

Philippians 1:3-11

Heartfelt Thanks To God

I think it is hard to put into words. It is hard to really express exactly what it is, but you know it when you see it. It might happen during a conversation with a loved one, or with a friend while you sit around a table with a friend. It could even happen as you watch a famous person speak on national television. In the moment you realize something special is happening. You realize they are speaking from the heart. You recognized the person is letting you see a part of their heart. You may even feel it in your own heart—the feeling of being choked up—the feeling of being overwhelmed with happiness.

On those rare occasions, we realize what a special event it is to see into someone's heart. We don't necessarily realize it because we see tears falling down their cheek, or the smiles on their face. It is merely a connection we, as humans, are able to have with one another.

When someone shows us their heart they can show a variety of emotions like love, kindness, thoughtfulness, and even thankfulness. It is easy to tell when someone is being heartfelt or not. For example, you have a kid come up to you and say, "Mom and dad...told me to say thank you." However, It may be as simple as someone saying, "I wanted to say, from the bottom of my heart.... Thank you!"

Sometimes we experience these heartfelt moments with the people whom we love, or maybe we even experience them with a thank you card in the mail. No matter if we have been on the receiving end or the giving end of the heartfelt thanks, there is a lot for us to be thankful for.

Today, we are moved to express heartfelt thanks—thanks which resonates in all the crevices of our hearts—thanks which we cannot help but express. As Christians, we express Heartfelt Thanks To God.

Do you wonder what they were feeling? What were they really thinking? They hadn't even heard from their leader, their pastor, and their shepherd. Paul was in prison in Rome for confessing his faith. They had been on their own for quite some time. They probably even felt like they were running the church on their own. They probably felt like there was no chance Paul would appear in their homes, sit around the table for dinner, or have the opportunity to talk late into the night ever again. These believers, in Philippi, were so concerned about him they were even willing to send one of their friends to help Paul.

Knowing all that, could you imagine someone handing a letter to those Philippian christians? As they held the letter and unrolled it, and realized in the first sentence it was from Paul, what did they feel? What emotions filled their hearts? If I were them, I think I would have felt several emotions. I probably would have felt excited. Excited because I finally had the opportunity to hear from my pastor, Paul. Maybe I would have felt a bit sad because he wasn't in front of me telling me in person. Perhaps I would have felt other emotions trying to demand my attention.

As they prepared to read the letter were they wondering what was on Paul's heart? What did Paul think as he wrote this letter, the same letter we are privileged to read centuries later? Did Paul think about his situation? Was he worried about what could happen next? Was he thinking about all his fellow brothers and sisters whom he was forced to leave? Was he thinking about how much blood, sweat, and tears he put in with sharing God's Word? What was on Paul's heart?

The Philippians were given the opportunity, to see what was on Paul's heart. Paul had opened up his heart with those scratches of ink on the paper which they now held. Right away, Paul started his letter as he often had. Words, clearly a Pastor would write, to his people whom

he had served and grown close too for many years. Paul said, **“To all God’s holy people in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons: 2 Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”** That comforting message of grace and the reassuring message of peace is what those Philippians needed for their own hearts. A message of grace and peace that could only come from Jesus Christ. The only grace that Christians could really appreciate.

However, Paul continued to say, **“I thank my God every time I remember you.”** What bigger heartfelt statement is there than that? You could almost see Paul laying, in his dark and forgotten prison cell. As he lay there not just thinking about his own problems, but he most certainly also thought about his friends and fellow Christians he left behind. They probably popped into his mind even during those dark hours. He probably remembered all those days he sat along the river, in the synagogue, in the homes of the people he served sharing the message of the Savior. He probably thought about how his brothers and sisters were doing. No matter what Paul was thinking about concerning these Philippians, he couldn’t help but give thanks to God.

Paul certainly gave thanks for what God had done in the hearts of those Christians people like God had done in Paul’s heart on the Road to Damascus. Paul indeed was thankful to God for creating faith in his own heart. When God did the same thing in the Philippians’ hearts, Paul couldn’t help but rejoice. He couldn’t help but feel joy. Paul says, **“Being confident of this that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.”** Paul was giving thanks that the Holy Spirit worked through his own sinful body, with God’s Word, to create faith in their hearts. Paul was thankful to have had the opportunity to baptize and strengthen the faith of so many people.

Do we ever slow down from our busy days, and take even a moment to thank God? I don’t mean, its time for dinner and lets quickly speak through our dinner table prayer, and start shoveling our faces kind of thankfulness. I mean really slowing down and thanking him for the work he has done in our hearts? I think for many of us, who have been Christians our whole lives, we might not take the time to think about it. Maybe we really don’t appreciate it for what it is. Do we give thanks to God for the people who brought the message of Jesus to our hearts? Are we thankful for the message we were able to hear when we were younger, or even older?

Why would God, the all-powerful, all just God, want to start anything good inside any of us? Why would he want to waste his precious time on people like you and me? It is not like we have anything useful to offer. It’s not like our hearts were in a place where they wanted to express heartfelt praise, love or even thanks. Instead, each of our hearts, if you really looked at them, would only want to express hatred, anger, rage, and disgust towards God.

