

Sunday 28th August 2022 – HALLEL PSALMS (5) – Psalm 136 ‘The power of gratitude’

As I wrote this talk on Thursday morning, I experienced a strange emotion as a Brit – I watched the rain come down from my study window and said ‘thank you’! It’s not often that anyone born and raised in the UK is thankful for rain: complaining about the weather is part of our national character, and we can find almost any type of weather too complain about: too hot, too cold, too humid, too windy, and if it’s none of those it’s probably too cloudy! – but of all the weather we get here, the rain is usually the one we complain about most. There’s a wonderful African song which has the refrain ‘Rain, rain, beautiful rain’: but in the UK it takes a particularly extreme set of weather conditions for the rain to pour down, as it did in Milton Keynes on Thursday morning, and for the population to look up to the sky with a big grin on their face and say ‘thank you’.

As we close our series on the Hallel Psalms, we finish with a slight departure, in the sense that this last psalm (136), known as the Great Hallel – literally the ‘Great Praise God’ – is not used as part of the Passover Meal. It’s known as the Great Hallel simply because of its subject matter: **it’s a psalm which is all about saying thank you, in particular saying thank you to God.**

So it begins, ‘Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good,’ and ends ‘Give thanks to the God of heaven.’ And the reason of course, which is given as the second line of every verse is this: ‘his love endures forever.’ Now we looked at the importance of God’s love and faithfulness enduring last week, so I’m not going to focus on that today, except to note that this psalm is really a list of lots of the ways that God has demonstrated his enduring love. When the people of God give thanks for enduring love, it’s not just a feeling, it’s based on *evidence*. God has demonstrated his enduring love in creation, in how he has rescued Israel and given them victory, in how he remembers the lowly and provides for his creatures. These and many other reasons are why the people of God can sing out with praise: ‘his love endures forever.’

So let’s keep that thought in the back of our minds, as the backdrop to what I do want to spend a little time on today, and that is the importance and value of gratitude. My working title for today is **the power of gratitude**, and I hope that in these few minutes, that we get a renewed sense of how vital a spirit of thankfulness is.

One of the things that has always sat at the heart of what it means to live as God’s people is thankfulness. Way back at the start of Genesis, the first thing Adam does when he meets Eve is burst into song; similarly their son Cain gave God his best produce as the first recorded act of practical thankfulness in the bible. Wherever the early people of God travelled they tended to set up altars to the Lord, which are little monuments of thankfulness; and time and again, God’s people are encouraged to retain a thankful heart.

Conversely, God’s people tend to go astray whenever they lose a spirit of thankfulness. Adam and Eve’s heads were turned when the serpent encouraged them to feel resentful for what the one thing they *didn’t* have, rather than everything they did. After the Passover and the rescue from Egypt, it’s amazing how many times the people bemoaned their luck every time some challenge arose, culminating in their refusal to enter the Promised Land a few months later.

For all that the bible is not designed as a handbook of psychology, it's interesting how often its insights absolutely predate and predict everything that modern psychology has 'discovered' about the power of positive and negative thought patterns. **It's fascinating that modern psychology now echoes all of those insights written down in Scripture more than 3,000 years ago**, especially about the power of gratitude on our wellbeing.

Recently Dr Martin Seligman from the University of Pennsylvania tested the impact of various positive psychology interventions on 411 people, each compared with a neutral assignment of writing instead about early memories. When their week's assignment was to write and personally deliver a letter of gratitude to someone who had never been properly thanked for his or her kindness, participants immediately exhibited a huge increase in happiness scores. This impact was greater than that from any other intervention, with benefits lasting for a month.

That's impressive: but one of the criticisms of such studies is that they tend to use 'well' people as their subject matter. However, this study was then replicated by Doctors Joshua Brown and Joel Wong with 300 students who were all seeking counselling to address poor mental health. Just as with the first study, they found that the group who wrote a letter of gratitude had significantly better mental health scores a month later than those who did not. Even more amazingly, that positive effect on mental health was seen even among those *who didn't actually send the letter*: just taking the time to write it, to consciously take time to express gratitude, made the difference.

This study also made three other amazing discoveries: first, that those who wrote the letter of gratitude spent less energy on expressing negative emotions which were the primary drivers affecting their mental health; second that the benefits of gratitude increased with time: the improved mental health recorded at four weeks was even higher at 12 weeks. In other words **the effect of investing in gratitude is not a quick fix but lasting solution**, with a potentially massive long term pay-off.

Finally, most amazing of all, they found that 'gratitude' stimulated a different part of the brain to guilt or desire: gratitude accesses the area which also governs learning and decision-making. This suggests that alongside improved mental health, people who are grateful are also more attentive to ways in which they can express gratitude: in other words **gratitude changes our behaviour, it tends to make us more kind and thoughtful**.

So it turns out the ancient text of the bible was right all along! **Gratitude is one of the keys to life**. This why we always try to include songs of thankfulness and praise in our worship. We worship the Lord for who He is, as well as what He's done. But it's also important to build gratitude into our lives. One of the best bits of advice I ever received at a low point in my life was to keep a praise diary: in other words, to spend a few minutes each day recording things I was thankful for. It made a massive difference to my wellbeing, and although I haven't made it a permanent part of my life, I've come back to a praise diary at various times since, and it's always been powerful.

I would also recommend cultivating a habit of saying thank you. We know it's polite, but as we've learned today it's more than that: there's a pay-off to you, as well as the person thanked. It's easy to get lazy with saying thank you, but let's resolve to keep cultivating the habits of gratitude.

Finally, today's passage reminds us to maintain an attitude of praise and gratitude towards God. Our prayers should not just be shopping lists of requests, but bathed in thanksgiving. Thankfulness helps us to approach the Lord as a generous parent not a reluctant, distracted boss.

All of this matters because life has ups and downs. We've all navigated a hard season these last couple of years, and many of us are dreading the winter to come. It's tempting to say: how are we going to be grateful in times like these? I would say – in fact, I think Scripture compels me to say – it's in times like these that **we need the power of gratitude more than ever.** As we've seen, thankfulness has a huge impact on our mental wellbeing, and also makes us more kind towards others. So this final Hallel psalm is not just an end of a series, it's a springboard into the autumn and winter that lies ahead. So may praise and glory to our great God be both our ending and our beginning – and may a spirit of gratitude empower our lives this week and in the time to come. Amen.