

Lesson 15

The Psalms of Thanksgiving

Next to obedience, perhaps the most significant response a man can make to God is that of gratitude and thanksgiving. In many ways the theme of thankfulness pervades the whole book of Psalms. But, several are specially focused on this human emotion.

We have studied the “lament” psalms, where individuals and the nation of Israel made fervent pleas to God for assistance, deliverance, or salvation in times of physical or spiritual crisis. In a number of the lament psalms there is a vow or promise made at the end to praise and thank God if He will deliver (7:17; 13:5; 26:12; 35:28). Thus, the thanksgiving psalms can be fulfillment of such vows.

Emotionally, the thanksgiving psalms are at the opposite end of the spectrum from the laments, the latter expressing fear, desperation, and inability to help oneself, the former joy, appreciation, and renewed trust in the One who came to the rescue. Thus, one commentator has described the psalm of lament and the psalm of thanksgiving as complementing one another like the “two shells of a mussel.”

The difference between the two types is that in the psalm of lament the crisis is *in progress*, while in the psalm of thanksgiving it is *past*, though still acutely remembered.

The thanksgiving psalm also can be described as “the final act in a human drama” where the heart has arrived. That heart has moved from complaint to trust and finally to thanksgiving.

In expressing gratitude to God, the psalms, psalmists, and we today emphasize a realization of something unique about God; that He is good and merciful and loving.

It might also be worth the time to parse the difference between gratitude and thanksgiving, the former being an attitude of heart and the latter the outward, verbal expression of that attitude.

During the Mosaical period, prayers and songs of thanksgiving were accompanied on many occasions by “thank offerings” given to God to express gratitude. Some

Thank Offerings
See Leviticus 7:11ff and 22:29ff

of the lament psalms promise such offerings (27:6; 54:6-7).

Thanksgiving Psalms May not Be a Separate Category

Some students of the psalms have argued that the songs that bespeak gratitude are merely a part of the praise hymns. And, it is observable that most, if not all, of the psalms that express thanks, also praise. At least one scholar argues that the Hebrew language lacks an explicit word for “thank” and that the verb *hoda*, which often has been translated “to thank,” rather means “to praise.” Other scholars argue for translating the Hebrew as “thanks” as well as “praise.”

Whatever the case, we have chosen to look at a selection of psalms which express gratitude.

“Gratitude is not only the greatest of virtues, but the parent of all the others.”

—Cicero
Roman philosopher

Importance of Thanksgiving

Gratitude is an important spiritual virtue. It is a central element of worship, for without it, one focuses only on self and not upon God. Further, out of the expression of gratitude grows love for and respect for God. And, from that love emanates obedience, trust, and faith.

Happiness and contentment come from a thankful heart, that appreciates God’s blessings and dealings with us. The opposite attitude engenders murmuring and complaining about how God has dealt with us. Such brings only misery and death, as is illustrated in Israel’s first generation wilderness experience.

For all these reasons, God has repeatedly commanded active giving of thanks.

Prayer and singing are the two most common vehicles for thanksgiving, and the psalms of Israel were used for both. Thanksgiving often is paralleled with the voicing of praise, which we've previously seen to be an integral element of the psalms.

Form of Typical Thanksgiving Psalms

While there are variations, the typical thanksgiving psalm is structured as follows:

1. Introduction: A call to worship, or blessing; stated intention to thank God
2. A restatement or narrative of an individual or national lament (trouble)
3. An account of God's salvation or deliverance
4. Conclusion: Praise of God and/or a further call to worship

It should be noted, however, that there is a large amount of variation in the structure of individual psalms. Sometimes the introduction is absent and at other times another element may be missing.

Two Basic Types of Thanksgiving Psalms

Generally speaking, the thanksgiving psalms can be divided into two categories:

1. Individual psalms of thanksgiving
2. Community or national psalms of thanksgiving

The Nature of These Psalms

Somewhat different from a simple hymn of praise, the thanksgiving psalms usually focus upon



a particular benefit or blessing or answer to prayer bestowed on an individual or the whole congregation.

These psalms follow somewhat the pattern of the earlier victory songs, such as the Song of Moses (Gen. 15:1-8) and the Song of Deborah (Judg. 5).

These psalms seek to give honor and praise to God for some definite benefit, while simultaneously thanking Him. And, they also seek to declare His honor before others, imploring them to likewise praise the Lord.

Looking at the Individual Psalms of Thanks

It is difficult to accurately subdivide and classify the psalms into exact categories. Many have elements of more than one genre and may be variously categorized by different students. However, several psalms seem to fit the model of an individual thanksgiving psalm.

Psalm 107 is a unique thanksgiving psalm. The central portion (vv. 4-32) consists of four sections, each telling of a group who were in distress.

- vv. 4-9: Desert travelers suffering hunger and thirst
- vv. 10-16: Prisoners

- vv. 17-22: People who were sick
- vv. 23-32: Seafarers in a storm

Each group in turn "cried out to the Lord in their trouble, and He delivered (saved, or brings) them out of their distresses" (vv. 6, 13, 19, 28) and then each group is encouraged "Oh that men would give thanks to the Lord for His goodness, and for His wonderful works to the children of men!" (vv. 8, 15, 21, 31). The final verses of the psalm are a hymn extolling the providence of God in the lives of men.

Psalm 18 (David's deliverance from King Saul)

This psalm is attributed to David and the superscription suggests it was written or delivered on the occasion of David's deliverance from his enemies and King Saul. He speaks of being confronted by death but being dramatically delivered by Jehovah. David attributes this deliverance to his own trust in and righteousness before God. It is full of praise of the power and attributes of the Lord.

