

Learning to Thank God

Psalm 105

The Baptist prince of preachers Charles Spurgeon was once mugged on the streets of London. Returning home, he told his wife what had happened, and then said, “Well, thank the Lord anyway.” His wife responded, “Thank the Lord that someone stole your money?” “No, my dear,” said Spurgeon. First, I’m thankful the robber just took my money, not my life. Second, I’m thankful I had left most of my money at home, and he didn’t really rob me of much. And third, I’m thankful to God that I was not the robber.

This was the attitude of gratitude exhibited by Charles Spurgeon. In fact, it was Spurgeon’s habit, when people asked him how he was to respond with the words, “Better than I deserve.”

Too many Christians regard thankfulness like an optional extra in the Christian life – like the icing on the cake – nice, but not necessary. For them, talking about gratitude is like talking about having a pleasant expression on your face, or like lecturing on how we ought to be cheerful and easy-going. They see gratitude as a part of the Christian life, but really quite low down on the priority list.

However, the Bible stands in stark contrast to this thinking. As far as the Bible is concerned, gratitude is a command to be obeyed. At least twenty-one times we are commanded to be thankful, to give thanks, to offer thanksgiving. In many other places, gratitude and thanksgiving are commended as good and right, and fitting and normal for a believer. In fact, in Romans 1:21, one of the indictments against mankind is this: ²¹

because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful,

Those who are unthankful are in fact tempting God, as the Israelites did with their unthankfulness. This is no optional extra in the Christian life. This is no little positive mindset attitude which we can brush aside. Gratitude is one of the marks of spiritual maturity, indeed of a right relationship with God.

As much as we know that, we still struggle with murmuring, with discontent, with taking things for granted, with a sense of disappointment, complaining, griping about the world and our lot in life. We need to have God re-adjust our minds so that we are a grateful people.

Psalm 105 teaches us how to be grateful. The first five verses tell us what the attitude of gratitude looks like:

Psalm 105:1-5 *Oh, give thanks to the LORD! Call upon His name; Make known His deeds among the peoples! ² Sing to Him, sing psalms to Him; Talk of all His wondrous works! ³ Glory in His holy name; Let the hearts of those rejoice who seek the LORD! ⁴ Seek the LORD and His strength; Seek His face evermore! ⁵ Remember His marvelous works which He has done, His wonders, and the judgments of His mouth,*

The rest of the psalm is a model on how to give thanks. Using Israel as its model we see four ways that God’s people are to give thanks. The psalmist is going to look back at God’s works and highlight four things that God does for His people which we ought to remember and reflect on, to be a grateful people. We have to think on these things to be thankful. In fact the word *thankful* derives from the Anglo-Saxon *thinkful*. You have to be thinkful if you’re going to be thankful. And the psalmist is going to cause us to think, to reflect on four areas of God’s works.

I. God's Promises

Psalm 105:7-11 ⁷ *He is the LORD our God; His judgments are in all the earth.* ⁸ *He remembers His covenant forever, The word which He commanded, for a thousand generations,* ⁹ *The covenant which He made with Abraham, And His oath to Isaac,* ¹⁰ *And confirmed it to Jacob for a statute, To Israel as an everlasting covenant,* ¹¹ *Saying, "To you I will give the land of Canaan As the allotment of your inheritance,"*

The psalmist begins by giving thanks to God for being a promise-keeping God. We see this in verses 8-10, with the repeated word *covenant*. What is a covenant? It is an agreement between two parties sealed with an oath. The specific covenant that the psalmist calls to mind here is not the Mosaic Covenant, made at Mount Sinai, but the covenant God made with Abraham and His descendants.

Genesis 17:1-9 ^{NKJ} **Genesis 17:1** *When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, "I am Almighty God; walk before Me and be blameless. ² "And I will make My covenant between Me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly." ³ Then Abram fell on his face, and God talked with him, saying: ⁴ "As for Me, behold, My covenant is with you, and you shall be a father of many nations. ⁵ "No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you a father of many nations. ⁶ "I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. ⁷ "And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you. ⁸ "Also I give to you and your descendants after you the land in which you are a stranger, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting possession; and I will be their God." ⁹ And God said to Abraham: "As for you, you shall keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations.*

From God's side, He promised to give Abraham and his descendants the land of Canaan as an everlasting possession, and to always be their God.

Even though Israel would turn to other gods, God kept His covenant with Abraham. He kept His promise to put Israel in the land, to restore them to it, and, even when exiled from the land, to return them to it. He promised to be their God and remain faithful to them, even when they were not faithful to Him.

