



Saturday
24 February 2024

Centenary Thanksgiving Service

Message by
Rev Dr Tim Patrick



Bible College SA

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Psalm 19:7-14 | Philippians 1:3-11 (NRSV)

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How wonderful to be together today to celebrate 100 years of Bible College SA, and to give great thanks to God for the great gift that this College has been to us, to countless people in the generations before us, and to even more people beyond us who have benefited from the fruits of the College's work. Thank you for coming to give thanks with us. We are so grateful for your presence and for your hearts being with this ministry.

There's no question at all that Bible College SA is, and has been, a great gift from God—a special and unmerited provision of his gracious disposition toward us. And as much as that grace is incongruous with our own deserving, it is, of course, very much in line with God's amazing character. After all, the gospel message tells us that God gave his only begotten Son for the salvation of the world that he made and he loves, despite the fact that none of us have any basis on which we could expect God to grant us such a blessing. God's grace to us in the gift of Jesus is at the core of what the College stands for, and more of God's grace to us is seen in the fact that the College stands at all, and especially in the fact that it stands for the promotion of the name of Jesus.

The ideas of gifts, blessings, and thanksgiving are prominent across the New Testament, but they do need a little unpacking, especially the idea of a gift because the way that the Bible speaks of gifts is in some ways the same as we tend to, but also in some ways quite different. We say that the College is a gift for us, but what do we mean by that?

Usually when we think of receiving a gift, we think about getting something for ourselves. If I get a gift, I get something that increases what I possess; something that enriches my life and my experience; something that makes me feel good. And the Bible does agree with this. Again, this is at the core of the gospel—Jesus died and rose for us, giving us the free gifts of forgiveness and eternity with him. Those gifts certainly enrich our lives and our experience of living, and should make us feel more than good! But the Bible also shows another dimension to receiving God's gifts that is radically different. Often, the gifts we receive from God are not actually all for us, but they are as much for other people. So if God gives me, say, the gift of hospitality, that's not just for me to enjoy, but for me to use to bless other people. If God gives me a special gift of prayer, that's not just for me to pray for and about myself, but so that I can intercede for others. If God gives me money, that's not just for my personal benefit, but for me to use in his service and for the good of others. Perhaps this dynamic reminds you of those Christmas presents you might get from an aid agency catalogue. You know the ones? You get a card saying that for you a goat, or a toilet, or a mosquito net, or a well for clean water has been given to people in need. And that is your gift. It's not something that you directly benefit from. But your gift is something for the benefit of someone else.

In the opening of Paul's letter to the Philippians that we've just heard read, we see that this dynamic extends even to the gospel.

3-5 Paul thanks God for the Philippians and joyfully prays for them because of their sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. I think that is partly about the Philippians having a share in the gifts of salvation and hope that the gospel has brought to them, but it's also partly about the fact that they now share with Paul in the ministry of the gospel—that is in speaking the gospel to others.

- 6 Paul is confident that the good work which God began among the Philippians, God will also bring to completion before the return of Jesus. And again, I don't think that good work is just the work of their conversion—the work that God has done in them and for them—but it's also the work that they are doing in speaking the gospel to others—that is, the work that God is doing through them.
- 7 This is confirmed in v7 where Paul says it's right for him to think this way because of the way the Philippians love him—which is evidence of the impact of the gospel on their hearts—but also because they share in God's grace with Paul, both in his imprisonment and in the defence and confirmation of the gospel. That is, God has been gracious to the Philippians by giving them the gift of caring for Paul while he's in prison and giving them the gift of defending and confirming the gospel like Paul does. The gift that God has given them is partly for them—they have freedom and hope in Christ—but also very much for others—they care for Christians in need and speak the gospel to people who don't know Jesus.
- 8-9 That work of the gospel both in and through the Philippians is why Paul longs for them with the compassion of Christ Jesus, and why he prays that their love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight. Notice that word 'overflow', it's a great word to capture what is going on. It immediately brings to mind the picture of water that has been poured into a container and then, because there's so much of it, it runs over the side. Here, Paul is taking about the water of life that has been generously poured into the Philippians, filling them right up to the brim, but which has then even spilled over and out from them to reach other people who are then blessed by their gift too.
- 10-11 Paul's prayer closes off with the hope that their overflowing knowledge and full insight will ultimately make them pure and blameless before God, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God. Again, not wanting to overstate the case, but I wonder if the harvest of righteousness that Paul refers to is not just their own personal righteousness, but the righteousness that others will come to have as they respond in faith to the Philippians' serving them.

