pounds of food goods and personal items. May those recipients praise and thank God for these things!)

Now you may be thinking, “Yes, but you haven’t told us what possible thanks could ever come out of last Sunday’s shootings in Texas. What is there possibly to be thankful for in considering such a terrible tragedy?” That’s a good question. But, we frame this as a tragedy—which it certainly was—because death came so unexpectedly, so very quickly, and to so very many. I don’t know what good God will work out from this tragedy. I am as blind to this as Corrie ten Boom was to the fleas that plagued her life in the barracks of that concentration camp. And I pray for the friends and families of the victims that God will bring them through this horrific, heartbreaking time. But in the short term, it does remind us of something that none of us can avoid. It reminds us that death is a certainty for all of us. Our days are numbered as God’s Word affirms.⁶ It reminds us that death can come to any one of us unexpectedly and without warning and in an instant. But, the horrific, heartbreaking tragedy comes for those who have rejected Jesus Christ. He is the sole indescribable gift that can save us from such an eternal tragedy. It was the indescribable gift He gave in shedding His blood on the Cross in order that such a tragedy may not fall upon you. And while that gift is indescribable, Paul comes closest to providing its essence when he writes: ⁵³ “For our earthly bodies, the ones we have now that can die, must be transformed into heavenly bodies that cannot perish but will live forever. ⁵⁴ When this happens, then at last this Scripture will come true—“Death is swallowed up in victory.” ⁵⁵⁻⁵⁶ O death, where then your victory? Where then your sting? For sin—the sting that causes death—will all be gone; and the law, which reveals our sins, will no longer be our judge. ⁵⁷ How we thank God for all of this! It is he who makes us victorious through Jesus Christ our Lord!” 1 Corinthians 15:53-57 (TLB)

In this lifetime, we lack the capacity to see beyond the tragedies of this world. For the time being, we “see through a glass darkly”⁷—to once again borrow from Paul’s words. But one day, we will be with our Lord and Savior, and then we will see, and know and understand as if seeing face to face. That is our hope in the face of all the awful things that this world can deal out to us. If we could see these tragedies through God’s eyes, then we would be able to see things that are less obvious to us now. I believe that last Sunday, as each bullet found its deadly mark, a more heavenly perspective might

reveal something different to our eyes; and we would see the ugly wounds being replaced by the warm embrace of Jesus as He carried His people home.

But what about the others left behind—those who made it out of the carnage with their lives still in this world. For some, God still has important things for them to do in serving Him—and so they continue on here. But for others—well, maybe they just weren't ready. Maybe they had come to church that morning for whatever reason, but as far as accepting Christ as their Lord and Savior, they were still on the fence. Maybe God spared them to give them a little more time before it is too late. The problem is that neither they, nor any of you, can stay on that fence of indecision and non-commitment for very long because for all of us our days are numbered. That day may come in the form of a heart-attack or some other illness, an accident, or some tragedy like the many that seem to be exploding randomly all around this world. Whatever the cause, the bullet of death is hurling toward each of us even now, and it will surely arrive on its appointed day. Now you might object and say, ***"Man, you really are seeing through a glass TOO darkly!"*** And yes it is a morbid thought. And yet there is no denying that death comes for all of us. For those on the fence . . . for those who may need more time to decide—it is my hope that they will not hesitate any longer in surrendering their lives to Jesus Christ before that bullet reserved for them reaches its mark. It will find you one day—death always does.

But, for those in Christ, there is no fear because we begin to know the peace and joy of His Kingdom in the here and now. Even during the tragedies of life—whether they are hurricanes, wildfires or massacres . . . even during times when those fleas descend upon our lives—come what may, we find rest in Jesus Christ. And when that happens, we give thanks to God in all circumstances—even in troubled times such as these.

Let us pray.

¹ Robert J. Morgan, *Preacher's Source*, "Thanksgiving," Thomas Nelson / Nashville (2007), p.736.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ John Yates, "An Attitude of Gratitude," *Preaching Today*, Tape No. 110. Elesha Hodge, comp., *Today's Best Illustrations – Volumes 1-4*, (Carol Stream, IL: Christianity Today, 1997), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, Under: "THANKFULNESS".

⁵ Luke 17:15-16 (NIV) ¹⁵ One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice. ¹⁶ He threw himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him—and he was a Samaritan.

⁶ Psalm 39:4-7 (NLT) ⁴ "LORD, remind me how brief my time on earth will be. Remind me that my days are numbered— how fleeting my life is. ⁵ You have made my life no longer than the width of my hand. My entire lifetime is just a moment to you; at best, each of us is but a breath." Interlude ⁶ We are merely moving shadows, and all our busy rushing ends in nothing. We heap up wealth, not knowing who will spend it. ⁷ And so, Lord, where do I put my hope? My only hope is in you.

⁷ 1 Corinthians 13:12 (KJV) For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.