

A Psalm of Thanksgiving, Psalm 100

Caleb Nelson | Harvest Reformed Presbyterian Church | November 22, 2020

Proposition: Celebrate Thanksgiving the Biblical way this year.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, I know we just took a break from 1 John and looked together at Psalm 73 as we talked about dealing with the fallout of the 2020 Presidential Elections in this country. But this week, we have one of the two biggest holidays of the year. The biggest, of course, is Christmas, due in just over a month. But this holiday is doubtless the second-biggest and most important, and virtually every American celebrates it. I'm talking, of course, about the holiday known as Thanksgiving. Now, like you, I have been to dozens of Thanksgiving celebrations. Generally speaking, it is *de rigueur* to have roast Turkey, cranberry sauce, and mashed potatoes at these events. It is generally thought appropriate to serve enough food for about five meals. And most of the time, guests from far and near will gather to enjoy the day together. And that's about it. I'm serious! On a day called "Thanksgiving Day," a day on which our political leaders release proclamations urging us to feel and express gratitude, most Thanksgiving celebrations don't even mention the word "gratitude," don't contain a formal time for every person to express what they are thankful for, and do not encourage the formal expression of gratitude in any particular way. It's reprehensible. Now, as you all likely know, "celebrating" a holiday while ignoring the ostensible purpose of that holiday is one of my pet peeves. I loathe Fourth of July parties where the signing of the Declaration of Independence goes

unmentioned. I hate Christmas celebrations where Christ is absent. I lament Labor Day barbecues where the accomplishments (and sins) of the labor union movement are quietly left in obscurity. And so on. But I am not here to preach my opinion, and if I do preach my opinion, then I am no minister of the word of God.

So, that said, the word of God has an entire chapter whose purpose is to tell you how to give thanks. How do you bring an attitude of gratitude to expression? Psalm 100 is here to tell you. This psalm is the only chapter in the Bible titled “A Psalm of Thanksgiving,” or as the ESV translates, “A psalm for giving thanks.” In other words, this passage of Scripture is, according to the inspired author, a text uniquely valuable for doing what our political leaders and cultural heritage tell us to do on the fourth Thursday of November. So this Thanksgiving, do it the biblical way. Use the holiday to express the riches of gratitude you have toward our Lord Jesus and His Father.

I. How to Celebrate Thanksgiving, vv. 1-4

So how should we as Bible-followers celebrate a holiday called Thanksgiving?

A. With This Psalm, Title

I would suggest that we ought to use this psalm to do it. I don't mean this in a legalistic sense, whereby if you don't read or sing Psalm 100 on the fourth Thursday of November then you have not actually shown any gratitude. Rather, I mean that it is appropriate to express the gratitude in your heart based on the teaching of this Psalm. Luke 2 is the passage for Christmas. It is appropriate to celebrate the birth of Jesus by reading all over again how it happened. First Corinthians 15 is the passage for Easter. It is appropriate to celebrate the resurrection by hearing the gospel Paul preached and getting answers to the common questions about the resurrection. And it is appropriate to hear what is in Psalm 100 on a week set aside for giving thanks to God Almighty for His mercies, blessings, benefits, and remarkable providences during the last twelve months.

B. With Joy, vv. 1a, 2a

So if you are going to give thanks according to the Biblical model, first of all, I urge you to do it with joy. Thanksgiving is not to be a glum affair. Yes, Covid has killed an awful lot of people. Lockdowns have depressed and impoverished many more. Your daily life may well be harder and less pleasant than it was in 2019. The specter of great power conflict looms on the foreign policy horizon, while at home the outrageous leftism of our likely new Democrat president can make even the stoutest hearts in coal country quail.

Yet though life may be getting worse, and is downright sorrowful and bleak for many, the source of our joy is not the circumstances of life in this world. We are not making this joyful noise, the expression of a joy so vast that it can hardly be articulated in words, because we got a raise, because the Dow is up, because we think that our country and the other nations of the earth are bound and determined to get more free and equal and rich, world without end, amen. No. We are joyful this Thanksgiving because of who God is. He is holy. He is the one who reigns, as the previous psalms have so sublimely emphasized. He has done marvelous things. He is a forgiving God, and the God who takes vengeance on the wicked too.

