

What Causes Gratitude

Colossians 1:12-14 *giving thanks to the Father who has qualified us to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in the light. ¹³ He has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love, ¹⁴ in whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins.*

On a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being the best and highest, how excited are you about the topic of salvation? Many Christians, if they answered honestly, would rank it a two, maybe a three. When it comes to the things that thrill and enthuse and excite them, it would be a particular TV programme, a car, the chance of making more money, listening to a certain artist, playing a game, seeing a movie, going shopping, eating a meal. But salvation would not be very high on their list.

It is a terrible thing that we grow bored with truth that should keep us excited all day every day. It is a sign of depravity that we grow tired of things that keep the saints in heaven, and the angels, eternally enthusiastic. It doesn't take much thought to realise there is something wrong with us when we grow blasé or nonchalant about the most important realities of all.

Yet it happens to all of us. With anything in life – we are thrilled about something when it is new – a new car, a new pair of shoes, a new job, a new friendship, a new church, a new phone. Because it is new, the newness causes our enthusiasm – there is discovery, there is something other than the tedium of what we already know. But after a time, the shoes get worn, the phone is used, the friendship becomes one of our old ones, the church becomes simply the church. Repetition dulls our enthusiasm. There seems to be some kind of law in our natures, that as familiarity increases, wonder and awe and gratitude decreases.

I think it is something, sadly, to do with a loss of innocence, something connected to our depravity, which makes us bored and tired of the things which ought to keep amazing and thrilling us.

There is nothing in the universe, including the creation itself, as awesome as God's plan to save sinners. Of all the things which should amaze, enthrall, and cause wonder, joy and gratitude, it is our salvation. Yet, we must admit, we all acutely sense this sad fact – we have long ago taken our salvation for granted.

This passage of Scripture gives us another chance to reverse the process of becoming bored with truth, apathetic, taking it for granted. God knows our spiritual tyres leak their air out. He knows the sad state of our hearts is to quickly lose enthusiasm and joy over truths that once seemed to sparkle.

Coming at the end of Paul's prayer, it is fuel for gratitude. All the words in verses 12 to 14 are designed to cause us to give thanks. They give us understanding of how we are to gain that joyful heart which gives thanks to God for our salvation. We know that, because Paul talks about our *inheritance in the saints in the light*. That inheritance refers to the eternal life we inherit at the point of salvation, and all the promises that are given to those who are in Christ.

Of all the references to thanksgiving in the New Testament – do you know what the outstanding subject of them is? *Salvation*. Again and again, thanks is given for salvation. Salvation is at the top of our list for thanksgiving. So if you are not thankful for the biggest blessing, you probably won't do very well with the smaller ones. So here then is the chance to examine *why* it is and *how* it is we are to be thankful over our salvation. There are three things this passage teaches us about our salvation:

I. Reflect on *Why* God Had To Do This

Look at the first thing we read God did regarding our salvation in verse 12 – '*qualified*'.

That word means God made us worthy, he made us sufficient to share in the saints' inheritance, which is eternal life in Christ. Now, if God had to make us sufficient, if God had to do the qualifying on our behalf, what does that imply about us?

a) *We were insufficient to qualify for eternal life*

We did not qualify for heaven. Left to ourselves, we were not sufficient to make it to Christ.

1 Corinthians 6:9-11 *Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, ¹⁰ nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God. ¹¹ And such were some of you. ...*

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Galatians 5:19-21 *Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, ²⁰ idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, ²¹ envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told you in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.*

Do you know that heaven rejects liars? Heaven rejects people who envy. Heaven rejects people who think malicious thoughts over others. Heaven rejects the sexually immoral. Heaven rejects idolaters. Heaven rejects gossipers. Heaven rejects people who cheat. Heaven rejects boasters. Heaven rejects people who trust in themselves.

No one is grateful for what they think is natural. Very few people are thankful for gravity, when they throw a ball and it drops down – they don't get misty-eyed and begin praising gravity. You take it for granted – it's supposed to happen that way. People are not often thankful that the molecules of solids stay together and don't melt over their hand when they pick up a book, for example. You don't give thanks for that, you just expect it.