Psalm 31 (deliverance from enemies)

The psalmist here repeatedly calls God his rock of refuge, his fortress, his strength, his God. He declares that God has delivered

him from the net laid for him by his enemies, those who persecute, lie about, and speak insolently and contemptuously of him. He summarizes by saying, “Nevertheless You heard the voice of my supplications when I cried out to You.”

Psalm 32 (deliverance from his own sins)

Here the cause of thanksgiving is not deliverance from an external enemy, but gratitude for God’s forgiveness. This psalm of David expresses the blessedness and great gift found in being forgiven. He expresses the physical and emotional turbulence that sin caused, until he determined to confess his sin to the Lord. Taking the lesson he learned and becoming didactic, the psalmist declares, “But he who trusts in the Lord, mercy shall surround him.”

Psalm 66

This psalm links what God has done for the nation of Israel with what He has done for the individual who read or spoke the psalm. Historical references to God’s mighty works are combined with references to “what He has done for my soul.” Additionally, there is reference to not only the thanksgiving of praise (of the lips), but of the burnt offerings of a thank offering (vv. 13-15).

Psalm 92

This psalm begins with an expression of the great value in thanksgiving to God. The Lord is generally praised for His greatness and then the psalmist speaks specifically of how the Lord has exalted him, anointed him, and caused him to flourish. He then draws the conclusion that such will be the case for all who will be righteous before God.

Psalm 118

Similar to other psalms of this type, this one speaks of how God

answered his prayer in the time of distress. It uses a repetition to make the key point: “For His mercy endures forever.”

See also Psalms 30, 40, 116, and 120.

Sing Psalm 118

Looking at the Community or Congregational Psalms of Thanks

The individual psalms of thanks appear to be the larger portion of this genre of psalms. However, there are a number which appear to bespeak the thanks of a whole community or the congregation of Israel. This is one of the more nebulous of psalm categories, since it is a fine line to distinguish between hymns of praise and communal psalms of thanks.

As in the individual psalms of thanks, we see (1) the report of the crisis, and (2) acknowledgement that the crisis has passed.

What distinguishes these from the individual category is some reference to a larger group or community, often observed in the use of plural pronouns or a national reference, as in 124:1, “If it had not been the Lord who was on *our* side, Let *Israel* now say. . . .”

In a couple of psalms there is a combining of individual and collective thanksgiving. For example, Psalm 66:1-12 appears to be a community reflection, while 66:13-20 seems to speak from an individual’s perspective.

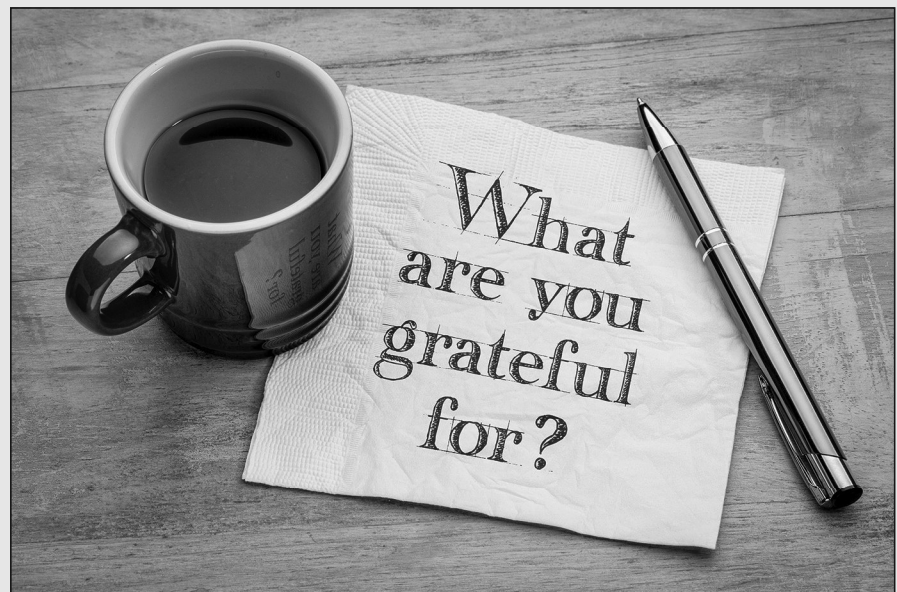
Psalm 65

God is thanked for atonement made for “our transgressions” and the praise of God is to be delivered “in Zion” (v. 1). Reference is made to God’s house, His holy temple.

Psalm 66

National Israel’s redemption is in view here, as is obvious from historical reminders of what God had done. It speaks of God’s testing and refining of the nation. As a result, the psalmist speaks of going to “Your house with burnt offerings.”

See also Psalms 107, 118, 124, and 129.



Homework and Questions

Be sure to do your homework because what you discover will become part of our study and discussion during class.

1. Drawing upon your memory, choose a time of crisis in your life in which you pleaded for God's assistance and He answered. Using this event, construct your own psalm.

a. _____

Speak of your intention to thank God for His answer

b. _____

Write of the details of the crisis briefly

c. _____

Tell of how God answered your prayer

d. _____

Encourage others to trust in God for help, as you did

2. What is thanksgiving (define it)? _____

3. What is the difference between gratitude and thanksgiving? _____

4. Is thanksgiving an integral part of worship? Explain. _____

5. Who do you believe benefits from the giving of thanks? Explain. _____

6. What difference do you see between "praise" and "thanks"? _____

7. What is the link between psalms of lament and psalms of thanks? _____