That's where the joy comes from. The attitude in the leader is going to be the attitude in the people. Ultimately, we make a joyful noise and serve the LORD with gladness because the LORD is glad. We don't serve a gloomy, dour God! Far from it. Put another way, Thanksgiving is God's holiday, while Halloween is the Devil's holiday.

So what about it? Is this joy in your heart this Thanksgiving? I'm not telling you to ignore the uncertainty, economic pain, political frustrations, and other problems facing us here in Campbell County and around the world. But I am telling you to get your focus off them. It's not "political problems" day. It's not "get ready for totalitarianism" day. It is a day for thanksgiving, because the LORD reigns, and we share in His joy to the extent that we have learned to submit to His reign. The better you serve Him, the more gladness in your heart. Now, this is not to say that Christians don't get depressed. Rather, is saying that the outcome of serving Christ is joy. You may not feel that joy right. That's okay, even understandable. But know that the joy is coming, and in knowing that joy is coming, be joyful!

C. With Others, v. 1b

But don't just be joyful alone. It is all lands that are called on to utter this shout of joy. The entire earth has reason to rejoice because God is king of all the earth. The next Psalm, 101, describes how exactly God's king will rule. But this psalm describes the communal joy we have in the reign of Christ.

Do you celebrate Thanksgiving with others? In principle, is your celebration open to as many guests as want to come? Are you committed to the truth that your gratitude is not real unless it can be shared with every other grateful human heart? If my gratitude is only for myself this Thanksgiving, if my attitude is "better him than me" as I look at the person who lost his mom and his job to Covid-19, then I am not wanting the whole earth to be joyful. I am feeding my joy on the misery and loss of others. Now, there is a place to rejoice at the downfall of the wicked — not that they fall, but that their wickedness has come to an end. But to rejoice over the fall of the wicked because it somehow lifts you up is indeed a sin against God and is the opposite of giving thanks. True gratitude welcomes the entire earth to come and give thanks together. Practically, of course, I can't seat 330 million Americans at my table. But if I could celebrate Thanksgiving with them all, and with the other tribes, tongues, and peoples, I would, because that is what Thanksgiving looks toward. Our day of thanks as a nation is a foretaste of that day when the whole earth will indeed make a joyful noise and serve Yahweh with gladness.

D. With Singing, v. 2b

That gladness in His presence is expressed with singing. Do you get together and sing on Thanksgiving? If not, why not? Is your heart not buoyant enough to rise through your throat in song? Notice particularly that the song ties the singing to the presence of God. If you spend time with God in private worship, family worship, and corporate worship, your heart will be full of the joy of His presence, and you will want to sing. Just as the presence of the candy store can fill my four-year-olds with bouncing steps and literal shouts of joy, so the presence of God can and will fill you with the bounciest steps your old bones can take and the loudest yells of jubilation your dignity can put up with.

Come into His presence. When you do, you'll start singing. The two are connected, and you can start with either one. Of course, the singing is easier to manufacture than the presence of God, and Ephesians suggests that we start with the singing. That way, we sound forth our amazement at the presence of God, and His word and Spirit dwell richly in us as we sing.

Borrow some hymnals if you need to. That's what they are here for. Take them home and plan to sing a few songs of joy in the presence of God this Thanksgiving. At least, that is what the psalm of thanksgiving says to do.

E. With Knowledge of God, v. 3

But the biblical celebration of thanksgiving doesn't stop there. You and I need to celebrate with knowledge. This holiday is not to take place in ignorance and darkness. No. You and I need to know four key things about our God when we thank Him this week.

1. His Name

The first thing we need to know about our Lord is His name. Know that Yahweh is God, the psalmist tells us. What does the name "Yahweh" mean? Something like "I am who I am." Know that the self-existent, eternal, underived Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is not a force or a power of nature. He is a person, and His name is Yahweh. The joyful thanksgiving this psalm describes is a joyful thanksgiving offered to a personal being with a name, someone whom we can know and respond to in a personal way.

I don't thank my computer at the end of a long, hard day's work. Sure I couldn't have done my job (as I currently do it) without the computer. Sure this new ultrawide monitor makes a huge productivity difference. But the thought to thank the computer never crosses my mind. Why? Because it is not sentient and it doesn't know that it's working for me. There is no more reason to thank the computer than there is to thank the boards that hold up my floor or the gas molecules that keep me warm. But I can most certainly thank God for creating the wood, for giving me a house, and so on. I can thank the folks who keep the gas flowing through the pipeline, and the miners who keep the coal trains coming to the power plant so that I can have electricity to run the fan and blow hot air all through my house.

