

A Prayer of Thanksgiving

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Date: 04 August 2013

Preacher: Rev. Jordan Senner

[0 : 00] You may be seated. Now, if you want to guilt a Christian, a guilt trip a Christian, the first question you should probably ask them is, how is your prayer life going?

And I don't really like that question very much to begin with, but it pretty much guarantees an instant guilt trip and a very awkward conversation. Am I right? Am I right?

And most of us, we're smart enough, we actually avoid asking the question because we know if we ask it, it's coming back at us. And so altogether, we just avoid the question.

We don't want to face it. But honestly, why do we not talk about prayer that much as Christians? I mean, isn't that kind of weird?

Why? I mean, we talk a lot about the fact that we need to pray, or we need to learn to pray more, or we have a lot of things that we want people to pray for us for. But actually exploring what prayer is and praying, Lord, teach me to pray.

[1 : 13] How often does that happen? And the interesting thing is that if you actually look at the 2,000 years of church history, this is quite a rare point in that sense.

Prayer would have been a major topic of conversation and exploration for much of church history. I mean, all the way back to Jesus' disciples. Think about one of the first things that Jesus' disciples ask him.

They say, Lord, teach us to pray. And there's a real sense, I think, in which being a Christian means being one who prays.

One who prays to the Father through the Son by the power of the Holy Spirit. To know God is to commune with God, to be in fellowship with God through prayer.

To believe in God is to trust God in prayer. But I fear that maybe we've lost a sense of the great privilege that this is. That we get to speak to the living God.

[2 : 16] And my hope is that in this short five-week series, we can start to regain a little bit of that. God would implant in our hearts a desire to know him through prayer.

I mean, isn't it true that we would love to know more of God's power over sin in our lives? Isn't it true that we would love to know God to transform our hearts more so that we'd actually love people more?

Isn't it true that we would love it if God would purify our minds with his Spirit so that we actually thought on what was good and true and beautiful and holy? And so that we could know intimacy with the living God?

And I want to submit to you this evening that at a place like St. John's, maybe it's not because we don't know enough, but maybe it's because we need to spend more time with the kneelers down and on our knees.

And so I think that's what Jesus is inviting us into, to ask him, Lord, teach us to pray. And this is not something that's just distant and abstract for me.

[3 : 27] It's very personal. I graduated from Regent College about three months ago. I got a master's degree, which was a lot of fun to finally finish. It took me forever.

But one thing that God has been prodding me with for the last three months, ever since I finished that degree, is kind of asking, you know, Jordan, you've studied a lot.

You've read a whole lot of books. You have a few extra bookshelves. You have a lot of extra essays. But have you learned to pray? Have you asked me yet?

Lord, teach me to pray. And unfortunately, the answer for the last three months has been, no, Lord, that's not what I did while I was at Regent.

But Lord, would you teach me to pray now? And so God has graciously been inviting me to spend more time on my knees and less time at my desk. And I'm wondering if for St. John's Vancouver

evening service, if God might actually be doing the same thing this year.

[4 : 35] Maybe God is inviting us as a congregation, as a people, to spend more time on our knees. Inviting us to more intentionally approach his throne of grace and say, Lord, teach me to pray.

Teach us to pray. Inviting us to commune with him. Inviting us to explore the depths of his love and his mercy and his grace and his beauty and his majesty.

Inviting us to experience his power over sin in our lives. His purifying spirit in our minds. Maybe that's what God is inviting us to this year.

As a community of people. I think he's inviting us indeed. So friends, that's why we're doing a five-week series on prayer.

Because God is offering to us and saying, come, ask me. Lord, teach me to pray. And so we're going to go through five different psalms, all the way from repentance to thanksgiving to lament to you name it.

[5 : 38] And we're going to talk about what it looks like to pray in every circumstance and situation of our lives. With that in mind, would you pray with me as we get started?

Lord Jesus, would you teach us to pray, we ask. Grant us the help of your Holy Spirit so that we may hear and pray what you teach.

Amen. Open your Bibles to Psalm 136. Psalm 136.

