

# The Lost Art of Thanksgiving

Message #4 in the series "Summer Playlist"  
The Book of Psalms: God's Songs for Life"

Psalms 18

St. Paul's United Methodist Church of Elizabethtown  
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Gratitude is unnatural to our species. Historians, social behaviorists, and evolution-ary scientists have argued that while our self-protective, 'survival instinct' has helped ensure our physical survival across the ages it has also resulted in hardwiring us to see the negative side of any given situation first and foremost.

Experience bears this out. Even our best efforts and intentions for being grateful and staying positive erode and give way to the irresistible tug toward negativity. The following admission by Marissa Henley attests to the strong, persistent and inevitable gravitational pull away from gratitude:

For a few glorious months at the end of 2011, I hardly ever complained, writes Marissa. I had endured several months of treatment for a rare cancer and had just been declared cancer free. I didn't know how many healthy days I would have with my young family before the cancer returned, and **I was determined to squeeze as much joy out of each day as I could.** To put it bluntly, my lack of complaining came from the realization that, statistically speaking, I should have been dead. I'd been given the gift of life, and gratefulness overflowed. *But it didn't take long* for me to forget what I'd been given. I fell back into old habits of grumbling, just like the Israelites in the desert who stood in awe of God's power at the Red Sea but didn't trust Him to provide drinking water (Exodus 14-15). Although I'd seen the Lord's faithfulness through the deep waters of suffering, I forgot His goodness in the smallest puddles of my day, such as gloomy weather or a slow-moving line at the coffee shop.<sup>i</sup>

Pastor David spoke, in a previous sermon in this series on 'Laments' about how our culture has become so well-versed in complaining. You could say, in fact, that complaining seems to have become the great American past time! People gripe about everything. We sure know how to complain - but one thing we are novices at is giving thanks.

Our culture fosters three 'gratitude killers': **consumerism**, where we associate happiness with what we have, acquire or accumulate. That builds an insatiable desire for more; a thirst that can never be quenched. We also have successfully instilled an **entitlement** mentality, where the list of things 'naturally owed' to us has grown very long. No need to be thankful for what is rightfully mine. And, lastly, our culture is one full of people who think the world revolves around themselves. That **self-centered** approach makes

sacrifice for others *or* awareness of sacrifices made for us by others - simply a concept that don't compute.

**Consumerism** ('I gotta' have it') is about 'give-me' not about thank you;

**Entitlement** ('I deserve it') is about 'it's mine' not 'thanks to whom?'

**Self-centeredness** ('I matter most') is all about my happiness, with or without you.<sup>ii</sup>

Now, before we point the finger at others, let's admit we all breathe in this air. It affects us all. Gratitude gets squeezed out of such a culture.

## GRATITUDE IS UNNATURAL

Even Christians, in a deceptively spiritual way can avoid thanksgiving. I had a friend who would attend our huddle/prayer group only sporadically. However, every time she and her husband did show up, they would monopolize the group's time and attention with news of a new desperate situation needing our immediate prayers. After this happened a few times, someone (okay, me) asked them about the person and situation that had been at the center of our impassioned prayers last time they asked us to pray. Her response was a verbal dismissal of its relative unimportance, "Oh, it had worked its way out..." she mumbled. She verbally and visually gestured a lack of interest in giving thanks. She communicated that the new desperate situation was much more pressing, it demanded our full attention, not worrying about yesterday's news. But I insisted we stop the meeting and take time to listen to how the last situation was remedied and to give thanks to God for working to alleviate and remedy that situation.

Honestly, most of us are never that blatant nor obvious in our avoidance of giving thanks. But, let's admit it, we often move on much too quickly to the next pressing prayer request before we adequately give thanks for the last issue God had resolved. Let me ask you, 'How often do we forget to inform others (when we've asked them to pray) about the resolution to past prayer items? We're not reluctant to share needs when we face them, but we often update people when prayers are answered. And, if we keep a prayer journal, how often do we spell out the answers? I would guess much less than we spell out urgent requests.

The psalms, what we're referring to as 'God's songbook for life' includes thanksgivings as one of its most common styles of song.<sup>iii</sup> The most common, making up 40% of the psalms, are 'laments' where the believer details for God the trouble he's in (refer to Pastor David's excellent sermon from July 18<sup>th</sup> entitled 'Lament'). Hymns of praise are the next most common at just under 30% and lastly, songs of Thanksgiving and trust make up almost 1/5 or 18% of the 150 psalms. These songs remember the trouble but then thank God for the answer!