In other words, the psalm is only being literal when it says that you need to know that Yahweh is God in order to give thanks. If you don't know who gave you the benefit you just received, you don't know who to thank. For example, one of you recently anonymously contributed \$500 to a member of this congregation for emergency dental work. Obviously the beneficiary knows that a human being gave him this money. But not knowing the name of his benefactor, he cannot write a thank-you note. He cannot hold a Thanksgiving celebration. He cannot adequately express his gratitude to someone whose name he does not know.

So is your Thanksgiving celebration going to be centered around the God you know? Would your gratitude appear obviously Christian to a Jew, Muslim, or Hindu who joined you at your Thanksgiving table? Or would your gratitude appear to have nothing to do with the God who provided the meal? Do you know the name of the one you're thanking? And do you know what He is?

2. His Nature

But the psalm continues to instruct us about how to celebrate an act of giving thanks. You need to not only know Yahweh's name, but also that He is God! Know that Yahweh is God. This is what one German theologian calls the "Mosaic distinction," because in the realm of intellectual history it was introduced by Moses. It is the distinction between true and false in matters of religion. Quite simply, to say "My God is true and yours false" is to introduce this Mosaic distinction. To claim that Yahweh is God, and that He exclusively is God such that no other claimant can be God, is to affirm not just a generalized gratitude, but a profound commitment to the faith of Israel.

Does it require a position on whether Yahweh is God to adequately give thanks? This psalm suggests that it does. An agnostic cannot celebrate Thanksgiving like you and I can. I'm not suggesting that agnostics are basically ungrateful. But I don't think it is derogatory in the slightest to suggest that a personalized thank-you celebration created and worked out for a specific individual is a better and more complex expression of gratitude than a simple "Thanks, whatever you are" muttered in the direction of the universe. The point is not the subjective level of gratitude in the heart. The point is that an appropriate expression of thanks demands a knowledge of the one you're thanking, and above all a knowledge that He is God. We already know that if you speak to a fellow human without knowledge of their official position, you can really dishonor them — unintentionally, but badly enough for all that. How much more do you think a human being can dishonor his Creator if he acts as though the Creator is nothing more than an equal, or even a slight inferior?

3. His Creation

But you need to know Him not only as God, but as your Creator. It is He who made us! Thanking someone for giving you a toothpick is little different than thanking them for giving you a car. But being made by God? That takes it to a whole new level of gratitude. When was the last time you spent some time discussing the miracle of creation around the Thanksgiving table? God made you.

4. His People

But the Bible goes beyond the truth of creation, as majestic as that truth is, and teaches the further truth of redemption. We are His! We belong to God twice over — once by creation, and a second time by redemption. Christ has purchased us with His own blood to be kings and priests for Him. We belong to Christ the same way sheep belong to their shepherd. Yes, He spends His time taking care of us, as a shepherd does his sheep — but the flip side of that is that we belong to Him, body and soul. Do you live as someone doubly possessed by Jesus Christ? Do you look to Him for food? I hope you do. I hope you're in the habit of praying before every meal and thanking Him for the food He gave you. Do you look to Him for spiritual nourishment? Do you pray for me as your pastor-chef, the one responsible before Christ for feeding you with the spiritual banquet you need every Sunday? We are His people. That truth of belonging is one of the preconditions of gratitude. If you are not connected to something beyond yourself, you cannot feel gratitude. You can only feel the urge to survive. But when you are integrated into the

community, when you know that you are loved and wanted, when you are just “His person” but part of “His people,” you can actually give thanks.

F. With Corporate Worship, v. 4

Indeed, thanksgiving comes to its fullest expression in corporate worship. The psalm suggests exactly this by speaking of entering God’s gates and courts. What are the gates of God? One can think of the term “Babel,” which in Babylonian means “gate of god” but in Hebrew means “confusion.” No, the gates of God are not the Tower of Babel. Rather, God’s gates are the doors that control access to His presence. We know, in other words, that they are the doors of the Temple. The courts of God were the courts of the Jerusalem temple; the gates of God were the gates at the entrance to that temple. Now that the temple is destroyed, where can God be found? In the midst of His gathered people. So rather than going to Israel and spending Thanksgiving Day in Jerusalem, the natural outcome of our work of Thanksgiving ought to be to go and worship with the people of God. This congregation does not have a Thanksgiving Day service. My previous church in New Hampshire had such a service, and I really liked it. Anyway, it is not necessary to go to church to show gratitude to God, even on a holiday particularly oriented toward gratitude. But it’s not a bad idea either. The psalm urges us to express three different things to God.

