

ROMANS 1:8-15

A REASON TO BE THANKFUL

“First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world. For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I mention you always in my prayers, asking that somehow by God’s will I may now at last succeed in coming to you. For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you—that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith, both yours and mine. I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented), in order that I may reap some harvest among you as well as among the rest of the Gentiles. I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome.”¹

“**F**irst...” I find it instructive that the Apostle’s first priority in this letter is to express gratitude. His gratitude for those to whom he writes is evident in even a cursory review of the letters he wrote to the churches and to individuals. Recall a few instances of Paul’s expressions of gratitude. Writing the Corinthians in his first letter to that congregation, Paul declared, “I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge—even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you—so that you are not lacking in any gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ” [1 CORINTHIANS 1:4-8].

The Ephesian encyclical demonstrates Paul’s thankful attitude for believers when he writes, “Because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come” [EPHESIANS 1:15-21].

The letter Paul wrote to the Christians in Philippi begins with this statement of gratitude. “I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now” [PHILIPPIANS 1:3-5].

Note how Paul began one other missive to a church, especially noting how the Apostle expressed gratitude for those believers. “We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven” [COLOSSIANS 1:3-5a].

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Consider one final expression of thanksgiving for an individual named Philemon. Paul wrote, “I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers, because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints” [**PHILEMON 4, 5**].

From this brief review of the Apostle’s heart for fellow believers, it is apparent that he modelled gratitude, especially gratitude for fellow believers as they stood firm in this holy Faith. Even if nothing is ever taught in Scripture about our responsibility to live lives marked by thanksgiving, the example of those who preceded us should lead us to be a grateful people.

Ingratitude is the default position of the world, as Paul makes abundantly clear in a very short while. The lack of thanksgiving is revealed when Paul writes, “The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things” [**ROMANS 1:18-23**].

Mankind endeavours to displace God from His rightful place of honour as Creator. People seek to establish man as the recipient of glory and honour simply because he exists. Anyone contemplating creation should recognise the Creator as good and kind. Mankind, exalting himself to the centre of his world, distorts reality and creates a fantasy. Mankind’s descent into spiritual madness begins with the dreadful refusal to be thankful. Therefore, ingratitude is the default position of fallen people.

Christians, when they are walking in the light—walking with the Living God, are marked by gratitude—Christians are a thankful people. This is the reason we return thanks to God when receiving a meal, give thanks to the Lord when we recognise we have been delivered from trouble, offer thanks to the Master when we have received grace. It is only as we take our eyes off the Lord that we try to hide our gratitude and appear as though we are part of the world.

However, because we are still in the flesh, though we are thankful to God by virtue of the New Birth, we are capable of slipping back into exalting self and again adopting the default position of ingratitude. Christians, truly born from above believers, are able to occupy the pew they have occupied since the day they were redeemed, all the while grouching about those whom God appoints to direct the affairs of the assembly, imagining that they are superior in their understanding of grace and ungrateful to God for His mercy and grace. Believers in the Risen Son of God are capable of acting even worse than the world when they exalt themselves.

The Apostle did not merely express gratitude for fellow believers when he wrote to them, he specified what caused him to be thankful to God. By this, he taught those who received his letters, and we who read those same letters to this day, to cultivate an attitude of gratitude. Moreover, he provided much needed guidance for how we Christians are to look at the world in order to effect this attitude of thanksgiving. Let’s look at what Paul wrote to the Romans in order to discover a reason to be thankful that might otherwise be overlooked.

YOUR FAITH IS PROCLAIMED THROUGHOUT THE WORLD — “I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world.” Paul’s gratitude is offered to God. It is good to be thankful to individuals who are kind toward us, but ultimately we recognise that God is the One deserving our thanksgiving.

Tomorrow, we observe the holiday we know as Thanksgiving. I question how thankful many of our fellow Canadians are. The day was long ago relegated to a family holiday; and while there may be a perfunctory prayer of thanksgiving before a grand meal, I must wonder how grateful our fellow citizens are. Ostensibly we are setting aside the day to think on God's goodness to our nation. It remains to be seen how grateful we are in reality.

I do not address the nation, nor do I speak to the seat of government for either our province or our nation; but I do speak to you, the people of God. For what are you grateful? I know that for myself, I focus often on the benefits I have received that have a personal impact on my life. As I offer thanks on this holiday, I will undoubtedly mention freedom, the bounty we enjoy as a nation, family and friendships. The text today calls us to give thanks because God is at work through us to advance His cause throughout the world.

