

The Stabilizing Power of Thankfulness

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Chapter of 1 Peter. We're going to see actually that the Apostle Peter begins his letter, the main body of his letter after the opening salutation, the first two verses which we've been looking at in recent weeks, we're digging into the body of the letter in verse 3 and the first thing he does is call on the people of God to reflect on the blessings of God and give thanks. Thanksgiving celebrates, of course, commemorates in America the first harvest of the Pilgrims in 1621; that was the root in America of this yearly celebration. The Pilgrims had their first planting season and reaping and they celebrated the harvest and giving thanks to God. It didn't become a national holiday until 1863 when President Abraham Lincoln made it one, but it was only a yearly, it was actually not officially a holiday in another way that every President on every year from 1863 to 1940 would declare it to be a National Day of Thanksgiving and then in 1941, Congress made the fourth Thursday of November Thanksgiving Day in the United States of America. And so it is a national holiday now for more than 80 years, in some way celebrated all the way back to 1621, 400 years. But as we see the slide of our culture away from God, we've seen Thanksgiving also has degenerated. It's become less about thanking God and more about thanking each other, or even just Turkey Day. But for the Christian, Thanksgiving, the expression of gratitude to God for his bountiful blessings is to be a way of life. It's not a holiday, it's the essence of who we are. And so Thanksgiving in our family times and times we gather with friends, opportunity that we have in those moments to shine with the light of God because so many of those that we know that will possibly be celebrating with this year don't know the Lord, don't really have grateful hearts, it's an opportunity to ask questions. You know, people, you know, "What blessings are you most grateful for this past year?" Just ask someone and let them share and then be ready to tell them about how God is encouraging you, maybe, "I'm so grateful for the peace of God in my life that He's given me no matter what's going on in the culture. The strength that the joy of the Lord gives me," something like that. You know, an opportunity to lift up Christ and to lift up the Lord.

So Peter begins the body of his letter exactly at this place, the place of thanksgiving in the word blessed, blessed be God. He is reflecting on the great blessings that God has given and reflecting back to him consistent with what we see throughout the Old Testament. The word blessing is a key word. In fact, this word translated in 1 Peter 1:3, the Greek word is found 450 times in the Old Testament, the Greek Old Testament, the Septuagint. Remember the Old Testament was written in Hebrew and some small parts in Aramaic,

but it was translated later into Greek and that's called the Septuagint. And in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, this word blessed occurs 450 times. The blessing of God is what we need, that God's blessing is divine power transmitted through his blessing to those whom he blesses. And then even the concept of the passing down of the blessing from Abraham to Isaac and Isaac to Jacob and Jacob to his 12 sons, particularly to Judah and most of all to Joseph is the transmitting of this, the power of God given to Israel through Abraham transmitted on down. And these blessings, then, call for those who are blessed to bless God in response; though we can give nothing to God we enjoy his blessings and praise him for that and give him pleasure and delight, though he needs nothing. He is all fullness overflowing with joy. Yet he gives us the privilege of blessing him, and this is what Peter does.

It's interesting, we talked about in previous weeks that Peter's purpose in the book, he has a pastoral purpose, he is writing to believers that he understands are experiencing already increasing cultural opposition to their faith. The church is becoming more and more the target of cultural animosity, escalating social hostility. Persecution is becoming more and more evident. The seed is growing into the full-blown plant of persecution. In fact, he writes in 63AD within a year or two, a massive persecution will break out in Rome and spread throughout the empire. Peter doesn't claim to know the future in this passage, but the God who is writing through him, every word in the Bible is fully man's word and every word in the Bible is fully God's word, the Spirit superintending the human author to give us a perfect revelation, and so God is preparing his people for the coming persecution. And Peter has on his heart as the man of God giving this message the burden that the people are experiencing. One of the key words in the book is the word suffering or suffer. It occurs 15 times in this letter. The word trials and testing another couple of times. Tested by fire 1:7 we'll read in just a moment. A fiery ordeal that encounters you, 1 Peter 4:12. And so this idea of suffering and experiencing the flames of affliction is a key part of what Peter sees as his reader's real-life circumstance and so he writes to prepare them for it.

Now before we read chapter 1, just turn to the end for just a moment. I want you to see the purpose statement. I haven't called our attention to this yet and you'll see this idea of suffering. Look at 1 Peter 5:9 to 12, and then we're going to read the text after that for this. fBut this shows you the purpose of the book. Peter is coming to the end of his letter and he says, he's been speaking about Satan being a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour in verse 8, and then he says, "But resist him, firm in your faith," 1 Peter 5:9, resist him, that is, Satan, "resist him firm in your faith knowing that the same experiences of suffering are being accomplished by your brethren who are in the world. After you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish you. To Him be dominion forever and ever. Amen." Here's the purpose statement, verse 12, "Through Silvanus, our faithful brother (for so I regard him), I have written to you briefly, exhorting and testifying that this is the true grace of God. Stand firm in it!" That's his message. "This is the true grace of God. Stand firm in it against the opposition, against the hostility, against the persecution. Be faithful. Stand firm in the grace of God."