Such is the dynamic of the wonderful gift of the gospel. And, in a way, the same thing is going on when we think about the gift of Bible College SA.

We're here today to give thanks for 100 years of Bible College SA—which we should note was called the Adelaide Bible Institute, or ABI, for its first 50 years—and I know it's very easy for us to think of the countless ways that we have personally benefited from this gift of God's grace. So many of our own lives have been deeply enriched through this College. We have built great friendships here. More than that, we have been connected into whole relational networks that radiate through the College and out across the city and even to the world beyond. For those who have studied and taught here, we have learned so much about the Bible and so much from the Bible. We've gone wide and deep into the scriptures and become more and more proficient at reading, understanding, and applying the Word of God, and that's been a treasure to us. More than that, we've also benefited immeasurably as our study of the Bible has humbled us, broken us down, explained more of us to ourselves, and turned us to Jesus with a greater need and a greater affection. So many of us can not just recite the famous lines of Psalm 19, but we can also affirm them as truths that are not only objectively fundamental, but also experientially definitive -

the word of God is more to be desired than gold,
even much fine gold;
it is sweeter also than honey,
and drippings of the honeycomb

How wonderful that through ABI and Bible College SA we have received the gift of more of the word of God in our lives.



And yet, as great as that blessing is, the real impact of the College has been for those beyond us—those who have never crossed the College's threshold, and indeed who might never even know that we exist. As our students finish their studies, graduate, and then head out to represent and serve Jesus in the world beyond, all that they have learned and been grown in at College becomes a blessing to the circles of people whom they serve after and away from College.

One leads a weekly Bible study group whose members are getting real depth in their studies thanks to our graduate's time studying the New and Old Testaments. The College has become a blessing to those others outside and beyond the College. Another graduate joins the staff team of a local church and so teaches and pastors the members of a congregation in a range of different ministry settings on any given Sunday, as well as at other times during the week in the homes of those members, or over a coffee at a local cafe, or even at their hospital bedside. The teaching and training provided at the College has again become a blessing to others outside and beyond the College. And then there are the graduates who pack up their lives and homes and relocate to distant parts of the world where there is little Christian witness, and they share the love of Christ with peoples from completely different cultures who might otherwise never have heard anything of the amazing good news of Jesus. In the earliest years, we were essentially a missionary training College and over the decades, countless graduates have gone out to serve in over 40 different countries from Afghanistan to Zaire. Lives around the world have been impacted for eternity. And once more the College has proven to be a gift not only to those who enrol to study, but to people outside, beyond, and far away.

We are so thankful that this is the kind of gift that the College is. For us, yes absolutely. But through us, also for many others across our city, state, and across the international community. Our graduates who now serve as missionaries, as pastors, as actively engaged members of our local churches, and as contributors to countless other ministries, bless those they serve, and I think we can say that the blessing is both quantitatively and qualitatively greater than it might otherwise have been thanks to their time studying here. God's gift to us is that we are spiritually useful far beyond ourselves. We can also helpfully reframe that truth to say that the College does not exist for itself, or even for the people directly connected to it, and it never has. Under God, the College exists for the sake of the gospel enterprise in our wider city, our state, and our world.

But as we celebrate and give thanks for all that God has done in us and through us, we must also cast our minds forward and ask, What does God want to do through us over the next 100 years? How can we be a gift and a blessing in our next century too? Well, as it happens the Board of the College has been asking these very questions, first of all focussing on the decade ahead. They have been asking what the College ought to be doing between now and 2034 when we will mark our 110th birthday. Two answers have been discerned. The first is that we should keep doing exactly what we have been doing for the last 100 years—training up women and men in Bible, theology, and ministry at the highest levels, so that they might be well-equipped to serve the next generations with the gospel of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. We want our children, our children's children, and the next generations of our friends and neighbours and communities in South Australia and beyond to live in places where the Word of God is easy to find, and where it is taught well and brought to bear on every part of life for the good of all and for the greater glory of our King. We are going to keep doing what we have always done. But secondly, the Board has also decided that we need to do something different in the next season of the College's life. We need to grow college bigger so that it can that train and form many more students than we have the capacity to train now. Of course we absolutely don't want to do this to boost our own egos and we don't even want it for the sake of the College itself. Not at all. We want to do it because, for all that the College is a great gift and blessing to people who receive the ministry of our graduates, at the moment, this really is just a drop in the ocean. We need to produce more graduates so that we can send more out to serve Jesus by serving faithfully and effectively in his world.



