

How to Experience the Best Thanksgiving Ever
Ephesians 2:8-10

Good morning, everyone! Happy Thanksgiving! Please greet one another. Let me greet you, too, church, Happy Birthday! Please greet one another again. This truly is a happy and wonderful occasion because we have a double celebration. Aren't you glad to be here? And I'm glad you're all here. And I'm sure God is glad you're here because we're celebrating his goodness and faithfulness to each of us and to his church. We really ought to be thankful to God for what he has done.

Fil-Am Church is now 26 years old. How many of you are 26 years old? How many of you are honest? Today is not really a big celebration because our tradition here is that we have a big bash only every 5 years. It was supposed to be last year but, as you know, it was kind of muted because of the pandemic. So, the next big celebration is 4 years from now, during our 30th anniversary. And, you know what, the actual birth of the church, Nov. 17, will fall on a Sunday, and so that will be a truly big celebration. You're all invited. Please mark your calendars. Who knows? We'll be celebrating it in our new building. Amen? Kuya Rey, take note of that.

Let me call David so he can share with you a short history of Fil-Am Community Church.

Merbin speaks. Show slides of Fil-Am Church.

Folks, today, I'd like to talk about how you can experience the best thanksgiving ever. Thanksgiving celebration, as you know, is an American tradition that started in 1621 when it was celebrated by the Pilgrims and Native Americans after a good harvest.

I celebrated my first Thanksgiving in 1992 with my parents and sisters when I first set foot here in America. Everyone of you can also remember the first time you celebrated Thanksgiving.

But can you remember the best Thanksgiving you ever experienced? Thing is, some people dislike this holiday. Some people dread Thanksgiving because they will have to meet relatives they don't want to see, right? (why did you nod your head?) I saw on the internet 15 reasons why some people say that this is their least favorite holiday. So, very quickly.

1. Chicken is way better than turkey. (agree?)
2. There's a lot of food waste. (agree?)
3. Black Friday is insane.
4. You're forced to watch football.
5. You get interrogated by family at the dinner table.
6. Travel is crazy.
7. You eat so much you end up hating yourself.
8. The color scheme is gross.
9. You're forced to interact with family.
10. It's a tough time for vegans and vegetarians.
11. You need to deal with mound of dirty dishes.
12. Someone always makes a Jell-O Salad.
13. Thanksgiving desserts, like Pecan Pie, are the worst. (Not sure if we have something like that later)
14. The weather is suddenly freezing.
15. Then there's the irony of giving thanks for what you already have while planning Black Friday shopping. (Ouch, I think I just shared a sermon about being content with what you have, right?)

Anyway, whether we like it or not, Thanksgiving is coming and we're celebrating it. But we just really have to focus on why we're celebrating it. Then, we will have the best Thanksgiving ever in our lives. So, my message this morning is entitled "How to Experience the Best Thanksgiving Ever".

Friends, actually the message I'm going to share with you is the third part in a series of messages that started two weeks ago. We've been talking about the Five Solas of the Reformation. The Reformation period was a time in the history of the church when theologians and religious thinkers like Martin Luther, John Calvin, Ulrich Zwingli, and others, steered Christianity back to its right position. Meaning, they taught the fundamentals of the faith since they have been neglected for a long time. And these fundamentals they summarized into Five Solas. Sola is the Latin for "Alone". The Five Solas are

1. Sola Scriptura (Bible Alone)
2. Solus Christus (Christ Alone)
3. Sola Fide (Faith Alone)
4. Sola Gratia (Grace Alone)
5. Sola Dei (To God be the Glory Alone)

This morning, I have combined two of these because they go together, Sola Fide and Sola Gratia. So, I'm going to talk about Faith Alone and Grace Alone. This message is based on Ephesians 2:8-10. Some of you probably know this by heart. Let us read together:

"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."