Notice, we've already said a few times, how the psalm begins. It begins with a resounding call to thanksgiving. Give thanks to the Lord for He is good, for His steadfast love endures forever.

Give thanks to the God of gods, for His steadfast love endures forever. Give thanks to the Lord of lords, for His steadfast love endures forever. And it's fitting that in a series on prayer, we start here, in a psalm, a prayer of thanksgiving.

[7 : 02] Thanksgiving is something that we should be well versed in as Christians. It's, in one sense, should be the most natural thing for us. I mean, aren't we those people that walk around proclaiming good news?

Aren't we those people that believe that God has given us a gift in Jesus that is undeniably delightful and glorious? And so thanksgiving should come naturally, it seems.

And yet, our prayers often fall short of this, if we're honest with ourselves, right? We're often not very thankful people. And often, our prayers can turn into little more than a list of felt needs and unfulfilled desires, right?

But Psalm 136 wants to reorient our hearts. It wants to recalibrate our minds. It wants to bring us back to the basics and train us in the art of thanksgiving.

And it does this by fixing our eyes on one thing, and one thing alone. It fixes our eyes on the steadfast love of God. And it just says, look there, and never stop looking there.

[8 : 14] And then you'll learn how to pray. It's a beautiful thing. Now, if you slide your eyes over this psalm, you'll see very quickly that there's a repeated structure, right?

The first line of every verse changes. The second line of every verse stays the same. For as love endures forever. And this does two things. It's meant to draw the community into the act of thanksgiving.

So no one gets left out of thanksgiving. Everybody gets in on the fun. And the second thing that it does is it tells us that everything that the psalm describes God doing is a revelation of God's love. Everything the psalm describes God doing is a revelation of his love. Psalm 136 invites us to understand prayer not primarily in terms of our needs and our wants, but primarily in terms of God's fullness and his love.

Thanksgiving, the psalm tells us, is the appropriate human response to God's love for us. One of my favorite theologians, he's a 20th century Swiss dude, says it pretty well.

[9 : 29] He says, prayer, first and foremost, is not a refueling, but it's an act of worship and glorification that befits love.

Prayer, first and foremost, is an act of worship and glorification that responds to God's love. So that's what we're going to look at. It comes in two sections.

Verses 4 to 9, the psalmist gives thanks for the steadfast love of God as seen in creation. And in verses 10 to 22, the psalmist gives thanks to the steadfast love of God as seen in redemption.

Creation and redemption. Look at verses 4 to 9 with me. It's as if in these verses, the psalmist is reading the very first chapter of the Bible.

It's as if he's reading Genesis chapter 1. And as he reads, his heart begins to erupt with thanksgiving. He is amazed by what he sees.

[10:33] Look at verse 5 with me. To him who by understanding made the heavens. That's a reference to the second day of creation in Genesis chapter 1.

Now look at verse 6. To him who spread out the earth above the waters. That means creating land. And that is a reference to the third day of creation. And then look at verses 7 to 9.

To him who made the great lights, the sun to rule over the day, and the moon and the stars to rule over the night. That is a reference to the fourth day of creation.

In day 2 and 3, verses 5 and 6, God gives us the gifts of space and place. And then in verses 7 to 9, God gives us the gifts of time and daily rhythm.

And the psalmist wants to make it very clear to us that these creative acts of God giving us place, giving us time, are creative acts of God's love. It's as if the psalmist looks back at Genesis chapter 1 and tries to make really clear to us what was implicit there.

[11:45] that God's shaping and ordering of creation was an act of God's love. When God was creating, he wasn't just being random.

He was creating a place that would be a home for humanity. He was creating a place that humans could dwell in and flourish. It was an act of God's love.

And so when the psalmist looks back at these events, he doesn't see an arbitrary or meaningless course of events. He doesn't see a God who is just mechanical or disinterested.

And he doesn't see a God that's lonely or needy. He sees a God who is full of love and whose love is so deep that it's inexpressible and it's inexhaustible. God creates out of love.

That is the point of this psalm. That's the point of these verses. Give thanks to the Lord for he is good for his steadfast love endures forever.

