

A Spirit of Thanksgiving

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[0 : 00] Thank you. I think it's the first time I've ever been introduced as a treat. Don't quite know what to make of it.

Anyway, actually it is a treat for me to be here. To see your beautiful faces. You are the church. And Jesus is deeply invested in you.

Amen. Amen. I trust you've enjoyed your 4th of July weekend. It's special for me. I became a citizen of the U.S. on the 4th of July 2000 under the Space Needle in Seattle.

So I have some amazing memories. And I'm super grateful to be part of this nation. On Thursday night, Lisa and I were in the park.

And it was just before the fireworks started. And we saw this couple walking into the park. And they were clearly not from here. She had sort of what I think was Middle Eastern dress flowing with a head piece.

[1 : 20] And they just looked real awkward and a little hesitant. And they had two little kids. Beautiful little girl. Beautiful little boy. And so as we walked past, I said to them, are you ready for the fireworks?

Fireworks. And they said, what fireworks? And I said, they're going to be fireworks tonight. And they said, why? And I said, it's the 4th.

And they looked at me. What's the 4th? Well, it's Independence Day. What's Independence Day? I said, it's America's birthday.

So she went, what does that mean? So I said, well, that's when we kicked England out of our country. And she kind of looked at her husband.

And today, we're going to talk about celebration and Thanksgiving and gratitude. And we're in this series in the book of Nehemiah.

[2 : 23] And they are celebrating what God has done. But the point I'm trying to make with this Middle Eastern couple is if you don't know the facts and the content and the context, it's hard to just celebrate.

Like if you don't know what's going on. And so that's why it's important that we go to the Scriptures to find out what's going on so that we can be grateful and we can be thankful and we can celebrate.

So if you haven't been with us over the last few weeks, you'll need to know some of the content here. So this is an Old Testament book named after the main character, Nehemiah.

And the context is that Israel had gone into exile for many, many years. And miraculously, God raised up an ungodly king who said, hey, you need to go back to your own country.

And so they began to filter back to Jerusalem. But it had been almost 100 years since they had returned, many of them. And the walls of the city had not been restored.

[3 : 38] Now, in the Near East, ancient cities, a city without a wall was like living in a house without a front door. You didn't sleep well and it didn't feel good.

And so this was a bit of a disaster. But God raises up Nehemiah, our main character, who was born in Babylon, never had put his foot in Jerusalem.

God put it in his heart. He prayed for four months. God raised him up and he became the project manager. And the wall was rebuilt despite great opposition in 52 days.

And then God didn't stop there. He began to rebuild the people. And he began to rebuild their lives. Now, this is important for us today because Jerusalem in Scripture is often a foreshadow of the church.

And we find ourselves in an age where the church needs to be rebuilt in our country and beyond. And our lives need rebuilding oftentimes and patching up.

[4 : 51] So we're going to lean in and really take this story as if it's a story for us because it is. And so when God starts rebuilding their lives, the walls are done.

And in previous sermons, you can go back on the website. He does it through the reading of Scripture. Ezra stands up, opens the books that were lost for decades, the Bible basically, the Old Testament.

And he starts reading. And the people for six hours stand and listen to the Word of God being read. And they're weeping. And then the next day, the leaders come and they discover they haven't kept the Feast of Booths for many, many decades.

And so annual feasts and rituals are being reestablished. And then they find out about the Sabbath. And they begin the Sabbath.

And so God slowly starts rebuilding them as a people. And it's just an amazing time. And last we looked at some of the sacrifices and services that were reinstated that showed them how to be the people of God, which is very exciting.

[6 : 05] Well, today, where we in previous chapters saw them standing shoulder to shoulder building a wall, now we're going to see them standing shoulder to shoulder celebrating the completion of the wall.

And our topic is gratitude and thanksgiving. Now, I don't know if you as a kid were ever told by your parents, be grateful.

Did you ever know how to do that? Especially after you'd thrown a tantrum? Or who have you have done that as a parent? No, no, don't put up your hands. But it's not always helpful.