Friend, **how can you and I experience the best Thanksgiving ever?** These verses we read tell us how. There are three things I need to do to experience the best Thanksgiving ever. First,

1. **I need to realize that I need to be saved.**

Verse 8 begins with **“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith”**. So, let me talk about being saved first. Have you thought about it? What are we being saved from? Why do we need to be saved? What is this salvation business all about?

You know, since man appeared here on earth, there has been a longing for each of us to escape from darkness. This darkness I’m referring to is death and sin. Death is the great unknown. Someone said, **“We may have traveled to space, walked on the Moon, climbed the highest mountains and sunk to the depths of the oceans. But death, always death, is the greatest journey we will all face eventually.”** Many people don’t know what happens after death. They don’t know where they’ll go after death. Because of that, they’re afraid to die. They’re just not prepared to die. The Bible is clear, **“Just as people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment.” (Hebrews 9:27)** So, in contrast to those who believe that people go through an endless cycle of death and rebirth which is called reincarnation, the Bible says that we only die once. Then, you face the Almighty God who is the Great Judge. Well, that truly is a frightening prospect. If I’m not prepared to face God, then I’ll truly be afraid.

But why do we die? Scientists have explained that it is because of wear and tear in our bodies. Our bodies are like a car that when you reach a certain mileage of 200 or 300,000 miles, then the pistons stop cranking and the engine starts to fail until it just wouldn’t start anymore. I look at myself and wonder how many miles do I have now? Maybe 150,000? I hope I’m a Toyota.

You see, some researchers believe that there's a limit on how many years a human being could live, the maximum being 125.

Others see a world in which we have centenarians walking around with people who have lived for 500 or 1,000 years. Diseases related to aging, like dementia and heart disease, currently block us from reaching that point. Our body parts wear out from use. In the quest for immortality, then, scientists are focused on how to stop aging from occurring within the body. Will they ever discover that? Or will they just be like Ponce de Leon who sought the mythical fountain of youth? Altho' that story of Ponce de Leon is a myth in itself according to some sources.

Anyway, you know what this tells me, people have this desire to defeat death and long for immortality because they know intuitively that death is not natural. Something has just gone wrong. Like when a car breaks down or stops working, something has just gone wrong with that car. The thing is many scientists would not believe you when you tell them what has gone wrong with human beings according to the Bible.

The Bible says that the cause of death, the Great Unknown is sin, the Great Destroyer. Sin is real although some people may try to ignore it or say it's a figment of the imagination or there is no such thing. I read an article by a former Christian who became an atheist who said that atheists are humanists who would need more information before saying whether a certain behavior is wrong. Be that as it may, what they judge to be wrong behavior based on their standards is what we call "sin" as Christians. It's the same banana. It's just that our standard of morality is the Bible and their standard is their own minds. Look what happened to millions of Jews because many people led by Adolf Hitler applied and implemented their own standard of morality.

So, sin entered the world when Satan, according to the Word of God, tempted Adam and Eve to apply their own standard of morality.

He made them eat the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil and their eating of the fruit signified their turning away from God, from being dependent on God, and to becoming the decision-makers themselves about what is right or wrong.

What's the result? The Bible says that God told them, "You must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die." (Gen. 2:17) Folks, they died some years after that event and all their descendants after them died too and we too will die. We have the stain of sin in us that's why we die. Not only that, because of sin, our minds and hearts have been warped that we commit things we regret afterwards. We act in ways that are destructive to us and people around us, even to people we love. The Bible gives us a list of sins in Galatians 5:19-21, "The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like."

That is the sad state of affairs for mankind. Because if you think about it, how can scientists and great minds of this world take away the stain of sin in our beings? Is there a chemical solution that will remove it? Will a machine be able to scrub it out? Is there a powerful enough computer who can debug it? How will this sin go away from our lives?

That's where God comes in. He is the only one who can remove sin. How did he do that? By the simple act of forgiveness. Which leads us to the next thing we should do to experience the best Thanksgiving ever.

2. I need to recognize that only God can save me.

So, again verse 8 says, "For it is by grace you have been saved." What is grace? Someone said, "GRACE is God's Riches at Christ's Expense".

