

Giving Thanks for Our Present
Colossians 3:15-17
Sunday, November 9, 2025

For the three weeks leading up to Thanksgiving, we're talking about being thankful. Last week, we talked about being thankful for our past. For the long line of saints—all the way from Jesus' apostles to our parents, grandparents, teachers, and co-workers—through whom we have learned about the New Life that Jesus came to make available to us through his life, death, and resurrection. We talked about remembering how and why we came to faith in Jesus, and giving thanks to God for that faith.

Today, we're going to talk about the present; giving thanks for right now. And as we celebrate the things we are thankful for right now, near that top of the list is the gift of our political freedom. This coming Tuesday is Veterans day. It is the day we recognize, celebrate, and give thanks for veterans of the armed forces. As we know, freedom isn't free. So, we give thanks today for the people who have, through their service and sacrifice, secured for us the freedom that we have come to enjoy. In setting aside a day for us to remember and celebrate our veterans, the idea is that we will hopefully never take their efforts on our behalf for granted.

But the freedom that the members of our armed forces have worked to secure isn't guaranteed. As our political polarization increases, there are more and more people, on both sides of the political spectrum, who are becoming concerned for the future of our country; the future of our freedom.

Which makes me think about how freedom worked back in the time of the apostle Paul, the author of today's scripture passage. Paul lived during the height of the Roman Empire. And

in that Empire, even for actual Roman citizens like Paul, freedom was a relative term. For instance, there was no such thing as freedom of speech. If you said the wrong thing to the wrong person, you could get thrown in jail or worse. Paul himself, on many occasions, got taken into custody for simply preaching about Jesus.

And the fact is that the vast, vast majority of the people in Greece, Turkey, and Palestine, where most of Paul's ministry was centered, weren't even citizens. They were subjects of the Empire and had very few rights. As an example, you could literally be walking down the street, minding your own business, and a soldier could stop you and compel you to carry their gear for them.

And if you were a Jew, it was even worse. They were considered a trouble-making religious sect by the Romans, and so were under constant suspicion and were frequently the subject of brutal oppression.

And if you were a Christian, it was even worse than that. At least the Jews were officially recognized as a religion by the Romans. The Christians weren't. The Romans considered them a small but potentially dangerous cult, that considered this guy named Jesus, and not Caesar, to be Lord. The Jewish authorities considered them a dangerous and blasphemous cult. They were persecuted and harassed as a matter of state policy.

And on top of all that, as we talked about last week, so many of these new Christian congregations that Paul was supporting consisted of former pagans. They were following Jesus in a culture whose values were about as opposite to the values of Jesus as you could get. These

former pagans, living in a pagan culture, were under constant pressure to leave their Christian values behind and return to their pagan ways.

And so, as bad as things might seem to us today, it's really nothing compared to the situation Paul and the new Christian church faced 2,000 years ago.

Which isn't to say things today are perfect. Far from it. I've already talked a little about the cultural forces that are conspiring to drain us of hope. But things in the church today can be a little depressing too. While I think we're doing ok here in Salado, across the country, attendance in churches is falling or, at best, remaining flat. More and more people are identifying themselves as "spiritual but not religious." And it seems like so many of those who are in churches would rather fight with one another than fight against the forces of evil, injustice, and oppression that surround us.

Now, I know this sermon series is about being thankful, and that this sermon is supposed to be about gratitude for what's going on in our lives right now, but sometimes it's just hard to find things to be thankful for, right?

And so, I find myself wondering, with all the he was facing, how did Paul find the ability to be so thankful? How did he handle the disappointment? How did he handle the backsliding? How did he handle the persecution? I mean, he had to lose hope, right?

Well, at least according to today's scripture, it doesn't look like he did. In this letter, Paul reminds the church in Colossi that there's a kind of freedom even more important than political freedom. Here calls it, "the Peace of Christ." Jesus refers to it as dwelling in God's kingdom or as

abundant, eternal life. It's a life lived in God's Spirit; in God's love. It's a life where we have been freed from the power of sin through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

And, in today's scripture, Paul encourages the church in colossi, despite the difficulties surrounding them, to be thankful for the peace of Christ that dwells in their hearts, right then; the word of Christ which dwells in them richly, right then. And he is very clear that that peace—that New Life that they have been given in Jesus Christ—is nurtured and supported in the context of their Christian fellowship; in the context of what we would call their church. He says they've been called together as "one body." That they are to teach and admonish one another, and sing songs together to God. That they are to be grateful for the fellowship in which they exist—with God and with one another.

Things might have seemed bad. Things might have seemed difficult. Things might have even seemed hopeless. But Paul tells them that difficulty and hopelessness is nothing more than an illusion, if they would just change their frame of reference. He reminds them that in the grand scheme of things, all that stuff they might have been worried about really didn't matter. The only thing that DID matter is God, and their relationship with God which is fostered by their fellowship of faith. As long as they can focus on THAT fact, and live in thanksgiving for it, they will never lose hope.

And neither will we. I don't need to repeat all the things in our culture, and even some of what we see in the Church, that threaten to make us lose hope. They're all too apparent, and made even more so by the 24/7, instant on media and social media environment in which we live. We are constantly bombarded with all the bad news of the world around us, our culture,

our society, our nation, our community. And as long as we allow the culture and the media to define our frame of reference, hope and peace is going to be really hard to come by.

So, Paul invites us, just as he invited the church in Colossi, to change our frame of reference. Instead of starting with what's wrong with the world, how about we start with thanksgiving for what's right in our world.

And a good place to start is at the beginning. There IS a world for us to be thankful for. God didn't have to create, but God did. And it was good.

And not only is there a world, YOU'RE in it. God created you; gave you life. You've got a body that can move around and experience that world. You've got a mind that can perceive and appreciate the splendor and miraculousness of that world.

And on top of that, you are *here* this morning, whether in person or online. You are a part of this family of faith. And as a part of this congregation, you and me and all of us together have the opportunity to experience the peace of Christ; to experience New, bountiful, and eternal Life. When you get down to it, in every way that really matters, there's really nothing NOT to be thankful for.

I am thankful for being born in this country. I am thankful for growing up with the privileges and freedoms that I have enjoyed my entire life. And I am extremely thankful for the members of the armed forces—and the overall political system within which they serve—who have made those privileges and freedoms a reality in my life.

But that isn't where I place my ultimate hope. It isn't where I find my peace. Because, as we see all too clearly, these things are subject to human judgment, and mis-judgment. I imagine

there were a lot of Romans in Paul's day who put their trust and their hope in the Empire. It must have seemed like a no-brainer. The Empire would last forever. But of course, it didn't. Neither did the Persian Empire, or the Babylonian Empire, or the Assyrian Empire, or, for that matter, the British Empire.

Human history shows us that to put our ultimate hope in something created by human hands is to surrender it.

True hope and true peace can be found in only one place: God, and the New Life God has given us through the life, death, and resurrection of God's Son Jesus. So, as Paul suggests, let's change our frame of reference to reflect this reality. Let's remember what God has done, and is doing, for us. Let's focus on that.