

From Nigeria with Love

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[0 : 00] Please be seated. One of the things that is really important when I preach in the church that I'm attached to in Nigeria is that I greet very well.

I need to say good morning. I need to bring greetings on behalf of my family who in true Nigerian fashion are sitting in a different part of the church to me. And so I greet you all very warmly. In fact, one of the things that the church there said when they learned that we were coming back, the one thing that we are commissioned to do by them is to greet you very well. So consider yourselves very well greeted. Now, you've been getting some teaching on prayer and I haven't really heard any of those messages. But one of the aspects of prayer that I find really difficult or hard to get my head around is the aspect of thanking God.

[1 : 25] Now, thanking God is easy when there's lots of good things happening. But things happen that where it's not so easy to thank God.

And we are commanded in 1 Thessalonians that we are to give thanks in all situations. And that's pretty hard when not so pleasant things are happening.

I think that as we read the Psalms, we get an idea of how that might be possible. And we're going to look at Psalm 95 this morning and think about how it might be possible to thank God in any situation.

But before we do that, let's pray. Lord God, our Heavenly Father, we thank you for your word. We thank you for revealing yourself to us. And we thank you that we can discover the truths that are there in your word and can apply them to our lives.

We pray that we would be diligent in doing that this morning. For we pray it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. So if you would care to open to page 479 of your pew Bibles, you'll find Psalm 95 there.

[2 : 53] We heard it read earlier. And when we first, when we look at this Psalm, the first words that we see, Come, let us sing to the Lord.

Let us shout. Let us come before him with thanksgiving and extol him. Let's do something. Let's get on with it. One of the things that we like to teach our children is to be thankful and to say thank you. And we've learned certain things about thanking. Haven't we? As we've grown up, we've learned that the bigger the thing is, the more you should show your thanks.

If I give you my mobile phone to make a phone call, you'd say thank you. If I give you the mobile phone, you'd say thank you very much. At least I hope you would.

Another thing that we are taught is that the greater the need, the more important it is to give thanks when that need is satisfied.

[4 : 16] I would give thanks to a greater extent if somebody saved my life than if they just passed me the salt.

And when we read the Gospels, we find that Jesus says the same things, really.

In Luke 7, he talks about the one who has been forgiven more, having more to be thankful for. And that really should turn our minds to what we have to be thankful for.

We have been forgiven much. As Christian people, we have turned to God in Christ. We have recognized that our greatest need is forgiveness.

And that has been satisfied. We should be very grateful. It is a big thing. It wasn't a small thing for Jesus to die on the cross.

[5 : 27] We should be profoundly grateful. But it's not just the spiritual things that we need to be thankful for. Paul, in the first letter to Timothy, reminds us that all things are good and created by God to be respected.

Seed with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. He's not talking about just the special things, but the ordinary things. Food, family. In the context is what he's talking about. We should be thankful for all kinds of things. We as Christian people have a special responsibility to give thanks to God for the things that he gives us.

Anybody can enjoy the good things that God gives them without giving thanks. And that doesn't really reflect any praise or glory to God.

It's as we recognize him that we glorify him. But as we read the Psalms and other parts of the scriptures, we notice that there's another reason for giving thanks to God.

[6 : 53] Time and time again in the Psalms, we are told to give thanks to the Lord. Why? Because he is good. Our thankfulness for God's good gifts should point us to the fact that God himself is good.

And we need to be continually reminded of that. It doesn't come naturally that we recognize God's goodness. If I looked at that mobile phone, I might tell you about it and say, Oh, I like my phone. It looks very snazzy. I thank God for it. It can take nice photographs. All these marvelous things about my telephone. And my thanks to God is sort of mixed up in the middle of that, and it can get lost a little bit.

The focus is on the telephone and how wonderful it is. And if I'm not really giving thanks to God for it, I'm not only not glorifying God, but when that thing is gone, when it's lost, stolen, broken, whatever happens to it, all my boasting is gone.

All my thankfulness is gone. There's nothing left to thank God for. Therefore, if I thank God because he does good things to me, then when the good things stop, I stop thanking.

[8 : 34] Unless the good things turn our hearts to God, who is good, we're in great danger. And we'll see that later on in this psalm. But we also need to recognize who it is that we thank.

If I were to send my son to a friend with a gift, and my friend honored my son and thanked him very well and treated him wonderfully because of what he has given, I would feel a bit upset.

The gift came from me, not from my son. He's recognizing the gift, but not tracing it all the way back to the giver.

And we are in danger of that sometimes with God. We don't recognize that every good gift comes from him. I remember as a child feeling annoyed when we prayed at the start of meals, thanking God for the food.

And I, but God didn't earn the money to put the food on the table. My father did. Why are we thanking God for it? Of course, we can see the fallacy in my reasoning, but we are possibly in the same danger.

[10 : 07] And it's more of a danger for us in a country where we are so far removed from the original source of the things than it is in a country or in parts of the world where life is a bit more precarious.

You see, we don't feel and know the danger of being shot up and robbed in our own homes. And so we don't thank God for getting us safely through each night.

We expect that there will be food available to feed our families, even when there's a drought or other hardships in the country. So thanking God for our daily bread can be a bit trite at times.

We're almost tempted to believe that those everyday things will be there whether God is caring for us or not. And so our thanks is a little bit empty sometimes.

In Nigeria, there's no safety net of social security. The police often don't protect us.

[11 : 28] The roads are death traps. And so people there are more easily reminded that God is looking after us, that we thank God for the good things that he gives us.

And sometimes we here in this country need to be reminded that all good things come from God. And he is the great God.

He is, in verse 1, it's described the rock of our salvation. He is the great king above all gods, verse 3. He is, in his hands are the depths of the earth, the tops of the mountains, the whole of the sea, everything.

