



Thankfulness in the Psalms

Thanksgiving Day is one of my favorite holidays of the year. I could list a million reasons why I grew up loving Thanksgiving Day: great food, family, and friends, fall becoming winter, vacation from school, turkey, pies as a staple of every meal, and I could go on and on. We as Christians are called to be thankful. But how does Christian thankfulness differ from other Americans' thankfulness? Surely there is more to Christian thanksgiving than watching the Cowboys or the Lions play on TV and avoiding school work. Let's look to the Bible and the Psalms to see how to give thanks.

Giving thanks is good

Psalm 92 actually begins with the phrase, *"It is good to give thanks to the Lord."* This Psalm starts by acknowledging the basic truth that we ought to be giving thanks to God, and it is good for us to do so. This is a Psalm of thanksgiving to God. Note what is covered. The Psalmist is made glad by the works of the Lord (v.4). This is how we ought to be: glad and joyful at the work of God. The Psalmist then initiates his thanks by focusing on God Himself. He is thankful for His steadfast love and faithfulness (v.2) and the work of His hands (v.4). He then goes on to give thanks to God for the promise of justice against the ungodly. He notes the evildoers are doomed to destruction (v.7). He then gives thanks that God has treated him with kindness and mercy (v.10). This includes the Lord laying low the evil doers and assailants that opposed him sinfully (v.11). These things are seen and heard, not just promises of future punishment, but things that God has already brought to pass. The Psalmist then moves outward from himself to the righteous in general. They are treated wonderfully by God (v.12) so that they flourish. This is something he sees and knows from experience. He then mentions the promises again, but this time the promises of mercy and grace rather than justice (v.14), as the Psalmist knows that God will be good forever to His people. And then the Psalmist closes with thanks for who God Himself is (v.15). God is the rock and there is no unrighteousness in Him. This is something for which we can be thankful as well.

This Psalm gives us a nice pattern for how to give thanks. It is something practical that can be followed if we are stuck and unsure how to give thanks to God on Thanksgiving or any day. Start by giving thanks to God for who He is, move to His promises, give specific examples you have seen around you, give thanks for what He has done for you, again give thanks for examples around you, give thanks for more promises, and back to giving thanks for who God is. It is a simple little exercise, but one that might help structure our giving thanks to God.

Before we leave Psalm 92, let's note one more way to give thanks included in this Psalm. It is in the very first verse: sing praises to God's name. This verse is sometimes used as a call to worship, and that is something that we cannot over look: worship as thankfulness. Many churches have worship services on Thanksgiving, and rightfully so. Go worship God. Sing praises to His name. As great as feasting on the bounty of God's provision of turkey is, it is even better to feast on His Word and to give Him the praise that is due His high and holy name. Many psalms begin with such calls to worship. The thankful heart is a heart ready to worship. So do not neglect the worship of our Savior.

Thankful for the goodness of God

Psalm 105 provides another good example of thankfulness in the Psalms. Again we are called to give thanks to the Lord (v. 1), but this Psalm focuses more on making His deeds known and telling of His wondrous works (v. 2). Then it begins to simply recount the history of God's greatness

towards His people. The Psalmist remembers all the way back to the covenant with Abraham (v. 6), and proceeds from there. He thanks God for his dealings with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (v. 10) and thanks God for the promise of the land (v. 11). He thanks God for the time the sojourning Israelites were without a land (v. 12-15), then the time in Egypt (v. 16-25), then for Moses and the deliverance (v. 26-36), then for the Exodus in the wilderness (v. 37-41), and finally brings it full circle by mentioning the fulfillment of the promise of the land given first to Abraham (v. 42). This is the good, old-fashioned way of giving thanks by simply making a list and recalling the mighty works of God. We see it in several other places of the Bible, such as in Psalm 106.

