

There is still much to be thankful for!

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 27 December 2020

Preacher: Daniel Ralph

[0 : 01] So hear the word of the Lord. Jesus is speaking to his disciples at this point, and he says, ask, and it will be given to you. Seek, and you will find. Knock, and it will be opened to you.

For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father, who is in heaven, give good things to those who ask him?

And hopefully, you've seen this week, as you saw last week, the correlation between the right fix. In other words, you remember how Satan tempted Jesus to turn stone into bread, because bread corresponds with their nature, and stone doesn't. And so Jesus here again is indicating that if your son is coming to you asking for bread, you don't give him a stone, you don't give him something that cannot do what bread can. It must be something that corresponds to our nature.

And of course, this is very much where the message will be this morning on the praise of God, that it must relate to us, because if it doesn't relate to us, then it is in many ways unrelatable. And if it is unrelatable, it is we can't have real any conviction over it. And so God works with his people always through that which is a means to fulfilling them on their part, like a positive negative side, that these marry, these fit, they correspond. And this is what Jesus is saying here in prayer to God, that as we lift up our prayers to God, they will correspond to what it is that we need. So God doesn't give us something that doesn't do the job. When we ask for forgiveness, it's either a total forgiveness, it can never be a partial forgiveness, it must complete, or it's not really fulfilling anything. And that's the emphasis on the prayer here. And the emphasis of when Jesus is saying, if your son asks you for bread, will you instead give him a stone? Well, if you as a human father won't do that, then it's a question of how much more will God the Father not do it, because he's so much greater than any human father. And the point that we're to recognize is that as you pray, and as God answers those prayers, they will correspond to what it is that you can expect to receive. And sometimes we don't always recognize it, because it doesn't come in the form and shape that we think it will do. But at other points, we do recognize it because it corresponds directly, this is a most definite answer to prayer. And I guess my prayer would be that the church would recognize all the means that God uses. And that really comes down to how we recognize rather than what God gives. It's much to do, and we'll see that later in the psalm. Well, with that in mind,

I'd like us to be able to, I want to give thanks again for the church. So Psalm 145, now hear God's word.

[4 : 27] I will extol you, my God and King, and bless your name forever and ever. Every day I will bless you and praise your name forever and ever. Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised, and his greatness is unsearchable. One generation shall commend your works to another and shall declare your mighty acts.

On the glorious splendor of your majesty and on your wondrous works, I will meditate. They shall speak of the might of your awesome deeds, and I will declare your greatness.

They shall pour forth the fame of your abundant goodness and shall sing aloud of your righteousness. The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. The Lord is good to all, and his mercy is over all that he has made. All your work shall give thanks to you, O Lord, and all your saints shall bless you.

They shall speak of the glory of your kingdom and tell of your power to make known to the children of man your mighty deeds and the glorious splendor of your kingdom.

[5 : 50] Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and your dominion endures throughout all generations. The Lord is faithful in all his words and kind in all his works.

The Lord upholds all who are falling and raises up all who are bowed down. The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food in due season.

You open your hand. You satisfy the desire of every living thing. The Lord is righteous in all his ways and kind in all his works.

The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth. He fulfills the desire of those who fear him. He also hears their cry and saves them.

The Lord preserves all who love him, but all the wicked he will destroy. My mouth will speak the praise of the Lord, and let all flesh bless his holy name.

[6 : 49] For ever and ever. Let us pray as we come to God's word. Father, we would ask of you this morning that you would enlighten our mind with a view of changing our heart.

That seeing that this psalm speaks clearly of us being able to see in order to praise, we would ask, Father God, this morning that you would give us sight. And we recognize that we see in the world first by hearing your word, and then we're able to see very clearly.

Father God, without your word, we are blind. And we would ask, Father, this morning that we would receive your word so that we can see your works and are then able to give you praise.

To guide us this morning, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Well, I would like very much to finish off this year, and I'm not really one who thinks in terms of a new year and new leaf.

I just don't see it that way. Perhaps some people do. I don't think there's a right or a wrong. For me, I think it can give false starts and give sort of a bumpy transition in the sense that I don't see any point in waiting for next month if you can do it this month.

