

Thanksgiving

November 11, 2018

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It's hard to believe but Thanksgiving is just around the corner. Since we're having our annual Thanksgiving dinner tonight, I thought it would be good to spend a few minutes reflecting on the importance of giving thanks. The Bible actually has a lot to say about giving thanks. So today, I want to walk through a couple of passages that shine a light on different biblical facets of thanksgiving. We'll conclude this service with a song and a prayer of Thanksgiving. So let's jump right in. The first passage I want to look at is Psalm 107:1-3.

Psalm 107:1-3

¹Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever. ²Let the redeemed of the LORD say this—those he redeemed from the hand of the foe, ³those he gathered from the lands, from east and west, from north and south.

Psalm 107 starts with a clear command: give thanks to the Lord. It then proceeds to explain why God's people should give thanks to the Lord. First, the Lord deserves thanks for his goodness. Second, the Lord deserves thanks because his love endures forever. Verse two then follows up with a second command: let those whom God has redeemed say this. Let's start there. What is it that God's people should say?

If you're older, you might remember a song that went something like, "let the redeemed of the Lord say so," followed by children shouting "so!" The reason kids were shouting the word "so" is because the KJV translates verse two as, "let the redeemed of the Lord say so." However, Psalm 107:2 isn't telling God's people to say

the word, "so." It's instructing those who have been redeemed to say that they have been redeemed.

So Psalm 107 instructs those redeemed by God to say that they have been redeemed because their redemption is proof of God's goodness and enduring love. What does it mean to be redeemed? To redeem something simply means to claim it back or buy it back. In the Old Testament, redemption could refer to property, to family members sold into slavery, or even to God's people as a whole, who at various times were redeemed from Egypt or Babylon. The fact that God redeemed his people was evidence of his goodness and enduring love. He refused to let them be lost and scattered forever.

The Psalmist then reminds the people of particular acts of God's redemption throughout their history, which serves to highlight God's goodness and enduring love. Verses four through nine describe those in desert wastelands, hungry and thirsty and disoriented. God heard their cry and he delivered them and he redeemed them from the deadly wilderness. He directed them to safety and gave them a place to dwell and even "satisfied them with good things." Why? Because of his goodness and enduring love.

Verses 10-16 describe those in prison because of their own rebellion against God. As a result of their rebellion, God "bowed their hearts down with hard labor" and there was no one to help them. But even then God heard their cry and he delivered them from their distress. He brought them out of the darkness and set them free. He is the God who "shatters the doors of bronze and cuts in two the bars of iron," that held God's people. Why would he help those who had rebelled against him? Because of his goodness and enduring love. As it comes to salvation, God doesn't help those who help themselves. He helps those who are smart enough to know that they can't help themselves and therefore humble themselves before him and ask for his mercy. If you can help yourself, you don't need God.

Verses 17-22 describe the suffering of those who were afflicted because of their own sin. They became sick, so sick that they "loathed food of any kind." They were so sick that they drew near to the gates of death and all of it was their own doing. Yet even then God heard their cry of distress and delivered them. He healed them and rescued them from destruction. "Let them offer sacrifices of thanksgiving, and tell of his deeds in songs of joy," the Psalmist says. Why would God do that? Because of his goodness and enduring love.

Verses 23-32 describe merchants doing business across the sea, whose voyage home landed them in the midst of the raging deep. Their boat "mounted up to the heaven," and then "plunged to the depths." It says they "reeled and staggered like drunken men and were at their wits end." They tried everything they knew to do until finally they realized they were helpless to change their circumstances. Only then did they cry out to God, who stepped in and rescued them. He stilled the seas and brought them to port. "Let them thank him for his steadfast love," the Psalmist says.

Verses 33-41 conclude the Psalm by picking various elements of Psalm already mentioned. Verses 33-35 make it clear that God can cause calamity on the land just as easily as on the sea, turning fruitful land into a waste or turning a desert into pools of water. Scripture bears witness to that fact again and again. Verses 36-38 describe how God settled his people and blessed and increased them in every way. Verses 39-41 brings the Psalm to a conclusion, describing God as one who can lift the humble and humble the mighty, who can bring blessing or pronounce a curse.

Psalm 107 Conclusions

In order to extract all of the nutrients in this passage, you will have to meditate on this Psalm yourself and I would encourage you to do so this week. But let me just draw a couple of conclusions that might give you some direc-

tion in how to meditate on it. One, we need to constantly remind ourselves of God's goodness and enduring love toward us and respond with thanksgiving. We do that by recounting specific instances of God's good and loving deeds throughout history, beginning with Scripture and continuing right up through today.

This is even more important if you're going through a difficult time. Remind yourself of the history of God's goodness and enduring love for you. It's often the case that God's good and loving actions toward us get eclipsed by our current struggles. We become blinded to what God has done because we're so tunnel-visioned looking at whatever our most recent struggle is. That not only robs us of a thankful spirit, but withers our faith and fills us with anxiety. By recounting God's good and loving actions toward us, it fosters a sense of gratitude and builds our faith to believe that the story of God's goodness and love toward us is still being written.