1. Thanks

The first is thanks. Here we have been talking all this time about thanks, but we have not said what it is. What is an attitude of gratitude? I think that gratitude is best described as the response to a gift that says, “I don’t deserve this. The person who gave this to me is incredibly gracious and generous.” Gratitude, in other words, is the opposite of entitlement. Gratitude is humility in action. When I feel grateful, my heart tells me that I have just been the beneficiary of something that someone did not have to do for me. And I then express that gratitude by saying “Thank you.” I can say it in those very words, or in some more elaborate form. But genuine gratitude is a humble action of receiving a benefit with awe and respect for the generosity of the one who gave it.

Do you act entitled toward the Almighty? Are you mad when He doesn’t give you what you think you deserve? Let’s say that your Thanksgiving plans didn’t work out this year. You didn’t get to see your parents. You missed out on that cruise. You were going to be at college, not sitting in front of a computer screen. On and on it goes. If you are mad, then you are not acting thankful. You are acting entitled.

2. Praise

Praise is very similar to thanks. But praise primarily focuses on lauding the person praised. It is the act of saying good things and meaning them. You can praise someone if you’re not grateful for anything in particular. I can praise the quality of Samsung screens without ever owning one. But to praise God is to say how wonderful He is.

Are you planning to do that this Thanksgiving? Or will it primarily be talk of how rotten our politicians are, how the country is going down the tubes, and how the anti-God forces are

relentless in their assault? Thanksgiving is important. But don't miss the opportunity to make it Praisegiving as well.

3. Blessing

Finally, we are called on to bless God's name. To bless is to wish good things on someone. "Oh, bless you!" You say that to indicate the opposite of cursing. To curse is to wish evil things to befall someone. To bless is to say, "May you be rewarded for what you've done! Have you wished that on Yahweh God recently? How about at Thanksgiving? Bless His name.

By the way, part of my job as a preacher is to lead you all in praising God, thanking God, and blessing God. If I'm not doing that, call me out. If some other preacher you sit under in the future isn't doing it, call him out — not from a place of entitlement, but from a place of gratitude to God for His perfections!

II. Why to Celebrate Thanksgiving, v. 5

So why should we celebrate Thanksgiving? Why do we thank Him and bless His name? The final verse of the psalm gives us three reasons, three really big reasons.

A. The LORD Is Good

The first is that, in the final analysis, the LORD is good. There is no moral ambiguity there. There is no moral waywardness latent in His character. He is not sketchy or weak-charactered in the slightest. God is good, full stop. There is no qualifier to put on there, no need to tone it down, no suggestion that "God is good" may be something less than the whole story. It is the truth and the whole truth. He is good.

Thank God!

B. The LORD Will Never Change

His goodness is also not subject to alteration. His mercy endures forever. The word "mercy" is the loaded word "hesed," lovingkindness or steadfast love. The kind of love and mercy and kindness that God specializes in is not something temporary. It will never go away, alter, or diminish. He is God for ever, and His love is eternal too.

C. The LORD Will Be Faithful to the Next Generation

He will be faithful not only to you, but to your children, indeed, to all generations. We know that all empires have fallen. The longest-running human institution is the Roman Catholic Church, which in its present form has been around for about 1700 years or so. The next oldest institutions are much younger than that, maybe three to four hundred years old. Well, maybe you can entrust your children's future to New York Life Insurance Company. That institution might be faithful to the next generation. It might even make it for three or four more. But who among us seriously expects the NASDAQ to be faithful to all generations? Summer's lease has all too short a date. The life expectancy of even the most stable institutions is not much better.

My cousin once announced that he enjoyed Christmas because you got to see your ancestors. And true enough, we love Thanksgiving for the chance it provides us to get together with our loved ones, including our children and grandchildren. But for all that, how much better to entrust ourselves to our faithful God, who will be faithful not only to our grandchildren but their grandchildren, and so on through the years right up to the end of time? His faithfulness is

from generation to generation. Thank God. Without Him would not exist, would not have each other, would have no reason to show gratitude. But because Yahweh is God, and we are His people, let's give thanks this week the Biblical way. Amen.