So that's the burden of his heart when he writes this letter and you'll see that throughout the real present, clear and present danger of imminent suffering, imminent persecution, and yet he's undergirding, he's seeking to give them the strength that they will have to stand firm in the midst of whatever they encounter because they're standing firm in the grace of God. And so with that in mind, think of that, that's his purpose, the setting to which he's writing, and the purpose of his heart is to strengthen these believers for faithful witness, faithfulness in the midst of opposition, faithfulness to Christ to the end. Where does he begin? He begins with thanksgiving. And so what we see is, and the title of the message this morning is "The Stabilizing Power of Thankfulness," or the stabilizing power of gratitude. The stabilizing power of thankfulness. That is, it gives you stability. It gives you a solid foundation with which to endure.

Let's read. 1 Peter 1:1 to 9. We're going to be focusing in on verses 3 to 6 this morning. 1 Peter 1:1,

1 Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who reside as aliens, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, who are chosen 2 according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, by the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with His blood: May grace and peace be yours in the fullest measure. 3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4 to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, 5 who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. 6 In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, 7 so that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ; 8 and though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, 9 obtaining as the outcome of your faith the salvation of your souls.

Let's pray together.

Our Father, how grateful we are for Your precious word. We come to it, Lord, always aware of our great need of grace for we are sinful, our minds have been darkened because of sin, and even though we now have, as the Scripture we just read, set a new heart, those of us who have come to Christ have been born again, we still need Your grace to continue to illumine the dark corners of our souls where our thinking is not in line with the truth, where our affections have been alienated and estranged. Lord, do Your work in us. Send forth Your light and Your truth and let them lead us to Your holy hill, to the place of Your habitation, to the place where Your glory dwells. We pray in Christ's name. Amen.

So the stabilizing power of thankfulness. Peter begins the body of his letter in a way that is actually identical word for word to two other places in the New Testament. In 2 Corinthians 1:3 and Ephesians 1:3, the Apostle Paul begins the body of his letters right after his opening salutation with these exact words, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." In the Greek exactly the same those three places. It shows that the urgency of beginning with reflecting on the blessings of God and what we see is, as I mentioned earlier, this idea of blessed be God, Peter is saying, "Blessed be God. Look at the Lord." He's actually inviting his readers to give thanks. He's inviting his readers to look at God and what he has done.

You know, you think about Thanksgiving, it's helpful to notice this. We were talking about this in our men's Bible study on Friday morning which we were talking about the doctrine of worship, and you note in the Psalms that the psalmist, it's important as you read the Scriptures to observe the text carefully. At times you'll see, you know, phrases or actions that are in this second person, that is, where man is speaking directly to God. "Forgive me, Lord." Or, "I praise You, Lord. I thank You, Lord." You see, "I thank You, Lord." It's also got first person, "I thank You," but the "I" is always there because somebody is talking; the speaker is the first person but the question is well who is he speaking to or about? So second person, "I praise You, Lord, for what You have done. I thank You, Lord, for what You have done." But you also find every bit as much, I think actually more, third person praise, that is, the psalmist is talking not to God directly. I mean, he's been talking to God, but in the Psalm he's talking to the people and he says this, "Look at the Lord. Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised." Do you see how it's third person? He's talking to the audience about God, the third person. He says essentially, "Look at Him. Look at what He's done. Reflect on His glorious character. Reflect on His glorious acts and praise Him." And this is thanksgiving. Thanksgiving has a second person element and a third person element where you say to the Lord directly, "Lord, I praise You. I thank You," and that needs to be in our hearts. But there's also this idea of look at the Lord how wonderful he is and there's something powerful about the body of Christ and how we are called to exhort one another to praise and this is what Peter is doing. This is some third person praise right here.

He said, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ," and then he recounts no less than seven major blessings that he has given to those who belong to Christ and he's basically saying, "If you will reflect on these blessings, if you will actively reflect on them, actively thank God for them, actively celebrate them among the community of faith, if you will learn to do that, you will be strengthened and stabilized against all opposition." It's the stabilizing power of thankfulness.

