

WHY BE THANKFUL?

PSALM 138

Thanksgiving was only eight days away. Michelle, who taught the Bible in a mid-week children's program, decided to ask her preschoolers about the upcoming holiday. She thought it would be effective to have the class playfully correct some wrong ideas about Thanksgiving. "Now let me see," Michelle said.

"Thanksgiving. That's the day when we think about all the stuff we have. And how we want more things than anybody else has. And how we don't care about anybody but ourselves. And —" "No!" the kids started to yell. "No-o-o!" Then one little guy called out, "That's not Thanksgiving, Miss Michelle, that's Christmas!"

Are you thankful? If so, why? Why should you be thankful? Perhaps you're thankful to God for family, for friends, for good health, for food, clothing and shelter, for things in life just going your way lately. Those are good reasons to be thankful. The fact is that all of us here today have many reasons to be thankful. In fact, someone has suggested that in light of God's many blessings it makes more sense to have a Grumpy Day just once a year instead of a Thanksgiving Day. That would be interesting, wouldn't it? Just one day a year we could devote ourselves to being as unhappy, grumpy, ungrateful, cranky and miserable as we could possibly be! It could be that there's a few of you out there who are already observing Grumpy Day frequently even though it's not a national holiday!

It's pretty easy to be thankful when everything is going well in your life. I'm far more impressed, however, when I see a person who is able to be thankful even though there's obviously a lot that's gone wrong or is going wrong in his or her life. Doesn't that kind of person impress you? David, one of the kings of Israel, wrote most of what we now call the book of Psalms. Many of those psalms express a high level of thanksgiving and gratitude. David had a great life; in fact, you could say it was a highly blest life. But David's life wasn't easy. He had some major problems and issues that he was forced to tackle. David also had a very eventful, exciting life. But his life wasn't peaceful or tranquil either. He had significant turmoil and tests along his life's journey. Today, I want you to look at Psalm 138 with me because it's a wonderful expression of thanksgiving to God written by David. What can we learn from that brief psalm of thanksgiving? Well, I see at least three attitudes running through those verses that will help you get and stay thankful. Here's the first one:

AN ATTITUDE OF PRAISE

Look with me again at v. 1-3 in another translation: "Thank you! Everything in me says 'Thank you!' Angels listen as I sing my thanks. I kneel in worship facing your holy temple and say it again: 'Thank you!' Thank you for your love, thank you for your faithfulness; most holy is your name, most holy is your Word. The moment I called out, you stepped in; you made my life large with strength." (Psalm 138:1-3 MSG)

Despite having some very serious problems in his life, David praised God with all of his heart. Now someone might say, "Wait a minute! David was a king. He became a very wealthy, powerful man with lots of people waiting on him hand and foot. Why shouldn't such a man be grateful?" But the Bible tells us many stories about David's life and he had problems to say the least. His predecessor, King Saul, became insanely jealous of David and tried to kill him on several occasions. For several years, in fact, David had to hide out in the wilderness because he knew Saul was hunting him down and would kill him if he got the chance. Yes, eventually, he was made the king of Israel. But many battles followed with Israel's enemies so much so that God didn't let David build the Temple because He said there was just too much blood on David's hands.

Some of David's worst problems were ones of his own making. There was the monumental moral failure when he committed adultery with Bathsheba and arranged to have her husband killed. Their affair led to Bathsheba getting pregnant and their illegitimate son died as a judgment from God. David was not a wise father either. His unwillingness and inability to discipline his own sons led directly to the rebellion of one of them - Absalom. Absalom came very close to overthrowing his father and taking the kingdom away from him. David had some very high highs, to be sure, but he also had some very low lows.

When another man you've heard of was 7 years of age, his family was forced out of their home, and he went to work. When he was 9, his mother died. He lost his job as a store clerk when he was 20. He wanted to go to law school, but he didn't have the education. At age 23 he went into debt to be a partner in a small store. Three years later the business partner died, and the resulting debt took years to repay. When he was 28, after courting a girl for four years, he asked her to marry him, and she turned him down. On his third try he was elected to Congress, at age 37, but then failed to be re-elected. His son died at 4 years of age. When this man was 45, he ran for the Senate and lost. At age 47 he ran for the vice-presidency and lost. But at age 51 he was elected president of the United States. The man was Abraham Lincoln, a man who learned to face discouragement and move beyond it. Did you know that it was Abraham Lincoln who, in the midst of the Civil War, in 1863, established the annual celebration of Thanksgiving? Lincoln had learned how important it is to stop and thank God in the midst of great difficulties.