It's in his hands. He's the creator. He's the sustainer. He's the controller of everything. And sometimes we forget a little bit how great and majestic and wonderful our God is.

And we think of him as being there for our benefit to provide good things for us, the sort of the cosmic slot machine, if you like. And we start to act in that way and treat him in that way.

[12 : 56] We look at ourselves as if we are the center. But when we recognize just who God is, our thankfulness turns to worship.

Come, let us bow down and worship. Verse 6. Thanksgiving will turn to worship if we concentrate on the giver rather than the gift.

Psalms 19 tells us that the heavens declare the glory of the Lord. It's as if the heavens are the finger pointing to the glory of the Lord.

There's a story of a missionary who went to a remote tribe and was learning the language.

And the first phrase that he learned is, what is this? And so he started to go around and point to various things to find out what they are.

[14 : 04] He said, what's this? And they said a certain word. That's good. What's this? They said the same word. So, oh, okay. What's this?

They said the same word again. And he sort of, well, he pointed to his wife. What's this? The same word again. He said, well, something's wrong here.

Either this is a very simple language or I'm a very simple person. And so it wasn't until afterwards that he discovered that the word that they were saying was the word for finger.

So when he said, what is this? They said, it's a finger. What is this? That's a finger too. What is this? It's a finger. Yeah. We are in danger of concentrating on the finger rather than the God that the heavens declare.

The good things are things that point us to the good God. We need to keep on looking and delighting in the goodness of God.

[15 : 32] We're like children. You know, when a small child, I felt so clever when my son was small because I'd show him something and he said, oh, do it again.

It was exciting. It was new. It was wonderful. Then when he grew up and he realized that it was just ordinary, I'm not so clever anymore.

We need to maintain the eyes of seeing how wonderful it is that God gives us good things.

He gives us air to breathe. Imagine, that's free. It's nothing. Who thanks God for air to breathe? But that very thing should point us to how wonderful God is.

We're God's people and he keeps on looking after us all the time. We're his flock under his care, the people of his own people. And just like sheep, often you have to, I used to live on a sheep farm and often you have to do things to sheep that they don't like.

[16 : 51] But it's for their own good. We're the flock under God's care. Sometimes we don't understand what God is doing to us and for us.

But there is a warning here. From the end of verse 7 to the end of this psalm, there is a very serious warning.

And the warning is reflecting the story of Moses and the people of God after they had come out of Egypt. You'll find the story at the start of Exodus 17.

I won't read the story now. But it's basically, Moses led the people to a place in the desert where there was nothing to drink. And the people, it says, were very thirsty.

And they complained to Moses. And they said, where are we going to get something to drink? And Moses said, please don't test God like this.

[17 : 58] They said, what? You brought us all the way from Egypt where we had the basics to live at least. And you brought us out into the middle of the desert where we and our children and our animals are all going to die.

You've done a terrible thing. And they were so angry and so thirsty, they picked up stones they were going to kill Moses at that point. And of course, we know that God did provide for them and that they did get something to drink.

Water came from the rock as Moses struck it. But the problem of the people, you see, was that they they knew their need at this time and they wanted the answer.

They forgot that God is good. They forgot that God had done all those sorts of good things for them up to that point. They forgot the exodus from Egypt.

They forgot the manna. They forgot the bitter water that turned sweet. They forgot all those good things that God had done in the past. And the only thing they could think of was where am I going to get something to drink?

[19 : 22] They didn't learn from God's goodness in the past that God is good. They focused on the gift rather than the giver and didn't learn that God is good all the time.

In a Nigerian church, if I got up and I said God is good, I would get a response back all the time. And if I said all the time, they would say God is good.

I was told by the 8 o'clock people that I should try and get you to do that. But they didn't do it so you weren't. But these verses tell us that forgetting that God is good amounted to hardness of heart. It wasn't just a once-off little slip-up. This is a serious sin on behalf of these people. The passage we read in Hebrews tells us that it amounts to unbelief.

It's a lack of faith. Not thanking God, not recognizing that he is good and therefore good in any situation amounts to lack of faith and a statement of unbelief in God.

[20 : 58] we need to be able to say the prayer or the statement of the prophet Habakkuk or as he's called in Nigeria Habakkuk.

Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord.

I will be joyful in God my Savior. The reason why Habakkuk could say those things, could write those things, is because he knew that God is good, even though there's no source of food, even though he didn't have any wealth, even though his savings were gone, even though everything was not there that he would normally look to, God is still good.

It's become something of a cliché to refer to Australia as the lucky country. And the problem with that cliché is that the blessings things that we enjoy can be seen as due to something other than the providential hand of God.

They're ascribed to this idol called Lady Luck rather than to the God who made us. We do have many things that we enjoy in this country and many things that are not found in most of the world.

[23 : 02] But it should follow that if we are amongst the most blessed countries in the world, we should also be amongst the most praising countries in the world.

pointing others to God's goodness. And sadly that is not so. But let us who have recognized God's goodness, we have seen the Lord's goodness, let us not stop recognizing the good things that God has done or the good things that God has given us.

And remember that those things point to the fact that God is good. We should be continually praising God because he is good, thanking God because he is good.

He is good all the time. And so even when our situations turn sour, even when things are not so good for us, God has not changed.

God is still good. And so you see, that makes Philippians 4.4, rejoice in the Lord always, makes it possible.

[24 : 28] It makes 1 Thessalonians 5.18, give thanks in all situations, possible. It doesn't say give thanks for all situations, give thanks in all situations because God is still good even in the worst situation.

So today, if you hear his voice, give thanks to the Lord, for he is good. Amen.