

## ***Liberating History***

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Psalm 105:1-6, 16-22, 45b

*“Remember the wonderful works God has done...”*

What does one do when one becomes a Christian? Offer thanks, right? Isn't that what we are here to do, to show our gratitude for all the good things God has done? So let's give thanks! Let's praise God for all the good that God has done! Let's shout with joy, let's bring down the roof with our praise and acclamation. Let's give thanks and praise for the rest of the service. Let's just say “thank you” again and again and again, until the hour is up.

I have a friend who thinks this is all Christians do - give thanks. He thinks all they do is spend time muttering *thankyouthankyouthankyouthankyou* without any real connection to God. In his mind, Christians are sniveling people who slither around this great and mighty God, always wanting to be in God's favor - we are God's “yes men/women.” In his mind, our gratitude is empty and routine. Our praise is hollow and meaningless. Our thanks is an empty gesture because it is so rote.

But there is this idea that it is a Christian obligation to constantly give thanks for all that God has done in our lives. It is seen as a Christian duty, as an integral part of the worship service, the act of giving thanks. We see individuals offering thanks to God all the time; during the Oscars, the Emmys, the Tonys, the Grammys, and every other overplayed award show. People with gobs of money offering thanks to God for, and let's be honest, their gobs of money. Athletes tend to thank God for victory, lottery winners thank God for good reward. We see people basking in success again and again offering thanks to God for the good things they have. And maybe that is right and proper. After all, we do claim that all good things come from God. We do claim that God is the true source of all things righteous and blessed. So a “thank you” seems appropriate from time to time. The English writer Gladys Brown Stern states that, “Silent gratitude isn't much use to anyone,” and if we do want to be in a relationship with God, perhaps spoken gratitude is the first step. But the gratitude I have mentioned thus far is for material, surface things. It is gratitude for awards, for winning, and for having. Is that Christian gratitude? Or are we called to be thankful for something deeper, something more profound, something intangible?

Think of the things for which we offer thanks that we can't buy - the budding flower, the drops of rain, the squeeze of a hand. Think of the doctor serving in a mission setting offering thanks to God for his or her skills of healing. Think of the musician who, just before leading a worship service, offers thanks to God for his or her skills of music so that others can be moved to a divine and holy place. This seems to be closer to the Christian gratitude. These accolades of thanks are for richer aspects of life that we are called to acknowledge and for which we are to offer praise. These are things that seem right to acknowledge as from God; not material, but substantial. Not surface but substance.

So what do you say? Are you ready to give thanks to God for all the good things in your life? Are you ready to stand up and shout with the Psalm “Glory in his holy name!” Let's give thanks to God for our gifts, talents, and opportunities, and our

precious, priceless blessing. But maybe we can go even deeper. Maybe, when we really look at our relationship with God through Jesus Christ, maybe there is something more foundational for which we should offer our deepest thanks.

Perhaps we need to look to those times when gratitude does not flow easily from our hearts. Perhaps we need to look to those times when words of praise do not easily leave our lips. Are there not times when giving thanks seems to be beyond our reach? Are there not times when the sun no longer seems to shine in our lives, when joy is a concept that seems beyond our comprehension. Maybe you know those times. Those time when the sorrow is to great, those times when the hurt is overwhelming, when the clouds are all you can see. Maybe you know those times when all you can play are the blues, because that is all you feel.

Maybe it is a time of grief over the death of a loved one. One of the more poignant moments in the *Simpsons* is when Ned Flanders, the religious, righteous, pious character loses his wife, Maude. The grief becomes so great that he cannot bring himself to praise, offer joy, or even turn to God except to voice rage and questions. How can he give thanks at such a time of despair?

Have you been there as well? Have you been to that place where thanks is beyond your reach? Have you found yourself skipping over this Psalm and going to Psalm 137 which asks, “How can we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?” Or Psalm 22, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Or Psalm 13, “How long, o Lord...” Lack of job, problems with relationships, your house may be falling in, your responsibilities may be stacking up to more than you can handle, or any other problems. We have all been there. If not now, than I am sure in the past you have been in moments when a praiseful declaration of “thank you” was difficult. For our church, for our world, for each of use here, we have been and will be again in that place where we cannot bring ourselves to say offer that praise. Muddy Waters, the great blues player, once said, “I been in the blues all my life. I’m still delivering ‘cause I got a long memory.” The memory plagues us of the distress. I am asking you to gather that memory, because I think in those moments, we begin to see and experience what it is we truly have to offer thanks to God.