You can get them to do certain things. But how do you really cultivate a heart of true gratitude and thankfulness?

That's what we're going to talk about. So we're going to read our text, which is out of Nehemiah 12, verses 27 to 47. And it's got a bunch of really difficult names.

[7 : 10] So you're going to enjoy yourself watching me struggle my way through pronouncing them. Just don't laugh out too loud. But there are things I want you to notice. You'll hear about two choirs.

The one choir goes on the wall to the north side and the other to the south side of the city. There are musicians. There are guitars. There are singing.

And besides all of that and the leaders, there's a big celebration. You'll see in verse 43 that even women and children were involved. And the noise and the rejoicing was so loud it was heard from far, far away.

All right. So let's start. Nehemiah 12, 27. And at the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem, they sought the Levites in all their places to bring them to Jerusalem to celebrate the dedication with gladness. With thanksgiving and with singing, with cymbals, harps, and lyres. And the sons of the singers gathered together from the district surrounding Jerusalem and from the villages of Nephthophites.

[8 : 23] The Nephthophites. Also, the Beth Gilgal, from Beth Gilgal and from the region of Geber and Asmaveth. For the singers had built for themselves villages around Jerusalem.

And the priests and the Levites purified themselves and they purified the people and the gates and the walls. Then I brought the leaders of Judah up onto the wall and appointed two great choirs that gave thanks.

One went to the south on the wall to the dung gates. And after them went Hoshia and half of the leaders of Judah and Azariah and Ezra and Meshulam, Judah, Benjamin, Shemiah and Jeremiah. And certain of the priests, sons with trumpets. Zachariah, the son of Jonathan. The son of Shemiah. The son of Mataniah.

The son of Micaiah. Son of Zachor. Son of Asaph. And his relatives, Shemiah, Azariah, Malilai, Gilalai, Ma'iah, Nethanel, Judah, and Hanani.

[9 : 38] With the musical instruments of David, the man of God. And Ezra, the scribe, went before them. At the fountain gate, they went up straight before them by the stairs of the city of David.

At the ascent of the wall above the house of David to the water gate on the east. The other choir of those who gave thanks went to the north.

And I followed them with half the people on the wall. Above the tower of the ovens to the broad wall and above the gate of Ephraim. And by the gate of Yeshanah.

And by the fish gate and the tower of Hananel. And the tower of the hundred and the sheep gate.

And they came to a halt at the gate of the God. So both the choirs of those who gave thanks stood in the house of God.

And I and half of the officials with me. And the priest, Eliakim, Masala, Minyamin, Micaiah, Eluri, Noi, Zechariah, Hananiah.

[10 : 43] With trumpets and Messiah, Shammai, Eliezer, Uzi, Jehohanan, Melchicha, Jan, Elam, and Ezra.

Ezra, sorry. And the singers sang with Jezriah as their leader. And they offered great sacrifices that day and rejoiced.

For God had made them rejoice with great joy. The women and the children also rejoiced. And the joy of Jerusalem was heard far away. And on that day men were appointed over the storehouses, the contributions, the first fruits, and the tithes.

To gather into them the portions required by the law for the priests and for the Levites. According to the fields of the towns. For Judah rejoiced over the priests and the Levites who ministered.

And they performed the services of their God and the service of purification. As did the singers and the gatekeepers. According to the command of David and his son Solomon.

[11 : 48] For long ago in the days of David and Asaph. There were directors of the singers. And there were songs of praise and thanksgiving to God. And all Israel in the days of Zerubbabel and in the days of Nehemiah gave the daily portions for the singers and the gatekeepers.

And they set apart that which was for the Levites. And the Levites set apart that which was for the sons of Aaron. Father we thank you for your word.

We thank you that it is life to us. Lord we ask you for your presence today. In Jesus name. Amen. So we're talking about thanksgiving and gratitude.

And I think we've discovered that it's not just something you can Nike your way through. Just do. Just do it. Just be grateful. Alright.

I think gratitude doesn't grow up in a vacuum. It has to be cultivated. Right. Just like the Middle Eastern couple.