Another aspect worth noting about Psalm 105 is that while we do not know for sure when this Psalm was written, we can know that the Psalmist did not live through all these events firsthand. He could not have been alive with Abraham and yet seen the people during the Exodus after their time in Egypt. The Psalmist rightfully calls us to give thanks to God for things that happened long before he was born. God's hand has worked for thousands of years, and it is a faithful hand. We can thank Him for things gone by and times long ago. We can thank him for His faithfulness and bringing about His promises, which is what ties Psalm 105 together. A promise was made, mighty works of God follow, and even though it is centuries later, God fulfills that promise. The thankful list is not just a random list of stuff. It is thanking God for His working and ultimate faithfulness to a promise. It is thanking God for His bringing about a promise in which we now benefit, but it is not man-centered by any means. It is focused on God's great works.

Thankful for the mercies of God

And this leads me to Psalm 77. I mentioned earlier that we ought to be made glad by the works of the Lord, and this is to be our normal state. But, it is not always our state. There are times when God lays us low, when affliction and hard times dominate our lives and thoughts. Psalm 77, a psalm of Asaph, gives us a look into these times and how to give thanks when we are sad and melancholy. Asaph does not tell us what it is that grieves him, but he is clearly grieved. He calls it the day of trouble. His spirit faints within him, and his soul is not comforted (v. 2-3). He has reached the point where he questions whether God will ever be good to him again (v. 7) and if God has forgotten how to be gracious (v. 9). This is a man who is in serious distress. What is the answer for a man in such mourning and trouble?

It might seem strange, but the answer is giving thanks, recounting the past mercies of God, specifically redemption. Asaph has to stir himself up to do this, but he does it. He tells himself in verse 10 to appeal to God, *"the years of the right hand of the Most High."* He is calling on the God who has been good for years. He says he will remember the wondrous deeds of God. But notice verses 11 and 12 where Asaph is almost telling himself to go and remember and ponder. He does not just start doing it; he makes himself do it. As we saw from the opening of the psalm, he does not feel like giving thanks or recounting the works of God. But he does not wait until he feels like it or wants to do it.

The time had come. Asaph goes on to specifically speak of the redemption of the children of Israel out of Egypt. We are told that many scary things took place such as lightning and thunder and the earth shaking, but God was doing a work of deliverance. Asaph recalls that the path of deliverance went right through the Red Sea and there were no footprints to follow (v. 19). In other words, in their redemption the people of Israel went through something that would have looked impossible, and they had to have faith that the water would not collapse back upon them. Yet, despite all the hard things and troubles, God was leading his people (v. 20). Asaph knows that in giving thanks and recounting the works of God even during the hard times, he would find comfort. We live in a time where we would rather wallow in our sadness than recount the mercies of God. We ought to give thanks even when we are sad and afflicted.

Thankful for God's faithfulness

This is by no means the only time we see this giving of thanks despite the circumstance. Psalm 79 shows the same thing. Here Asaph is again asking God how long He will be angry (79:5). And he ends up telling how the people of God *"will give thanks to you forever from generation to*

generation; we will recount your praise” (79:13). Another instance is Jeremiah in Lamentations 3. It is in the midst of the wormwood and the gall that he commands himself to remember that the Lord’s mercies are new every morning (Lam. 3:23). Giving thanks, then, should be expressed even when our hearts are not glad. Giving thanks is not just for the times of feasting, but also for the lean times and times of fasting.

Hopefully, we have seen some practical things about giving thanks that can be gleaned from the Psalms, but there is one overarching point that should be stressed. Giving thanks is not to be a self-centred exercise. We have seen in these few Psalms that the thanks we give to God does not focus on ourselves. Yes, we can and should thank God for what He has done for us, but there is so much more. Thanks that is only about what God has done for us is short-sighted thanks. Christian thanksgiving must not be like worldly giving of thanks. The world is focused upon itself and feeding its own desires. Our thanks should be more than that. Psalm 92 showed us to start with God, then His promises, other general thanks, then ourselves, then general, then promises, then God himself again. The Psalmist spent the smallest amount of time on himself. Psalm 105 thanked God for all He had done in the past to work out His promises, and even though the Psalmist likely lived in the land God had given to Abraham, his thanks focused on God. Finally in Psalm 77, Asaph gave thanks to God despite his distress and personal sadness. He stopped and made himself recount God’s good works.

We are to thank God because He is good. And He is good not because He does good things for us. He is good because of who He is. This Thanksgiving Day make sure that when we give thanks it is more than simply for what God has done for us personally. God is bigger than that.

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