Paul commended these Christians because their faith in Christ was known throughout the world. God is to be praised because He both calls us to faith in Christ His Son and He then instills in the believers' hearts the Faith. How is faith in Christ recognised? What did the Apostle see in these Roman believers that led him to comment on their faith in Christ as he did? In a very real sense, Paul is saying that the Christianity of the Roman Christians was recognised throughout the world. When we discover the answer to the question of how we recognise faith in Christ, we will be well positioned to explore the impact we are having in our world.

It is one thing to recognise that salvation is by faith. We will have perhaps memorised the statement given in the Ephesian Letter, "By grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast" [EPHESIANS 2:8, 9]. Christians are comfortable declaring to any who may ask, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved" [ACTS 16:31]. What is often missing from urging faith in Christ to those who seek salvation, is that saving faith transforms our life! It is not *profession* that saves; it is *possession* that saves. When Christ comes into an individual's life, that person will be changed. Thus, the Apostle teaches, "We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" [EPHESIANS 2:10].

This is the explanation Paul has provided concerning the transformation witnessed in the believer's life. "This I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. But that is not the way you learned Christ!—assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness" [EPHESIANS 4:17-24].

In the Letter to Colossian Christians, this same concept is stated in slightly different form. "Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these the wrath of God is coming. In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all" [COLOSSIANS 3:5-11].

Our faith in Christ is seen through how we live! Underscore this thought in your mind. What you say you believe is ultimately of little importance. How you live your faith is vital. These Christians were committed to living godly, righteous lives. This brings up a serious problem in our world. The unbelieving mind imagines that they are pleasing to God because they live a good life. Tragically, they redefine “good” rather than seeking God’s definition of “good.” For much of the world, we imagine that being “good” consists of avoiding harming others, being nice and decent, refusing to be judgemental and other similar actions. What is absent from this idea is the concept of holiness. Holiness leads the individual to seek the mind of God, doing those things that honour Him as God and bring glory to His Name.

Here is a biblical example of individuals who were transformed by the presence of Christ. In what was perhaps his earliest letter to have been included within the canon of Scripture, Paul spoke of his affection for the Christians in Thessalonica. “We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything. For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come” [1 THESSALONIANS 1:2-10].

What marked these saints as Christian? In the first place, *they received the message that was preached*. Like the first believers in Jerusalem, “they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship” [see ACTS 2:42]. The message “cut to the heart” [see ACTS 2:37], but it brought them to repentance. This devotion to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship served as powerful evidence that the Spirit of God was working in power among them.

Tell me, which church did you last visit where the message revealed your sin, compelling you to confess your sin and seek full restoration? When did you last hunger and thirst after righteousness? When was the last time you found yourself eager to go to the House of the Lord because you had prepared your heart and you knew you would meet the Risen Saviour there? We find our way to the modern religious experience with scant recognition of our sinful condition and we join an organisation, much as we might join any community organisation. Heart commitment to the fellowship is a vague memory relegated to a long-forgotten past.

Again, *they responded by imitating the lives of the Apostles and the life of Christ Himself*, even in the face of persecution and opposition. The mere act of receiving the message resulted in “affliction,” in severe pressure and persecution. Like the Apostles when they were haled before the Sanhedrin, these believers could boldly proclaim, “Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard” [ACTS 4:19, 20].

I don’t know that modern church goers are prepared to suffer opposition. At the first whiff of ridicule Christians seem prepared to quit the Faith. Tragically, we often have become indistinguishable from the world. We look like the world and we live like the world; and we wonder why we have so little power with God. We are fallen from our high position in Christ.

Note yet again that *they were mission-minded*, sounding forth the Word of the Lord. This was not a mere act of giving money to a missionary group—this was an investment of life to advance the cause of Christ. These saints were personally invested in spreading the Word of God. These believers were committed to “every member evangelism” before the modern churches even knew such a thing existed. These saints, as was true of the missionary band who brought them the message of life, “turned the world upside down” [see ACTS 17:1-6].

These early saints were pray-ers—they looked to God who could do anything but fail. When the apostles were threatened, “they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them” [ACTS 4:23]. The immediate and spontaneous response of the Christians that received this report was that “they lifted their voices together to God” [ACTS 4:24]. They prayed! And the prayer they offered was not for deliverance or for God to silence the foe or for God to make their life easier—they prayed, “Sovereign Lord ... look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak Your Word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the Name of Your Holy Servant Jesus” [ACTS 4:29, 30]. They were on mission with God. They were co-workers with God advancing His cause and pushing back against the darkness.