[12 : 52] For them to be able to rejoice. Be grateful for anything concerning the fourth. They need to know the story. No different for us. So true heartfelt gratitude and thanksgiving needs to be cultivated over time.

And with the help of certain conditions. Okay. Now we're going to look. If you can imagine gratitude and thanksgiving being cultivated like a beautiful plant.

And it really is beautiful. Cicero. A hundred years before Jesus. Said that gratitude was the prime virtue. And all virtues came out of it.

Paul said love was. But Cicero was so interested in gratitude. It was so beautiful. So with every beautiful plant that grows.

You need fertilizer. And there are two fertilizers. That fertilize this idea of a growing gratitude that's beautiful. And we're going to see what those two fertilizers are.

[13 : 56] And then there's also a tap root. And we're going to see what that is. Okay. So you're going to learn all about plants today. Anyway. So firstly. Before we try to answer the question.

Why is it important to have gratitude? If I was living by myself. My house would be completely different. If I wasn't living with my wife.

Now I'm a little bit artistic. But I would not have the pictures arranged as beautifully as they are. I would not have plants in my house. It may look more like a dentist's office.

Just knowing myself. But now that there are plants. And pictures on the wall. And there's this beautiful woman who's chosen to live with me.

You know. For 30 something years. You take that away. Ain't no sunshine when she's gone. Right? And so.

[14 : 57] In the absence of true gratitude. Things like depression. And may I even say anxiety. Tends to take its place.

Those are the. Oftentimes the weeds. Of our lives. I was speaking to someone recently. Who's just come back to Jesus. And. They were saying to me.

I've been on medication for anxiety. For many years. And recently. I've just felt some of that anxiety lift. And so I said. Oh. Was there a change in medication?

This person said. No. I've learned the key. Of being thankful. And every morning. I remind myself. Of who God is. And what he's done.

For me. And this woman said. I'm feeling the anxiety. Begin to decrease in my life. So. The first fertilizer.

[15 : 52] I think is so obvious. It's. Songs of praise. That cultivate. Gratitude. So there are these two choirs. There's musicians.

There's instruments. And there's people. Singing. This is not just the warm up. For the sermon. This is ancient. And it's profound.

I was speaking to someone. Who has been out of church. For five years. And they said. Just recently coming back. They were in church. And they.

They just stopped singing. And worshiping. And they were listening. To the church. Worshiping. And this young woman said to me. It's one of the most beautiful things.

I'd ever experienced. And I grew up in church. I've taken it for granted. All my life. You see. There's an incredibly. Powerful thing happen.

[16 : 50] When people begin to sing. The truths of God together. It is thousands of years old. Right. Even Jesus. In Hebrews 12. Says. That he is not ashamed.

To call us. His brothers and sisters. And that he will stand. In the presence of the father. In the congregation. Worshipping with them. What a picture.

Jesus is standing. Going. These are my brothers. And sisters. And this is what we do. All right. So. Rabbinical teaching.

Tells us. That the reason why Israel. Went into exile. Was because they forgot. They forgot. They forgot. They forgot.

Who God was. And in light of that. They forgot. Who they were. Worshipping. And singing together. Helps us. To not forget.

[17 : 48] Psychologists. And. The. The. The. The people who study the brain. Tell us. That when music. Is connected. To words. We tend to remember. The words better.

You. You may have experienced this. Either you. Or. You with someone. What's that. What's that song. What are the words. La la la la la. La la la la.

Ah ha ha ha ha. And you get the words. Right. The music. Helps you remember the words. And the words. Tell a story. And we are story people.

We have to be reminded. If we are not reminded. We drift towards exile. We drift away. That's the human heart, right? And so this idea of songs of praise is fertilizer for the plant of gratitude and thanksgiving, that beautiful plant that you can't fake.

You cannot fake it, right? And so what is the second fertilizer? I think the second fertilizer here is service and sacrifice.

[19 : 00] Now, living in North Carolina, I have a renewed appreciation of service with all the military people around us. It is so celebrated. We honor people who've served and served wholeheartedly.