[8 : 14] And that type of thing, that perpetual pushing off of something, is perhaps many of the reasons for why things don't get started and why year after year we can make the same promises and fail to keep them.

So I want this year, or at least I want this message towards the end of this year, to be a message of Thanksgiving, regardless of what this year or the last couple of years have brought, or even what is going to be brought into next year, given that COVID won't pay attention to any turning over a new year's leave.

It will carry on regardless through time and dates and everything. And it's going to be difficult for perhaps people who hold my position, in that being that I'm post-meal, that my whole understanding of God's word leads me to appreciate and understand that things get better and more glorious before Christ returns, not worse.

It gives me a very optimistic view of the future, not a pessimistic one, where I'm crying out for the Lord to come quickly because things are going from bad to worse.

Now, I don't have time, and you may not have the patience to perhaps sit through and listen to why that is the case, other than the case that you already know to be true, that God's will will be done on earth as it is in heaven and his kingdom will come, which is not a negative end.

[9 : 57] It's a very positive and glorious end. So in your conscience, you know ultimately that it all turns out for the good. How we get to that good, we may differ.

But I do recognize that we can be born in different generations and witness different things, given the generation that we have been born into.

And therefore, we must understand that while it's tempting to believe that we may be the last generation to live on earth before Christ returns, it could be, it might not be, but other generations have also believed that, and they lived within different circumstances and different things that are happening in the world.

And so there is this perpetual hope within the heart of believers for Christ to come quickly, for it all to be over, take the pain and suffering away, and give us a glorious future.

But at the same time, I want us to be positive, not simply as a means of positive thinking, but to have good reasons.

[11 : 09] In other words, I want to give you something to stand on, not just something to believe.

Positive thinking that it is simply like a mantra where you say, it'll be all right, it'll be all right, not because it is all right, but because you're trying to work yourself up into believing that it'll be all right.

And so your praise to God is very mantra-like rather than reasoned or foundational. In other words, your optimistic thinking is not based on anything more than the hope of everything being positive rather than the good reasons that it will be.

So I want to be able to convince you this morning of a very optimistic future, the good reasons for praising God, and that everything will be okay and good, even for us in this generation.

And therefore, I want to avoid any kind of frantic praise or uninformed praise. Frantic praise would be the mantra type where you're trying to convince yourself into praising God because you can't really find any reason to do it.

And then uninformed praise would be like a child who has to be told to say thank you because it's not immediately apparent to them why they should. I want to avoid that type of praise as well.

[12 : 35] I don't want to encourage you to give thanks to God without giving you the reasons why we ought to be thankful because it's artificial. It's groundless.

It's unreasonable. And therefore, thanksgiving that doesn't overflow out of the heart is not really the kind of thanksgiving that I think we should be offering to God when we think of laying down our life as a living sacrifice.

So I first have to fill your hearts with the works of God, and then the praise is not something that I'll have to tell you to do because it'll overflow like water in a glass that's already full.

It'll naturally come out simply because your heart is full with the praise of God. So let me begin with a summary of Psalm 145.

And the best way to begin is by just indicating this is a Psalm of David, and that's worth indicating for a couple of reasons. The most important reason is so that we don't read ourselves into the parts that are not about us.

[13 : 45] This is a common problem with reading the Psalms in particular, that the Psalms were written by particular people at a particular time. And while there is an overlap in that God can work in our lives in the same way he worked in theirs, there's not always a direct overlap.

And so one Psalm in particular, Psalm 51, where David says, and do not take thy Holy Spirit from me, that would be impossible for a believer to be worried about or even to say because it's not possible for that to happen if you're one who belongs to Christ.

And that would be a dangerous overlap if you were to read yourself into that verse because the verse doesn't apply to you. It doesn't speak to you.

And it's speaking about David in his situation as he reflects what happened on Saul. Because he saw the Spirit of God depart from Saul, the previous king, he is worried now because of his sin before God that the same thing will happen to him.