King David has much to teach us about thanksgiving in Psalm 18. We'll have to be selective, because it's one of the longest of its kind in the psalms. I think there is much to learn from his introduction in the first three verses which we will focus on.

*I love you, O Lord, my strength.*

<sup>2</sup> *The Lord is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer,*

*my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge,  
my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.  
<sup>3</sup>I call upon the Lord, who is worthy to be praised,  
and I am saved from my enemies. (Psalm 18:1-3)*

If you're familiar with the Bible, you have probably heard these terms before, often: rock, fortress, deliverer, refuge, shield, and stronghold. They're common biblical images. When we read them we automatically 'code-switch' these terms into the functional connotations that they convey. For instance, when we refer to God as a 'Rock' we realize that it is because He provides us with firm stability and unshakeable security. He is our 'refuge' and 'stronghold' because he is our ultimate safe place, where we find our protection from threat. What we might miss, however, is that the imagery was originally derived from real-life, actual, down-and-dirty experiences. These terms were derived from mortal combat amidst military conflict and from the flight of a fugitive through the dry, arid, near eastern wilderness. The first 'rock' was the cliff in the Desert of Maon (1 Samuel 23:24), the second 'rock' (which is a different term in Hebrew), was the Crags of the Wild Goats in the desert in En Gedi (1 Samuel 24:2), and the fortress and stronghold spoken of was the cave of Adullam where David hid from Saul (1 Samuel 22:1).



Of course, these places signified safety, security, and protection for David but they were forged in the heat of real, physical, life-threatening battle. What does that teach us?

Simply this: Gratitude grows in the soil of difficulties. Let me read again the opening of this psalm.

*I love you, O Lord, my strength.  
2 The Lord is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer,  
my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge,  
my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.  
3 I call upon the Lord, who is worthy to be praised,  
and I am saved from my enemies. (Psalm 18:1-3)*

David uses military imagery: deliverer, shield, refuge (safe retreat), horn (power of rescue) – all terms derived from his experiences on the battlefield. And, David uses imagery drawn from his wilderness flight, as he fled for his life across the desert: rock, cliff, stronghold (inaccessible height), fortress (mountain stronghold).

## GRATITUDE GROWS IN THE SOIL OF DIFFICULTIES

Think about it, all the effort we exert to avoid difficult situations....all the anxiety we spend fearing difficulties, and all the anguish we express while in difficult situations – it is in and through these very difficulties that we learn who God is to us, and we forge our trust in Him to be with us, to lead us and to embrace how much we need him. It is when we look back that we realize how much those difficulties have shaped us and how they have strengthened our faith. And for this we give thanks.

There is an often-quoted truth that C.S. Lewis uttered in one of his famous apologetic radio broadcasts that expresses this well:

God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our consciences, but shouts in our pains. Pain is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world.

Why is this tool so important for us? Because, quite frankly, we're too prone to 'God amnesia'. We simply forget God amidst the busy-ness of life. Especially when life is going well, we have so many distractions to be entertained that can lull us away from pursuing the things that God would have us pursue. Things that lead to our growth as persons, things that promote the good and welfare of those around us, for spreading the light and love of the gospel among those around us. Sometimes those around us who are hurting but we're unaware of this because we're immune to living more than on the surface of life. But when we're submerged in difficulties, our eyes are opened to our need for God – and we also just might realize that we're surrounded by those who need God, too. But all too often there are so many shiny, flashy items before our eyes that it's easy to forget the invisible God who stands behind everything.

I mentioned before that Psalm 18 is by far the longest thanksgiving psalm in the Bible, so, for our purposes, I'll just look at one more section of this psalm – this is the middle section that gives the rationale for why God answers his prayers. It is one of those passages that highlights the deepening development from Old Testament to New Testament as things become clearer in the light of Jesus.

David writes...

