Studying in Psalms: Songs of Faith

Lesson Nine

Give Thanks for God’s Blessings

Focal Text
Psalm 116

Background
Psalms 107; 116

Main Idea
God’s blessings in time of dire need call for acts of sincere thanksgiving.

Question to Explore
How will you say thank you to God?

Quick Read
When we remember all God has done for us, we are moved to transforming thanks.

Commentary
What is your favorite holiday? According to the surveys, Christmas is America’s first choice. Yet it may surprise you to learn that Christmas was not celebrated for several centuries after Jesus’ birth and did not become popular in America until the late nineteenth century. Too, no one is sure when Jesus’ birth actually occurred. Many historians theorize that this blessed event is observed on December 25 because early Christian leaders wanted to replace Saturnalia, a popular pagan holiday observed on that day.

In contrast to the popularity of Christmas as a holiday, few people rank Thanksgiving as their favorite holiday. Would you? God does.

Celebrating the birth of Jesus is a glorious and wonderful thing. We should do so every day. But thanksgiving is the one observance that is commanded by our Lord, absolutely mandated by the Scriptures: “give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus” (1 Thessalonians 5:18). Thanksgiving is the will of God.
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Why is thanksgiving so important to God? How can it be more important to us? This week’s study teaches this simple fact: thanksgiving is the key to the presence of God and the power you need for your life and problems today. Our text will show us how to use that key this Sunday and every day until we enter the eternal worship of our Father.

Remember what God has done (116:1-11)

Truly our Creator has blessed us beyond human understanding. The first step to thanksgiving that empowers us and honors God is to remember all that God has done for us. Psalm 116 is a thanksgiving psalm appropriate for just this kind of adoration. The thanksgiving psalms express our gratitude to God. Whereas the hymn psalms describe God’s character, the thanksgiving psalms focus on God’s actions, especially times of divine intervention experienced by the psalmist.

Some thanksgiving psalms express the gratitude of an individual (see, for example, Psalms 30; 34; 92; 138). Congregational thanksgiving psalms offer the appreciation of the congregation or nation (see, for example, Ps. 68; 75; 107; 115; 124; 125). Psalm 116 is an excellent example of the individual psalm of gratitude.

The psalmist looked back on God’s blessings in his past and remembered three gifts of grace. As you study his list, ask yourself how many of these blessings have been the Father’s gifts to you and your class as well.

First, God has answered our prayers (116:1-2):

I love the Lord, for he heard my voice;
he heard my cry for mercy.
Because he turned his ear to me,
I will call on him as long as I live.

As the psalmist began to praise God, he thought first about prayer. In singing the praises of God, he was mindful first of all the ways God had heard such praise and petition. Answered prayer is a logical first place to remember in prayer all the ways God has blessed us.

All through his word, our Father promises to answer the prayers of his people:

- “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened” (Matthew 7:7-8).
- “If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer” (Matt. 21:22).
- “I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it” (John 14:13-14).
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- “This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him” (1 John 5:14-15).

If you are a child of God, you are living proof that God answers prayer, for God granted your request for salvation and eternal life. When last did God meet a need you gave him in intercession? When last did God give you his comfort, guidance, or help because you asked for it? Answered prayer is an excellent reason to give God the thanksgiving that glorifies him and empowers us.

Second, God has delivered us from death (116:3-7). There was a time when the psalmist was near death and “overcome by trouble and sorrow” (116:3). The psalm does not give specifics, so that these words apply to us all. We don’t know whether the writer was suffering from disease, disaster, or discouragement. We don’t know whether his problems were physical, relational, or emotional. But we can all understand his pain, for it has been ours. In the midst of such heartache, he called on the name of the Lord (116:4): “O Lord, save me!” The Lord answered his prayer out of compassion for his child (116:5-6), giving cause for peace and gratitude (116:7).

Peter quoted this very prayer when sinking on the Sea of Galilee: “Lord, save me!” (Matt. 14:30). He experienced the psalmist’s deliverance, proving that God’s salvation is available to all who will seek it. Indeed, “Those who know your name will trust in you, for you, Lord, have never forsaken those who seek you” (Ps. 9:10).

Has the Lord given you physical deliverance in the past? Has the Lord healed disease, protected you from disaster, comforted you in distress? If Christ is your Lord, you have already experienced his spiritual and eternal deliverance. You will never perish, for you have eternal life right now (see John 3:16). You are in the Lord’s hand, knowing that nothing can take you from his protective grace (see John 10:28). The next time you find it hard to be grateful to God, remember the ways God has delivered you. Know that God loves you that much, right now.

Third, God has redeemed our problems and pain (Ps. 116:8-11). The psalmist now considered all the other ways God had helped him, not only when God delivered his soul from death but also his “eyes from tears” and his “feet from stumbling” (116:8). God had given comfort and guidance through the problems of life on this fallen planet, so that the writer could walk with God “in the land of the living” (116:9). Even when he found himself “greatly afflicted” (116:10) and so discouraged that he was sure “all men are liars” (116:11), God was his present help and strength.

When last did you feel this abandoned and alone? When were you last afflicted by suffering or loneliness? Have you been the victim of slander or abuse? of abandonment or gossip? Have you felt that you had nowhere to turn and no one to trust?