Where is such prayer in this day? Where is such boldness now? Where are the saints investing sleepless nights pleading for the city? Pleading for lost children? Pleading for lost friends? Pleading for their marriage to be healed? Have we no compassion for lost family members? For lost colleagues? For lost friends? Are we unconcerned for our community? Christians are prepared to ask someone to join them for a special day in church, but have we actually stopped inviting people to the Saviour? Has the Great Commission been rescinded? Are we actually freed from going and making disciples today?

The one overarching mark of the new life these believers had received was that *they turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God*. They were finished with the life they had previously known; now, they were committed to serving the One True God. The evidence they were serving the One True God was that *they were waiting for His Son from Heaven*. Living in anticipation of the coming of Christ the Lord demonstrates a transformed life. This subject demands that we invest some time thinking about this.

I must question the dedication of modern Christendom. When did we last spend the night in prayer for our child because we know Christ is coming soon and our child is lost? I don’t mean that he’s not a nice boy or that she’s not a polite girl—I mean they have no love for Christ! When did we last find our lives disturbed because we knew the Saviour would soon be here and our community is lost? We have ceased living in anticipation of the return of the Master. We don’t want to be called fanatics, so we attempt to live like the world about us, being calm, cool and collected. Our message, if we have a message is “Repent, after a fashion, and believe, such as it were, or be damned in a measure.” There is no urgency in our service.

The Apostle has taught us that “The love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised” [1 CORINTHIANS 5:14, 15]. If I continue to live in pettiness of spirit, censuring others because they fail to measure up to my standard, I am living for myself and not for Christ. Such judgemental pettiness must be condemned as unworthy of a twice-born saint. Have we not heard the Master? “If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s” [ROMANS 14:8]. In practise, let us determine that we will “pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding” [ROMANS 14:19].

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This exposes a serious flaw in the attitude of contemporary Christians. We imagine that we “join a church.” Because we join, we can quit whenever we want to quit. Our commitment is tenuous, at best; we have no long-term commitment to the congregation because we are at the centre of our life. Perhaps we enjoy the worship; and so long as the worship meets our standard we’ll attend services. Perhaps we have set the pastor on a pedestal; as long as he meets our expectations we’ll continue in attendance. Perhaps we enjoy the fellowship; and as long as everyone makes us feel good about ourselves we’ll participate in the services. However, we don’t see ourselves as being added to the number [see **ACTS 2:47**]; we are in control of our own participation. We don’t believe that God directs us—we are in charge. Consequently, *we* may be proclaimed throughout the world, but our faith is never recognised.

YOU ARE GROWING IN CHRIST — “I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you.” Paul continued by noting that he longed to see these saints, most of whom he didn’t know. His reason for longing to meet them was so that he could bless them by strengthening them through the Spirit. The Apostle believed in the concept of Body Life.

Modern church services have become a spectator event. We go to church to watch performers present what is called worship. If it is a good show, we may throw a few extra dollars in the offering basket; if the entertainers fail to excite us, we’ll find another place to attend on another week. Paul knew he was gifted; and he knew that the saints to whom he wrote were gifted. His purpose was to ensure that the saints were growing in Christ through building one another investing their lives and their gifts building one another. Surely this is the meaning of Paul’s teaching when he writes, “Speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into Him who is the Head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love” [**EPHESIANS 4:15, 16**]. Christians are expected to be always “bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God” [**COLOSSIANS 1:10**]. We are to “grow[] with a growth that is from God” [**COLOSSIANS 2:19**].

It is instructive that the final command Peter gives to those reading his Second Letter is, “Grow in grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ” [**2 PETER 3:18**]. He concludes this missive in that way because he began the letter by urging readers to anticipate and to work toward growth. He opens the letter by saying, “His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire. For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love” [**2 PETER 1:3-7**].

He continues encouraging readers by observing that, “If these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For whoever lacks these qualities is so nearsighted that he is blind, having forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins. Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to confirm your calling and election, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall. For in this way there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” [**2 PETER 1:3-11**]. Peter urged all believers who read this letter, “Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation” [**2 PETER 2:2**].

When believers are growing in Christ, we are each encouraged by the progress witnessed. When believers cease growing in Christ, the saints grow cantankerous, obstreperous, combative, pugnacious, argumentative. The congregation of the Lord is strengthened by growing in Christ. Obviously, if we are growing in Christ we are serving one another—building one another in the Faith, encouraging one another and consoling one another [cf. 1 CORINTHIANS 14:3, 4]. What might be overlooked in this situation is that growth in Christ encourages the faithful primarily because it demonstrates Christ at work among us. We see Him working in the lives of others and we rejoice in what is being accomplished. We witness Christ at work and we endeavour to honour Him by employing the gifts He has entrusted to us to further the growth of the church. When He works among us, we eagerly enter into the work He is performing.