This idea of thanksgiving is so fundamental to the Christian life. I want to show you this. If you look, not every epistle begins this way, but most of them do. Turn back over and I want to show you how Paul is consistently this way. If you turn back toward the front of your Bible past James, past Hebrews, you come to Philemon. And after you have the opening salutation what's the first thing Paul talks about? Philemon, verse 4, "I thank my God always." Now Titus, he doesn't begin exactly that way, but 2 Timothy 1. So turn past

Titus to 2 Timothy. We're going toward the front of our Bible from the back. Our kids on Wednesday nights are learning where every book of the Bible is. They don't have to scramble like some of you, and some of us do sometimes when, "Where exactly is that book? Where is the book of Hezekiah?" There is no book of Hezekiah, but anyway. 2 Timothy 1:3, again right after the salutation he says, "I thank God whom I serve with a clear conscience." Then you go past 1 Timothy, again it's not every letter, but it's powerful when you look at how often it is the case, to 2 Thessalonians. 1 Timothy 1, he waits to verse 12, so I'm not going to qualify that one. I'm going to say that that one is a different one. But 2 Thessalonians 1:3, again right after the salutation, "We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brethren." Now just 1 Thessalonians, turn the page. Verse 2 of 1 Thessalonians 1, "We give thanks to God always for all of you making mention of you in our prayers." You see, begins each letter almost every time with thanksgiving. Colossians, turn back to Colossians 1:3 again after the salutation, "We give thanks to God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you." Turn to Philippians, the next book. Philippians 1:3, "I thank my God in all my remembrance of you always offering prayer with joy in my every prayer for you all." And then Ephesians, I mentioned Ephesians is exactly the same wording as we have in 1 Peter because he doesn't say thank, he doesn't use the word thank, he uses the word blessed be, which is the exhortation to bless God, that is, to speak well of God, that is, to praise God or give thanks. He says exactly the same words in Ephesians 1:3 that he said in 1 Peter 1:3, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ." And then from verse 4 to verse 14, he unpacks the glory of this in no less than seven amazing blessings. You find the same thing in 2 Corinthians 1.

And so I wanted to show you that because thanksgiving is to be at the at the essence of who we are as Christians. If we are not thankful we will not be faithful. In fact, that's the root problem of why Israel was unfaithful to God. They were not thankful. To be thankful means to stop and to look at the things that God has done and to celebrate them and to praise him for that, to reflect on that, to think about it, to stop and really experience the wonder of it because you can receive a lot of blessings that you never even notice that you have, and when you do you are robbed of the richness of the blessings that God has given.

In our Wednesday night study this week, we were talking about Numbers 11. I'll just tell you the story, you can read it later. This is about a year and a half after the people of Israel have left Egypt through the exodus. Remember they're delivered out of slavery? Remember God had heard their cries by reason of their taskmasters? He saw their suffering. He cared enough to come down and to send Moses to deliver them out of Egypt out of Egyptian slavery and remember how tyrannical Pharaoh was with them? When Moses goes to him, he basically says, "Turn the screws on these guys. They need it even worse. Give them the same quota of bricks but now don't give them any straw. Make them gather the straw before they make the bricks. We've been too soft on our slaves." So a year and a half later, they're getting close to where they're going to go into the Promised Land and, of course, they're going to fail, they're going to fail in unbelief in

Numbers 14, but in Numbers 11 they come to have this grumbling and complaining about the fact that they have to eat manna. And in fact, let's do turn there. You need to see this.

Numbers 11. Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers. Verse 4. It's a an example of what ingratitude does, the power of ingratitude to destroy and to discourage. Numbers 11:4, "The rabble who were among them had greedy desires; and also the sons of Israel wept again and said, 'Who will give us meat to eat?'" They'd been eating manna from heaven for well over a year, probably about a year and a half. And you know, we can think about that. I don't know about you, but I'm a person who likes to eat leftovers. Any of you guys like that? If it's good the first time, it's good the second time, maybe the third time to me. If I love it, hey, just bring it on again. Patty is not that way. It's like one time and then it's on probation for about a week or so until it can come back around, and so I get to eat all the leftovers that way. That's actually a blessing to me. No, but seriously, you know, too much of a good thing we can understand, right? Humanly speaking we can understand that, and so they come out of Egypt, there are 600,000 men of fighting age, so probably more like 2 or 3 million people, they're in a wilderness, a desert that is basically, there are no fields for them to glean from, they don't have any, you know, any livestock to speak of to satisfy their hunger, and basically they're homeless and helpless, and so what God does is God feeds them from heaven. Every morning they wake up and there's manna on the ground, and the manna they collect and then they mix it with honey, and they're able to roast it and to make some kind of a bread thing out of it, and they are fed every day like this for a year and a half. Now they're about to go into Canaan, and they're going to have a land flowing with milk and honey, but the Lord gives them this time of manna.

And so what it's saying here is they got so upset because they hadn't had meat. "We need something better to eat." And what this shows is, think about that. God told you he's taking you into a land flowing with milk and honey. He keeps emphasizing that, milk and honey, which I think a modern translation might say that sounds like ice cream to me. Milk and honey, right? It's going to be a great place. You're going to have everything that you would ever want. You're going to have vineyards that you didn't plant, fields that you didn't plant, flocks that you didn't raise. You're going to have the abundance of God but in this meantime God is feeding you out of heaven. You think they could have been patient but they weren't. They were so discontented and their discontent, their failure, I mean, think about this, if you were hungry and you woke up in the morning and supernaturally you knew God just put food there, would you complain that it wasn't your favorite food? "Lord, really can't You do better?" I mean, if you're starving to death and you need food, you're going to starve if you don't have food and God gives you food, a hungry man rejoices to have food. And the fact that it's been miraculously done, you can't forget that but they did. They not only forgot that, they forgot, it's like ingratitude leads you toward less and less sanity.