And so in its context, it makes perfect sense. But when you place yourself in the Psalm in a way where you don't fit, you can read things that don't apply to you and perhaps even cause yourself a whole deal of worry and concern that you really ought not to be concerned with in the first place.

[15 : 12] So reading carefully is something we must always do. And Psalm 145 lends itself to that type of strength of reading for this reason, that David is having a good time.

David is having a good year, not a bad year. The kingdom, it would appear, is flourishing. And it's easy to be thankful. Perhaps it's easy to see if you have eyes and hearts to see the works of God, just how good it is for David at this particular time.

David is living in a good situation and good circumstances, unlike what we've been through this past year. And so because the kingdom is flourishing, it does bring with it particular dangers.

And that is that God's people can be tempted in times of flourishing to forget that God is still the means and source of that flourishing.

And this is partly down to the fact that when things go well, because things are going so well so often, there's no need for us to cry out to God for help.

[16 : 25] And that's where communication with God on a daily basis is reduced, because things are going so well. But then there is a flip side to that, and that is that people who go through particularly difficult times and hard times, that the natural assumption would be, well, therefore it's much easier for them to cry out to God because they need the help.

But that's not true either, because I think on balance, people respond to different means in different ways.

So some people cannot pray when they go through a hard time. Just read the end of James, the man there who has to call the elders to pray for him.

And you want to ask the very obvious question of, well, why can't he do it himself? And that is, of course, that some people can get themselves into such a spiritual condition that they just cannot bring themselves before God in prayer.

They know that they ought to. They know that they ought to come and bow the knee and submit to God, but they can't do it. The means and circumstances with which they are living in has sort of altered them in a way where they can't bring themselves to prayer.

[17 : 40] Trouble doesn't naturally lead all people to trust and rely on God with a greater deal of weight, and it just doesn't happen.

Whereas in the same time that Thanksgiving can be absent from us when things are going well for other people can be the very opposite. They recognize or they've learned through so much hardship that everything is from God, and therefore this is time to thank God.

Well, David understands his history, that God's people have a particular history with blessing and curses, and it often repeats itself in all of God's people, and that is that when God blesses his people, at first they recognize it as a blessing from God.

But it doesn't take too long before they begin to think that this is the work of their own hands, that they just so happen to be the right people in the right place with the right skill set, the hardworking, made the best of the opportunities that they had, all of which could be true, but they're mixing cause and means together.

And so they go from giving thanks to God for the blessings and end up thinking that they are the cause of the blessings that they have received. And of course, my favorite quote by Codd Mather, faithfulness begat prosperity and the daughter devoured the mother.

[19 : 10] Okay, faithfulness begat prosperity, their faithfulness to God brought the blessing, but the blessing devoured their faithfulness to God in the end because they did not know how to handle it correctly.

And now that is a repeatable trait of God's people, both of Israel in the Old Testament and even New Testament Christians fall into that trap, although we don't often make the same covenantal connections, which is a shame.

In verses one to three, David understands that praise is a good part and a right part of his life before God, that he, a king, will extol God the king, that he will bless his name forever, that he will praise his name.

And we must question whether or not this is David just having a good day and being able to say good things. And that would add to it, I'm sure. But there is heartfelt praise here as we see throughout the rest of the psalm.

And then he goes into verse four of the need to then model this and explain this to the coming generations which follow. That God works in all generations and there's a wealth of history that we are to remind younger people about what God has done.

[20 : 34] So we tell them the stories of old, of creation, of Noah and the ark, of Solomon, of David and Goliath.

And we tell them these stories so that they would understand the mighty works of God in the people of God and throughout his world in the past because God is eternal.

And this is what David is saying, that one generation should commend the works of God to the following generation. Why? Well, because they need to be able to see in their generation how God works because if they don't see it, they will not give God praise for it.

And so being able to see the works of God is essential for being able to give God the praise. If you can't see it, then you can't thank God for it.

And so David is not just modeling here, and passing it on to the next generation. He is indeed understanding the important part of this in the act of praising God.

[21 : 43] Then in verses 5 to 9, we see that we are to recognize the works of God in the world because of our ability of being able to see them.