What thanks can we offer in those times and those moments of sorrow and stress. These are the times when we often feel the farthest from God, so how do we maintain a relationship with God when we have a difficult time seeing God active in our lives? This question makes us ready to return to the psalm for today. We don’t know when exactly this psalm was written, we don’t know what was happening with the Hebrews when this psalm became a part of their liturgy, but imagine with me for a moment that this psalm was offered during a time of hardship. Imagine with me that the Israelites were gathered in Jerusalem, and just outside their gates are the armies of Babylon. Imagine that the Israelites have been under siege for days, their defenses have fallen, and they know it is only a matter of time until they fall into the hands of their enemies. So they gather in the temple for some hope, for some consolation and maybe a sign that God is still with them. They gather in the temple, and what do they hear, but, “O give thanks to the Lord, call on his name, make known his deeds among the peoples. Sing to him, sing praises to him; tell of all his wonderful works...” Such a psalm initially makes little sense for a people in hardship and toil, but then it continues, and the psalm tells the story of the Israelites.

Specifically, in the passage for today, the psalm calls us to remember the famine of the past. The psalm calls the Israelites to remember that Joseph, one of their great

patriarchs, was in chains, he was a slave, rejected by his own brothers and placed in a strange land. Remember that things were bad, very bad. Remember the distress Joseph felt as he was betrayed by his family, remember the sorrow of the land struck by starvation and the desperation of the people? Is that different from now? Were the people faced with similar anxiety as you are today. And then remember how God worked through Joseph, how God used Joseph and saved the people. It was a difficult time, and God saved. For that past, offer thanks. For the actions that God has done, offer thanks. Offer thanks that Joseph was liberated, that starvation was abated, and that salvation was granted to all. In your despair, your fear, look to the past and remember what it is that God has done.

Do you see what is different with this psalm? It is leading you to remember the times in your past when things were difficult. It is leading you to remember the times in your past when you found it a challenge to praise God with the pep and joy that may be expected of Christians. This is a different way of remembering and telling our story. We would rather remember the good times, the glory days, the days when all things were prosperous. When people talk about this history of this church, they don't talk about the last ten years, they don't reminisce about the decision making process to sell the Lancaster Chapel, they talk about the glory days, the Joe Faith, Bob Matherly, and Dr. Scott days. We like to remember the good times. But the psalm is initially heading a different direction. This isn't remembering the glory days, it isn't remembering the great days, it is remembering the difficult days. It is remembering the fire that shaped the Israelites, the hardships that formed them, and the pressures that directed God's people to be who they now are.

One of our great American story tellers, Utah Phillips has pledged to tell the difficult stories of the labor movement. He doesn't tell of happy workers in the 1950s punching in, punching out, and becoming a company man. He tells of lives lost, of battles fought, and of sacrifices made. He describes the hard, dangerous work that was the backbone of this country, and the hardships that came with such work. Utah Phillips claims that now, with minimum wage, with safer working conditions, with workers rights, now are the glory times, and the past hardships need to be remembered. The psalm is doing the same thing. Maybe things are difficult now, and we would like to remember the glory days, but the psalm is calling us to remember the difficult times of the past.

As we look at the difficulties of our life, eventually we will find ourselves at the cross, because in our moments of pain, of distress, of sorrow, it is the cross where our cries can best be articulated. Where else do you feel the most heard in your sorrow past and present, but at the cross? Where else do you feel that your pain is most profoundly understood but at the cross. Where else does your hurts, your sadness, and your blues can best be spoken, but at the cross. The pain, the guilt, the sins, and all of it is greatest throes is fully understood at the cross.

