

## A Time to Be Grateful and to Praise!<sup>1</sup>

I suspect that for a lot of people, the Thanksgiving holiday is little more than a chance to take it easy. But for Christians, it should also be an opportunity to focus on a number of important questions such as what it means to be grateful, why we should be grateful, or whether we can realistically, as the apostle Paul says in Ephesians, be grateful for all things.

While thanksgiving and praise can be used interchangeably (1 Ch. 25:3; 2 Ch. 5:13; Neh. 12:46; Ps 69:30), the texts don't always associate the act of giving thanks with a particular reason. In some instances, they just refer to someone doing so (1 Ch 16:41; 2 Ch 7:3). On other occasions, the psalmist simply exhorts the people to offer thanks to God (Ps 50:14). Evidently, we don't always need a reason to give thanks. In fact, when I surf through the Psalms, I get the net impression that praising God should be as natural as breathing.

The Psalms do, however, offer plenty of hooks on which to hang our praise. In Psalm 26:7, the psalmist gives thanks for God's wondrous works. In Psalm 95:2-7a, he offers thanks for who God is and for his relationship with us:

<sup>2</sup> Let us come before him with thanksgiving and extol him with music and song. <sup>3</sup> For the LORD is the great God, the great King above all gods. <sup>4</sup> In his hand are the depths of the earth, and the mountain peaks belong to him. <sup>5</sup> The sea is his, for he made it, and his hands formed the dry land. <sup>6</sup> Come, let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the LORD our Maker; <sup>7</sup> for he is our God and we are the people of his pasture, the flock under his care (NIV).

In verse 5, the psalmist states that the "sea is his." A trite statement for us perhaps, but how so stunning for the ancient readers. The sea symbolized chaos. Terrifying monsters and demons populated its depths. In an age without GPS, nuclear-powered submarines, deep-sea survey equipment, the psalmist unabashedly declares God's absolute sovereignty.

Nothing was beyond God's reach then, and nothing is beyond his reach now. Our God is in the inner city and the richest suburbs. His footprint is in every city of the world. He was with the Jews in the Nazi camps. He is with persecuted Christians in the Middle East. We thank God, because nothing escapes him.

Our inability to process human suffering often causes us to project the cause for the world's condition back to God and to judge his character on the basis of what we see. Honestly, how can we be expected to trust God? He must either be some type of sadist, a megalomaniac, or a cosmic judge anxiously waiting for us to slip and to render judgment swiftly and mercilessly.

Psalm 100:5 makes mince meat of these accusations: "For the LORD is good and his love endures forever; his faithfulness continues through all generations." Here the psalmist enthusiastically states that the real God is eons away from our human creations. Three reasons, then to praise God: He is good, his love endures forever, and his faithfulness is forever.

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In Philippians 4:6, Paul exhorts his readers to present all their concerns to God “by prayer and petition, with *thanksgiving*.” In Colossians 2:7, he states that Christians should *overflow* with thanks. In Ephesians 5:19-20, Paul goes even further: “Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, *always giving thanks* to God the Father for *everything*, in the name of our Lord Jesus-Christ.”

I suspect a good number of people find Paul’s insistent exhortations to give thanks somewhat exasperating. Face it. Complaining comes a lot more naturally to most of us. And Paul surely goes too far in Ephesians 5. Can we really give thanks to God for everything? Does God really expect us to mindlessly recite some thanksgiving mantra regardless of our circumstances? Somehow, I doubt it.

According to Scripture, there are times when superficial utterances of praise just will not do. The psalms contain countless expressions of lament that convey the sorrow, anger, and frustration of believers in distress (see Psalms 88 and 137).

Regardless of who we are, suffering will one day knock at our door. It is inherent to the human condition. Children suffer humiliation from classmates, worry over grades, despair over losing their friends. Older folks worry over jobs, aging parents, friends who shipwreck. No one is shielded from the storms of life. They mercilessly strike us, leaving but chaos, destruction, and pain in their wake.

About thirty-five years ago, a friend of mine lost her youngest daughter in a car accident. The young woman was on her way home from college to visit her family over the Christmas break. A few years later, the same lady lost her husband to cancer. A few months after that, she was attacked by two men and left for dead. She survived...barely. Later, the unthinkable happened. Her youngest son was killed in a freak boating accident, leaving two young children and a wife behind.

Can we praise God for such tragedies? Not really. There is no praise for the illness that ravages body and mind. No praise for economic upheavals and war. No praise for death, particularly the death of children. Only bitter lament.

So what are we to do with Paul’s exhortation to give thanks in all things? Are lament and thanksgiving destined to be forever separated by an impassable chasm? Let me offer a possible way forward.

In Scripture, praise is never reduced to a simple formula or articulated within a narrow cause and effect framework. Thankfulness is something that ultimately flows out of a basic orientation towards the living God.

An attitude of thankfulness is more than a positive thinking technique designed to bring happiness and balance to our existence. God is not some commodity to be bought and sold. Praising and giving thanks are first and foremost an acknowledgment of who God is.

To give thanks to God is to recognize that God is free. That he is free to be who he must be and to act accordingly. In a fallen world, the living God cannot be enrolled to serve us or some system we have created to give us security.

Our faith in this free God, whom the Bible calls the God of the impossible (Luke 1:37) is what ultimately enables us to live with a deep attitude of thanksgiving and to reconcile us to the reality of evil.

To lament is to recognize that God exists, that he cares, and has the power to intervene in our lives. The atheist doesn't lament. He can only despair. To lament is the humble acknowledgment that God is indeed the God of the impossible, who will act, not in keeping with what we think is possible, but in accordance with his infinite wisdom and power. In this lies the bridge from lament to praise.

When the full weight of who God truly finally dawns on us, hope will erupt. In the midst of our despair, the future will open up again. At that moment, praise and thanksgiving will indeed rise out of our hearts and flood us with peace and joy (Philip 4:4-7).

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