Now, just as a context for me, growing up in South Africa, we had to do military service. You didn't have a choice. You did that or you went to jail. And so I spent 11 years in and out of the military, not because I chose to.

I had to because we were upholding a political system called apartheid, which was legislated segregation. And one-fifth of the population dominated four-fifths, the whites over the blacks.

And it was our job to enforce it. And it was horrible. And morale was low. So we served and served and served. But it wasn't life-giving at all.

Not at all. And I think another thing about living in this area is, and God forbid, it's many years before another storm hits us.

[20 : 11] But when storms hit, we sacrifice for each other. I don't know if you realize how unusual that is. If you were born here, you probably don't. I've lived in Seattle. I've lived in L.A.

I've lived in Denver. And when I came here and I saw what people do when there's a storm, I'm like, what? So we have this heritage of service and sacrifice, which is beautiful.

And it really is good. But we've got to be careful that we don't assume that any old service will do and any old sacrifice will do.

You know, if you take too much fertilizer and you dump it on your lawn, you kill it. It becomes brown, right?

And so we're not saying, serve harder, sacrifice more. We're saying, obey God. Follow Jesus.

[21 : 16] Right? Now, I don't know anything about lawns. I read this online. And if you look at my lawn, you'll know. This guy knows nothing about lawns. But that's what I've heard.

And so we're not asking you to just dump service and sacrifice. What we're asking you to do is ask the question, what is God asking me to do? What is God telling me to do right now?

What am I reading in Scripture that I feel convicted about? What are the people around me doing that I'm in community with? All right? So even these people weren't just told to serve harder and do more.

In verse 44, it says, part of our text, On that day, men were appointed by over the storehouses, the contributions, the firstfruits, the tithes, to gather them into them, the portions required by the law for the priests and for the Levites, according to the fields of the towns.

For Judah rejoiced over the priests and the Levites who ministered. And listen to this. They performed the service of their God and the service of purification, as did the singers and the gatekeepers, according to the command of David and his son Solomon.

[22 : 30] David and Solomon lived hundreds of years before these people. But God had shown them what it looked like to follow God, and in our case, to follow Jesus.

You know, there's a story in the Old Testament, in the book of 1 Samuel 15, where the first king of Israel, Saul, was instructed to destroy a certain tribe for very good reasons.

It wasn't genocide, but we can't go into that right now. And he decides to keep some of the spoils. And Samuel the prophet comes to him and says, What are you doing?

You've been disobedient. He says, No, no. I kept these so we can sacrifice. And Samuel says to him, Don't you know obedience is better than sacrifice?

You see, this is the difference in my mind between obedience and sacrifice. In sacrifice, I still stay in control. I decide what to give, who to give to, and how much to give or serve.

[23 : 39] In obedience, God gets control. And I like control. The other problem that arises is, I tend to try to take the glory in sacrifice.

Look what I did. Look what I gave. Whereas when I'm in obedience to him, he gets the glory. I get the joy, right?

And I think this is what Jesus was saying, and this was the kind of serving Jesus spoke about in Matthew 5, when he said this, In the same way, Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

Not to give glory to you. So our conclusion is, that the second fertilizer is an obedient response to God in service and in sacrifice.

Okay? So, I would love to be able to get a little more practical with you about what that looks like, but there are guys who've written books.

[24 : 51] There's one book that our leaders are all reading. It's John Comer's book, Practicing the Way, and it is very helpful in teasing out what it means to be with Jesus, become like Jesus, and do what Jesus does.

So, I have a picture of the book on the screen, and you can order that book. I don't get any royalties from it, obviously, but I found it to be a very helpful book, and I'm not going to try to tell you what he says so well.

But, we've got this plant. It's the beautiful plant of gratitude and thanksgiving. It decorates our lives and brings fragrance to our lives like few things do.

And then there's these fertilizers of reminding ourselves together in song, remembering who God is and what He has called us to.

And then there's this obedient response to Him in love, in sacrifice, and in service, right? But any plant without a great root system, without a big tap root, will wither when the going gets tough.