Two, God's goodness and enduring love is most fully shown to us by the coming of Jesus. The Psalmist wrote these things while having only a foggy notion of how God would ultimately save his people through the coming of the Messiah. Because all of God's promises are yes and amen through Jesus, Jesus should be the focal point of our thanksgiving. He is the one through whom God provides for all of our needs. He is the one through whom we are adopted into God's family and ushered into covenant with him. Without Jesus, we would be dead in our transgressions and sins, bound for eternal judgment. Never can God's goodness and enduring love be more clearly than in the sending of his Son to save us even when we didn't deserve it and in spite of the fact that we could not save ourselves. And that leads us to the second passage I want us to consider this morning, 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18.

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

¹⁶Be joyful always; ¹⁷pray continually; ¹⁸give

thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

At the end of 1Thessalonians 5, Paul wraps up his letter with a series of commands and exhortations. Verses 16-18 are connected by the fact that each command is to be done always, continually, and in all circumstances respectively. In other words, joy, prayer and thanksgiving should mark the everyday life of God's people. These are not topics for special occasions, but should be present in every time and season of our lives. So let's look at thanksgiving for just a moment together.

Paul's command to give thanks is qualified in two ways. First, thanksgiving should be offered in every situation or at all times, depending on which version you're reading. No matter how you translate it, the point is that thanksgiving should not be attached to the relative state of our happiness or well-being at any given time. Thanksgiving is not what we do when our life is trouble free. It's what we do all the time. If thankfulness is predicated on the circumstances of our lives, it will be impossible for us to give thanks in all circumstances. And since we are tempted to focus on what's going wrong rather than on what's going right, our thanksgiving will be rare indeed.

The second qualification is that thankfulness in all circumstances is God's will for us in Christ Jesus. Although it sounds clear enough, what does it actually mean that we should give thanks in all circumstances because that is "God's will for us in Christ Jesus?" Thankfulness in all circumstances is made possible by the fact that we are in Christ. To be in Christ is to be a new creation and is therefore to see the world in an entirely different manner. To be in Christ is to have the confidence that God is making all things new through Jesus, even the things that at present are broken and painful and ugly. We see that first in the work God has done in us to save us. So what do we learn from 1Thessalonians 5?

1Thessalonians 5 Conclusions

One, giving thanks in the midst of all circumstances is in part a recognition that God's provision for us is constant. Even in difficult times, he provides and supplies and protects. Just because we're walking through a difficult time does not mean that he has disappeared. Thanksgiving is merely an expression of that faith and our appropriate response to his goodness and enduring love even when we don't see it.

Two, giving thanks in all circumstances is more than Pollyanna's glad game. If you've never seen it, Pollyanna would play a game where she could always find something to be glad about, usually by thinking about how a situation could be worse. If you broke your leg and smashed your finger and are getting audited by the IRS, at least you don't have boils or leprosy and so you can give thanks. That's hardly what Paul is talking about. The point is not to make ourselves feel better, but to give voice to the objective reality of God's goodness and enduring love in our lives even when we're walking through a difficult time. So let me draw a couple of conclusions from these two passages that can help us to give thanks not only this week, but every week.

Conclusions

One, as it relates to our church family, it is the joy and responsibility of the older generation to pass down the stories of God's goodness and enduring love to the next generation, not only to provide reasons for them to give thanks, but to build a foundation of faith that will sustain them when they walk through their own trials. Psalm 78:4 says, "We will not hide them from their children; we will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the LORD, his power, and the wonders he has done." As a deliberately intergenerational church, we want to pass on the stories of God's goodness and enduring love to the next generation. We want them to know that God has and will always provide for his people and that he is renewing and restoring this world.

Some day will find themselves in the wilderness or in the midst of a storm-tossed sea. Some day they will sin and find themselves in captivity. They need to know that even in those times God's goodness and enduring love will not fail them and for that we can all be thankful.

Two, in Christ we see that God is redeeming his people and renewing his creation. And we know that he is doing that even in the midst of our trials and struggles. Romans 8:28, although sometimes used tritely, is no less true: "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." That means that even in the midst of our suffering and loss, God is still accomplishing his purposes. God is still moving all creation toward recreation. We can give thanks in all circumstances because we can be confident that eventually every sorrow will be erased, every disease destroyed, and even death itself will die. Nothing in this creation can separate us from God's love and nothing can even slow down the inevitable march of God's work in this creation.

Before we close, let me say this: the fullest and most beautiful expression of God's goodness and enduring love toward us can be seen in the fact that God sent Jesus to earth for us. He lived the life we should have lived. He died the death we should have died. And he did it to redeem us from the slavery of sin and death and damnation. If you have never accepted the gift of salvation, we would love to pray with you about that or maybe answer questions you have about what that means.

THANKSGIVING

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