David's attitude here in our psalm reminds me of that song: "Through it all; through it all; I've learned to trust in Jesus. I've learned to trust in God. Through it all, through it all, I've learned to depend upon His Word." He just kept right on thanking God with all of his heart! Why? He gives us some reasons in v. 1-3. He tells us that God is full of "unfailing love and faithfulness." In other words, God never let David down even when David let God down. God always came through for David. He always kept His promises. He answered David's prayers and cries for help. Of course, David had his problems, but God had even more

solutions than David had problems! David had many occasions to be fearful, but God had more power to deliver him than David had anxious moments.

Life threw a lot of different stuff at David, but he was able to maintain an attitude of praise because he realized God is faithful “through it all.” Some people are thankful only when they receive God’s blessings. But other people continue to be thankful despite life’s problems. That’s the kind of person David turned out to be. How about you? My friend, you are either one or the other – thankful only when you receive or thankful despite what you lack.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Sr. was the father of the famous civil rights leader, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Martin, Sr. was also a pastor like his son, Martin, Jr. Martin, Sr. said his own mother had told him to always thank God for what was left. That thought stayed with him his whole life long. And he had reason to think of it and also to practice it often. Over the course of his long life, Martin, Sr., lost both of his sons as well as his beloved wife who was shot to death right before his eyes at the organ in the church he pastored in Atlanta. Can you imagine? Nevertheless, even after those tremendous losses, Dr. King, Sr. liked to say, “Thank God for what’s left.” There’s always enough left in life to make it worth living. There’s always a very good reason to be thankful. Here’s a second attitude that will help you get and stay thankful:

AN ATTITUDE OF HUMILITY

Look with me at the next three verses of this psalm. David says, “When they hear what you have to say, GOD, all earth’s kings will say ‘Thank you.’ They’ll sing of what you’ve done: ‘How great the glory of GOD!’ And here’s why: GOD, high above, sees far below; no matter the distance, he knows everything about us.” (Psalm 138:4-6 MSG)

Can you hear David’s humility? He was overwhelmed by the sheer greatness of God as he should have been (and as you should be!). The more he knew about God... the more he experienced God personally... the more he learned about God, the more God’s bigness and his own smallness came into focus. Part of God’s greatness, from David’s perspective, was the fact that God cares about creatures that are so far below Him in every way. That includes you and me! You and I have absolutely no claim on God. We have no right to expect anything of Him or from Him. He owes us nothing. But David reminds us that, “Though the LORD is great, he cares for the humble....” (Psalm 138:4 NLT)

One spring afternoon an older couple came to a church looking for a handout. They were ragged, dirty and claiming to be homeless. They said they didn’t want money, just some food. The pastor took them across the street to a convenience store. While they waited outside, he bought them each a sub sandwich, chips and soft drink. He watched as they attacked the food he provided. The man took a huge gulp of his drink and then made a face. Sitting there on the

pavement next to the store, he looked up at the pastor and said, “What’s this? Diet?” The pastor laughed out loud because the Lord allowed him to see himself immediately. How often we all react that way even to the gifts God Himself provides! We react in such a way as if to say, “Lord, is that the best You can do?” We forget that we’re totally dependent upon Him for all things.

What does it mean to be humble or proud from God’s perspective? I think David assumes here what the Bible teaches elsewhere. Humble people are those who don’t think God owes them special attention. They don’t think God owes them anything. They don’t expect special treatment in life or expect that everything will go their way. When disappointment comes to them, they just shrug their shoulders and move on. They don’t blame God, tell Him off and indulge in bitterness. When anything good does come their way, they’re truly surprised and pleased. They find ways to thank God consistently.

Who are the proud? Proud people are those who think God does owe them special attention. God is forever their debtor. Proud people believe God exists to solve their problems and meet their needs. When disappointment comes to them, they conclude, “It’s God’s fault. He’s not who He claims to be.” When good stuff comes their way, they expect it and feel they deserve it somehow. That’s exactly why it’s impossible for proud people to ever be truly thankful. When you’re entitled to everything, how can you be thankful for anything?