As Israel reflected, they were to give thanks, sing to God, sing psalms to Him, make known His deeds. This was a joyous thing! Their God was a promise-keeping God!

Why is that cause for thanksgiving? In a world filled with truce-breakers, oath-breakers, liars, perjurers, how glad we should be to come across someone who will keep His promises. In a world filled with backstabbers, adulterers, betrayers, and gossips, how grateful we can be to find someone who remains faithful to us, even when we are unfaithful.

To know that God is willing to make promises to people, and to know that He cannot lie and cannot fail to keep what He commits Himself to, is a deep and profound joy. In a world where it seems that anything can change at any time – here is a firm foundation: God makes promises and keeps them.

To us as churches, God has made several promises. He has promised that God will honour those who honour His Word. As we place His Word in the centre of our church, God blesses us. He's promised to not allow His Word to return void, and we have seen conversions, and growth. He's promised to supply our needs as we give to His work. He has promised to keep us from falling, to continue the work in us that He began. Most importantly, God has made a covenant with us in the blood of His Son – a covenant in which we are His people, and He is our God forever.

Have you recently given thanks to God for all the promises He has made to you and kept? There are

many promises God has made to you that belong to when we die and when we are raised with Christ. But Scripture is full of God's promises to comfort, to sustain, to encourage, to provide, to protect, to teach, to grow, to use you, to bear fruit through you, to supply your needs, to answer your prayers, to reveal Himself to you.

II. God's Protection

Psalm 105:12-15 ¹² *When they were few in number, Indeed very few, and strangers in it.* ¹³ *When they went from one nation to another, From one kingdom to another people,* ¹⁴ *He permitted no one to do them wrong; Yes, He rebuked kings for their sakes,* ¹⁵ *Saying, "Do not touch My anointed ones, And do My prophets no harm."*

The psalmist praises God that God protected Israel. Even when they were just a few – just Abraham and his family, or Isaac and his, or Jacob and his sons, they were no match for the hostile kingdoms around them. They could easily have been absorbed, scattered, or killed by a vindictive king at any time. A few times, the very promise of God to bring Israel through Abraham and Isaac came under threat from Abraham and Isaac themselves e.g. letting king Abimelech think their wives were their sisters. But through this all, God protected His people physically and protected them from being mixed with other peoples. He protected His own promises, and protected His people physically and spiritually.

Giving thanks for protection is a funny thing. You often don't realise how much you have been protected until you have a close shave or a brush with danger. When you dwell securely, you begin to take protection for granted. But after you do, you come to realise how many ways you could be harmed. You understand how many threats there are and how God has truly fenced you about and watched over you.

There are many ways God protects a church, and protects individual Christians. He protects us from the many possible physical threats: attacks from criminals, car accidents, accidents at home or at work. As a church, He has protected us from robbery during one of our services. He has protected our possessions.

More than that, God provides spiritual protection. There are so many threats to our faith. Satan seeks to destroy us. He sends false teachers along to divert us, confuse us, and pervert the sound teaching of the Word of God. He sends apostates from within the church to draw others away. He raises up wolves, who infiltrate the church, posing as sheep, but seek to turn others against the under-shepherds and draw people away after themselves. He, under God's control, can arrange circumstances to intimidate us and cause fear in us. God has faithfully protected our church from false teachers, heretics, wolves and divisive people. Satan attacks churches by tempting believers within to proudly oppose each other, supposedly in the name of Christ and as they give in to it, it splits churches apart, as the unity in the Spirit is quenched. God has protected us from that.

Why should this handful of believers still be here ten years later? Why should we not have scattered all over? The answer is the gracious protection of our God.

Have you recently given thanks to God for His protection? Yes, give thanks for protecting you from crime, and car accidents and crippling disability. But more importantly, and especially when He chooses not to protect you from those things, give thanks that He has protected your faith. He has kept you from falling. He has protected you from temptations that would destroy you, He has protected you from trials too severe for you. He has protected you from false teaching too crafty and

and too subtle for you to detect and discern. This all comes from the good hand of our protecting God. Our shield, our high tower, our defender, our Shepherd with His rod and staff.

