

Learning How to Give Thanks

Psalm 18

Studies in the Psalms #18

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HOW do you know how to give thanks? We teach our kids after they open a gift: “Say thank you.” And they say “thank you,” but that’s about it. How do you get them to *feel* thankful and *want* to give thanks? As a pastor over the years I’ve sat with many new believers who have said, “What do I say when I pray?” And I’ve said, “Give God thanks.” “For what?” “For everything, but start with what he’s done for you.” Psalm 18 is a very personal song of thanks from the lips of David. And isn’t it interesting that this longest Psalm we’ve looked at so far is a song of thanks? The Lord asks you today, “You have your laundry list of petitions, but how long is your list of thanks?”

That’s the easy part. He’s the hard part. Psalm 18 reminds us that when we read, pray, and sing the Psalms, we do so with three layers. We had this great birthday cake recently that had three layers. There was a really good whipped cream frosting. Then there was a moist chocolate cake. But the kicker was the fudge filling. I couldn't just eat it as if it were a plain chocolate cake. I had to see all the layers and enjoy them on their own, but also

together in each bite! We need to enjoy Psalm 18 as David's song of thanks for deliverance from his enemies, and especially Saul as the heading say. As you read 1–2 Samuel you have David fighting King Saul, the Philistines, Ishbosheth, Saul's son, David's own son, Absalom, and then in 2 Samuel 22 we read this Psalm (with slight variations). We need to enjoy Psalm 18 as a song of Jesus for his deliverance from the grave. In fact, it was John Calvin who said in his commentary that much in this Psalm "applies more truly to the person of Christ."¹ We read of his suffering and death in verses 4–5, his resurrection in verses 6ff., the Father raising him because of his righteousness in verses 20–30, his ascension and session at the right hand of God as he is subduing his enemies in verses 31ff., and his eternal kingship in verses 46–50. How do we know this? Turn to Romans 15:8–9. It makes it easy when the apostles apply Old Testament passages directly to Jesus. Paul puts the words of Psalm 18:49 on Jesus' lips. And as we are united to Jesus by faith, we too can enjoy Psalm 18 for ourselves. After all, it was not only a **Psalm of David** that pointed forward to Jesus, but it was intended for all God's people as the heading says, **To the choirmaster.**²

¹ *Commentary*, 300. See also Melancthon, *Reformation Commentary on Scripture*, 142.

² Augustine, 198.

Two Ways to Give Thanks

It's so important for us to learn to give thanks to God for our redemption in Christ (HC, Q&A 2) and Psalm 18 teaches us *two ways to give thanks*.

First, we thank him with love (v. 1). I love you, O LORD (v. 1). We know that the first commandment in the law is, "You shall have no other gods before me" (Ex. 20:3). And as Jesus said, loving God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength is the first great commandment (Matt. 22:34-40). We know this. We hear this so often. But do we *feel* it? In Hebrew, David feels love for the Lord. This word he uses is always used of the Lord's love for his people. And the Lord's love is a jealous love, which is better understood by us as a zealous love. He is zealous for us his people. He is passionate about us. And here for the first and only time in the Old Testament David uses this word of love back to the Lord! We're not to be frozen chosen! We can get emotional about what our God has done for us! Amen?

Second, we thank him with words (vv. 2-3; 46-50). Mere zeal can descend into sentimentalism. Words are such powerful things, aren't they? We remember a meaningful song, a moving speech, an insightful book. And some words hurt us so that our physical and mental health is affected.

Notice how David expresses his thanks in words with a lengthy list of descriptions of God: **my strength** (v. 1), **my rock, my fortress, my deliverer, my God, my rock in whom I take refuge, my shield, the horn of my salvation, my stronghold** (v. 2). Do you know who your God is, brothers and sisters? And notice how personal this is with the repeated use of **my**. Can you speak of him this personally, this intelligently, this passionately? Now you begin to get what he says, **I call upon the LORD, who is worthy to be praised!** (v. 3) **The LORD lives, and blessed be my rock, and exalted be the God of my salvation!** (v. 46)

“Pastor, how am I to give thanks to God?” Give him your heartfelt love and give him your thoughtful words!

Two Reasons to Give Thanks

“Why?” It seems sort of blasphemous to even ask why, doesn’t it? But we have to go there to truly appreciate what thankfulness is all about. I watched one of those “man on the street interviews” this week about July 4. And it was filmed right here at the Oceanside Pier. I’m so glad to hear that we celebrate Founding Fathers like Jesse Ventura and John Wilkes Booth declaring our independence from the South in 1984! We need to learn how to give thanks to God for our redemption in Christ (HC, Q&A 2) and Psalm

18 also teaches us *two reasons* we are to give thanks.

First, we give him thanks for what he's done for us (vv. 4-19). After all the years David recounts his deliverance from his enemies. But unlike prose, which would just say, "David was delivered from his enemies," poetry says it with flair! He remembers his battles in this way: **The cords of death encompassed me; the torrents of destruction assailed me; the cords of Sheol entangled me; the snares of death confronted me** (v. 4-5). For us this means you're not going to know how to give thanks for your salvation in Jesus until you remember what you were like before Jesus saved you. And even more, you won't know the significance of that deliverance and the significance of thanks until you realize how spiritual, how eternal your struggles were.

Then he describes what the Lord had done for him. Look at how it's all God: ***He rescued me from my strong enemy...the LORD was my support. He brought me out into a broad place; he rescued me, because he delighted in me*** (vv. 17-19). And in verses 7-16 notice how David describes his personal deliverance in language reminiscent of the God's deliverances in the past: the Exodus (Ex. 9:23-24; 14:21-22; 15:8; 19:16-20), the wilderness (Deut. 32), the conquest under Joshua (Josh. 10:11), and the judges (Judg. 5:4-

5).

Second, we give him thanks for what he's done by us (vv. 31–45). In verses 31–45 David thanks for the Lord for delivering him, but notice how he's even thanking the Lord for enabling him to fight his enemies. It wasn't like David sat around and did nothing. He praises God for sure—**For who is God, but the LORD? And who is a rock, except our God?** (v. 31)—but then he says, **the God who equipped me with strength and made my way blameless. He made my feet like the feet of a deer...He trains my hands for war, so that my arms can bend a bow of bronze** (vv. 32–34). If I can put this in terms we know, the two reasons we are to give thanks to God is for what Jesus has done *for* us and for what Jesus is doing *in* us. In theological terms this means we thank the Lord for all that Jesus did that justifies us and for all that Jesus is doing by the Holy Spirit to sanctify us.

As an aside, I think this is the key to understanding the shocking words of verses 20–30. David is not saying he's sinless but steadfast in the ways of the Lord. After all, in verses 28–29 he says all the good he has done comes from the Lord: **you...light my lamp; the LORD my God lightens my darkness...by you I can run against a troop, and by my God I can leap over a wall.** John Calvin said that the Lord graciously gave David a kingdom

and David responded in love and obedience to God. This is shocking language, but it's similar to how Paul spoke. Paul said Jesus saved him as the chief of sinners (1 Tim. 1:15) but he also said, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing."

"Say thank you." The question is how? And the Holy Spirit wants to teach us to feel thankful and to want to give thanks to our Lord Jesus for his redeeming work and our Father for his eternal love. Give the Triune God your love and give him your words because of all that he has done and is doing for you. Amen.