Now many people have the idea that going to heaven is a very natural thing for humans, like rivers run to the sea, so humans live, die and go to heaven. They think you have to do something extraordinarily sinful to go to hell. In other words, they think people *do* qualify for heaven naturally, that they are *sufficient*.

Some Christians do not think much of their insufficiency. They think they missed it by a hair, and Jesus gave them a nudge. So they are not thankful.

Reflect on why God had to initiate salvation – because you and I were insufficient.

Look in verse 14:

'in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins'

Now we don't use this word *redeem* much today. We do talk about *redeeming the voucher we got*, or *redeeming a prize through something we received in a product*, but it's pretty trivial things. In Paul's day, redemption was a life and death, blood and dirt and tears kind of thing. It had to do with slavery.

We know that slavery was a terrible thing. Humans were sold as products, mere objects to be used as you saw fit once you had bought them. People became slaves for various reasons. Sometimes they were captives from a conquered nation. Sometimes they had got into debt, and sold themselves into slavery. Sometimes they were convicted criminals. Sometimes they were picked up as abandoned babies or infants and sold by unscrupulous people. Sometimes they were simply the

children of other slaves. Slaves had no rights, no freedoms. They were sold in a slave market. Usually they were naked and in chains. People would bid on them. Whoever paid the best price would free that slave from whoever was selling them, to become their own property. If you were bought by a good master, you would enjoy a good life. If you were bought by a cruel or wicked master, you would suffer.

If we have been redeemed, what does that say about where we were, who we were?

b) We were enslaved

We were prisoners of our sins, criminals, children of other slaves, captives of sin. As much as we thought we were free and independent, the truth is, we were captive to our own sin natures; we were bound by our selfish desires; we were ensnared by this world and its lies and goals. And we were, in the sight of God, like a naked, wretched, miserable slave, in chains. Worse, we were acting like we were just fine.

It is thinking about why He had to do this, which causes gratitude to spring up. The one who has sinned much and knows it – loves much.

The hinge that gratitude swings on is the word *deserve*. If you think you deserve better than what you are getting – you will not be grateful. If you think you deserve worse than you are getting – you will be grateful.

When you realise who and what you were, and what God had to do to make you a partaker of the inheritance of the saints in the light – gratitude begins to grow. When you begin to realise – I was hopeless, a slave to sin, completely at the mercy of God, then gratitude starts to well up in the heart.

II. Reflect on *What God Did to Save Us*

The second way that gratitude grows in the heart is to think on what God actually did to give you eternal life.

a) He redeemed you

Just as the ancient slavers had to pay a price, so God had to pay a price. The word 'forgiveness' speaks of a debt. We owed a debt. To buy us out of slavery, would mean to pay that debt.

Let's say you have got into astronomical debt, let's imagine over two million Rand. And the one you owe that money to sells you as a slave to get that money back. So he sets the price at the level of your debt – two million Rand. Who would pay two million Rand to buy you?

In our case, the debt was much higher than money. Sin is like going to the vault of God's glory, and stealing some and then wasting it on yourself. It is stealing His gift of life and using it for self-worship, self-pleasure, self-admiration. Every sin, every word, thought and deed, is another theft from God's glory. Now add up every single word, thought and deed – done and left undone – how much do you think you owe God?

You owe Him back his glory – His righteousness. Could you ever pay that? Can any other person pay God the price of God's glory? The only Person who could do that was Jesus. God, the Son, paid God, by giving up His life. Since Jesus is God, if Jesus sheds His blood, He is giving up that glorious life. He is paying for you, with His own glory – with His life. (Acts 20:28)

b) He rescued you

In verse 13 we have a further description of what the Lord has done to allow us to share in the inheritance of the saints.

