

Songs for the Soul - Thanksgiving

Teaching & Scripture

[00:00:00] Thanksgiving this week, and I wanna, wanna remind you, uh, the difference between thanksgiving and last week's... You remember the difference between praise and thanksgiving? I know we talked about it. Simple definition. Oh, that's right. One, thank- praise was to lift up what, who God is, and this week is what God has done in thanksgiving.

But there's some more practical things within that that I wanna kinda talk about. Uh, some of them maybe make more sense in our world, but I think they probably did just with different understanding way back in Jesus' day.

Let me talk from a marketing perspective for a second. How many of you have old, ever heard the old rule of thumb that a dissatisfied person tells far more people about a negative experience than a satisfied person tells about a positive one? Mm-hmm. It's just, it's true.

But what that really comes down to is a very, very old lizard brain part of your brain, like something [00:01:00] evolutionary way back when. It's that our brains are wired somewhere back in our evolutionary species to notice threats, problems, disappointments more intensely than ordinary goodness.

If you think about it from a lizard perspective, if over and over again there's any chance of you getting hurt if you go that way, you go that way. It makes sense. Uh, it's a self-protective mea- measure. Part of, when I, when I say lizard brain, what I really mean is it's a primitive brain technique. You know, it's, it's makes a lotta sense.

Well, I think the ancient Israel, they probably understood it very different than you and I did, but they somehow knew that same thing, that we need to rewire our brain. And ancient Israel then understood long before psychologists studied it, that there's something to that. So human beings forget goodness. We remember wounds and disappointments. So how do we respond? I [00:02:00] mean, what's the answer to that problem, right? Train our ears to remember through Psalms of thanksgiving.

So the ancients knew that if you wanna talk about what we believe in God, you have to tell the stories. The oral tradition, we've talked much broader than that,

then becomes a tool of sharing thanks to God, the stories that we tell over and over again.

It's not so different from what primary schools' teachers do with simple songs to teach simple concepts, right? You guys all have some of those songs still in your head from your childhood. And if you don't, um, you know, the odds are you do and you just don't even remember them until somebody starts up and then all of a sudden you're singing along. Maybe there's a tune you've forgotten, but if somebody started it, yeah, you're there.

So, um, ancient Israel, they knew human beings forgot, and they created songs to [00:03:00] remember. They trained God's people to remem-remember grace that might otherwise be overshadowed.

So what is a thanksgiving Psalm? What is that title? Again, praise Psalm last week. Uh, praise Psalm celebrates who God is. Thanksgiving, what God has done. Scholar Claus Westermann said, "Praise says, 'God, you are faithful.' Thanksgiving says, 'God, when I needed help, you showed up.'"

Thanksgiving Psalms are deeply personal and include more other categories of Psalms like the others, but they are by nature storytelling songs. They tell the community, "Here is what God did." And so it kind of goes through that.

And I- I'm just gonna skip out of order just for a moment to mention the Psalm we're gonna read today. It is believed to be a Psalm that was regularly read as an intro to the Passover. It was a Psalm that kind of set [00:04:00] the tone.

Uh, the only thing I can think of in our liturgy that might be similar, we don't sing it, but we always recite it. In the Lutheran church, when we have a baptism, we have that Lutheran prayer, uh, that "in the beginning, Jesus moved over the waters," and, and they're, they mention water over and over again. They tell the story before the baptism. So it's natural that Psalms do that too.

Um, I'm gonna now skip back to just the basic setup. Scholar Hermann Gunkel, uh, another good German name, uh, observed these Psalms often follow this pattern, and I like to show you the pattern. And I, I mention this also because our song today definitely follows this overall pattern. And so I encourage you when we listen to our, our pop song, even though it's not about thanksgiving for God, it does hit the same pieces. It's just not to God.

So the first one is trouble remembered. I was in distress. The second one is a cry for help. [00:05:00] The third one is divine intervention, and that's what it is in

the scriptures, and you can imagine some of our songs will have the intervention of a friend. But I might even say as, as we interpret that, we can talk about that as the Spirit's intervention, because when you need somebody to show up, I do believe in a God that would do that, that, that brings people into our lives. And then the last piece that is a part of these Psalms was public gratitude. It was basically saying, "Now tell the story. You tell the story."

And in a sense, by having that at the end, it reiterated to everybody listening that we have to keep doing this. It's not just this time. You now are part of the storytelling too.

And if you think about it, it's kinda like, again, the grade school thing. You know, how did you teach the ABCs to a little child when you were in eighth grade? If you met them, you would know, and that would be such a cool thing, where you could teach [00:06:00] the ABCs and you weren't a teacher. When you think about it, I think every kid had that moment too, where they got to be a part of singing a song that they knew really well from when they were a lot younger, and all of a sudden they could do that. They could participate in it. They could be teachers. What a cool thing. Um, yeah.