And if we begin to think God chose you or me because of something we would accomplish, we are dead wrong. It is so easy for us to think, “God choose me because he knew I would help his church by being a teacher, a leader, or some other kind of helper.” Or maybe even we are tempted to think, “I served God’s church for 20 or even 40 years.” Or, maybe we say, “Look at all the people I have brought into God’s kingdom, I was the best person God could have ever picked.” If we begin thinking this way, we are showing how corrupt our hearts are. Instead of heartfelt thanks for God’s grace and peace, we are so eager to pat ourselves on the back.

If there was anything God should see to completion, it would be our judgment. It would be the day Jesus returns and sentences us like the filthy, sinful people you and I are. We would know God was serious by the tone of his voice, and by what he should say, “Away from me! You have no value to me!” Our hearts would drop. Our hearts would be filled with anger. Our

hearts would experience torment forever. But, that is precisely what every single one of us deserves. We shouldn't blame God for giving us a sentence like that.

Yet, even in chains, Paul knew firsthand Jesus' affection. He knew his love. He knew the affection Jesus had for the people in Philippi and elsewhere, no matter their background or age. He knew the heartfelt love Jesus had for you and me. This was the gospel we hear in Paul's letter. The same gospel that began in their lives, as well as our own. The excellent news of what Jesus did for you and me, and for the whole world. It was not uncommon for Jesus to say to people, "Your sins are forgiven." When he said this it was a heartfelt statement! It was true statement! It was something which impacted the hearts of so many people. It was something that impacted their lives. It wasn't just a statement that had no meaning or any backing. Jesus loved you and me enough to die for these filthy and disgusting souls that live in us. Jesus blood, which was shed on the cross, is what makes us righteous in his sight. The Lord from his heart can say, **"Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine."** This is a heartfelt statement for all of us to hear today.

This is reason enough for us to give a heartfelt thanks to God. This is sufficient reason for us to present the ultimate praise to God. What a wonderful blessing it is that God has created faith in our hearts to believe the gospel. A faith, the Holy Spirit started in our lives when we heard the Word for the first time from our pastors or parents. When we heard proclaimed in church, in Sunday School, or at our baptisms. A baptism which worked in these sinful hearts. A baptism which we cherish. A baptism that is as important if not more important than our actual birthdays. A day we should never forget, a day we should give a heartfelt thanks for, no matter if we were baptized on March of 1952, May of 1989, or will be in August or September of 2018. We simply cannot give thanks enough for all God has done in our hearts.

Yet, he doesn't stop there! We have even more to give thanks to God for. We can offer a heartfelt thanks to God for the work he had done through all of us. That he has made us partners of the Gospel.

Here you have Paul, who was considered one of the greatest missionaries of all time. Imagine all the people he witnessed too. Imagine all the people he shared the gospel with. If there was anyone who could have bragged about how well his ministry went, it would have been Paul. But, Paul doesn't do that! Instead, he thanks God for all the work which was done in the hearts of so many people. He also thanks God for giving his fellow Christians as partners in the gospel mission. As he said here, **"4 In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy 5 because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now,"**

Dad, as you celebrate your 40 years in the ministry today there is probably a lot that is on your heart. Maybe you are thinking back to the places you served. Maybe you are probably giving a heartfelt thanks to God for giving you the opportunity to serve as a pastor, a husband, a father, and even a grandfather. You probably are giving a heartfelt thanks to God for parents who took the time to raise you in the faith from an early age, and encourage you in your schooling. Maybe you are giving thanks for the family members and even members whom you served at Crown of Life, Fort Meyers, Fl, Jerusalem, Morton Grove, IL, or even a Plan Giving Counselor Norther Wisconsin District. These were the people who were there with you and made your ministry possible. There is so much to give thanks for on a day like this!

And all of us have a lot to give thanks for too! No matter if we are a pastor, teach staff minister, or layperson, we give thanks that we are not alone. First, God is always with us. He is blessing the work we are doing on his behalf. Second, we have each other! We are working together in our different capacities, and using our different gifts.

Yes, a Pastor is extremely valuable to his church and we should thank God for the men he has put into our lives. A pastor is valuable because he is the spiritual leader. He gives spiritual guidance and instruction. He is the one who comes to your homes or to the hospital when you or a loved one are dying. He is the one who is willing to drop everything to give you words of encouragement from God's Word when you need it the most. Almost every pastor cherishes these moments. These are the moments that make a pastor eager to take their first call no matter if it's to Fort Meyers, Florida, or Abrams, WI, or Appleton WI.

However, the pastor, if he is wise, will quickly realize he is not alone in the mission of the church. The people who fill up the pews, these ones included, are right there with him. They are there to encourage him. They are there to help in the mission of sharing the gospel to the whole world, just as much as he is.

As a kid who grew up here at Mount Olive, I understand how impactful the encouragement a congregation has on a boy who has the gifts to be a pastor. The boys and young men who sit in the pews with you could be the next generation of pastors who continue to proclaim the gospel. This is why God's people have a special place in a pastor's heart, people who encouraged him, people whom he serves or served, people he will never forget and will pray for like Paul did.

So understand, God is working through all of us to continue to share the gospel. As he works in our hearts, we are even eager to see God complete the work he has started, until he comes again.

Therefore, no matter if we are celebrating 40 years of ministry, or have just started serving God's church in our many and varied ways, we have a lot to give thanks for. We are eager to give a heartfelt thanks to God. A God who worked something significant in our hearts— And a God who works through us to further his kingdom.

Amen