Always Thankful

Text: Psalm 118

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**Readings:** Luke 17:11-19; Psalm 118

**Series**: Occasional

**Theme:** The thankful psalmist calls all the covenant people of God to respond in gratitude to the Lord for his constant goodness and ever faithful love.

**Proposition:** Jesus is the reason to be always thankful.

**Introduction**

Helen Keller, American author, political activist, and lecturer, was struck by an illness when she was under two years old which left her blind and deaf. With the help of her teacher Anne Sullivan, she learned to communicate and went on to graduate at college. During her lifetime, she received many honours in recognition of her accomplishments.

Imagine a life where you cannot see, no colour, no light, no open landscapes, no ancient architecture, no plants, no animals, not able to look up on the faces of those around you. Imagine a life where there is no sound, no music, no audible words, no words heard from those you know, no rustling of leaves on an autumn day, no birdsong in the morning, no thunderclaps heard in the storm.

Yet Helen Keller, blind and deaf though she was 86 years of her life, once said “*So much has been given to me that I have no time to ponder that which I don't have*”.

Here is a dictionary definition of thankfulness – the expression of gratitude, the grateful acknowledgement of a benefit or favour.

We heard earlier of the 10 lepers mercifully healed by Jesus (Luke 17:11-19). Author Charles L. Brown asked the question: “Why did only one cleansed leper return to thank Jesus?”

Then he **speculated** about possible reasons for the 9 lepers remaining unthankful:

* One waited to see if the cure was real.
* One waited to see if it would last.
* One said he would see Jesus later.
* One decided that he had never had leprosy.
* One said he would have gotten well anyway.
* One gave the glory to the priests.
* One said, "O, well, Jesus didn't really do anything."
* One said, "Any rabbi could have done it."
* One said, "I was already much improved."

How can you and I always be thankful to Jesus, no matter what happens to us in life, no matter how much we lose, or how much we never have or become?

Psalm 118 helps us, as we’ll see in 3 ways:

1. Remember the past
2. Look forward to the future
3. Live in the present
4. **Remember the past (1-13)**

Do you know what a coxswain is? Literally. a ‘boat servant’. Coxing rowing 8s – calling out the stroke…hoarse voice at times in the cold mornings on the river Cam. In rowing, the coxswain sits in either the bow or the stern of the boat (depending on the type of boat) while verbally and physically controlling the boat's **steering, speed, timing and fluidity**. The primary duty of a coxswain is to ensure the safety of those in the boat. The coxswain is also tasked with motivating the rowers, not only as individuals but as members of the crew.

In Psalm 118 the writer is calling out to others ‘on his team’: “*Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever!*”

It’s an exhortation to respond in gratitude to God.

The verb translated ‘give thanks’ has the primary meaning of making an acknowledgement with the mouth – by speaking or singing. Like the healed leper in Luke 17 who went back to where Jesus was ‘praising God with a loud voice’ and then falling on his face at the feet of Christ, giving him thanks’ (v16).

A coxswain needs to communicate to all the rowers in the team. Likewise, the psalmist calls out to all the community of God’s people to give thanks in v2-4:

Israel, the house of Aaron, all who fear the Lord say “*His (the Lord God’s) steadfast love endures forever*”.

Can you say it together with me now…?

The steadfast love of God is one of the big themes of the Bible. The KJV translates the Hebrew word for this steadfast love (Hesed) as ‘lovingkindness’. In the OT God repeatedly demonstrates His faithful, kind, generous, gracious, undeserved lovingkindness for His covenant people Israel.

Two key events in the history of the descendants of Abraham are

* **The exodus** from slavery in Egypt when God appointed Moses to lead His people to freedom AND
* **The return** of the exiled Jews to Jerusalem after 70 years of captivity in Babylon.

It’s not clear which of these two demonstrations of God’s steadfast love, or another event, was the personal experience of the psalmist when he writes –v10 *“All the nations surrounded me; in the name of the Lord I cut them off’*.We cannot be sure whether Moses, a king, a priest or some other representative of the people is here remembering God’s faithful, love in the past. But we **do know**: that the Lord provided the strength which brought victory (10-12).

**We know** that whilst the outcome was good, the process was painful and difficult–v13: “*I was pushed hard, so that I was falling, but the LORD helped me*”.

Here he speaks on behalf of the whole nation. Who was doing the pushing, shoving, thrusting, casting down? The enemies of Israel. They had many throughout OT history: Egyptians, Assyrians, Babylonians…

Read the Bible and you will see, that the Lord always helped his people, but **so often** they were pushed hard and were falling…

A good coxswain knows how to motivate the rowers, he must also know personally something of the feel of the oars, the dynamics of the stroke, the fatigue of the muscles as they strain to power the vessel through the water…

Here the psalmist knows **not only** the faithfulness of God’s love towards the nation, but also towards him **personally**: v5 “*Out of my distress I called on the LORD; the LORD answered me and set me free*”.