[26 : 02] It will wither. And the parables, Jesus told, about plants like that, who die. And so, what is the tap root of gratitude? Now, ironically, when you take the Greek word for gratitude, and you find the root of that Greek word, it's the word charis, which means grace.

grace. The root of the word gratitude and thanksgiving is the word grace. And the root of the idea of gratitude is a tap root called grace.

All right? Now, think about this. We can be grateful for many things. I may be grateful because I'm driving a new car, which I'm not, but I'm just using it as an example.

But that car will someday end up in the junkyard. What will happen to my gratitude when that happens?

Or someone may total it. Well, my gratitude may be threatened. I need something deeper than the new car.

[27 : 17] All right? And the reality is, God's grace is new every morning. when my, when that is my tap root, whether the car goes or stays, doesn't kill the plant.

You got the idea? All right? And this was revealed to me so beautifully because it's, it's, it's not intuitive, this idea of grace.

So, I was preaching in the Raleigh church a number of years ago, and there was a man there who was a Colombian man, beautiful man, but very extrovert. He was loud.

And so, I'm preaching about grace one morning and he puts up his hand and he goes, excuse me, excuse me, and I'd never had that happen while I preach because people are meant to keep quiet when you preach.

That's just a law. Right? He goes, excuse me, excuse me, do you mean to tell me that if someone gave me something, like a car or something, I would treasure it more than if I, with my hard-earned dollars, bought that car?

[28 : 30] And I said, yes, I think that's what I'm saying. Especially if you couldn't afford the car. And he went, I just, I don't see it. So I said, well, I'll tell you what, Romero, why don't we talk afterwards?

I've got to finish a sermon this morning. Is that okay? And he was like, okay, he sat down and everyone felt so awkward they looked at each other. And, but this is the story. He was in a community group with me and about three, four months later, someone called us outside after the community group and they pointed to this, the F-150 truck that was about four years old, beautiful condition, well looked after.

And this guy said to Romero, I want to give this to you. You've got five kids and I know you're struggling with cars. I want to bless you with this. And he went, no.

We actually all went, no. I went, why him? I need a truck too. Anyway, I believe in grace. He doesn't, no. And he was like, what?

And for five to six months he became the new truck evangelist. He told everybody that God gave him this truck. You'd see him coming through the doors and you'd know.

[29 : 52] The opening line is, hey brother, God gave me a truck, you know. And so after it had all blown over, I said to him one day, hey, do you remember? Do you remember when you put your hand up in church?

He goes, oh yeah. I said, I was right, wasn't I? And he goes, yeah. And oh, I felt so good. It's one of the few times God allowed me to be right publicly.

Publicly. Yeah, yeah, yeah. So, so when, when your, your, the root is, is in the big tap root of God's grace, it makes such a difference.

I remember reading about Jonathan Edwards, which is probably America's greatest theologian. He lived in the 1700s and he, he was pastoring a church in New England somewhere and the smallpox came, came through and people were dying, but they were very afraid of the medical solutions that were being reported.

Now, don't get your, your COVID PTSD thing on right now. Just try to push that away. But he volunteered to be inoculated with the smallpox virus.

[31 : 13] to help his congregation embrace it. He, he felt like it would save a lot of lives. Well, it ended up killing him. He died two weeks later. and so, his wife wrote this letter to their daughter in 1758.

What shall I say? A holy and good God has covered us with a dark cloud. Oh, that we may kiss the rod and lay our hands on our mouths.

The Lord has done it. He has made me adore his goodness that we had him for so long. But my God lives and he is my heart.

Oh, what a legacy my husband and your father has left us. We are all given to God and there I am and love to be your ever affectionate mother Sarah Edwards.

That is a gratitude that is rooted in a taproot that goes way, way deeper.

[32 : 28] you see, even these people in the story we are reading, as they heard the scriptures being read by Ezra, they knew that God had them in mind for hundreds of years.

They were listening to their story. They knew that God hadn't abandoned them. They just didn't, they were like the Middle Eastern couple arriving late on the scene.