Look with me at verse 5. They said, "'Who will give us meat to eat,'" in verse 4, "We remember the fish which we used to eat free in Egypt, the cucumbers and the melons and the leeks and the onions and the garlic, but now our appetite is gone. There is nothing at all to look at except this manna." Now, what's interesting is that sounds like...Paul Tripp was doing the video the other night and he mentioned this passage and he said it sounds

like they're talking about their favorite restaurant. You know, "We remember, man, you remember the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, the garlic? Oh, remember how just tremendous meals that we had at that restaurant?" But where were they talking about? They were talking about what they ate when they were slaves in Egypt. They were talking about the rare moments of pleasure in the midst of oppressive bondage. But they'd forgotten the bondage. All they could remember was the little, tiny grain of joy that was otherwise crowded out by this oppressive cloud of suffering. Their failure to be grateful in the present made them forget the past. They were irrational about how they thought about the past. They wanted to go back to Egypt rather than, "Hey guys, have you just really considered this, that the laws of physics don't allow for this to be happening every day? We should not have food. We should be dead. Our God who delivered us, though we are not an army, we didn't have any weapons, He delivered us from the mightiest empire on the earth at that time, Egypt. By His mighty hand He delivered us. He took us through the Red Sea. He gave us water out of a rock, and He's been feeding us with bread from heaven. Wow, we have a lot to be thankful for!" And if they could have been rehearsing and reminding themselves of the amazing, awesome works of God, now you know, hey, I understand manna is getting a little old too, but the Lord... You see, if you have a right view of your past because you're thankful it gives you a right view of your present and it helps you have a right view of the future, then you can say, "Wait a minute, it's not going to be too long until we're in Canaan. This same God who's feeding us from heaven every day has promised to get us into Canaan." Three chapters later they're going to come up short because of their unbelief. They're going to look at the land of Canaan, the walled cities, the giants they see there, and they're going to say, "We can't do this," because they can't do this but they've forgotten the God that has promised he would do it for them. You see, gratitude for God's blessings that he's already given you strengthens you and gives you confidence in the promise of God for today and tomorrow.

They had forgotten that and so Peter is doing exactly the same thing. He's saying, look guys, you cannot possibly, I'm not going to start talking to you about the suffering that's coming or the difficulties until I, first of all, help ground you in what God has done. And we need to help each other to stay grounded in what God has done. So he says, "Blessed would be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ," and he basically begins listing, enumerating extraordinary blessings of God that are theirs now because of what God has already done, and in this he's saying, "Listen, faithfulness is rooted in thankfulness." And one thing I want you to see also in this as we go into this, is thankfulness, faithfulness is rooted in thankfulness because thankfulness produces joy. Thankfulness makes you joyful. Joyfulness makes you faithful. Remember in Nehemiah, the joy of the Lord is your strength. The way you're able to be strong in the Lord is to have the joy of the Lord and the way you get joy is by being grateful, and you see this in the passage we just read, twice there's a word use that is a very emphatic word about joy. Verse 6. After he's talked about some of the blessings, he starts enumerating the blessings in verse 3, and then in verse 4 he continues. In verse 5 he continues. In verse 6 he says, "In this," what I've already been talking about, in these blessings "you greatly rejoice," and the word is a word that's not used many times in the New Testament. It speaks of exuberant joy. It speaks of a joy that bubbles up from within and motivates an expression of joy. The Psalms that we read earlier, Ted and James read, "Shout joyfully to the Lord." God intends

to give us as we see who he is and what he's done, the joy that comes, it actually comes out of us. It can't be held in. This is the idea here and, "In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials." You have great rejoicing in the midst of this distress, or sadness, or sorrow, but then he's going to say in verses 7 and 8 God helps us in the present through that, we'll see this next Sunday, Lord willing. But look at verse 8, "though you have not seen Him," that is, Jesus Christ, "you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice." There it is again, same word. You rejoice with exuberance. And then he adds this phrase, "with joy inexpressible and full of glory."

He's saying that if you're looking at what God has done already in your life, you will be joyful. You will be exuberantly joyful. If you are just looking at reality, listen, if you are looking at reality as it truly is for the Christian, you will be at moments filled with joy inexpressible full of glory, you will be rejoicing. This is why Paul says in Philippians 4:4, "Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say, rejoice." Imperative both times. Rejoice in the Lord always. In some of the times? No. Most of the time? No. Always. Again I say, rejoice. And thankfulness and rejoicing go together. He's saying as you recount the blessings of God, you think about the blessings of God, you will greatly rejoice.