Did you catch the irony in what David says here? On the one hand, he implies that God likes to give special attention to people who don’t expect special attention – namely, the humble. On the other hand, God moves away from people who think He owes them something – namely, the proud. “Though the LORD is great, he cares for the humble, but he keeps his distance from the proud.” (Psalm 138:4 NLT) David, despite all of his achievements, was a humble person. How about you? My friend, you are either one or the other – humble or proud. Let me underline a third attitude that will help you get and stay thankful:

AN ATTITUDE OF SUBMISSION

That’s what I hear in the final verses of this psalm. “When I walk into the thick of trouble, keep me alive in the angry turmoil. With one hand strike my foes, with your other hand save me. Finish what you started in me, GOD. Your love is eternal—don’t quit on me now.” (Psalm 138:7-8 MSG)

I believe it’s significant what David says and does not say here. Notice that he never asks God to take away every problem in his life. That’s the way I tend to pray! “Dear God, do not let me have any problems ever! In Jesus’ Name. Amen.” Instead, David asks God to preserve him in the midst of his problems. He doesn’t say, “God, make all my enemies go away.” Instead, he prays, “God, give me the strength I need to deal with my enemies.” In other words, David allowed God to be God. Another translation puts that last verse like this, “The

LORD will work out his plans for my life— for your faithful love, O LORD, endures forever.” (Psalm 138:8 NLT) God’s in control. God knows best. Do you know what that is? That’s submission. And submission is necessary to thankfulness.

Four year old Justina’s mother was pregnant and expecting soon. One day, Justina’s aunt asked Justina a question, “What do you want, sweetheart, a baby brother or a baby sister?” “Aunt Donna,” Justina said with some exasperation, “Sometimes you just gots to take what God gives ya.” Now, that’s very good theology! Sometimes you just gots to take what God gives ya.

David, a man who exercised kingly authority for much of his life, was submissive when it came to God. And that submission of heart and mind became a fountain of thanksgiving to God. How about you? My friend, you are either one or the other – a person who wants to be in charge of your own life or a person who recognizes that God’s in charge of your life all the time every day. Oliver Wendell Holmes said, "The great act of faith is when a man decides he is not God." And I would add that it’s also the beginning of all true thanksgiving.

I recently read a story about a woman who said that as a girl she was poor. She grew up in a cold water flat, but she married a man who had money. And he took her to a place where she had flowers, gardens, and grass. It was wonderful. And they had children. Then suddenly this woman became physically sick. She went to the hospital and the doctors ran all sorts of tests. One night the doctor came into her room, and with a long look on his face, said, “I’m sorry to tell you this. Your liver has stopped working.” She said, “Doctor, wait a minute. Wait a minute. Are you telling me that I am dying?” And he said, “I... I can't tell you any more than that. Your liver has stopped working. We've done everything we can to start it.” And he walked out.

The woman says, "I knew I was dying. I was so weak. I had to feel my way along the corridor down to the chapel of the hospital. I wanted to tell God off. I wanted to tell God, 'You are a shyster! You've been passing yourself off as a loving God for two thousand years, but every time anyone begins to get happy you pull the rug out from under them.' I wanted this to be a face-to-face telling off of God. And just as I got into the center aisle of the chapel, I tripped, I swooned, I fainted. And I looked up, and there stenciled along the step into the sanctuary, where the altar is, I saw these words: LORD, BE MERCIFUL TO ME A SINNER. I know God spoke to me that night. I know he did."

She didn't say how God communicated this to her, but what God said was, "You know what this is all about. It's about the moment of surrender; it's about bringing you to that moment when you will surrender everything to Me. These doctors, they do the best they can, but they only treat. I'm the only One who can cure you." The woman recalled, "There with my head down on my folded arms in the center of the chapel, repeating, 'Lord, be merciful to me a sinner,' I surrendered to God. I found my way back to my hospital bed, weak as I was. The next

morning, after the doctor ran the blood tests and the urinalysis and so forth, he said, "Your liver has started working again. We don't know why. We don't know why it stopped, and we don't know why it started up again." But that woman said in her heart, "But I know. Oh, but I know. God has brought me to the brink of disaster, just to get me to turn my life over to Him."

Thanksgiving is all about the praise of God. Thanksgiving is all about humility before God. Thanksgiving is all about my submission to God. Happy Thanksgiving!