If you prayed about your discouragement, did the Father provide? Did God give you his peace and protection, his hope and help? Remember the time when you last faced such
despair and found the presence of God’s grace. Then, use that time of help to motivate your gratitude today.

One of the first stories I remember hearing in a sermon was about the boy who built himself a little red toy sailboat. He loved it and played with it every day—until the day the string broke and it sailed down the river and out of his sight. He was crushed.

A few days later he saw his boat in the window of a pawn shop. He went to get it back, but the owner told him he’d have to buy it. So he saved every nickel until he had enough money. He took it to the shop and retrieved his boat. As he left the store he said to the boat in his hands, “Now you’re mine twice. I made you the first time, and I bought you the second.”

You are God’s twice. He made you, and then he bought you. Remember all the ways God has heard you, saved you, and delivered you. Your soul will be moved to the gratitude that glorifies your Father and empowers your life and work.

Offer transforming thanks (116:12-19)
How do we respond to such grace? In the psalmist’s words (116:12),

   How can I repay the LORD
       for all his goodness to me?

First, we offer our personal praise (116:13):

   I will lift up the cup of salvation
       and call on the name of the LORD.

This “cup” may be part of the Passover seder, or a cup used at a time of feasting and worship. Either way, the psalmist would participate personally in this event of worship and gratitude. He would not depend on others to express his thanksgiving but would engage personally in adoration.

Next Sunday, your family of faith will gather to sing hymns and choruses that glorify God. Will you join them or merely listen? Will you sing with your heart or only your lips? Have you yet given God your personal praise today? This psalm is a good place to begin: pray its words slowly, reverently, with passion and purpose.

Worship is not a spectator sport, and we don’t get points for showing up at the game. God is searching for those who will worship in him in spirit and in truth (John 4:24), engaged personally in the praise that is his due.

Second, we offer our public praise. We worship God “in the presence of all his people” (116:14), giving him the “thank offering” that is his due (116:17) in the presence of his people (116:18) amid the “courts of the house of the LORD” (116:19).
The “thank offering” was a particular kind of sacrifice offered to God in gratitude for his gifts. Leviticus 7 gives specific direction for its proper administration (7:11-15):

These are the regulations for the fellowship offering a person may present to the Lord:

If he offers it as an expression of thankfulness, then along with this thank offering he is to offer cakes of bread made without yeast and mixed with oil, wafers made without yeast and spread with oil, and cakes of fine flour well-kneaded and mixed with oil. Along with his fellowship offering of thanksgiving he is to present an offering with cakes of bread made with yeast. He is to bring one of each kind as an offering, a contribution to the Lord; it belongs to the priest who sprinkles the blood of the fellowship offerings. The meat of his fellowship offering of thanksgiving must be eaten on the day it is offered; he must leave none of it till morning.

This act of worship was made in the midst of the congregation, as a part of their public worship. So it is that the psalmist models public gratitude for us. When last did you join God’s people in genuine thanksgiving for God’s goodness? Not just to sing familiar hymns or hear an anthem or sermon, but to make a true sacrifice of worship? When last did it cost you something to express public gratitude to God?

Third, we offer surrendered praise (Ps. 116:15-16). Verse 15 is one of the more misunderstood verses in the Psalms: “Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints.” At first reading it seems that God wants his people to die. I’ve heard the statement used to claim that the Lord wanted his child with him and so called him or her from earth to heaven.

While God can certainly call his people home, such is not the intent of this particular statement. A better translation would be, “Precious in the sight of the Lord are his saints who die.” It is not death that is “precious” or valuable to God but rather his “saints” or people. God uses death as a means to the end of eternal life, the process by which “the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality” (1 Corinthians 15:53). Death is an imposter, defeated by the victory we have in Christ.

In response to such grace, the psalmist declared himself to be the “servant” of the Lord, the “son of your maidservant” (Ps. 116:16). The latter phrase can refer to being like an indentured servant, as the children of slaves were themselves slaves to their masters. The meaning is that he offered the unconditional surrender of his life in gratitude for all that his Lord had done for him.

Such obedience is the truest test of gratitude. It is good to offer personal and public thanksgiving for God’s gifts, to join in worship with those who affirm and support our faith. It is even better to praise God with surrendered lives when our gratitude comes at a cost. To follow God’s will when it is hard, to refuse sin when it is enticing, to put God...
before those we admire is difficult at best. But such surrendered souls prove that our gratitude is genuine.

Conclusion
It has been estimated that if we were to shrink the world’s population to a village of precisely 100 people, with all existing human ratios remaining the same, that village would contain the following: 57 Asians, 21 Europeans, 14 from the Western hemisphere, and 8 Africans. Further, 52 would be female, 48 male. Too, 6 would possess half or more of the world’s wealth. Moreover, 80 would live in substandard housing, 70 would be unable to read, and 50 would suffer from malnutrition. Do you know how many would have a college education? One. How many would own a computer? One.

How many ways has God blessed you? He has answered your prayers, saved your soul from death, and given you his help and hope. When last did you return God’s grace with your gratitude? When last did God receive your personal, public, surrendered praise? When last was Psalm 116 your faith story?