[12:48] And oh, how I wish the world could know this. How I wish the world could know this. I'm told that we supposedly live in a scientific age. I don't have an iPhone yet, so I'm not quite sure what that means.

But in this scientific age, many people believe that the existence of God has been disproved or that God's existence is merely irrelevant, even if it's true.

And many claim that science gives us pretty much everything we could want. I mean, science tells us how things work in the universe. And so science tells us how we can use things and manipulate things to create the sort of technology we want so that we can get what we want and do what we want.

Right? And often people tell us that science is what shows us and reveals to us what the real world is. And it's a world that's devoid of God's presence.

It's a world with no God. It's a mechanical world. Science, we are told, reveals the real world sometimes. But this psalm gives us a completely different perspective.

[14:03] And it doesn't do it by saying science is stupid, science is bad. That's not what it says. Science has its place. But what it says is there's far more depth to the real world than you ever could imagine.

The psalm is concerned with who made the world and why the world was made. And the psalmist tells us that it's all about steadfast love.

The world was created out of deliberate, intentional love. And that's the real world. That's the real world.

And the psalmist just starts to erupt. Give thanks to the Lord for he is good. For his steadfast love endures forever. You can't imagine how good it is.

But the psalmist doesn't stop there. He doesn't stop with God's act of creation. He moves on to God's act of redemption. Look at verse 10.

[15:05] The psalmist begins to give thanks for God's love as seen in redemption. God's saving love. In verses 10 to 16, the psalmist remembers the way that God delivers Israel out of slavery from Egypt.

And then in verses 17 to 22, the psalmist remembers how God brought Israel into the freedom of the promised land. And everything is viewed from the perspective of God's love.

From the last of the ten plagues to Israel's deliverance out of Egypt. From Israel's passing through the Red Sea to the destruction of Pharaoh and his armies.

From Israel's pilgrimage through the wilderness to the inheritance of the promised land. everything is viewed from the perspective of God's love. God is the one who delivers Israel out of slavery, conquers their enemies, and gives them an inheritance.

And that is the gospel of the Old Testament. God delivers, God conquers, God gives. God delivers, God conquers, God gives. God delivers, God conquers, God gives.

[16:14] That is the gospel of the Old Testament. From slavery in Egypt to freedom in the promised land, everything is one great story of God's love.

God acts on behalf of his people in love. That's the main point of verses 10 through 22. That is who God is.

That's who God is. And I stand up here this evening to tell you nothing else. Thousands of years of history have gone by since this psalm was written and nothing has changed.

God is still a God who acts for his people in love, steadfast love, and you need to know that tonight. Because I know there are some of you sitting in the pew right now that feel like you're in the slavery of sin and you need to know that God is for you in love.

And there are some of you that are walking in the wilderness right now and you feel alone and like there's suffering that nobody understands and you need to know that God is a God of love. And there's some of you that are being attacked by Satan and you're being tempted to listen to his lies and you need to know that God is a God of love and it will change your life.

[17:30] But there's one more thing you need to know tonight. It's that since this psalm was written, God has done something far more glorious than anybody could have ever imagined.

He revealed his love more clearly than anybody could have ever imagined as he poured his life out unto death. God's love was revealed in the most unexpected of ways in the face of a dying Jewish man from Nazareth.

Jesus hung on a Roman cross outside Jerusalem wearing a crown of thorns sitting on a throne of humiliation mocked by the ones he came to save abandoned by his friends and his disciples dying a criminal's death and in that moment a helpless dying man we see the clearest display of God's love for us.

That is the clearest display of God's character. Nothing has changed my friends. Nothing has changed. God is who he always has been.

He's a God who loves his people. He's a God of self-sacrificing love. A God of the cross. And what the psalmist is doing for us tonight is he inviting us to stare into the face of God's love.

[19:00] He's inviting us to stare into the face of God's love and give thanks and just rejoice in it and sing and delight in it and just not get enough of it.

Give thanks to the Lord for he is good for his steadfast love endures forever. Give thanks to the God of gods for he is good give thanks to the Lord of lords for steadfast love endures forever.

in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit Amen. of use being and by the Lord all on the beginning of the Tabii