The Lord literally set him in a broad place, no longer hemmed in by fears, anxieties, heavy burdens and consuming cares, no longer crushed, no longer driven to despair, no longer forsaken. He had experienced the steadfast love and abiding goodness of God in a life-transforming way…

He knew where his help had come from…Not ultimately from his family, friends, or his community (v8) …Not ultimately from those with human authority and power (v9) …But in the refuge, the protective shelter, of the Lord who had always been good to him, had always loved him...

**How do you remember the past?** (pause)

How do you look back? Is it with sadness, regret and despair? Or do you see how the Lord God has always done you good, even when, or perhaps more evidently when, you were falling?

The Israelites didn’t think that the Lord would provide them with good gifts in the barren wilderness: they grumbled and complained about the lack of meat pots and bread (Ex 16:3). They had already forgotten that they had been set free.

When the exiles returned from Babylon, there were many disappointments – the buildings in Israel were broken down, the land neglected, those who had remained there were indifferent to the Lord.

In the book of Haggai the people do not appear to be thankful for their release from captivity. Did they remember the Lord’s faithful goodness and steadfast love?

Do we as a church? do you as an individual member of ‘the team’?

Your current situation and circumstances of life may not be what you had expected, but beloved believer, the Lord has been consistently good to you, even, when you were pushed hard, so that you were falling…

Brother and sister in the Lord, you have never been **less loved** by God than you are now.

Even when you have failed Him miserably, even when you have turned away from Him, even when you have been thankless for his good gifts, even then, His love was no less than it is now.

“*Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever!*”

Will you say together with me:

*“His steadfast love endures forever!*”

1. **Look forward to the future (17-27)**

**There are dangers** in looking back with distorted vision:

We may **only** see disappointments and discouragements when our expectations of how life ‘should’ turned out have not been met. As we have already noted, remembering the past goodness and steadfast love of the Lord helps us to be thankful for what he has already done.

Likewise, **there are dangers** when we look forward to the future with distorted vision: We may be filled with uncertainty and fear. We may be troubled by what may lie ahead…we may lack confidence...

One aspect of God’s goodness and faithful love is that he reveals the future to us **so that** we be confident and thankful **now.** God has chosen not to provide exhaustive details about what is yet to come, we see this here in Psalm 118 as we focus on two familiar verses:

Firstly v22-23: *“The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. This is the LORD's doing; it is marvellous in our eyes”.*

How much did the psalmist understand of what he was prophesying in these words? We do not know….

But wesee the future fulfilment of this truth in Jesus Christ:

When he had told a parable of the wicked tenants who had leased a vineyard in Matt 21:33-46, He described how the owner’s servants were killed by these tenants when they came to collect the fruit which was owed to the master of the vineyard. He then predicted his own death and quoted these words from Psalm 118.

This was yet to be a future event for the OT psalmist.

This was yet to be a future event for Christ Himself when the chief priests and Pharisees heard this prophecy of the kingdom of God being taken away from them and given to a people producing fruits…. we know that is death is now history.

Jesus **was** killed and yet He lives, and He has become the chief foundation for the living temple, the household of God (Eph 2:19-22), the new Israel, the community of fruit-bearing believers who have experienced and acknowledged the goodness of God towards them.

This is truly marvellous. You cannot avoid Jesus. You will either see what he has done for you and bear the fruit of thankfulness…Like the one leper who returned when healed OR You will stumble over Him.

A second familiar verse is 26: *“Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD!”*

When Jesus entered Jerusalem as a King, the crowds welcomed Him warmly as one sent to them by God Himself. A few days later a crowd would join together and shout ‘Let him be crucified’. (Matt 27:22)

Notice that the psalmist also looks **beyond** the first coming of Christ to the second, a future event for him and for us. He prophetically sees a time when every single one of God’s people saved by grace will bless Christ ‘from the house of the LORD’, crying out with a loud voice: *"Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!"* (Rev 7:10)

The psalmist speaks of the entrance into the tabernacle/temple sanctuary where God is present and where he can give thanks and prays that God would allow him entry. When he writes (v20) ‘This is the gate of the Lord; the righteous shall enter through it’ – he gazes upon the way of access to be with God, but he also points forward to Christ.

Christ who said, ‘*I am the door/gate for the sheep’* (John 10:7) *I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture (9).*

If you say the words ‘pearly gates’ to many people they will know that this corresponds to the entrance into heaven, although most probably don’t know – from Rev 21:21 - that there are 12 gates each made of a single pearl – a precious stone. That these are the gates to the New Jerusalem, the earthly dwelling place of God’s people, the restored paradise where the temple is the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb.