*19 He brought me out into a broad place;  
 he rescued me, because he delighted in me.  
 20 The Lord dealt with me according to my righteousness;  
 according to the cleanness of my hands he rewarded me.  
 21 For I have kept the ways of the Lord,  
 and have not wickedly departed from my God.  
 22 For all his rules were before me,  
 and his statutes I did not put away from me.  
 23 I was blameless before him,  
 and I kept myself from my guilt.  
 24 So the Lord has rewarded me according to my righteousness,  
 according to the cleanness of my hands in his sight.  
**(Psalm 18:19-24)***

David fought real, actual people. In the New Testament, we take up spiritual weapons to fight spiritual battles. David fought in deserts, across geographical and territorial boundary markers, in the New Testament our battles take place across the landscape of hearts, we're engaged in a warfare for allegiance, a surrender of devotion. And, there is a corresponding deepening appreciation of grace and truth that comes with Jesus Christ - there is a deepening of realizing who our true enemies are, and what ultimate conflict lies at the heart of all problems. Jesus Christ was the ultimate warrior in a sense - combating and conquering not flesh-and-blood opponents, but spiritual dominions and powers, Death with a capital 'D', the grave, Evil itself and scaling the wall of separation from God. Whereas sins were dealt with in the Old Testament economy by an elaborate sacrificial system, Jesus removed all barriers to God by becoming the Lamb of God who took away the sins of the world.

So, when you listen to David explaining why God answers his cry for help, it boils down to his own righteousness, his own law-abiding lifestyle, his "clean hands" so to speak. That rationale has sometimes snuck into my own prayers, where I've bartered with God, "Look, I've scratched your back (by doing good), You scratch my back." Almost amounting to telling God he owes me due to my service for him. No matter what our 'track-record' is - we have a surpassing value in Jesus Christ himself who has become our righteousness. **It's in Him and through him that we bring our prayers to God and it is in him that we have his attention:**

A simple way of looking at the New Testament's appreciation of how Jesus is the basis for all our confidence in prayer is seeing Jesus as the representative for all of us. We are blessed, our prayers are heard because he is the Righteous One, He's our representative -

Hear how the New Testament reasons

*For there is none righteous, no, not one*  
**(Romans 3:10; Psalm 14:3b)**

*For Christ also suffered once for sin, the Righteous for the unrighteous, that  
 He might bring us back to God (1 Peter 3:18)*

*Jesus, whom God made our wisdom and our righteousness...*  
**(1 Corinthians 1:30)**

God answers our prayers because He delights in us because we are in his Son, and He is our righteousness. This puts everything into focus.

## **GRATITUDE PROVIDES CORRECTIVE LENSES**

Gratitude opens our eyes to the greater context around us. Gratitude opens our eyes to what is good amidst the bad.

I taught my children to pray when they were really young. I took this tact: I gave them one very short, simple sentence that they could fill-in-the-blank. It went:

Jesus, thank you for \_\_\_\_\_.

The challenge each night was to find 3 things from their day that they could thank Jesus for. Now my kids are so competitive that they never learned that when someone asks, "Who'd like to pray?" that there is to be an awkward silence and avoidance of eye contact until the questioner gives up and prays first. No, they just jumped right in. The very first time, Caleb was quicker and he prayed out first, "Thank you for Jesus." He had reversed my statement and I was going to correct him, but then realized that his theology was in actuality, more accurate.

## **GRATITUDE IS EVERYTHING BECAUSE IT SEES GOD'S GRACE IN EVERYTHING**

Last week, Caleb and I took a trip back up to Doylestown for three meetings. Well, none of them went as planned, each was more disappointing than the previous one! On top of that, we encountered traffic jams and then torrential downpours. On the way home I asked him, what went wrong today? Let's list them. After we did a thorough listing, I asked him what do we still have to give thanks for? Well, we survived the long trip without an accident. We're still breathing. God still love us.... Our little exercise showed how gratitude changes everything.....

Because of Jesus our past is forgiven and we're at peace with God. Thank you for Jesus. Because of Jesus our present experience, suffering included, is purposeful. Thank you for Jesus. Because Jesus has blazed a path to glory for us, we have hope. Thank you for Jesus.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://tabletalkmagazine.com/article/2019/11/gratefulness-and-complaining/>

<sup>ii</sup> These three maladies are described by Reggie Joyner, "The Opposite of Gratitude," <https://theparentcue.org/opposite-of-gratitude/>

<sup>iii</sup> Glen Pemberton and Austin Holt, Hurting with God: Learning to Lament with the Psalms, the percentages are given across pp. 31-39; Matt Pastiff, "Categorizing the Psalms" gives the exact numbers (<https://www.fbcaa.org/MAPBlog/PsalmsCategories.pdf>)