Once we see the works of God and we witness God as we witness his works. And that's how praise begins. That the moment we can witness that this is of God, the moment we can give thanks to God for it.

And so what David is saying is that your praise of God is going to be linked to your witness of God and his works in the world in which you live.

So praise flows naturally in the person who sees most clearly. That when a person looks and interprets what is happening in their generation as an act of God, that we're able to give thanks.

And I've often used the illustration of we've got to be able to interpret our surroundings. We've got to be able to interpret what is happening and why it is happening.

[22 : 51] And the simplest way of introducing that idea is by indicating to you the reason why you give thanks for the food that you receive.

You went out and bought it in the shops. You're the one who did the shopping. You're the one who paid for it with the money in your purse or in your wallet. You're the one who brought it home in a shopping bag.

You're the one who then stored it away into the fridge or to the cupboard. You're the one who did all of that. And then, of course, you're the one who manages to mix all these ingredients together and produce a meal.

And the moment the meal is on the table before you eat, you give thanks. And look at all the work that you've done. Look at everything that you have done and yet you stop to give thanks.

Why? Because you recognize. Well, hopefully it is that you recognize and this isn't just a convention. But you recognize, know, that this is of God. And all I'm saying is that if you're able to do that with food, then you must be able to do that with everything that is in the world.

[23 : 57] That's all that this psalm is pushing us towards. Verses 5 and 9. Being able to recognize precedes us being able to give praise to God.

Verse 10 then leads us into the kingdom implications that in God, we have the supremacy of God in all things in this world. When we understand that, we are then able to live within the promises of God.

Verses 14 through to 20. And then, of course, verse 21, we finish with a call to everyone to bless the name, the holy name of the Lord forever and ever.

So let me indicate what it means to live by the promises of God. The promises of God will shape your faith and they will shape your prayer life.

They will also shape your thanksgiving. They will also shape how you communicate with God and relate to God on a daily basis. All your hopes are going to be explained within the promises of God.

[25 : 01] Either promises made, promises fulfilled, or promises yet to be fulfilled. Your hopes will be explained by them. The same with your faith. Your faith in God and for all that faith in God means will be explained in the promises that are written down in Scripture.

So promises shape us. We are shaped by the word of God. We are shaped by the promises of God. But verse 16 is where we have the chisel and hammer.

Verse 16 is that which gets to work on us in a different way. Now, we have all known a time in our life where we have had to be shaped by other people.

In hindsight, we can notice it as we reflect back and look back onto those situations. You know, that I can remember the first time I ever went to work on a building site and it was the shock of my life.

But these men who looked rough and not ready and just, I'm going to have a terrible time here. I'm going to hate it. In the end, you realize that they're looking out for you.

[26 : 18] But they're looking out for you in a way that men do. There's not much deep and meaningful conversation. It's just, I'll make a man out of you. Now, of course, not all men are able to make men out of other men or men out of boys.

But you begin to realize that what looks like hard and a horrible place on the surface is actually a very good place to be. But it takes some time to be shaped and molded in that kind of way.

Some people respond to just direct orders. Some people respond to just encouragement. I, for one, always found that I responded to someone just telling me what to do, just get on with it.

Rather than someone encouraging me. Just get it done and get it done quickly. You know, that, I guess we're shaped differently and perhaps, you know, it then works out in other people.

But God uses means and people to shape us the way that he does. And this is what I think that we need to perhaps understand more than anything else.

[27 : 27] If we fail to see the means, we will fail to see what is produced by those means. And verse 16 here, that you open your hand and you satisfy the desire of every living creature.

this may not seem like a hammer and chisel moment. It may not actually come across as though God is shaping us with this type of verse that we would understand it properly.

But let me try and explain to you what it is leading us into understanding. Now, a catechism is not something that you use to punish children. It sounds like it.

What are you doing today? Well, I'm catechizing my children. You're what? A catechism is nothing more than a question and answer form of biblical theology.

Biblical theology rather than systematic theology or part of both. Systematic theology simply means that you're ordering scripture in a way where it can be understood logically.