By the way, total tangent, but I think a good one. Um, a youth minister, and I cannot think-- I'm not gonna quote the right person, so I'll just say it. They said, "Faith is caught more than taught." And isn't that a good way to say that about a lot of the things that teachers actually do too? It's caught more than taught. We, we help them to do it.

So in other words, the, the, the part that maybe is a, a parallel to faith for that story that I told is when a child realizes that they can keep singing that song and teach somebody else. It's almost like they've learned the faith of a teacher, that if you just keep sharing this, it's [00:07:00] something that can be given.

Back to grace, though, in this way, personal grace becomes communal memory. Things that happen to you when we tell the stories come together, and they become part of it. It's an interesting way to tie in the thanksgiving Psalms to songs today.

Uh, important note here, ancient Israel understood memory differently than we do. Of course they did, but it's, it-- There's a couple things that might help us.

Modern culture often treats gratitude as positive thinking, and I think because we said it at, in terms of what are you grateful for, you got the true idea that Biblical thanksgiving is something more, too. Israel's faith depended on

remembering. It's not just positive thinking. It's actually that our faith needs these memories, that without these memories, we lose our connection.

If you think about it, the story of Abraham is that he'll have as many descendants as there are stars in the [00:08:00] sky, and the idea behind that entire piece is long before they even knew how to write, they understood that they needed to tell that story. That's pretty powerful to think about.

I think, you know, there is something to be said in our day that books can become something where... kind of like the phone, right? Here-- Actually, here's a much better example. How many of you know more phone numbers from your childhood than you know now? It is absurd, right? It is absurd. I don't know my own children's phone numbers now, because I don't have to.

And I think if you think about it, the oral tradition piece lives in that time period sort of like phone numbers for us, but in a much more fluid way of saying, "This is the only way that we can tell the story." So they are grateful because they could tell the story.

So Biblical thanksgiving is, is really this deep understanding. Israel's faith depends [00:09:00] upon memory, uh, de-dependes upon remembering. So the true deliverance isn't just being delivered. It is an act of retelling the story, because otherwise you lose the deliverance. It's kind of an interesting thing.

In our society, we would probably say, "Be careful," um, or, "Learn history so you don't have to repeat it." Well, I think that's true for the people of God in one sense, too. Israel feared forgetting more than doubt then. That's an interesting thing to think about. You could doubt all you want, but let me tell you the story again.

And you know the same thing when I had my children not wanting to listen to me. "Dad, you're wrong." You know how I could get them back? I could tell them a story, and if it was a story about me failing just as big as they were, even better.

They didn't have the built-up belief, the [00:10:00] Hebrews didn't, of our informational world. Just like our par-- our, our s- kids. You can't just say to your kids, "You know what? I know you messed up there, but if you read this instructional book, you'll have it." How's that gonna work? You need the stories.

The Hebrews couldn't rely on being posted and kept safe to reread. It had to be carried orally. They couldn't rely on, "Well, I put that into my diary, and now

it's there. I can always go back to it." How many of you are really good at writing things down that you know are important? That person is much more than I am. But, um, yeah, that's, that's one of those things.

So thanksgiving Psalms often live in that third movement that I mentioned. Oh, no, I didn't mention those. Let me say this. Okay. So back up.

Thanksgiving Psalms are not simply the best of times. They share all of those stories. They're actually thanks-- They [00:11:00] share thanksgiving that they had in hard times. Psalm thirty actually begins with distress. It comes out of the suffering. Uh, Psalm one sixty begins with danger. Psalm one twenty-four remembers the threat. So they tell the story of that moment and then how God was there.

So it's not just-- Sometimes we make gratefulness on just a beautiful day, but to remind ourself that gratefulness is sometimes in those other moments. And my goodness, I think a lot of us have those stories too. We don't love that that always feels that way, but have you ever had something that was really hard that happened to you and you'd never want to re- replay that moment, but you never felt closer to family, you never felt closer to somebody you love, you never felt closer because all of a sudden in that moment things were laid bare and things were more clear?

Walter Brueggemann often [00:12:00] describes faith as moving through orientation to disorientation to find a new orientation. And I think that that's really an interesting thing for all of us to, to feel like. Have you ever had something that you had to go into-- you had to go through a valley to understand more? You had to... Because you never, you never had to worry about it, so you never thought more about it. Disorientation after orientation allowed a new orientation. Until you got lost, you were satisfied with the old way. And then having something that can teach you or just a little tweak of that might help.

Thanksgiving Psalms then often live in that third moment, new orientation, not because life became perfect, because people discovered God remained present in the hard times. Um, interesting too then, Jesus, uh, at the [00:13:00] Last Supper, when He's about to share ev- communion, and we share it every single week in worship, we say Jesus took the bread, and what did He do? He gave thanks before He gave it for all to eat and drink. Uh, each of those elements, He took them, broke it, gave thanks, and broke it.