III. God's Providences

Psalm 105:16-38 ¹⁶ Moreover He called for a famine in the land; He destroyed all the provision of bread. ¹⁷ He sent a man before them -- Joseph -- who was sold as a slave. ¹⁸ They hurt his feet with fetters, He was laid in irons. ¹⁹ Until the time that his word came to pass, The word of the LORD tested him. ²⁰ The king sent and released him, The ruler of the people let him go free. ²¹ He made him lord of his house, And ruler of all his possessions, ²² To bind his princes at his pleasure, And teach his elders wisdom. ²³ Israel also came into Egypt, And Jacob dwelt in the land of Ham. ²⁴ He increased His people greatly, And made them stronger than their enemies. ²⁵ He turned their heart to hate His people, To deal craftily with His servants. ²⁶ He sent Moses His servant, And Aaron whom He had chosen. ²⁷ They performed His signs among them, And wonders in the land of Ham. ²⁸ He sent darkness, and made it dark; And they did not rebel against His word. ²⁹ He turned their waters into blood, And killed their fish. ³⁰ Their land abounded with frogs, Even in the chambers of their kings. ³¹ He spoke, and there came swarms of flies, And lice in all their territory. ³² He gave them hail for rain, And flaming fire in their land. ³³ He struck their vines also, and their fig trees, And splintered the trees of their territory. ³⁴ He spoke, and locusts came, Young locusts without number, ³⁵ And ate up all the vegetation in their land, And devoured the fruit of their ground. ³⁶ He also destroyed all the first-born in their land, The first of all their strength. ³⁷ He also brought them out with silver and gold, And there was none feeble among His tribes. ³⁸ Egypt was glad when they departed, For the fear of them had fallen upon them.

The psalmist here thanks God for His wonderful acts which included such strange things as a famine, the unfair imprisonment of a just man, Joseph. The exaltation of Joseph, the prosperity of Israel in the land of Egypt, followed by the ascendancy to the throne of an evil Pharaoh who put them in bondage; followed by the ten plagues on Egypt, until Israel was voluntarily released, and loaded with gold and silver.

What do we call all this? Providence. Providence is “God's gracious guidance and governance of all events, including the free acts of men and their external circumstances, and directs all things to their appointed ends for His glory.” (Layton Talbert, *Not By Chance*)

God was in control of the evil and the good that happened to Joseph. He was in control of the Pharaoh that loved Joseph and in control of the Pharaoh that hated Moses. He was in control when there were years of plenty, and when there were years of famine. He got Israel into Canaan and then down into Egypt as a group of 120. He then multiplied them in Egypt into a group of two million, and then led them all out with a mighty hand. God was in control of light and dark, the rivers, frogs, lice, flies, locusts, hail, down to the lives of the first born.

Joseph understood providence when speaking to his brothers:

Genesis 50:20 ²⁰ "But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive.

The New Testament continues the idea that God governs all things for His glory.

¹⁶ Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day. ¹⁷ For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory,

Romans 8:28 And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose.

James 1:2-4 ² My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, ³ knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. ⁴ But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete,

lacking nothing.

When we look at circumstances through the eyes of faith, we can have a grateful attitude for providence. God rules over all, and He rules for His glory, and for our good.

This is why at the heart of gratitude is a heart of believing submission. The Christian, thinking like this, understands that his life has been ordered by God. He submits to God's wise choices for his life and is grateful for them. He is grateful, if not for the actual circumstances, then for the fact that God is in control of them. He submits to God – bows the knee and accepts all of life as part of the providential and wise hand of God.

We could not logically delight in things that are not delightful. That would mean we would be dishonest. Nor could we honestly enjoy suffering, or else it would, by definition, no longer be suffering. However, we can submit to God – and rejoice in Him. We can find delight in His plan.

Remember Paul and Silas? After having been beaten and placed in stocks in Philippi, they began to sing praises to God. Were they reacting to their circumstances, or acting upon their relationship to God? They were acting, choosing, deciding to submit to God. They chose to rejoice in the God of their circumstances. As they did that, no doubt a real and genuine joy sprung up.

Have you reflected on God's providences in your life? Have you thanked him for how He has shaped you, where He took you, the people He used in your life, the painful trials and problems He used, the chance meetings, the exposure to the Gospel, the exposure to your local church, the financial and physical circumstances He put you in? Can you see it is ordered from a hand that loves you and knows what you need at this time in your life?