Christians are to be marked by thanksgiving and Christians are to be marked by joy. I mean, what's the second fruit of the Spirit? The second fruit of the Spirit: love, joy. When Jesus describes the Christian he's basically giving a portrait of the citizen of the kingdom in his Sermon on the Mount, the Beatitudes Matthew 5:3 to 12 when Jesus begins to teach on the mountain about the kingdom, what does he say? "Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are those that mourn." Well, "Blessed are," the word he uses there, *makarios*, is different than this word "blessed." That word in Matthew 5 speaks of joy itself. It's not so much about giving thanks, it's more about the joy actually. To be blessed as Jesus says, "O how happy are the poor in spirit." You could translate it that way. "O how happy are they who mourn, for they shall be comforted. O how happy are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

So joy is a part of this. We must be joyful. It's interesting too, that in the providence of God we read the miracle of Jesus turning water into wine. I remember when I was preaching on that years ago, it's been about 13 or 14 years ago when I was preaching through the gospel of John, and as a Baptist pastor to preach on Jesus turning water into wine brings up a little more difficulty than for a Presbyterian pastor. If you've been around Baptist churches, Presbyterian, you'll understand that. And so, in looking at that to understand what's going on here, some people say that the wine wasn't really wine, it was grape juice or something like that. I think that's silly. Doesn't make sense of the text. You say the best wine is what he says. Jesus made the best wine. Well, if you want some homework this week, look at Isaiah 25, one of the prophecies of the Messiah and what you see about the Messiah is he ushers in a time of abundant wine. And what you see as you read the Old Testament is, though we're not ever, we're not to be drunk with wine, we're to be filled with the Spirit, drunkenness is an evil, the reality is that wine gladdens the heart, and though we must be careful with it, it's a blessing of God and when Jesus turns the water into wine, he's saying, "Listen, the Messiah has come to bring abundant

joy." And not just a little joy, six giant jars full of joy, more joy than they could have ever needed at that wedding. They were running low, it was embarrassing. Mary's like, "We've got a problem." It would be a shame for parents who had planned the wedding. This is hitting a little too close to home, actually right now, but parents who had planned a wedding to not have enough for the people that are there, right? I mean, you've got to prepare for all of your guests to have a joyful celebration, and so it had been shame upon them. So Mary, her sensitive heart comes to the one she knows can do something about it and Jesus says, "Look, I don't think it's My time yet. I'm not supposed to be doing any miracles yet." But God even working through Mary and the circumstances is telling Jesus, "Yes, it is. This is the first one." And they're short on wine and what Jesus does is give them more wine than they can ever need, and what he's doing is he's saying and the first sign, the first miracle, it is joy to come to know Jesus Christ. Yes, you will come to see your sin if you're going to be saved, you have to be poor in spirit but, O how happy are the poor in spirit. O how happy are you when you come to realize you have nothing before God and that you are a wretched, sinful man like me in yourself. Nothing to commend yourself. O how happy are you because Jesus is everything that you need. He has taken your sin and it's been nailed to the cross. It's taken away and he gives his righteousness to you to robe you in the wedding garment to lead you to the one event that all of history is pointing to, the marriage supper of the Lamb when you who belong to Christ robed in his righteousness will celebrate with him and experience indescribable joy in his presence. And so Jesus was announcing that when he turned the water into wine.

Christians are joyful people. Now listen, many of you are not joyful. I know there are many times I'm not joyful. It seems like it's a lot easier to be unjoyful than it is to be joyful. But when we're being sad, I mean, listen we face life and that's what I love about Peter, you're going to have circumstances like he says in verse 6, which distress you, that is, the idea is heavy weight of sorrow comes upon you. That's what life in a fallen world does and Jesus, the Messiah of joy, was a man of sorrows acquainted with grief. The reality is in this world you're going to have tribulation, you're going to have sorrow, but the Christian who's thinking rightly will find that in the moments of distress and the moments of great affliction and sadness, when he remembers all that he truly knows to be true and he reflects on who God is and what God has done, he will find bubbling up in the midst of that sorrow an indescribable joy that strengthens him to be faithful. This is what God is talking about. This is what we need, this ability to be grateful and joyful.

