

November 18, 2018

SO MANY STREAMS FROM THE FOUNTAIN

Psalm 118:1-9

INTRODUCTION

Recently we took care of our granddaughters, Ella and Cara, for an extended period as Toby and Anna were on a trip she had to take for her job. Ella, who is now closing in on 3 years old, has a favorite television show that's called *PJ Masks*. She calls it "Gecko Mask" because her favorite character on the show is Gecko. We gave her the little figurines of the 3 main characters of the show because that's what grandparents do. When she's at our house she has to have those figurines accompany her wherever she goes. One night it was almost bedtime. Ella had brushed her teeth and went into her bedroom with Laurie for book reading time when she realized that there was a problem. She had all the PJ Mask toys except for Gecko. She and Laurie quickly figured out that somehow Gecko had been left downstairs. Ella explained the problem to me and requested that I go downstairs and retrieve Gecko. Then she said, "please hurry, Yapaw." Clearly the retrieval of Gecko was a matter of considerable urgency.

I got a kick of that little 2 plus year old saying, "please hurry." It was pretty funny, but it was also good to hear, for there has been an effort to teach her to say please when ordering adults around. There has been a coordinated effort to teach her to say thank you, which she is doing pretty well with, although in her case it comes out, "Thankem." But we all know that saying "thank you" is an important practice to learn. It is as important for us adults as it is for children. In fact, saying thank you is enormously important for us. Ephesians 5:20 says we should be "always giving thanks to God the Father for everything." You know how people say married couples should not use the words "never" and "always." Paul didn't hesitate to use the word "always" and then doubled down by tacking on the words, "for everything" at the end. It is hard to imagine how you could make a statement more encompassing than that one. We are to be giving thanks always, for everything. That means there is not a single thing that happens or a single moment that we should not be giving thanks to God! In 1 Thessalonians 5:18 Paul said giving thanks all the time is God's will for you! As we pause this week to celebrate Thanksgiving it seemed appropriate to take some time to think about giving thanks.

What are we supposed to be thankful for? Why should we give thanks? Let's think about those questions and see if we can get some insight from Psalm 118, which starts with the command, not a suggestion or recommendation, but a command, to

“give thanks to the Lord.” The Psalm includes some powerful reasons for giving thanks to God.

GIVE THANKS FOR HIS GOODNESS

Verse 1 starts with the simple command, “Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good.” God is good. That is his nature, and it is true of every part of him in everything he thinks and does. His goodness determines every single action he takes.

God is good in two crucial ways. First, he is morally good. Habakkuk 1:13 says to God, “Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrongdoing.” God is absolute, pure good. 1 John 1:5 says, “God is light, and in him there is no darkness at all.” This is crucial, for if there were even the slightest hint of a miniscule amount of evil in him, we could not really trust him. Many years ago our family had an extended vacation in Florida one summer. During that trip we visited Key West. While there we bought a couple of tee shirts at a shop. Several months later a charge showed up on our credit card statement for several hundred dollars. It showed we had purchased something in Key West, but we had not. I contacted the credit card company and they investigated. It turned out that the shop in Key West where we had bought the tee shirts had gone out of business. But before they did they used card numbers from past receipts to make fraudulent charges. They collected the money and disappeared. Ever since that has made me slightly uneasy when we are on vacation and buy something with the credit card at local, less well established places. It planted a seed of doubt. What if these people are not really good and trustworthy? That’s what it would do to us if God we’re not pure good, if there was any hint of evil in him. Because of his unlimited power any kind of evil at all, even for a fleeting instant, would have devastating effects. We can trust God and draw near to him because he is pure good.

This goodness means that he is always seeking to do good to people, for that is what goodness means. J. I. Packer wrote that God’s goodness includes generosity. He then said, “His generosity expresses the simple wish that others should have what they need to make them happy.” A. W. Tozer wrote that God “takes total pleasure in the happiness of his people.” I get that completely. All parents understand that they want good for their children whom they love. This is what God wants for us. It drives him continually, because he is true, pure good!

Psalm 119:68 says to God, “You are good and what you do is good.” God is good in the sense that he seeks our good and does good continually. James 1:17 says, “Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of

heavenly lights.” Every single good thing you have ever experienced has come right out of the goodness of God. The great Puritan, Stephen Charnock, in his book, *The Existence And Attributes of God*, wrote, “All created goodness is a rivulet from this fountain.” Every single good thing you’ve ever known is a gift that has come from God.