[28 : 31] Biblical theology means that you're ordering scripture in a way that corresponds to the way that it is written down. And a catechism is simply a way of understanding through questions and answers what the Bible teaches.

That's all that it is. And so, you raise the question and then you read the answer. And you catechize a child. You catechize an adult.

You disciple them with the word of God. You give them questions and answers so that their faith is built and strong. Well, in the Heidelberg Catechism, which is one that we have used often, we have this in question 27 and 28.

In question 27 and 28, we learn that it is God who upholds and governs the heaven, the earth, and all living creatures. Verse 16, that He is the one who opens His hand and satisfies the desire of every living thing.

It is God alone who upholds the heavens, the earth, and every living creature. And then, of course, it carries on in question 28 and the answers that it gives with this question.

[29 : 42] And I'll summarize it. Why do I need to know that? Or, what is the advantage of me knowing what you have just told me?

Why is it important for me to know? Or, what difference does it make to me? And the answer is this, that we are able, in the light of this knowledge, to be patient in adversity, thankful in propriety, and in all things which may hereafter befall us to place our trust in our faithful God and Father.

So, what it's doing is it's raising the issue that God is the one who governs everything. then it poses the very important question of why this information, this truth, this revelation will advantage you rather than disadvantage you.

And the answer is, is because it is this truth that can make you patient in times of trouble, that can make you thankful in times of wealth or poverty.

that it is this truth that can give you hope and trust in God your Father who is able to take care of all things, who upholds the heavens and the earth and everything in it.

[31 : 11] So, this is not about simply believing or remembering a set amount of knowledge. This is about having something that has practical benefit for you as you live tomorrow.

that it actually advantages you in the real world rather than disadvantaging you like many other things can.

And so, we're brought back to the place, once we've understood this, of understanding the difference between genuine praise rather than a superficial praise.

Genuine praise is being thankful to God as a natural overflow of your heart rather than like the child who has to be told to say thank you. Now, they're still in the learning stages.

You're passing on to the next generation to say thank you. Why? Because it's the right thing to do because you have received. This costs them time and money and resource. So, you're passing on to one generation the right response to what it is that you've received.

[32 : 19] So, children have to learn to say thank you and they have to learn it by people telling them to say thank you. Well, Psalm 145 works in exactly the same way.

You are learning why it is that you are to say thank you to God. You are learning why it is that you are to praise God. You're not just being told to do it, but you are learning why you are to do it.

So, what about the means and the source? And this is where we sort of bring it to a conclusion.

Well, there is a difference between the means and the source, but the most important difference is this one, that we would recognize the difference between the two.

Now, the difference between the means and the source is best illustrated in this way, between the stream of water and the water that you receive in your homes.

Let's say that pipes bring the water from the stream, from the fresh spring in the mountains, down into your home in the valley. And you recognize that the pipes are the means by which that water is able to flow from its source to where you are.

[33 : 33] Without those pipes, it would flow in a different direction. It would make its quickest route down to the bottom of the valley. But with those pipes, you're able to bring it from the top of the mountain into your home.

Now, you recognize that the pipes are the means. They're not the source because pipes filled with fresh air will not deliver anything to your home apart from the air that's contained in them.

But if they're connected to the stream that's at the top of the mountain, they're able to bring that stream into your home. But why is this important? Well, it's important because every single one of us experience God through means.

we know that God is the source, but the way that we experience God is actually through means. We pray to God who is the source, but then we look to means to experience answers to those prayers. Which father of you will give his son a stone if he asks for bread? We look, we understand that answers comes in forms of means.

[34 : 45] The source is God, but the means could be fathers, could be mothers, could be sons, could be daughters, could be employment. It could be a number of these different things.

And so one of the reasons why believers can become anxious and even unthankful and ungrateful and a number of other conditions before God is because they fail to see the means by which God will provide.

They know that God will provide. They know that God does provide. But because we relate to God through means and we don't experience the means, then suddenly this alters our relationship with God.

An example would be that God can seem very absent when the means are absent. For instance, perhaps you're praying for a job and you don't have one.