And so we have to reflect upon the blessings of God and so I want to share with you beginning today and continuing next week on even blessings of God or seven gifts of God for which we should actively reflect on, actively give thanks for to him, actively give thanks for or about to others. Let's look at the first one. "Blessed to be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again." The first thing that we can say is that the first blessing that we have from God is we have received his great mercy. If you are a Christian, you are a recipient of great inestimable mercy. Mercy is that attribute of God where he sees us in our misery which we have brought upon ourselves, which we deserve, his justice would leave us there rightly so, but the fact that he's also a God of mercy, not just a God of justice, he's a God of mercy too, he is a God of justice, he does not stop being a God of justice, but he's

a God of mercy, he looks at us in our misery, his heart is moved with compassion into action to alleviate our suffering. And it is irrespective of anything in us, it is welling up in him and we are recipients of this great mercy, that is, he does not give us what our sins deserve. He has found a way to be just and holy and righteous and still pardon sinners because he punished, if you are in Christ, he punished your sins fully in Jesus on the cross, that is, every bit of the wrath of God that you deserve for every evil thing that you've done or that I've done, every evil thought, every evil action, every evil attitude, God placed upon Christ and poured out his holy wrath upon the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, treated Jesus as we deserve to be treated, turned his back, as it were, upon the Son on the cross. He who knew no sin became sin for us. That's why Jesus, this idea of wrath, remember what Jesus said in the garden of Gethsemane? "Father, if it be possible let this cup pass from Me." Why is he talking about cup? He's talking about the cup of God's wrath. He knows that he's been appointed to be the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world and as he stands literally in the shadow of the cross the night before his crucifixion, he pleads with the Father in his humanity the agony of what he knows he will be experiencing, the reality of the author of life experiencing death, the one who, when the seraphim saw him in Isaiah 6 said, "Holy Holy, is the Lord of hosts." John 12 says they saw Jesus. "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts." He will become sin. And so Jesus, in his humanity, he looks ahead to that reality. He says, "Father, if there's any other way for You to accomplish Your will, let this cup pass from Me. Let the cup of Your wrath, I don't want to drink the cup of Your wrath. Nevertheless, not My will but thy will be done." And three times he prays like that, but he always ends with, "Nevertheless not My will but Your will be done."

And he did drink the cup all the way to the bottom, and that's why those words that he said, "It is finished." After he'd hung on the cross for hours abandoned by God's loving presence now experiencing his wrath, separated, he says, "It is finished, paid in full. The sin debt has been paid in full. The wrath of God for all Mine who will belong to Me has been exhausted. I have received all of it. There remains therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." Do you see why that's the case? All of it was taken by Jesus for everyone who would ever believe/ And you're a recipient of that mercy. And if you reflect upon that, how that gives context for whatever you're going through, doesn't it? It's just helpful to remember that sometimes we think we deserve better and the world tells us that, "You deserve." You know, years ago is, "You deserve a break today." Is that Burger King or something like that? I don't remember, but anyway, "You deserve better. You deserve good healthcare. You deserve. You deserve. You deserve." The reality is, no, you deserve, you and I deserve hell. That's the only thing we can claim that we deserve. But God's mercy, he's found a way not to give us what we deserve.

So you're a recipient of God's great mercy. Celebrate that. Reflect on that. Secondly, you have received the gift of a new birth if you're in Christ, "Who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope." You've been born again. What an amazing reality this new birth is, a supernatural, miraculous, spiritual birth. This is what Jesus was talking about in John 3 when he speaks to Nicodemus when he said to Nicodemus, the Jewish teacher of the law, "You must be born, unless a man is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." A man must be born again. Nicodemus, the teacher

of the law, this well-known, Jesus calls him, "You're the teacher of Israel," was apparently like the celebrity preacher among the Pharisees. "You're Israel's teacher and you don't understand these things?" Because Nicodemus says, "How can a man be born when he's old? You can't go back into your mother's womb and be born again?" Jesus says, "You must be born of water and the spirit." You have to be born spiritually and after he has this discussion with Nicodemus, he says, "I can't believe you don't understand this." Now of course, Jesus knew that he wouldn't understand this. Jesus knows all things, but what he's saying is, "Look, if you read your Bible, Nicodemus, with any sense at all, you would know that you must be born again." The Bible has made this clear, the necessity of the new birth. The Old Testament made it clear.

We're going to look at this more when we look at verses 10 to 12, but essentially just know this that the Bible made clear from the beginning that we needed to have circumcised hearts. The covenant of circumcision in Genesis 17, the only thing that God required of Abraham was his part of the covenant was to be circumcised, and that meant to circumcise the foreskin of the flesh of every male. That's circumcision, but then shortly after giving that revelation through Moses to the people, he clarifies in Deuteronomy 10:16 and Deuteronomy 30:6, that you must circumcise your hearts to the Lord. In fact, Deuteronomy 10:16 says circumcise the foreskin of your hearts. Chapter 30, verse 6 says in that day after the Babylonian captivity, in the future salvation that God is going to bring, he will circumcise your hearts. Deuteronomy 30:6. Then Jeremiah and Ezekiel pick up this theme and they make it clear. So Jesus is saying, "Look, if you've been reading your Bible with any attention to detail at all, just looking at the plain meaning of the text, you would know this, Nicodemus. How can you not?"