Uh, the word Eucharist literally means thanksgiving. It's the moment we call the thanksgiving. I mean, that's kind of amazing to think about how it's just central. And what do we do every Sunday? We tell the story. So that if you're coming into our church for the first time, you are centered around that.

Which by the way, if, if somebody wants to make an argument that we don't have to have communion every week, I can see that. You can, you can find a theological reason because you don't have to eat the elements for you to have God's grace, sure, from that perspective.

But from a communal perspective, it's hard to argue that we [00:14:00] shouldn't have communion or something similar every week because we need to tell the story every week. I would be okay with al- with having a communion or a baptism. And I'm also okay with a couple occasions, like a Good Friday service or an Ash Wednesday service perhaps, because it's almost like you're supposed to miss it on that day. But it should be the exception, and that's why I love to have communion every week.

And I understand that some churches that are rural, um, it's hard even to get a pastor there. But even that, that's where, as a pastor myself, I would move towards, uh, getting a lay minister, uh, sanctioned, so to speak, to, to be over the Lord's Supper, because we just need to tell the story. Thanksgiving is who we are.

So I asked you, where has grace-- where have you been, uh, grateful? Um, where, where have you seen-- been grateful this week? But another way to look at this is [00:15:00] thanksgiving Psalms, they kind of invite us to pray backwards. By doing that, I think, I can't remember if it was this group or the last one, I mentioned that with another group, I asked them, "Where have you seen grace this past week?" And they couldn't answer it, but all of a sudden they started thinking about it.

And then, um, thanksgiving Psalms, um, invite us to pray forward because-- pray backwards because we look not where God will be tomorrow, but where God has been, which hones our eyes, our ears, our senses to see God in our daily life. Instead of praying just for tomorrow, we look to the past to see the movements of God.

And my goodness, that's in, in line with everything else we do in this world. You ask a person if you wanna find a, a deer out in the wild, it really is helpful to know where the deer have been. Some of it some seems so obvious we don't think about it, but it's true. You, you, you go, "Well, this, the [00:16:00] apple

tree over there, they like that apple tree, and so I would check for a path around there and, and look there. We've seen them there many times before." Even the simplest things, we look to the past to see movements of the future.

That's the stopping place for that, so I'm gonna go into Psalm 118. I want you to listen to this Psalm not just considering that it was, you know, this beautiful piece of music that we don't have anymore, but to consider that it was an entry song into the Passover.

So Psalm 118, as I read it out loud, uh, again, what, what is the Passover? It is the telling of the story of when God passed over the houses of the ancient, uh, ancient Hebrews in Egypt and spared their lives and took them out of that place and led them into the Promised Land. So hear this as a Psalm of thanksgiving, and sometime it's also, this one is called a song of victory. [00:17:00] But what that victory is, is a story of how God was with them in a very dark time. You ready?

"Oh, give thanks to the Lord, for He is good. His steadfast love endures forever."

You wanted to say that out loud, didn't you?

"Let Israel say, 'His steadfast love endures forever.' Let the house of Aaron say, 'His steadfast love endures forever.' Let those who fear the Lord say, 'His steadfast love endures forever.'"

"Out of my distress I called on the Lord. The Lord answered me and set me in a broad place. With the Lord on my side, I do not fear. What can mortals do to me? The Lord is on my side to help me. I shall look in triumph on those who hate me. It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to put confidence in mortals. It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to put [00:18:00] confidence in princes.

"All nations surround me. In the name of the Lord I cut them off. They surrounded me, surrounded me on every side. In the name of the Lord I cut them off. They surrounded me like bees. They blazed like a fire of thorns. In the name of the Lord I cut them off. I was pushed hard so that I was falling, but the Lord helped me. The Lord is my strength and my might. He has become my salvation.

"There are glad songs of victory in the tents of the righteous. The right hand of the Lord does valiantly. The right hand of the Lord is exalted. The right hand of

the Lord does valiantly. I shall not die, but I shall live and recount the deeds of the Lord. The Lord has punished me severely, but he did not give me over to death.

"Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the Lord.[00:19:00]

"This is the gate of the Lord. The righteous shall enter through it.

"I thank You that You have answered me and have become my salvation. The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This is the Lord's doing. It is marvelous in our eyes. This is the day that the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it. Save us, we beseech You, O Lord. O Lord, we beseech You, give us success.

"Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. We bless You from the house of the Lord. The Lord is God, and He has given us light. Bind the festal processions with branches up to the horns of the altar.

"You are my God, and I will give thanks to You. You are my God. I will extol You.

"Oh, give thanks to the Lord, for He is good, for His steadfast [00:20:00] love endures forever."