However, the one who has ceased growing in Christ will turn inward. The evidence that such a person is turning inward is that he tends to look for something to criticise, becomes a busybody seeking what he imagines to be wrong so that he can correct it, begins to grumble because he is listening to salacious gossip. Turning inward, it is impossible for a Christian to be thankful because he is unable to see the Saviour at work; his eyes are not focused on the Master. The Apostle offered thanks to God because he sought opportunity to further the growth he witnessed among the Roman Christians.

When you give thanks, give thanks for the spiritual growth you are witnessing in others. If you cannot see others growing in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour, then ask Him to open your eyes of faith. As you offer thanks to God, are you able to thank Him for the opportunity you have to share in the growth of fellow worshippers? Giving thanks to the Lord of the church, plead with Him to employ you to the praise of His glory by investing in fellow Christians the spiritual gifts He has entrusted to you. The fact that Christ is at work, strengthening and encouraging fellow Christians is a cause for giving thanks.

Ultimately, the Apostle's goal was to strengthen believers. Paul possessed spiritual gifts (*chárisma*) in eminent degree. He had received divine assurance that when he at last arrived in Rome he would be able to give the believers there the fullest benefit of those gifts. This is why he wrote, "I know that when I come to you I will come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ" [ROMANS 15:29]. The gift Paul sought to impart to these saints was from the Spirit of God to the spirit of man. Paul wanted to strengthen the Christians, thus encouraging them. This should be the aspiration of every child of God.

Paul yearned to see these Roman Christians confirmed in the Faith. The original text makes it clear that Paul is not saying that he has some mystical power to strengthen these saints; rather, he is saying that through employing the gifts entrusted to him, saints will be encouraged. The word he uses is commonly used of the work of Christ exercised through mere mortals to strengthen His people. For instance, recall that when Peter boasted of his commitment to the Master, Jesus cautioned him against thinking that he was as strong as he imagined. Jesus said, "Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, **strengthen your brothers**" [LUKE 22:31, 32]. Though He uses human instruments, it is nevertheless Christ Himself who strengthens His people. Peter apparently learned this lesson, because he writes, "After you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself restore, confirm, **strengthen and establish you**" [1 PETER 5:10]. Perhaps God will use human instruments, but He will be the one making His people strong. Perhaps the Lord will employ you to strengthen others, but it will be God at work through you.

YOU ENCOURAGE THE SAINTS — “I long to see you . . . that we may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith, both yours and mine.” The ministry of the saints is reciprocal. That is, we serve one another. This is yet another reason to give thanks to God. He did not appoint us to His service expecting that we would be stolid, impassive, aloof; we are not expected to stand alone against the world. There is a reason we Christians are identified as “the sheep of His pasture” [see **PSALM 100:3**].

There is no Mount Sinai from which one believer dispenses blessing to another; rather, we Christians serve one another in love. There are no less than ten reciprocal commandments given in this Letter to Roman Christians, and at least thirty additional reciprocal commands given in the remaining letters of the Apostle. This is important precisely because among us there are no superior or inferior Christians. Jesus taught us that we are to aspire to be servants. Recall His words, “If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all” [**MARK 9:35**].

The Master did not merely tell those who follow Him how to live, He modelled the life we should live. When the disciples squabbled about who was the greatest, Jesus reminded them, “The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you. Rather, let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves. For who is the greater, one who reclines at table or one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at table? But I am among you as the one who serves” [**LUKE 22:25-27**].

This teaching is expanded by Matthew as he writes, “Whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many” [**MATTHEW 20:25-28**].

Thus reminded of Jesus’ teaching, think again of those reciprocal commands. We are to “love one another,” “outdo one another in showing honour,” live in harmony with one another,” refuse to “pass judgement on one another” and “welcome one another.” These commandments are provided to remind us how dependent we are on the ministry of others. If our service consists of coming to church, listening to a sermon and returning to our dreary routines without being transformed, we are neither benefitted by what we do nor do we benefit others.

Are you encouraged by the faith of others? Do you know that your faith encourages fellow Christians? The goal of every believer must be to honour Christ through encouraging fellow believers. We have already seen the emphasis on mutual encouragement. This is important to note primarily because the Apostle is being careful in his approach to these saints. Admittedly, he has stated that he wants to impart a spiritual gift to them, thus strengthening them and encouraging them. However, note that he speaks of his own need for encouragement.