And the New Testament unfolds this wonder that God always intended to save us. Through the death of Christ he justifies us, but he gives us a new nature, a new birth. You have been born again. You have been born spiritually. You were dead but now you're alive. You've been born into a new family. You have a new Father. You have the same Father that Jesus Christ has. The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ has caused us to be born again. The doctrine of regeneration, this is the idea that to be saved you must be made new. 2 Corinthians 5:17 says if any man is in Christ he is a new creation. It's not just a change of attitude or change of belief or change of mind about, "I believe Jesus is who he says he is. I want to change my way of life. I don't like how I'm living." That's part of what salvation brings but its fundamental barest essence it is the impartation of a new nature. That's regeneration. Regenerate means to recreate.

2 Corinthians 5:17 I quoted just a moment ago. Paul says if any man's in Christ he's a new creature. Chapter 4, verse 6 is interesting. He says in the previous chapter, 5:17, he talks about the new birth and he likens it to the creation of the world. Creation ex nihilo. He says in 2 Corinthians 4:6, the God who said let light come out of darkness has shone in our hearts to give us the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. He's saying that the saving work of God in the human soul is like the same amazing miracle when God looked at darkness and said, "Let there be light and there was light." It takes that same kind of creative power to save a sinner. This is why the gospel is the power of God into salvation. The proclamation of Christ is the means by which God then speaks

into the heart of someone who's spiritually dead and he makes them alive and he makes them a new creation, a new spiritual baby. In fact, Peter is going to say in 1 Peter 2:2, like newborn babies long for the pure milk of the word. You're like a newborn baby as Christians. Well, what should newborn babies want? They should want to eat and the milk of the word is what you need to eat. In fact, he talks about being born again in verse 23 also. How is a person born again? Well, God has to do it. How can I do it? God must do it right? Well, how does God normally do it? Look what he says in verse 23 of chapter 1 of 1 Peter, "for you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, through the living and enduring word of God." That is, the means which God uses to bring about new birth is the word of God. So what do you need? You feel like, "I'm not born again. I need to be born again." What should you do? Read the word. Sit under the teaching of the word. Sit under the preaching of the word. Cling to God. Ask God to save you and continue to fill your minds with the word of God. Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of Christ.

So God saves us through his word. When you come humbly to the Lord and you say, "Lord, save me, give me a new heart," he will not turn you away if you come genuinely and you're trusting in him. In fact, his exhortation continually is, "Come." Isaiah 55, "Come to the waters. Come without money or without cost. Come and receive." Revelation 22, there again, "The Spirit and the bride say, come." It's always, "Come." The invitation, God must do it but he says you must go to the Lord pleading with him to do what only he can do. And when you go knowing that you have no power in yourself and you look to Jesus Christ, he will speak. He says, "If any man come to Me I will by no means cast him out." But the evidence that we've been saved, there is new life, a new birth, a new nature, the beginning of new desires. You still have the old man and sometimes the old man clouds out the new man so that you can't even see in there anymore and often it's the case in counseling with brothers and sisters who are caught up in sin. It's hard to see have they really been saved yet? Only time will tell as you continue to work with them and if life is there, it will be evident as they seek to put off sin and put on holiness. It will become evident.

But you've received a new birth. The point here is, he's saying, "Listen, you have been born again." Think about that. Think about how amazing it is that you have been out of all the people on the earth who are walking around without hope, without God in the world, God looked at you and he made you. He said, "Let there be light," and you had light in your soul. You have a new nature. "Yeah, it's hard to live in this sinful world. Yeah, it's hard to go through what I'm going through. You don't know what I'm suffering." No, I don't but I know if you would put that in context of with all that I'm dealing with, with all that I feel inadequate for, remember isn't it amazing that you have experienced the new birth? And a new birth means a new family. A new Father. And he says next, thirdly, a new hope, a living hope. You have received great mercy. You've received a new birth, and you have received a new birth to a living hope.

Amazing phrase he uses here. The word hope in the New Testament, the way the authors of Scripture use it in the Old testament as well, is never like we sometimes use it in English. Hope can be wishful thinking. "Boy, I hope it works out, but I really don't expect

it to." That's not this kind of hope. The biblical hope is a desire for some future good just the same way with the wishful thinking. It's got some of the commonality to it. It's not wishful thinking. It is a desire for some future good with expectation of obtaining it, that through faith it is more and more certain of it because the reality is when God has promised it, you will have it. If you understand the promise of God rightly a lot of times we misunderstand the promises of God, we claim things that we shouldn't claim because we're just wrong, but when you claim what God has told you that you should claim, you will have that which you ask and you're to believe that with firmness of faith. And the stronger your faith, the more lively your hope. But we've been born again to have a living hope. We now have a hope in us, a sense that there is good coming for us in the future, a growing expectancy as the more you walk with God, the more you're in the word, the more you grow, a growing sense of certainty that, yes, heaven is my home. It's not just hope, it's a living hope. A living hope. A hope that certainly means undying, but it means more than that, it means an animating hope. It's a hope that that moves you.