The word, *deliver*, means to rescue, to save out of great danger. God rescued us. Every story we have ever read which depicts a brave person rescuing someone from an evil place with great danger only points to The Great Rescue - God plundering the dark domain itself, and rescuing us.

Where did we have to be rescued from?

The domain of darkness. This speaks of the powers of evil, and the domain they have in this world. So here is a terrifying place to be – a place of evil, ruled by cruel angels of darkness, where sin and shame run unrestrained. It is a dangerous, destructive, malicious place, filled with hate.

One of the things about Satan's kingdom is this – no one escapes. No one slips out by themselves. No one just wanders out. The only way you get out is if you are broken out. When a power greater than his power breaks in; opens your blind eyes; resurrects your dead heart; places His own Spirit in you; adopts you as His own; grants you Christ's righteousness.

c) He relocated you

Look at verse 13, because there are two parallel contrasts.

He took us from one place and transferred us into another.

That's the next phrase – He conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love. The word used here is the word used to talk about deporting people from one land to another. God rescues us from that dark country, and takes us to the land ruled by His beloved Son. He does not free us to go off and do our own thing. He rescues us to place you under the rule of King Jesus.

But if King Jesus is loved by the Father, and God rescues us to place you in His kingdom, what does that say about God's attitude toward us? He loves us indeed. For Him to have paid the price of His own Son, means He loves us very much indeed. It does not mean you and I were worth the price of God's Son in ourselves. It means God loved us so much He thought it worth paying that price.

As we reflect on *why* this had to happen, and *what* He did to make it happen – gratitude and love can swell up in our hearts.

But there are thousands of Christians who read Colossians 1:12 to 14 and gratitude does not spring up in their hearts. They reflect on why this had to happen, they reflect on what He did and gratitude doesn't spring up. What is the problem?

I am going to attempt to explain something which will require some work on your part to grasp, because it is a bit subtle and you have to apply yourself, and probably spend a good deal of time thinking about it afterwards.

I believe the reason gratitude does not spring up in the hearts of Christians who understand these things with their minds, is that they have not imagined the truth properly.

Imagine the Truth Properly

Now people get nervous when they hear *imagination*. Generally, when you hear the word *imagination*, you tend to think of that part of your mind which dreams and thinks of unreal things, the part of you which is amused when it watches stories about spaceships and flying horses and magic kingdoms.

But, in fact, the imagination is a part of your mind which you have to use to understand things which you have not seen, cannot see, nor cannot understand any other way.

Let me illustrate. If I told you there was a new animal called a Lumpka, what would come into your mind? Nothing would come, because you cannot imagine it. You haven't seen one, so *memory* won't help you. You can't *reason* it out, and try to use logic, because logic and reason deal with things you know. How are you going to know what to think when I say 'Lumpka'? The only way would be if I tell you what it is like, and then you will imagine it. If I say, 'it is a bit like a cross between a zebra and a donkey, with a tail like a pig's', then, because you know what a zebra and donkey are, and what a pig's tail looks like, you could put those together and try to understand what this creature is about.

Now in the same way, when God comes to man to tell him, 'This is who I am', there is a difficulty. God is like nothing we know. That is part of what it means to be God - to be utterly unique. So when God says - 'This is what I am,' guess what He must use. He cannot use your *memory*, He cannot use *reason* or logic all the time. Certainly they have their uses in Scripture - to reason what is revealed. But you can't reason what you don't know.

So God compares Himself to things we do know. We know light, we know darkness. God says - who I am is like your experience of light; I am not like your experience of darkness. We use our imagination to think that this means God is open and revealed like light, truthful, it is bright and welcoming and safer than night. Darkness is dangerous, and shameful things are done in the dark, and evil doers like the cover of darkness.

We know fire. So God says - 'I am like fire.' Using our imagination we understand this means God is powerful, and even dangerous, but purifying, beautiful.

When you think about it, this is almost entirely how God explains Himself to us. Using pictures, things we can associate with Him, so as to understand Him. Rock, Shepherd, Door, Water, Shield, Bridegroom, King, Master, Judge, Dwelling Place, Commander of an Army, Father, Eagle, Lion, Lamb. We could list many, many more.