Riches refers to our salvation and all the spiritual blessings we receive as a result of God giving Jesus to us. Jesus is God's son who he sent to earth to die for our sins. God sacrificed his own Son by letting him be crucified on the cross so that we can be forgiven of our sins. When the blood of Jesus was poured on the cross, our sins were wiped away. As the Bible says, "Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness." (Hebrews 9:22)

I hope you see that our salvation is all an act of God. That it was his grace alone that saves us. We don't have any part in our salvation. It is given to us for free that's why the second part of verse 8 and then 9 says, "and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast."

Now, if we back up a few verses, beginning in verse 4, it says, "But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved."

(Ephesians 2:4-5) So the idea of our salvation by God's grace is already introduced by Paul in verse 5. And verse 7 is where the idea of the acronym of GRACE comes from, "In order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus." (Eph. 2:7)

So, you see, salvation is a free gift as what verse 8 says. Many Christians say it that way. Free gift. But that is redundant isn't it? A gift is always free. If it's not free, it's not a gift, it's a reward. And if it's a reward, you earned it. But the Bible says we don't earn our salvation. It is a gift from God.

You see, Christmas is coming and we will receive gifts. Would you ever say to the person who'll give you a gift, "How much is it?" "What do I do to receive this gift?" "I'm pretty sure there's something behind this that's why you're giving me a gift". No, a gift is meant to be received and enjoyed.

But sometimes, we say to ourselves, "What did I do to deserve this gift?" "I don't deserve this gift". Friend, yes, you don't deserve the gift of salvation.

The Bible says that what we deserve is death because of our sin. “For the wages of sin is death”. (Rom. 6:23) But you know what, God gave us Jesus anyway because he loves us. The Bible says, “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” (Rom. 5:8)

Let me give you a more precise definition of grace. Grace is God giving us what we don't deserve. God giving us what we don't deserve. Do we deserve salvation? No, we don't. The Bible says in Isaiah 53:5, “We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way”. We all want to do our own thing, right? We want to be independent. We want to control our lives. From the time of Adam until now, people don't want to be under the authority of God. They despised him. They have thumbed their noses at him. They have ignored him and said he doesn't exist. But you know what, despite the stubbornness of man and their utter disregard of God, God still loves mankind. He wants everyone to be saved and not perish. And so, he sent his Son Jesus to die for our sins because he doesn't want us to die. That's how great his love is for us.

But this gift of salvation needs to be received, right? How do you receive it? Which now brings us to the third thing you can do to experience the best Thanksgiving ever.

3. I need to receive the gift of salvation through faith.

So, OK, Jesus did all that. His cross and his blood purchased my salvation. But what about faith? Isn't this where I do my part? You know, where I make my decision for Christ? Isn't that up to me, by an exercise of my free will? No, look at verses 4 and 5 again, “God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions”. It says we were dead. Remember when God said to Adam and Eve that when they eat the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil they will die? God was talking not only about physical death, but spiritual death as well. And, therefore, we were all dead. Dead men don't make decisions.

And your will was willfully willing the wrong things, following the devil, the world, and the flesh. Your will, like the rest of you, was dead in spiritual matters. And so faith itself, your coming to believe in Christ—that too is a gift.

The whole “saved by grace through faith” thing—that whole thing is, as our text states, “the gift of God.” Salvation is a gift. And I must add, faith is a gift, too. You would not have believed in Christ, you would not have received the gift, if God had not first enlivened you, given you spiritual life through the good news of Jesus Christ so that you could receive it. The bottom line is, both our salvation in Christ, the forgiveness he extended to us on the cross, and the faith to receive that gift—all of it is God’s doing. He gets all the glory. No boasting allowed.

No boasting allowed, either, even when it comes to our good works. Paul says in verse 10: “For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” We Christians are God’s handiwork—not our own handiwork, but his. Our good works are due to his good working in us.

