

Why Be Thankful?
Romans 1:18-22

Turn to Romans 1 please. I decided to speak about being thankful because I got tired of myself. I got tired of covid and thinking about things I did not like, and at the same time reading the Bible where there is so much thanksgiving to God. So I want to aim myself in a better direction. I thought maybe you could use this too.

Then I realized that Thanksgiving was in two weeks, and this message is two weeks early. Or maybe it is just in time.

We hope to answer two questions today. One is, why does God want us to be thankful? Two, what happens to us if we are not thankful? Our main text will be Romans 1:18-22. We'll look at several other Scriptures too, but Rom 1:18-22 is our center.

And I will start with a line near the end of this paragraph, and work backward. This line from v21 is our starting point today: *They knew God, but they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him.*

In this paragraph Paul describes what went wrong with the human race, but in the process we learn much about how things were supposed to be. That's our interest today – how were things supposed to be? *They knew God, but they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him.*

Be Thankful because it is the normal, healthy response to knowing God (Rom 8:21)

When we're hungry, we look for food, when we're thirsty, we get a drink, when we're tired, we rest. These are normal healthy responses, and don't have to be taught. In the same way, when we know God, we honour and thank him.

I had to be taught to be thankful to people for their kindnesses and gifts, and I was not a fast learner. Now, because we are twisted and don't see spiritual truth quickly, we have to be taught to thank God. But at the beginning it was not so. Back there, people stopped honoring and thanking God as a deliberate rebellion, not because they forgot.

Being thankful is the normal healthy response to knowing God.

Be thankful because it is the normal healthy response to living in this world (Rom 1:19-21)

Let's go back to v19. *What may be known about God was plain to us, because God has made it plain to us. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse. Although we knew God, we neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him.*

God deliberately designed the visible and material creation to make his invisible qualities clear. God's power and his character can be clearly seen in the world around us. We can understand the invisible God from what has been made. And the natural response to what we plainly see around us is to praise God and thank him.

Here are a few examples from Jesus. Jesus said that the good people and the bad people get the same amount of sunshine from God, and the good people and the bad people get the same amount of rain from God. That's true, we see that.

Obviously, said Jesus, the Creator is kind and generous and soft-hearted, because he treats his enemies just as well as he treats his friends. Why is it that we can see the good people and the bad people, and the sun and the rain, but we don't see God's great kindness behind this?

We have different explanations for how that happens. But Jesus is showing us how God makes his invisible qualities clear by what he has made: here his kindness and generosity.

Jesus said, "Are you watching the birds? Do they plant seeds in spring? No. Do they harvest in fall, and put it in granaries? No, they don't. Yet they eat every day, all year long, because God feeds them every day, all year long. So why are you people worried about food, when you are so much more important to God than the birds?" We see all this, but don't learn about God.

Jesus said, "Check out the flowers. Do they save up money and shop for expensive clothes once in a while? No. Do they shop online for better clothes? No, they don't live long enough for the package to arrive. Yet no human has ever worn clothes as fine as these flowers that won't last to the end of the month. That's how God dresses the flowers. So what are you worried about?"

In Acts 14, Paul preached to a crowd in Lystra that had never heard of God. He said, "Turn to the living God, who made the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything in them. He has let all the nations go their own way. But he has not left you without a message, without showing himself. He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons, he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy."

God was sending a message to those people all along, by rain from heaven, crops in their seasons, plenty of food, and he put joy in their hearts as they celebrated harvest. Food and joy, too. God speak about himself to people in these things.

There was a time when people knew all this, but we stopped praising him and thanking him, and we all got blind. Don't see it anymore. But the reasons for praise and thanks are all still here.

We've seen two reasons to thank God: because it is the normal healthy response to knowing God, and because it is the normal healthy response to living in this world. Here's a third:

Be thankful because God wants relationship with us.

God urges us to thank him because God wants relationship with people. He loves and blesses and cares for all people, but not just because he's kind and generous. He wants a relationship with us.

And the relationship works like this: He gives us all we need, and things to enjoy, and we thank him and glorify him. That, people, is how relationship with God works. He lovingly provides us with all kinds of things, and we praise him and thank him. He always does things that should naturally bring this out of us, and that's what he hopes for.

“If the only prayer you ever say in your entire life is ‘thank you,’ it will be enough.” That comes from Meister Eckhart, a German monk and theologian, about the year 1300. He's on to something. If the only prayer you ever say in your entire life is ‘thank you,’ it will be enough.

I am in fact somewhat blind to God's kindness, and I get distracted by my particular troubles, and I lose sight of the miraculous world in which we all live. God does not want thanks and glory because he needs steady compliments to keep going. God wants thanks and glory because it is the only fitting response to his power and kindness.

