

Thanksgiving According to the Psalms

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Throughout the Bible, thanksgiving is a normal and necessary part of saving faith. And so it ought to be in our lives as well. Sure, the holidays may jump start our cold hearts, but for those who know the Lord, thanksgiving is a way of life, not a holiday feeling.

Still, what does thanksgiving look like on a regular basis? And how can we grow in our expressions of thanksgiving? Let's go to the Psalms and answer that question.

Thanksgiving According to the Psalms

In the Psalms "give thanks" appears 37 times (in the ESV). By looking at these passages, we can begin to form our "thanks giving" after a biblical pattern. Despite the way "thanksgiving" is bandied about in secular culture, gratitude is not the natural disposition of the human heart (Rom 1:21). It is something that God alone can put in our hearts and something that we must cultivate as a discipline in our lives. Therefore, let's answer four questions about thanksgiving.

To whom do we give thanks?

In the Psalms God is always the object of thanksgiving. Psalm 136 sings,

Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good,

for his steadfast love endures forever.

Give thanks to the God of gods,

for his steadfast love endures forever.

Give thanks to the Lord of lords,

for his steadfast love endures forever;

Likewise, on more than 15 occasions, the Psalmist focuses on the name of the Lord (e.g., 7:17; 30:4; 44:8; 54:6; etc.). For instance Psalm 75:1 read, "We give thanks to you, O God; we give thanks, for your name is near. We recount your wondrous deeds." In short, there is never a generic, objectless thanksgiving in the Psalms.

Thanksgiving is always personal and directed to the God of Israel. Our thanksgiving must follow this same pattern. Praise that stops at creation—be it a thing or a person—is anything but biblical. Biblical thanksgiving always rises to the praise of God himself, the giver of every good and perfect gift (James 1:17).

How do we give thanks?

Thanksgiving in the Psalms is always passionate, never perfunctory. Never do the Psalms offer thanks the way I thanked my Aunt Lucille for Christmas sweaters. Rather, they always gave thanks to the Lord with their “whole heart” (9:1; 86:12; 111:1; 138:1). In faith, their hearts exulted in God’s strong help (28:7); in song, their lips praised God’s character (30:4); with instruments, they created choruses of praise (33:2). Their thanksgiving was anything but an unspoken feeling. As a rule, thanksgiving swelled in the heart until it erupted in spoken praise (28:7; 33:2; 100:4). As Psalm 109:30 sings, “With my mouth I will give great thanks to the LORD.”

In the same way, we must articulate praise to our heavenly father. Thanksgiving that remains at the level of an unspoken feeling is not thanksgiving at all; it is a mysticism that steals verbal praise from God. This doesn’t mean we cannot offer silent praise; it does mean that the Christian will not be satisfied with silent praise.

Where do we give thanks?

Psalm 109:30 doesn’t stop with the mouth, it also speaks of the feet: “I will praise him in the midst of the throng.” One of the recurring features in the Psalms is how thanksgiving is associated with the temple of God. Psalm 100:4 exults, “Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise.” Psalm 122 speaks of giving thanks in the holy city of Jerusalem, and Psalm 140:13 unites praising God’s name with his dwelling place.

In the Old Testament, God’s name literally dwelt in a place (see Deuteronomy 12). The people of Israel, thankful to God for their yearly provisions would travel to that place to worship. At feast times, they would bring thank offerings to God. In time, these practices were lost (because of exile) or corrupted (because of impure hearts), but they set the pattern for thanksgiving.

In the New Testament, Christ says that God’s people will no longer travel to a geographical place (see John 4:21), but he doesn’t deny the importance of place. Rather, Jesus becomes the place where we offer our praise (cf. John 1:14). Christ, in whom all deity dwells (Col 1:19; 2:9), has received the name above all names and is now God’s chosen *place* where believers come to bring thanksgiving (cf. Heb 12:22–24). And how does that happen today?

Thanksgiving occurs when we gather to worship him in spirit and truth. While we celebrate holiday meals in our homes, the central place for thanksgiving is in the gathered assembly of believers each week. This weekly pattern of gathering culminates our personal acts of thanksgiving *and* it recalibrates our hearts with a fresh word of grace that sends us into the world with thanksgiving in our hearts. For as Psalm 138:1 says, “I give you thanks, O LORD, before the gods I sing your praise.” In other words, just as joy in the Lord moves us to gather with his people; so joy in the Lord causes us to praise him in public, “before the gods” of this age.

For what do we give thanks?

In short, we ought to give thanks to God for everything from *Seven-Up* to sex (1 Tim 4:1–4). But with the comprehensive command to give thanks in all circumstances (1 Thess 5:17), the Psalms specify five key areas for thanksgiving.

- *First, we are to thank God for who he is* (7:17; 30:4; 136:1–3). As the Maker, Sustainer, and Redeemer, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, God deserves all praise. Even when the stalls are empty and field is barren (Hab 3:17–19), we can take joy in

the Lord and give thanks to him for his lovingkindness, his wisdom, and his gospel that promises forgiveness of sins and life eternal.

- *Second, we are to thank God for what he has done*(9:1; 106:47). Moving from creation to redemption, Psalms 104, 105, 106 recount the works of God in Israel's history. They form the background for Psalm 107 which promises redemption in the future. And in the midst of these historical psalms, the Psalmist praises God for his works of redemption. Which brings us to the third attribute of thanksgiving.
- *Third, praise for his works should focus on his redeeming work of salvation.* While the Psalms do praise God for his creation; it is the exodus that receives the most attention. In fact, the Psalmist prays in 106:47, "Save us, O LORD our God, and gather us from among the nations, *that* we may give thanks to your holy name and glory in your praise." Thanksgiving in this verse is predicated on salvation; indeed for all who know the Lord, salvation is the zenith of our thanksgiving.
- *Fourth, we are to praise God for the superlative blessing of salvation—namely, the access to the dwell near God.* Not to be set against God's redemption, the Psalmist regularly expresses desire to be close to God and his dwelling place (Ps 27:1–4; Pss 42–43; Ps 73:25). Therefore, he gives thanks God's nearness and the ability to be in the presence of God: "We give thanks to you, O God; we give thanks, for your name is near" (75:1); "Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the Lord" (118:19); "Surely the righteous shall give thanks to your name; the upright shall dwell in your presence" (140:13).
- *And last, we are to thank God for the way he has glorifies his name above all things.* Indeed, the purity of your thanksgiving can be tested by this final measure: Do you thank God for your glory or his glory? Psalm 138:2 reveals the heart of a believer who has forsaken idolatrous self-glory and become so consumed with God that he gives thanks to God when God is glorified: "I bow down toward your holy temple and give thanks to your name for your steadfast love and your faithfulness, for you have exalted above all things your name and your word."

At Thanksgiving and throughout the rest of the year, the world feels gratitude for the goodness in life. However, the Christian who has been born from above has been given a new capacity to praise—and he or she thanks the triune God for the salvation that he gives and for the joy of seeing his name glorified. Indeed, it is this kind of thanksgiving that thunders through the halls of heaven and must guide our own thanks giving.