But we are not to just stay in the misery of our past. We are to name the struggles and then to *name the ways in which God was working in those days*. Look to the difficult times in your past, and do you see how God was active? Look to the hardship of your life and do you see where God was present? Look to the low times of the church and can you name the actions of God? This is our history, our liberating history. This isn't an easy way to remember your history, but it is an authentic. Stanley Hauerwas describes our history and our God thusly: God, having delivered the Israelites out of Egypt raised Jesus

from the dead. Our history is one of liberation, and it is at the cross three days later where we can offer God our greatest gratitude, because it is not the end. The resurrection happens, salvation happens, God happens in our lives that one profound time, and all times. In our times when we find it difficult to give thanks, we so disparately want to look longingly to the shiny days of our past, and wish for it again. But listen, sing with, and remember with the psalm to the difficulty of the past, ultimately leading to the cross, and find, and see, and name the ways God was active in those valleys. Now you have hope.

Then we can use that hope for the present and into the future. Then, in our struggles, we can remember to look for hope. We can say, “yes it is difficult now, just as it was then, but God acted then, and God is acting now... so let us give thanks.” This is the hindsight that offers hope, it is the redemptive suffering of the past, the liberating history of our story. And we may still have to struggle, we may still have to face difficulties, but the hope of our history will give us strength and resolve to continue to walk, work, and praise. Such an idea is not new. Augustine, in the fourth century, when writing about this very psalm, said, that “faith has already found Him, but hope still seeks Him.” Jim Wallis describes hope as a deliberate decision, and in giving thanks in the good and the bad, we are making a deliberate decision to place our hope in the redeeming, resurrecting actions of God. Our history gives us that hope for today.

But remember that it is you and I who go to the cross, not someone else for us. Remember that it is our own story that offers us hope, not someone else’s. Our hope, our history, our liberation is our own, just as our despair is our own. We are united with the greater body of Christ through the one cross, but we all get there in different ways. God will guide this church as God has done in the past. God will work in your life as God has done in the past. What we must avoid is the envy of other’s blessings. Because when we are looking across the street and wishing it were ours, then we are no longer looking for God. When we are watching the television and wishing that was us, then we are no longer looking for God. And how then can we give that profound thanks?

It is your story, it is your hope, it is your salvation, this light that shines through your past, this light that shines into your present and offers you that continual hope. Do you want to know how God will save this church, then tell me, how has God saved this church in the past? That is your direction, your hope, and your history. And our thanksgiving resounds all the louder for the past actions of God, and the present ways that those rays of light shine onto our souls.

The closing of the movie, *The Grapes of Wrath* capture this history and this hope. Tom, names the hurt, and almost claims the way God is present in the suffering of the workers as he says, “I’ll be all around in the dark. I’ll be ever’ where - wherever you can look. Wherever there’s a fight so hungry people can eat, I’ll be there. Wherever there’s a cop beatin up a guy, I’ll be there. I’ll be in the way guys yell when they’re mad- I’ll be in the way kids laugh when they’re hungry an’ they know supper’s ready. An’ when the people are eatin’ the stuff they raise, and livin’ in the houses they build - I’ll be there, too.” God of the past liberation is in our present. Our hope of our story is our hope of our suffering.

So we go off into tomorrow giving thanks for the past hope, for the current salvation, and looking for the ways God will continue to lead and guide us. Do you remember what Ma said in the very end of *The Grapes of Wrath*? “Rich fellas come up

an' they die an' their kids ain't no good, an' they die out. But we keep a-comin'. We're the people that live. They can't wipe us out. They can't lick us. And we'll go on forever, Pa... 'cause... we're the people."

Can you find yourself saying the same thing? Troubles come and troubles go. Hardships come and hardships go, but we will keep on going because we are Christians, we are guided by a liberating God, and that God will continue to guide us. Let us look to today, to the hope offered, and move forward, following the light of that hope which is shining onto the horizon. In the next year we are going to be asking more and more how we should move forward as a people. In the next year I am going to be challenging you more and more to consider how you should move forward as a Christian, as a follower of Christ. In the next year we are going to be lifting our eyes up to the cross, we are going to be turning to the cross, a place of great sorrow, of great despair, and of great hope, and we are going to ask how that cross guides us into the tomorrow. Follow the hope of God, follow the hope of the cross from the past, in the present, and towards the future. AMEN