

# *Thankful for God's People*

## WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

November 19, 2023

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*Psalms 111 (NLT)*

<sup>1</sup> Praise the LORD!

I will thank the LORD with all my heart  
as I meet with his godly people.

<sup>2</sup> How amazing are the deeds of the LORD!  
All who delight in him should ponder them.

<sup>3</sup> Everything he does reveals his glory and majesty.  
His righteousness never fails.

<sup>4</sup> He causes us to remember his wonderful works.  
How gracious and merciful is our LORD!

<sup>5</sup> He gives food to those who fear him;  
he always remembers his covenant.

<sup>6</sup> He has shown his great power to his people  
by giving them the lands of other nations.

<sup>7</sup> All he does is just and good,  
and all his commandments are trustworthy.

<sup>8</sup> They are forever true,  
to be obeyed faithfully and with integrity.

<sup>9</sup> He has paid a full ransom for his people.  
He has guaranteed his covenant with them forever.  
What a holy, awe-inspiring name he has!

<sup>10</sup> Fear of the LORD is the foundation of true wisdom.  
All who obey his commandments will grow in wisdom.  
Praise him forever!

*Romans 1:8–12 (NIV)*

<sup>8</sup> First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is being reported all over the world. <sup>9</sup> God, whom I serve in my spirit in preaching the gospel of his Son, is my witness how constantly I remember you <sup>10</sup> in my prayers at all times; and I pray that now at last by God's will the way may be opened for me to come to you.

<sup>11</sup> I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong—<sup>12</sup> that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith.

*Colossians 3:12–16 (NIV)*

<sup>12</sup> Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. <sup>13</sup> Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. <sup>14</sup> And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

<sup>15</sup> Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. <sup>16</sup> Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts.

*Regardless of the circumstances of our lives this Thanksgiving, we ought to all find it easy to be grateful for the people of grace that make up St. Andrew.*

We approach another Thanksgiving . . . a day set aside to take stock of our many blessings and to thank God and many others for all that they have done for us. This year, like most, I find myself swamped with blessings. My cup runneth over, indeed.

I know how blessed I am to have Patti, my sons, and my family. I love my work and am showered with appreciation from so many people at St. Andrew. I enjoy and respect my co-workers. Patti and I have a beautiful home and money in the bank. We're healthy. . . . See, it is easy for me to come up with a long list.

Of course, this hasn't always been the case in my life. I've been through divorce, job loss, and assorted other problems. Some years, Thanksgiving had a pretty hollow ring to it. And I know that every year there are people in our congregation for whom gratitude will not come easily. For them, there has simply been too much loss and pain.

But whether gratitude comes easily to us this Thanksgiving or with difficulty, we can all take the time to be grateful for the people who make up the fellowship of grace we call St. Andrew.

### *Rome, Colossae, Thessalonica*

Of course, people of grace is what we ought to find at St. Andrew and every other community that calls itself Christian. We are recipients of God's grace and we are called to be givers of grace. Indeed, we are not simply urged or even commanded to be people of grace. Such grace-giving is simply part of who we are as Christians, new selves reborn into the body of Christ (see the page four textbox).

Paul is thankful for the people to whom he has been sent. Though he knows some of the Christians who have now returned to Rome (see the page four textbox), he doesn't know most of the community. But he is thankful for them. He knows that when he finally comes to Rome, he will be encouraged by their faith, as I'm sure he was despite the circumstances of his arrival.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, he writes that their faithfulness is being spread throughout the world. Hyperbole? N. T. Wright:

Hyperbole it may be, but it is still no mean thing to say that the faith of the Roman church was proclaimed "in all the world." Presumably this means that travelers known to Paul, not least Jewish Christians who had had to leave Rome under Claudius, were reporting the arrival in the capital of this strange new sect, neither ethnically Jewish (all the Christians in Rome for five years being Gentiles) nor pagan. There is unlikely to be a particular reason why he stresses their "faith" here, rather than, say, obedience (as in 16:19) or love (as in Col 1:8). What matters is that they are an authentic Christian congregation, for whom Paul thanks God through Jesus the Messiah (another formula that is hardly a formality). Paul often speaks of his "unceasing" prayers, referring probably to his keeping of regular times of prayer each day, though not excluding the sense of being "in prayer" at all times, standing in the presence of God with the churches on his heart and mind.<sup>2</sup>

Likewise, Paul is thankful for the Christians in Colossae<sup>3</sup>: "In our prayers for you we always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, for we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints." In today's passage from Paul's letter to the Colossians, he in turn urges them to be thankful, living out the new selves that they are in Christ.

Paul is thankful for the Christians in Thessalonica: "We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ." (1 Thess. 1:2).

He is similarly thankful for the Christians in Corinth and in Philippi. Paul's thankfulness for all these people shines through his letters despite their many problems and issues. Only Paul's letter to the Galatians lacks any thanksgiving for the Christians there, but that's a story for another day!

For years, Paul traveled around the Mediterranean, establishing colonies of a new human race. The colonists had been reborn in Christ and were filled with the very

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<sup>1</sup>Paul doesn't get to Rome until the early 60's AD, and then it is as a prisoner of Rome. Though under house arrest, Paul was surely able to spend much time with the Christians in Rome.

<sup>2</sup>Wright, N. T. (1994–2004). The Letter of the Romans. In L. E. Keck (Ed.), *New Interpreter's Bible* (Vol. 10, p. 422). Nashville: Abingdon Press.