This is a dramatic picture the Apostle paints with these words. We tend to think of Paul in almost heroic terms, as though we were some sort of super-Christian. He never lost hope, never grew discouraged, never wanted to give up, never suffered a misstep, never questioned what he was doing or what God was doing through him, at least that is what we imagine. However, here the Apostle admits that he needs encouragement. In saying this, Paul is confessing one of the secrets every pastor harbours.

Pastoring is lonely business. The pastor is not able to discuss all that is revealed to him. Many issues are kept silent lest a member of the assembly should be injured through indiscretion. When accused of malfeasance, the pastor must silently bear with the charge. Church members may bruit gossip as though it was gospel. When asked for the source, they piously declare that they can’t say who told them. The pastor must tolerate this, ensuring that his work is lonely.

When Paul writes of the demands faced in order to fulfil the ministry he received, do you imagine he had never faced discouragement, never been tempted to quit? He was compelled to defend his service because of people whom he deemed “super apostles”—preachers for hire who advanced themselves by demeaning him. His defence was delivered in pointed terms.

“Whatever anyone else dares to boast of—I am speaking as a fool—I also dare to boast of that. Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they offspring of Abraham? So am I. Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one—I am talking like a madman—with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant” [2 CORINTHIANS 11:21-29]?

Every pastor needs encouragement; I am no exception. I labour over the messages I deliver. Few people could know, much less appreciate the requirement for hours of study and prayer that a given message requires, and the more so since a disastrous auto crash some years past robbed me in a measure of the ability to speak. Nevertheless, I am driven by the desire to bless you—speaking the truth in love, providing sound exposition of the Word so that you may be instructed in the Faith and so that you may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. It is easy to grow weary in the work of the Master. At any given time among us are some who are capable of draining the pastor’s energies through demanding attention, through failure to grow, through refusal to participate in the life of the Body, through grumbling. I don’t need commiseration from anyone; I do need to see Christ at work in your life. And the evidence that Christ is at work through you will encourage me just as it will encourage others. As you reveal the presence of the Master, others will assuredly be encouraged. As I witness Christ working in you, I am encouraged. I daresay that those in whom the Master works temper the sting of others who have grown senescent, drinking at the fountain of criticism and complaint, all the while unconcerned that loved ones are unsaved and going to a Christless eternity.

I want to speak of my deep desire for you who hear me at this hour. I long for us to be a thankful people. We will gather around our various tables tomorrow, each enjoying the company of family and friends to enjoy a meal. It will be a celebration of God’s rich blessing on us as a nation. No doubt each of us will offer a prayer of thanksgiving before the meal. My desire is that Thanksgiving will not be merely a day in our life, but that thanksgiving will become an indelible marker of who we are in Christ Jesus. I long for us not only to offer thanks to God for all the material blessings we enjoy, and they are great, but I want us to begin to give thanks to God for His work in our midst.

My plea to you is that we will give God thanks because our faith is becoming known throughout the world. The message of life is going out far beyond these walls through your witness and through your prayers. Though some may scoff at the thought that we are doing much, let us rejoice that God is working to spread the aroma of Christ through us each day. My plea to God’s holy people is that we will give thanks because we are growing in Christ. Give thanks that fellow believers are growing in Christ. My plea is that we can be thankful because God is encouraging us through our mutual service. My plea is that we will be a thankful people.

ROMANS 1:8-15
A REASON TO BE THANKFUL

In the midst of being thankful, may I speak of my growing concern. The days are evil and those who oppose the Gospel are waxing strong. Opposition to righteousness is growing daily. Even professing Christians are found aligning with those who occupy the seat of the scornful. Christ is coming soon and all about us are people who are unprepared for His coming. There will be a great separation when Jesus returns to call His people out from among this dying world. Believing mothers will be separated from unsaved daughters. Believing sons will be compelled to leave behind unbelieving dads. You always meant to speak to that neighbour that is unsaved, but somehow the time is never right. When Christ suddenly appears, flashing as lightning from one side of the sky to the other, there will be no opportunity to plead—it will be too late.

We are losing opportunities to win our loved ones to the Faith. Surfeited with material goods, our families are doomed. My prayer is that the people of God will invest themselves in seeking God's power in these days of powerless religion, that God's people will pray for holy boldness to reclaim precious opportunities that are being lost. Your child is worth your earnest prayers. Sleepless nights are a small price to pay for another opportunity to turn your workmate to the path of righteousness. Are not our marriages worth the time to ensure that they work? It is time for the people of God to grow desperate, pleading with God, saying, "I will not permit my child to die without Christ! I will not allow my neighbours to go another day without hearing of the love of God! I will fight for my marriage and for my family to stand firm in the Faith!" With all this, let the people of God offer thanks to God for the Family of God. Amen.