They didn't know. And all the way back to before Moses and the Exodus, way back to Abraham, way back to God's faithfulness in Noah as they read the books that Moses had written, Genesis and Exodus.

And they began to realize this God is a faithful God. He's a great God. I love the words of David in Psalm 139.

He says this, you saw my unformed substance. All my days are in your book. before I was born. Have you ever noticed this about a little baby lying in their little crib?

[33 : 56] And they can't walk yet. They can't talk. I've got two grandbabies. They're beautiful. You don't know what you're missing if you've ever had, never had a grandbaby. And they're looking to see who's looking at them.

Now the little boys will get a little more distracted. They'll get caught up with a fan for a while. You know, whatever. But they're looking and when you look at them, when their eyes lock on you, and then you see their faces.

If you've got a scowl, if you're smiling there, they feel reassured. We were born looking for who's looking for us.

That's how we were created. That's how we were created. Looking around the room of our circumstances and our lives. But my friend, he is looking, he's looking at you before you were born. When you were still unformed in your mother's womb. David says, he was looking at you. You see, this taproot isn't dependent on my relationship with God.

[35 : 08] I meet people all the time at the church and they come in for prayer and they come in for help and they will inevitably start telling me about their relationship with God. And it goes something like this.

I walk with God sometimes but then I don't. And I wish I read more and I wish I prayed more and I'm trying to love my wife but it's not and there's a point where I've got to go, okay, we've spoken about your relationship with God now but let's turn it around.

Let's look at his relationship with you. What does that look like? And I don't know, getting back to babies because I have them on my mind, I'm going to be seeing my babies in about 12 hours.

When you see a mom or a dad holding a little baby, have you often noticed how that baby will sometimes grab onto their shirt or grab onto something? They just have that impulse.

They don't even know what they're holding, right? And that little baby is holding on to mommy's shirt. That baby's not going, I better take precautions because this idiot might drop me.

[36 : 14] That is not what's going through that baby's mind. What's holding that baby and the only thing that is holding that baby is the arms of the mother.

Let me tell you the only thing that's holding you are the arms of the father. But the fact that you are hold onto him shows that you're alive, you're not a carcass.

You're a living being. Right? And that's the taproot that holds us. And this is what these people are discovering.

There's a God who holds us. We think in decades. He thinks in centuries and millennia. I forget. He is faithful to his promises.

Unbelievably so. Right? And so, we get back to this idea of looking for him who's looking at us.

[37 : 22] How do we do that? Through remembrance. We do that through worship. We do that through the simple, obedient steps. I think of the people and sometimes I'll see them at the Moorhead site filling these communion colors.

These are chiropractors, business owners, people far smarter than me.

Why? Reminder. Reminder. Reminder. I have a taproot. It goes way deeper than my love for him.

Right? Oh. And so, we're going to come to the table this morning. Now, if you do not know Jesus yet, you're not following him, I'm encouraging you not to just jump into this.

The Bible actually says, it's kind of like over fertilizing the lawn. Just hang back and get the context.

[38 : 33] Meet who this is about. There will be a prayer on the screen. We want you to come because you are overwhelmed by who he is.

And if you're a believer and you want to come to the table but you think, I'm not worthy, let me ask you this. Who of you have ever thought to yourselves, I'm not going to take a shower because I'm just too dirty.

I mean, the shower floor is white. I mean, it's the inside of the house. No. We shower because we're dirty. We come because we need it.

Right? It's the taproot. I'm not the taproot. My record is not the taproot. He's the taproot. I'm not holding him. He's holding me. And that's one reason why I want to caution you not to come if you're not convinced Jesus is, his grace is your taproot because you will come for all the wrong reasons.

So, let me pray for you. The worship team will lead us and we can come and enjoy.

[39 : 58] Pull up as much life as you can. Drink as deep as you can and eat your fill. Father, Father, only you can open our eyes but one thing I know you're looking at us.

Father, help us. Free us from the distractions. Help us to see who we need to see this morning. Lord, I thank you for beautiful plants, fragrant plants of thanksgiving and joy and worship and gratitude in Jesus' name.

Amen. Amen. for Thank you.