This hope, this expectancy, what are you going to say, we'll look at this more next time, the living hope is rooted in this inheritance. It's rooted in what we have coming in heaven. And the more that we focus on that, the more that we understand all that God has for us in the future in heaven, and also we're going to see in the future in our lives that he's only going to bring blessing, this hope, this living hope undergirds and strengthens us and makes us more and more joyful and thankful and faithful. This living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, the power that gave us new life is the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. The thing that has given us mercy is the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and the thing that has given us hope is the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. I think this has kind of a double relationship to hope. The resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead means that he, God, has certified all of his promises forever, and so everything that he has said he will do, he will do, and the proof is Jesus lives. He did not abandon his soul to decay, his body to decay, his soul to the grave. Jesus lives and because he lives, you will live with him, because he lives everything God said he would do he has done and will do.

But it also has another aspect of it. The reason we have this living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead is that what God has done in giving us new birth in this great mercy and this hope is he's actually connected us organically to the resurrection power of Jesus. The same power that raised Jesus from the dead is at work in you who believe and that power that raised him from the dead is what enlivens your holiness and your hope. And so he's saying lean on Christ. Remember when you don't think you have anything, remember that the resurrection power of Jesus is in you. You're able to walk in newness of life through the resurrection of Jesus. Romans 6:3-5. It's your union with Christ.

We have hope that the world can't understand. They need and we need to share it with them. That's what I was telling about earlier when I was talking like I've been thinking about Thanksgiving. You know, hey, wouldn't it be a good conversation starter because a lot of times, especially for a pastor, it's really hard to have conversations when people already know you're a pastor. Their guard is up, you know? But like, "Hey, what are you

thankful for this year? What are some blessings you're really most thankful for?" And you listen and you hear what they have say and you celebrate that. "That's great. That's good to hear. You know what I'm most thankful for is the hope that I have in Christ and the peace that I have, even though I see the world decaying and just going down the tubes around us." So many people know that that's happening and they don't have hope but we have a living hope. And you see, we can meet them at a point of need, and we can say, "Listen, I found hope. I found a certain hope. I know that the God who reigns over heaven and earth is still reigning." And actually as I've been reading Isaiah lately, he's doing exactly what he did in Isaiah's day. He's pouring out judgment on people who've said, "Leave me alone. Leave me alone. Leave me alone." America has been saying, Leave me alone. Leave me alone." He's saying, "This is what it looks like when I leave you alone." But the wonderful thing is, when you read Isaiah, I was reading Isaiah, there's a passage Isaiah 19 and 20, it talks about Egypt and Assyria, the great enemies of Israel, that God is going to make a pathway from Egypt to Assyria, and he's going to be a Savior to the Egyptians and the Assyrians, another evidence that God has always wanted to reach the Gentiles. And he's going to send a Savior for the Egyptians and the Assyrians. And so what you're seeing is God's judgment that comes, comes judging sinners and evil sinners so that some might repent and be saved. It's getting the attention of people, evil people who are running away from God. God brings judgment to get their attention to say, "Look, there's another reason to live. You need Me. You need to know Me. You need to love Me. You need to be saved by Me."

And as we as Christians, if we can be people who are marked by thankfulness and joyfulness in this day, I mean, how we will shine. Everybody is more depressed. Not everybody, most everybody. The joy level for everybody has gone down some, hasn't it? But the Christian's joy level isn't tied to the things that are going on around us. We have a living hope, an unshakable joy in a risen Savior and that's something we need to think about, we need to thank God for, we need to celebrate among each other and keep reminding each other of these things so that we can live triumphantly and God will be glorified in a people who are joyful and thankful and satisfied because we of all people ought to be joyful and thankful and satisfied.

Let's pray.

Our Father, how grateful we are, Lord, Your salvation that You have made known to us isbBeyond anything we could have ever in our wildest dreams imagined. So miraculous is Your divine love and it blows our minds, it leaves us in awe and wonder that You would save sinful people like us, people who are just like the Israelites so often. We grumble and complain. We miss the plain facts right in front of us that You have been so kind and so merciful. Forgive us, Lord. Have mercy on us. We pray especially for those who have not repented and placed their faith in Christ that You would cause them to cry out to You from the depths of their being and, Lord, that You would answer their cry because You are faithful to do so. We know You will. Save them through Your glorious Son, through Your word. And Father, for Your people, make us joyful. This holiday season I pray that we would be rooted and grounded in the things that You have done and we would develop and cultivate a deeper joy and gratitude than we've ever known

before. And help us keep picking each other up and helping each other to remember because we're so prone to forget. Father, be glorified in Your people. We pray this in Jesus' wonderful name. Amen.