The greatest example of this is the fact that out of his goodness God sent his Son into the world to die on our behalf so that we might have life, that we might be loved by him. Jesus took on himself what we earned, so that we might have the priceless good that he deserves. This is the greatest evidence of God’s goodness, and it’s what makes us able to trust him. When Laurie was in her teen years she wasn’t much interested in God. She’d gone to church and heard some about God, but the whole church thing was super unattractive to her. She was pretty sure that God wanted to take any fun out of life. If she trusted him and gave her life to him he surely would make life miserable for her, quite possibly make her be the wife of a pastor or something, and that idea was repulsive. She wanted no part of it. But then she encountered Romans 8:32, which says God “did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all. How will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?” In other words, God has given you his Son. What good thing do you think he is going to keep from you? She realized he was indeed good, so she trusted him. And in less than 2 years she was the wife of a pastor!

You and I are inundated every day with gifts from God’s goodness. Just the fact that we are alive today is a gift of his goodness. That we are forgiven is a huge gift. That we have eternal life is worth more than anything else on this planet. But that we can see, hear, taste, have friends, see sunsets, flowers, the ocean, that we can enjoy music and good food, there is so much. One night this week Laurie and I stood on the lanai of the room where we were staying. It was a warm evening. We looked out at the ocean and could see the reflection of the moon on the water. It was spectacularly beautiful. It looked like a painting because it was so perfect. At one point as we were gazing at the amazing scene Laurie said, “God is so good.” She was exactly right. All of that beauty was a result of God’s goodness.

In his book, *The Holy Wild*, Mark Buchanan remembered an incident that happened to him in Uganda. He was there with a missions team. One Sunday evening they gathered with a group of 100 Ugandan Christians as they sang praises to God. Buchanan was not happy. They were on the edge of a cornfield under a lean to with a dirt floor. The music was terrible. He felt crummy from eating the terrible food. And he had been offended, hurt by a member of the missions team.

He wallowed in his misery as the Africans joyfully sang. Then the pastor asked if anyone wanted to share. One woman said, "I love Jesus so much. He is so good to me, I don't know how to tell you." But the crowd responded, "Tell us. Tell us about his goodness." She said, "He is so good. For 3 months I have prayed for shoes. And look." She picked up one foot. A very ordinary shoe covered it. She said, "He gave me shoes!" The Ugandans went wild, cheering. Buchanan wrote, "Not me. I was devastated...In an instant God snapped me out of my self pity...In all my life, I had not once prayed for shoes...And in all my life, I had not even once thanked God for the many, many shoes I had."

GIVE THANKS FOR HIS LOVE

Psalm 118:1 goes on and says we should give thanks because God loves us and his love endures forever. In other words, nothing can stop God from loving us. His love endures, even through our failures and weaknesses. He loves and he never stops loving.

It helps me to remember some history of God's love. God promised Israel they would be his people and he would be their God. They became slaves in Egypt and God did a long series of miracles to free them. Do you recall how they responded? Out in the wilderness they complained at every turn and at the first opportunity began worshiping an idol they made. Yet God did not give up on them. They finally got into the land he promised them and soon began imitating their pagan neighbors and worshiping other supposed gods. So God would have them experience the consequence of being raided and abused by other people. Then he would empower a leader to rescue them. They'd turn back to God and follow that leader until a victory was won, then they'd go right back to worshiping false gods. Over and over it happened, but God still loved them. Over the centuries they repeatedly trampled all over his covenant with them, but his love endured. Finally he sent his Son, the Messiah, to them, and they rejected and killed him! Still God has not given up on them. His love endures to this day, and that is unfathomable. We can't imagine loving a person that way. That's how God loves us!

Think of what it would be like if God's love did not endure forever. What if you had to be good enough to at least convince him to not stop loving you? What would life be like? It would be miserable. You would be under constant pressure and never be sure where you stood. You'd always be in danger of putting a foot wrong and having God said, "That's it. I'm done with you." You would live in constant fear and stress.

But God's love endures forever. Zephaniah 3:17 says the Lord, "will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing." Literally that says God rejoices over you with joy. Do you understand that when the Bible says God loves you it means that he delights in you, that he rejoices over you?

I have a vivid picture of what that means. Ella and Cara are truly precious, and Laurie and I delight in them. Neither of them are perfect. Both of them at times melt down and throw tantrums of selfishness. But they are still a delight. Ella's favorite movie is *Frozen*. Her favorite song is *Let It Go*. Recently when they were at Disneyland she visited with the two girls who were portraying the characters Elsa and Anna from that movie. Ella called them "Let It Go and Let It Go Sister." We watched the movie with them. When the scene came on where Elsa sings *Let It Go* Ella stood up and sang with her. The thing is, she doesn't know all the words. She mostly comes up with the last word of each line. And she can't really sing much yet. She sings that last word and only occasionally is on pitch. But she perfectly mimics the movements of Elsa as she sings. So what she does is not great art, but I love watching her. I delight in her. And that's how God feels about you. You are far from perfect and what you do may not be anything worthy of much praise, but he loves it.