When the College was founded in 1924, more than 98% of the local population identified as Christian. Since the 1960s, that percentage has been plummeting, so that at the last census, it was below 50%. And, as you know, most of that 50% is made up of just nominal Christians—people who ticked the box but who do not actively live out any faith in Jesus. On any given Sunday, only around 3% of South Australians will be found in any church. And many of those folks are old, having faithfully persevered in Christ for decades. But this means that in many churches—especially in the traditional denominations it seems—many of the current faithful members will not be there in ten years time having gone to glory and as far as we can see with our human eyes, it does not look like many of them will be replaced. There are other churches with a younger age profile, but sad to say that, in some of these, the pastors do not really understand the Bible at much depth having not had a rigorous theological education and so they're unable to pass on very much of depth to the up and coming generations. We must add to these observations the fact that the state is growing, and beginning to take off—in the last quarter South Australia's economy was the best performing in the nation for the first time ever—and that might mean that we ought to anticipate further population growth. If we put all of this together, we forecast that in ten years time our state will be richer and more populous, but will have significantly less Christian witness per capita, and what there is might be shallower than what we have today. And all of this is to say nothing about the overwhelming needs that exist overseas. This is why we believe we must now seek to grow the College—so that we can have more of an impact on the generations to come. And in a rapidly changing culture, they're going to need the good news of Jesus in all of its fulness even more than we need it now. Both breadth and depth will be required.

It can sound daunting to plot such an ambitious course, even as we acknowledge the sovereign and loving oversight of God. Yet, over the College's history, there have been other big moments like this. For example, when we bought the grand Mt Brekan without the means to do so, and then saw a booming ministry in Victor Harbor. Or when we relocated here to the city again to see over 40 years of fruitful ministry since. And even going back to when the College was first founded—just a few business people cast and grasped the vision that brought the College to life from nothing at all. As we consider and give thanks for all of that history today, and ongoingly across this year, we are convinced that we are at another such moment where we must step in to a new future bravely and boldly precisely because beyond our doors and outside of our circles are so many people who desperately need the word of God in their lives. It's going to mean employing more staff. It's going to mean working hard to more empower many more potential future students. It's even going to mean moving to a new building. This place we are in now has been an enormous blessing and has served us well for decades, but even as you look around today, you'll see that it's tired and no longer fit for purpose. It's come to the end of its great run.

As we now look to take the next step and advance our history, we very much need you all, as well as many, many others to join with us in fervent prayer, in passionate advocacy, and in sacrificial financial partnership too. It is big and it is a daunting, but it's not too big for God—look at what he's already done with this ministry over the last 100 years. I think that it's actually also quite exciting. It's another gift and another blessing to not only be part of what God has been doing in and through the College up until now, but also to be part of the great works that we trust he will do in the years and decades ahead. I think we need to grasp this centenary year as a legacy moment for those of us who love this College. A moment for us to come together so that—under God—we can leave behind something better than what we inherited. Something that is fit for purpose for the needs of the next 20 or 50 year. Something that will help the faithful generations who will follow us; to whom we have some obligation today. I think the reality is that if we don't do this now, it will be nigh impossible for anyone to do it in the future when so many of our current supporters have gone to glory, and when so many churches and ministries that have received our students have wound down. I wonder if this is a once in a lifetime moment for our relationship with the College.



But enough looking forward for now. Lets's focus on celebrating this moment and the 100 years of amazing moments that God has given to this wonderful institution. Let's give thanks for his immeasurable grace in letting us all participate in and contribute to the gospel cause. And as we do that, let's turn our minds back to Jesus, our risen Lord because of whom and for whom the College exists. And not just the College, but every one of us who in faith have been privileged to share in its rich history. Thank you again so much for being here to rejoice in God's grace with us. May he bless all of us to the ever greater glory of his Son.