The word that’s used here for handiwork can describe a work of art that a craftsman or an artist makes. Imagine works of art that are truly beautiful and glorious: textiles, carvings, beautiful landscapes, stained glass windows. Noble, excellent things of beauty that show the skill and design and creativity of the artists who make them. Well, take that idea now and apply it to God. He is the great Artist par excellence, and we Christians are his handiwork. We are new creations in Christ. He has designed us to show forth his glory by our life of good works. As Jesus says, “Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.” (Matthew 5:16) That is the Christian’s life of good works. That’s who God has created you to be: a reflection of his goodness and love and character, in how you love and serve your neighbor.

So, you don't need your good works for your salvation. No, that is 100% God's doing. But your neighbor needs your good works. And you were designed to do them. You are God's channel of blessing for your neighbor. God has mapped out the course beforehand for you to walk in good works of love and service. God will give you opportunities to serve your neighbor in love. He'll put those opportunities in your path. Now just walk forward into them. Walk with Christ. You will recognize those opportunities, and you will do those good works.

So the whole thing, from start to finish, is God's doing: Your salvation in Christ. The faith to believe in Christ. And your life of good works as God's workmanship. All of it, the whole thing, is a gift. Now why is this a good thing? Because if it depended on you, in any part or any measure, you could never be sure that you had done enough. You would always be wondering, "Have I done enough to satisfy God?" But because it is a gift, from God, then you can be sure. You can be sure of your salvation, because Jesus Christ finished the job for you on the cross. Likewise, you can be sure God will provide you with what you need to keep you in the faith. For that is simply the gospel, which comes to you here in plenteous supply, in the gifts of Word and Sacrament. And you can be sure that God will help you to live the new life of love and good works, for that is what he has created you to do. And finally, you can be sure of the eternal life that is waiting for you in heaven. Eternal life is possible because Jesus Christ rose from the dead on the third day. On the day we call Easter. You have God's word on it, and his promises are a sure thing. All of this, then, is God's doing, his gracious gifts bestowed on you for Christ's sake.

In his book, *Surprised by Joy*, C.S. Lewis tells how he became a Christian, mainly through the reading of both secular and Christian books. The first step came in 1929 when he was 31 years old.

He had been reading some Christian books over and over again when he decided to go to town on the bus. He got on the bus an atheist. As he rode along, he reconsidered Hegel's philosophy of the absolute and festooned it with Berkley's notion of the spirit. What resulted was a philosophical construct he called God. When his stop came, he got off the bus believing that God did indeed exist.

The first thing that happened to him was a consciousness of sin. He looked inside himself and was appalled by what he saw: "A Zoo of lusts, a bedlam of ambitions, a nursery of fears, a harem of fondled hatreds." He wanted to pray. But to whom? He did not yet know the God he believed existed. Nonetheless, "I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England."

A year later at age 32 Lewis spent an evening discussing mythology and Christianity with some intellectual friends who were Christians, one of whom was the writer, J.R.R. Tolkien. They challenged him as he had never been challenged before to think critically about Jesus. After the meeting broke up, Lewis could not go to sleep. He continued to wrestle with the concept of Jesus as God in the flesh. By 3:00 a.m. he had decided to accept Jesus as his Savior. Twelve days later he wrote these words to Tolkien: "I have passed on from believing in God to definitely believing in Christ — in Christianity."

As Lewis reasoned about Jesus and His claim to deity, he kept asking himself, is He God or was He simply what most people say, that is, "a great moral teacher"? He suddenly came to a conclusion that has convicted millions since that time:

"A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic — on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg — or else he would be the Devil of Hell.

You must take your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else he was a madman or something worse.”

Friend, I believe that it was not an accident you came here this morning. God brought you here. God wanted you to hear this message of salvation so that you can too can enjoy the blessings he provide to those who believe in his Son Jesus—the blessing of eternal life and the blessing of his peace and joy and grace on this earth. If you will make a decision today for Christ, you will then experience the best Thanksgiving ever this coming Thanksgiving Day!