Sadly, most people don’t know that Jesus is the only way into God’s heaven on the new earth…They don’t know that **Jesus is the gate of the Lord**; and those made righteous by Him shall enter through Him.

**Do you know this?**

In Luke 12 this gracious warning of Christ is recorded: ‘Beware the leaven of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy’.

How easily a works-based righteousness spreads into our lives, like yeast spreading through dough and causing disruption to the matrix of the mixture. How easily we can proclaim a gospel of grace and live a gospel of works…which is no gospel at all!

Looking to the future reminds us that nothing we do, no amount of services attended, no quantity of good works will open the gate into the dwelling place of God in the paradise to come.

Jesus alone, who is that gate of righteousness, provides entry in…It is ALL of grace!

Can you say together with the psalmist: “*I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation*”?

1. **Rejoice in the present (14-16; 24-25; 28-29)**

Brother and sister remember the past and see what the Lord has done for you in Christ. Look forward to the future and see that the way through to a perfect life in a perfect place with our perfect God has been fully secured for you by Christ.

If we see the good that God is and the good that He has done, if we see the faithfulness of his never-failing love, then surely our response must surely be like that of the psalmist…An expression of **heartfelt gratitude** for the favour which God has bestowed upon us in Christ.

Parents have you ever tried to teach a reluctant child to be thankful?...“say thank you”. Then with gritted teeth, the ungrateful progeny pushes out the words ‘thank you’. You know, and they know, that their heart is not behind their words…...the words ‘thank you’ have little or no meaning when forced out in unwilling response to an instruction.

Now thankfulness is a command of God, we see this in Col 3:15 “Be thankful”. However, this is not only a Biblical truth to be understood, but perhaps far more importantly, it is a response to be experienced.

See in the psalm how thankfulness leads to rejoicing: *The LORD is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation. Glad songs of salvation are in the tents of the righteous: "The right hand of the LORD does valiantly, the right hand of the LORD exalts, the right hand of the LORD does valiantly!"*

The ‘coxswain’ psalmist calls out to all the people of God…To give thanks to the Lord for his goodness and steadfast love past and future and the result is joy in the present.

Perhaps the best-known verse in Psalm 118 is v24: “*This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it*”.

Notice that the emphasis is firmly on the present time. It is the Lord who has made **this day.** It is the Lord who gives life to body and soul to live **this day.** It is the Lord who has led you by his perfect providence to **this day.** It is the Lord who has only ever done you good.

It is the Lord, brother and sister in Christ, who has turned everything in your life, pleasant, unpleasant, pleasurable, painful, satisfying and saddening – all of it for your benefit.

Yes, all things have worked together for your good. (Rom 8:28)

Why does the Master of the Universe, all-powerful, all-knowing carefully attend to the smallest events in the smallness of our lives so that we only receive good from Him?

**Because He loves us brothers and sisters in the Lord**

Yes, disciple of Christ, He loves you with an enduring love that will never fail. It is the Lord who will take you forward from this day **into the future.** It is the Lord who will continue to remain at your side **into the future.** It is the Lord who will provide refuge for you **into the future.** His great love is so firm and strong, so enduring, that no one and nothing can separate us from that love of God.

“*This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it*”.

Christ is the Light of the World, whose love is a reason to be glad today, no matter what the circumstances and situation of your life at this time.

Jesus said "*I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life*". (John 8:12)

In OT times the people of God offered sacrifices of thanksgiving (Lev 7:13). Bible commentators and scholars struggle to fully understand v27b “*Bind the festal sacrifice with cords, up to the horns of the altar!*”

But it is clear that the psalmist is calling God’s people to a joyful thanksgiving offering of sacrifice to the Lord who saved them. This is the right response for us too…Not to slaughter bulls, goats or sheep and offer them on altars. But to die to our old nature, to put away anger, wrath, malice, slander and other practices of the old self and to put on compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and forgiving one another. This is a call from God to put on love and let the peace of Christ rule in our hearts.

This is part of the presentation of our bodies as living sacrifices to God (Rom 12:1), not from a sense of enforce duty, but because we want to express gratitude, the grateful acknowledgement of the favour which God has shown to us in Christ.

How can you and I be led to greater thankfulness?

* Remember the past
* Look forward to the future
* Rejoice in the present

Remember Helen Keller in her physical blindness and deafness for 86 years and say with your whole heart: “*So much has been given to me that I have no time to ponder that which I don't have*”. Will you say together with me? *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 love endures forever!* (Ps 118:28-29)

AMEN