Now this is where I am going with this. When God talks to us about salvation, it is so massive, and so glorious, that the only way He can explain it to us is again to use word pictures, things we do know, to understand what we don't know. He says 'Justification', is like a courtroom scene, redemption, a slave-market scene, regeneration, a birth scene, cleansing - and so on. He does these things so we can understand what is happening.

In fact, in this passage alone, there have been at least eight images - qualified, inheritance, light, darkness, kingdom, domain, rescue, redeem.

God gives us these images to grant us understanding. If we will ponder the meaning of the images, we come to an understanding of what is going on in the unseen spiritual realm.

But there is more to it than that - He does so, because the *images are what cause these kinds of affections*.

Basically stating the doctrine in propositional form does not move the heart to gratitude. But the image of a valiant warrior, storming the heart of the evil King's castle in the dead of dark night, freeing us, placing us on His white horse and riding into the bright, kingdom of His love for us - that evokes gladness.

So when you come to reflect on your salvation, ponder the images.

Here is the problem – if, when you heard *rescue, deliver, redeem*, your mind could not imagine it, or what it did imagine caused no gratitude in you, it shows you that that is where the problem lies. You don't have a problem understanding these propositions. But growing up in the culture we do, we have a hard time letting the biblical pictures affect us as they should – or to put it another way – to imagine them correctly.

You need to become aware of all the images with which you are being bombarded every day. Begin to think about what it is that is shaping your religious imagination. To what do you expose yourself that is going to help you correctly imagine what God says about Himself? To what do you expose yourself that is going to help you understand what the Bible means when it talks about unseen things like truth, justice, courage, trust – and above all – love.

If your understanding of King, Shepherd, Master, kingdom, redeem, love, is being shaped by trite, shallow, banal, sentimental TV shows, or books, you will not be awed by those images.

Protect your imagination by exposing it to what is true, and noble, and honourable and upright, and lovely and pure. Much of your faith depends on it.

Parents, protect your children from what will trivialise and water down their understanding of biblical images. They will never tremble, nor be in stunned silence, nor filled with excitement, nor amazed nor thankful, if the images coming into their minds when they hear 'inheritance, rescue, redemption, light, darkness' are shallow, small, boring images. If they need a TV to make them imagine, they are hobbling on one leg when it comes to faith, because faith requires the moral imagination.

Therefore, you need to think very carefully about your music, your TV watching, your reading, your entertainment choices. Shield yourself from those who rock the Gospel. Shield yourself from Christian songs which dumb down the religious imagination. The reason we select the hymns we do, is that they fire the religious imagination. Consider the profound images in this beloved hymn:

*We taste Thee, O Thou living Bread,
And long to feast upon Thee still;
We drink of Thee, the Fountainhead,
Add thirst our souls from Thee to fill.*

Compare that to the trite sentiments of love for Jesus, which, ironically, do not cause the love we are singing about.

Shield yourself, not only from TV containing blasphemy and nudity, but also from that which 'dumbs down' your imagination. It does more damage than you will understand on this side of eternity.

These things – reflecting on the meaning of salvation; reflecting on the images; require time and thought. If you cannot carve out time, and wrestle your own schedule to make the time, your faith will be anaemic, hollow and not able to power your Christian life.

You know your moral imagination is in trouble if these images do not evoke any response in you. The wrong image creates the wrong response. God did not make a mistake in selecting the image. If the wrong response is present, then probably the wrong image is in our minds.

So what you read; what hymns you sing; what music you listen to; what artwork you look at; what poetry you read; what books and stories you read, are not secondary. These are the things which are going to put the very images of Scripture in context – give them colour, meaning, depth, power.

The attitude of gratitude comes about through reflection and imagination. Reflect on why you had to be saved. Reflect on what it meant to be saved. And then seek to understand these biblical pictures of salvation, to understand and experience the massive reality that is our salvation.