And the job would be like the bread, not a stone. And as you receive the employment, you recognize that yes, God is the giver of all good things, he is the source, but I've experienced God through the means, and the means is employment, or the means is food, or the means is clothing, or the means is somewhere to live.

[36 : 04] And when I don't have those things, when I don't have the food, and I don't have the money, and I don't have the employment, and I don't have the shelter, then suddenly this can have a dramatic impact on my relationship with God because I experience God through means.

I'm not denying the source, but I am recognizing that I experience God through means. and that's what this psalm is indicating, that God opens his hand and blesses every living creature, that my relationship with God is interwoven with both source and means, and I can cause myself to doubt in God when I do not see the means that God will use to provide and keep me safe and secure. that's the very definition perhaps of anxiety, when I know God is the source but I cannot see the means that God will use.

Well, here's the exhortation as we close. In what has been a very difficult year, there is still much to be thankful for to God.

For me, it's very self-evident that if it were possible for Christians to simply worship God as a matter of it being in their heart, that it's simply a matter of their heart before God, then it would be impossible for us to experience God through the means that we do.

[37 : 51] This is not questioning a person's heart, it's simply saying that it cannot remain in the heart. If it remained in the heart, we wouldn't have stewards, we wouldn't have sound and video people, we wouldn't have microphones and electricity.

We experience God through means and therefore it's absolutely crucial that we appreciate and understand those means. That yes, God is the source enabling people to be stewards and tech guys and all of this.

It's crucial that we understand that God is the source. But it is also crucial that we would understand and appreciate the means which God uses for us to be able to come and worship God in spirit and in truth.

If it simply resided, if all of that simply resided in the heart, it would be impossible to come and worship God as we have been doing.

So these people are the pipes. God is the source. But these people have been the pipes enabling us to be able to come and gather and worship God.

[39 : 01] And therefore there's so much to give thanks to God for. God is the source, but they are the means. The means that God has chosen to use.

So in conclusion, I like you have no idea what tomorrow will bring. and I also understand that this year, or at least the last couple of years, has been more difficult for more people than perhaps the previous 10 or 20 years, put together even.

It's devastating to see that more people are flooded out of their homes on Christmas Day and Boxing Day and the days after in the middle of winter, just as it was before COVID struck and we

have one of the greatest floods in the UK that we've ever seen for a number of years. Year after year, we are seeing something that causes devastation and terrible things that people have to live through. And here I am trying to convince you that there's still much to be thankful to God for.

Well, I'm convincing you to be thankful to God because he is the means by which he, he is the source through which all means bring to us the blessings that he has to give us.

[40 : 22] And so while I'm looking into next year without any kind of assumptions, I am able to look into next year with a great sense of assurance that God is able to provide and direct and guide his church and his people.

And so I'm not asking you to be positive. This isn't a talk for you to have a positive mindset. but a message from Psalm 145 to teach you that we ought not to live in frantic praise like a mantra trying to work ourselves up into a positive frame of mind or that this is somehow like a child who has to be told to say thankful but on one level it is because we have to learn the reasons why.

But these are real reasons to be optimistic. These are real reasons to be thankful. because now that we have seen the means by which we experience God we are able to give thanks to God for them.

That God is the source of all these means and God has always worked through means. The most famous ones of course are the word of God, prayer, and communion. The means of grace.

But there are many other pipes that God uses to bring that water to us, that blessing to us. And those pipes are you. You who come here and support one another and bless one another by your presence so that we are able to worship God in spirit and in truth.

[41 : 55] And we are saddened by the fact that the rules don't allow the others who have been coming. And it's not because as I've often joked that they're not as blessed as us.

Or they might be. We'll see. Let's pray. Father God, we give you thanks. We really give you thanks now that we see and understand how it is that you provide.

And that Father God, while we are caused to doubt you in sin when we don't see the means by which you will use to bless your people, we do recognize that our life fluctuates because we experience you through those means.

And so, Father God, I ask that you continue to provide for your people, for your church, in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.

Well, we'll finish before we come to the final exhortation with this final carol, and then we can close this morning. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[43 : 00] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.