IV. God's Provision

Psalm 105:39-44 ³⁹ *He spread a cloud for a covering, And fire to give light in the night.* ⁴⁰ *The people asked, and He brought quail, And satisfied them with the bread of heaven.* ⁴¹ *He opened the rock, and water gushed out; It ran in the dry places like a river.* ⁴² *For He remembered His holy promise, And Abraham His servant.* ⁴³ *He brought out His people with joy, His chosen ones with gladness.* ⁴⁴ *He gave them the lands of the Gentiles, And they inherited the labor of the nations,* ⁴⁵ *That they might observe His statutes And keep His laws. Praise the LORD!*

The psalmist thanks God because God provided. How did He provide? He provided guidance and direction through the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire. In the desert, where there is almost no food at all, He provided them with both bread and meat. He provided water for them. He brought them into the land He had promised, where He provided them with houses they had not built, farms, field and vines they had not planted or cultivated. He richly provided for them.

From our earliest years we are taught to say thank you when someone gives something to us. When do we stop saying thank you for things provided? We stop being grateful for what has been provided when we begin to regard those things as a right.

Imagine a child brought up with all of life's luxuries. He has lived in the finest of houses, with the best of food, and an endless array of little pamperings and entertainments that go with being born with a silver spoon in your mouth. Now imagine another child, who has literally been clothed in rags, whose shoes are open at the toes. His meals have been infrequent, inconsistent and never quite certain. His one-roomed house is lit only by the paraffin lamp of his mother. Now, let us compare the two. Do you think the first boy will be thankful for running water? Do you think he will be

thankful for the fact that he has more than one pair of socks? No. Why not? Because he is so used to his blessed status – he regards such things as a right. He expects them. He even complains if he has had the same meal twice in one week, because for him, variety of foods is expected, he regards it as his birthright. Now we move to the second child, and we provide him with electricity and he is delighted. We give him 5 pairs of second-hand clothes, and his face lights up with joy. We give him a little toy and he is enthralled. Why? Because in his life, he never began to regard any of those things as an expectation. His circumstances were so meagre, that the tiniest thing will be met with the surprised joy of a thankful heart. The rich boy would never regard a microwave oven as something to be thankful for, because for him, it is normal. As far as he is concerned, he deserves it – though he might never have thought of it. But for the poor boy, the idea of his own computer games would be a wide-eyed wonder.

This is the difference between the proud heart which regards itself as deserving of much, and is therefore unthankful, and the humble heart which has no expectations, and is therefore thankful. See, if I regard myself as a pretty great guy, who ought to receive the best in life. When I receive the best in life, it will be nothing less than normal in my eyes – it's what I expected it. However, if I regard myself as deserving of very little or nothing, even the smallest things in life become icing on the cake. Take it a step further: if I realize I deserve hell, and instead am receiving salvation, eternal life, a relationship with Christ, plus some earthly benefits and joy - here, my gratitude is doubled.

Your gratitude is proportional to what you think you deserve. The unthankful are simply proud people exalted in their own eyes. Unthankfulness in my heart is when I am so great in my own eyes that I expect the world to lay its presents at the feet of King Self, and arrogantly spurn the gifts that do not meet my expectations. When people or circumstances fail to meet my proud expectations of what I deserve, I become unhappy and unthankful - I grumble and murmur, because I feel I am being mistreated.

Interestingly, before Jesus cleansed 10 lepers, of whom only one was thankful, he gave a parable on servanthood. He said that a slave does not get thanked for the things he does, nor does a master reward the slave for the things he is expected to do. In the same way, Jesus said we, as Christians, should not walk around with the haughty expectation that God must give us a pat on the back and gift us with all things. Rather, we should regard ourselves as unprofitable servants, who are simply doing our duty. Because from there, we will be so surprised and amazed at the generosity and kindness of our good Master.

Have you spent time thinking of all God has provided you with? We are supposed to be content with food and clothing, but has God given you more than that? Think of all the advantages He has given you. Think of your goods, and your income - more than what you need for food and clothing. Think of how many luxuries and kindnesses fill your days. Think of how many helpers, teachers, advisers, counsellors, examples, encouragers he has sent you. Think of how many opportunities he has given you, more time to know and love Him. Think of how He has given you all things necessary for life and godliness. Have you ever lacked what you needed to be godly? Have you ever lacked what you needed to be content? Remember contentment is learned and obeyed.

What is cause for gratitude? God's promises, protection, providences and provision. What does it look like?

Psalm 105:1-4 *Oh, give thanks to the LORD! Call upon His name; Make known His deeds among the peoples! ² Sing to Him, sing psalms to Him; Talk of all His wondrous works! ³ Glory in His holy name; Let the hearts of those rejoice who seek the LORD! ⁴ Seek the LORD and His strength; Seek His face evermore!*