We don't see how dark and twisted it is to know God, and know what he does, and yet not thank him and praise him.

God gave tastes of his glory and generosity to different writers of the Bible, and they saw it and they got it. And those writers tell us often, “Praise the Lord, people! Can't you see what he's done? We all have to praise the Lord, and give thanks. Anything less would be criminal. Look at what he does, and what he's like, and let's all praise him!” That's the response of those who see.

What Happens to US if We are Not Thankful? Rom 1:21-22

Although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools.

Here's what happens to us if we're not thankful: our thinking becomes futile, and our foolish hearts get dark. We claim to be wise, but we become spiritual fools. We can still do math, but we cannot figure out life. We are spiritually ignorant while feeling wise and perceptive.

How can we be thankful when “everything goes wrong”? Deut 8:2-5

Sometimes God does not seem to be generous with us. Moses was speaking to Israel at the end of the 40 years in the wilderness, just before Joshua took them across the Jordan and into Canaan, the promised land. Let's listen to Moses talk about our own hard times:

Moses said, “Remember how the Lord has led you all these forty years, to humble you and test you, to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would live in his ways. He humbled you and caused you to hunger, and then he fed you with manna, so you would learn to trust in him. Your clothes did not wear out and your feet did not swell during these forty years. As parents discipline their children, your God disciplines you.”

God takes full credit for bringing hard times on Israel, and it was not to punish them, but to teach them to trust him, in a time when it was clearly hard to trust him.

Food does not come from our hands and our job, it comes from God. He wanted to know if they would still live in his ways in hard times. He does this to us, too.

But get this: God was not neglecting them, he was paying close attention. He wanted to teach them to depend on him. He did cause them to hunger, but he also fed them. He made sure their clothes lasted and their shoes lasted, and Moses says God still led them, he led you these forty years. God was with them, and helping, providing, and leading. So also us in our hard times.

If God's creation is so generous and faithful, what about natural disasters? Rom 1:18

If regular crops and food and sun and rain show us God's kindness, what about terrible things, like earthquakes, tsunamis, floods, plagues, and so on?

Verse 18 reads, *The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against the godlessness and wickedness of people.* "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven." What wrath is Paul talking about? This wrath is already being revealed, and it comes from heaven, and the focus of this paragraph is God speaking plainly in visible material creation. That much is clear.

Probably, God is revealing his wrath in natural disasters. In the Bible, things like the flood in Noah's day, fire on Sodom and Gomorrah, and the Egyptian army being drowned in the Red Sea.

Jesus talked about disasters in Luke 13, and he made a point we need to get real clear: the survivors are just as guilty as the victims. Did you get that? The survivors are just as guilty as the victims, and if the survivors do not repent, they will perish in the same way.

The disasters are a general message to all people that the Creator is not pleased with the human race, and if humanity does not turn to God, it will get worse. In Revelation, God sends plagues and disasters, and we read several times, "but the survivors did not repent or give God glory." (Rev 9:20-21; 16:9, 11, 21).

Paul tells us in the next chapter of Romans that the riches of God's kindness should lead people to turn to God. Jesus and John's Revelation tell us that disasters should lead people to turn to God. Those two are really God's only options, so he keeps doing both.

So Let's Be Thankful

I have completely ignored all the benefits that Jesus Christ brought us, I know that. We'll get to that on Thanksgiving in two weeks. Today, the things he gives all his creation.

I've heard that in some counselling these days, counsellors encourage thankfulness in troubled people, because thankfulness is good for them, it makes their minds and emotions healthier.

They don't tell people to thank God. They just say, list what you're thankful for, and steer your minds that way. Spend some time every day reminding yourself of what you're grateful to have in your life. Reflect on these things. Keep a little grateful journal. It turns out even those without God can see that this is good for us. God works in mysterious ways.

In spite of our hard times and natural disasters, God still gives us sun and rain, God gives crops and food, God gives us a place to live and clothes to wear, God gives us family and friends, God brings satisfactions and joys into our lives. These are all generally true in the world, and certainly true of us.

God does this because he wants a relationship with us. He provides as parents provide, so we will live as his grateful children. Great is your faithfulness, O God our Savior, all we have needed your hand has provided. Amen.

PRAYER OF THANKGIVING: O Father, thank you for your long generosity to this world, to us all. You have kept us alive for all these thousands of years, feeding us and clothing us and giving us sun and rain and places to live. You've given us family and friends and work, and you have regularly brought joys and satisfactions and celebrations into our lives. You have given us strength to carry on, and you have led us through it all. When you're our Shepherd, we have all we need. Thank you. Amen.

[response time]

BENEDICTION: May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.