<sup>3</sup>Colossae was a city in southwestern Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). By Paul's day it was a city in decline, helped along by a calamitous earthquake in 60 or 61 AD.

Spirit of the Lord God. In his kindness to and love of these people, Paul was not merely being encouraging and hopeful, but clear-eyed about the grace and the faith evidenced by these disciples of Jesus.

### *People of faith and grace*

Grace is one of those words that we toss around a lot, often without thinking about what is really meant. I like the old-fashioned definition of grace: “unmerited favor.” If you deserve it, it isn’t grace. Well-deserved rewards maybe, but not grace. Grace means a gift that we have no right to expect . . . none . . . zero . . . zip.

One of my favorite movies is about grace. It came out about ten years ago and was titled *Lars and the Real Girl*, and starred Ryan Gosling. You probably haven’t seen it, but I’m not giving the movie away by telling you that Lars is a troubled and socially alienated young man who finally gets a girlfriend by ordering a life-like, life-sized doll. For Lars, this doll is very much real and he begins to build an elaborate delusion around it/her. As the community learns of Lars’ delusion, they might be expected to respond with ridicule. Poor Lars does seem completely nutty. But they don’t, believing that the way to help Lars is to go along with his delusion. Instead of ridicule, they respond with grace. Participating in Lars’ delusion is their gift to him; he is the recipient of their unmerited favor. And this grace takes them all to a very surprising place.

#### “The gospel of his Son” (Romans 1:9, NRSV)

In AD49, all the Jews In Rome were told to leave by order of the Emperor Claudius. The biographer Suetonius tells us that this was due to troubles in the Jewish quarter caused by one called “Chrestus.” Even by that time, there were Jewish followers of Jesus in Rome and they too were swept up by the edict. Priscilla and Aquila (see Acts 18) were two of those forced to leave Rome. But Claudius died in AD54 and the edict died with him. So Jews and Christians began returning to Rome. Paul writes to a Christian community struggling to be unified as Jewish believers returned to Rome and found the Gentile believers in charge.

Now, in in his letter to the Christians in Rome, Paul tells them that he is serving God by “announcing the gospel of his Son.” What is this “gospel?” The answer may be a bit surprising to you. It is in this proclamation that the Roman believers can find unity.

Though the writings attributed to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are called gospels, that is not what Paul has in mind. The “gospel of his Son” is not a summary of Jesus’ teachings nor even of his ministry. The gospel is not the good news of Jesus, it is the good news about Jesus.

The underlying Greek word for “gospel” is *evangelion*. It is variously translated in the Bible as gospel/good news/glad tidings. From it, we get our English word “evangelism,” which is grounded in proclaiming the truth about Jesus.

In the Roman world of the first century, *evangelion* was not a church word, but was used to connote a proclamation of unusual importance, such as a great military victory, the birth of a son to Caesar, of a new Caesar taking the throne. Here is an inscription from 9BC about Augustus Caesar that illustrates my point:

“Caesar [Augustus] through his appearance has exceeded the hope of all former good news [*evangelia*] surpassing not only the benefactors who came before him, but also leaving no hope that anyone in the future would surpass him, since for the world the birthday of the god was the beginning of his good news [*evangelia*].”

One could substitute “Jesus” for “Caesar” and it would sound familiar!

Paul brings to the Romans and all the world a proclamation, announcing that in Jesus, God has redeemed all humanity and creation from bondage to sin and death. And that though it may seem to the world that Caesar, ruler of the vast Roman Empire, is the lord of all, in truth, it is Jesus who is Lord. The announcement of the gospel of God’s Son necessarily sets up a confrontation between God and the powers of this world, a confrontation that God has already won by virtue of Jesus’ faithfulness all the way to death on Caesar’s cross.

I remember that as Patti and I watched the movie, we both thought to ourselves, “Wow, what friends . . . shouldn’t we all have friends like that! Such caring, grace-giving people.” And we knew that we do have such friends. Here, in the St. Andrew family, there are countless people who would extend to us and to one another the same love and grace that Lars’ friends extended to him.

#### *A Thanksgiving resolution*

If you are deeply connected into the fellowship that is St. Andrew, I know that you have been richly blessed. If you are only marginally connected, I urge you to resolve to deepen your connection to this fellowship of believers. Join a connection group. Get involved in a class or group. Find places to serve. Yes, it means you have to take the initiative, but if you do, I’m confident that next Thanksgiving, your prayers of gratitude will, like my own, include this family of grace.

## **Scott Engle’s Bible Classes**

### **Monday Afternoon Class**

Current study: *Numbers*

Meeting on-line at 3pm Monday on Scott’s Facebook page. Search for “Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC.”

### **Tuesday Lunchtime Class**

Current study: *2 Samuel*

Meeting at 12:00 noon Tuesday in person in Piro Hall and on-line on Scott’s Facebook ministry page. Search for “Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC”.

#### *About the weekday classes:*

Join us whenever you can. Each week’s lesson stands on its own. This is very “drop-in.” Both classes are recorded and are available each week in my podcast at [scottengle.podbean.com](http://scottengle.podbean.com). They are also available on Apple podcasts and elsewhere. Search by “Scott Engle Bible Studies”.

### **Scott’s Sunday Class**

This Sunday: *From Shepherds to Sugarplums*, Part 1

Meeting on Sunday at 11:00 in Smith Worship Center and on Scott’s Facebook page. Search for “Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC.”

**Videos of all three classes are posted on Scott’s YouTube channel.** Search for “Scott Engle.” These videos are posted as soon as possible after class.