The Bible tells us that God also sympathizes with us. His love is not a cold, aloof, calculating thing. He truly identifies with us. Jesus came here and experienced every single painful or difficult thing we will ever experience. He knew poverty, prejudice, racism, opposition, rejection, being mocked and laughed at, and ultimately physical pain beyond our comprehension. Because he loves you he made sure that he can feel every pain you have ever felt. He sympathizes with all your hurts. We should always give thanks for his love.

GIVE THANKS FOR HIS PRESENCE

Verse 6 says, "The Lord is with me; I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me?" Verse 8 says, "It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in humans." In verse 9 it says having the Lord with us is even better than trusting in powerful people like princes.

Jesus said he would be with us always. Do you believe this? He doesn't lie, so we know it's true. He goes with us everywhere. That is a powerful truth. That's the greatest thing that could ever happen. Mere mortals can't do anything to us that he

doesn't allow them to. They will be powerless against us, because he is infinitely more powerful than any human.

I have mentioned that I recently performed a wedding up in the redwoods. I had to fly to San Jose, rent a car, then drive to a place I've never been before. Then I had to drive to the wedding site that was in the middle of nowhere. And of course I had to do the rehearsal and the wedding, and basically I knew the couple getting married, the bride's mother and sister, and two other people. Everyone else there were strangers to me. Being a pastor at a wedding can be kind of an awkward deal. They have to have you there. You play a key role. The thing won't happen without you. But if most of the people don't know you, they are usually not interested in changing that circumstance. Few if any are thinking, "Wow, I'd really like to know that pastor guy." Some people, the true extroverts, will be just fine in a situation like that. I'm not a true extrovert. I usually feel out of place there. No one much wants to talk to me. Being alone in that kind of situation can be hard. But I didn't have to do it alone. Laurie went with me. And she likes to talk to me! I didn't have to find my way to these unfamiliar places all alone. Laurie and Google combined to be a lamp unto my feet. And I never felt awkward in the situation, because I got to be with her, and frankly, I'd rather be with her than with anyone else on the planet. She was with me, so that made the whole thing kind of fun.

Having God with us means we're never alone. His presence completely changes the situation. We don't need to fear or fret, because he is with us. We can be at peace no matter what happens, because if it's hard he will help us and strengthen us, if we feel lost he will direct us, and he will make sure that we get where he wants us to be. No one and nothing can keep him from working his good in our lives, no matter what they do. Isn't that reason to give thanks?

APPLICATION

WHY DOES GOD MAKE GIVING THANKS SO IMPORTANT?

Because it flips us from the negative to the positive.

I was thinking recently about a person I know who seems to always find the negative in everyone and everything. I realized that when that person is doing that it does not enhance my life. It focuses me on the negative and causes me to feel more discouraged. The most common state of humans is the state of complaint. People complain all the time. It is so rare to hear people talk about how much good they have in life. They are always harping on what they perceive to be wrong.

Writer David Brooks made an interesting observation in an article in the *New York Times* a couple of years ago. He said he is often happier when he is staying at a budget motel than when he is in a high end hotel. When he first noticed this he thought it odd, but then he figured out why it happens. When he stays at a really nice hotel he has certain expectations about the service and experience. If he has to crawl around to look for a power outlet, or if the shower controls are impossible to figure out, or if the place considers itself too fancy to put a coffee machine in the room, then he finds himself dissatisfied and getting a little grumpy about it. But at the budget motel he has few expectations. A functioning iron is a bonus and the waffle maker in the breakfast area is a delight.

He's right. It's all about expectations. We tend to have rather high expectations of how life should treat us. When they aren't met we get pretty grumpy. We complain. And all we do is drag our own spirit down. God wants us to give thanks because it flips our script. To give thanks we have to focus on the good that we experience. And the more we do that the more it will lift our spirits. We will begin more and more to be positive rather than negative.

Because it reminds us of who God is.

As we give thanks to God we are reminded of how much good God has given us. It focuses us on who he is. It reminds us that he is good, that he does love us, that he is with us, that he is powerful, that he is faithful, that he can be trusted. It reminds us that he is worthy of praise and worship, not complaint. It reminds us that he is the center of all things, not us.

Because it reminds us of who we are.

It reminds us, as I just said, that we are not the center of all things. It reminds us that we have been given unimaginable mercy and grace. It reminds us that we have not been given what we deserve, but been given huge gifts that we absolutely do not deserve. In short, it humbles us.

As we give thanks to God this is what it does for us. That causes us to be far less demanding, less self centered, more satisfied, and it makes us more gentle and patient with other people. It increases our joy. On our flight home from vacation we had what is for us an exceedingly rare treat. We got to fly first class. How that happened is a long story, but suffice it to say this was highly unusual. We've only done it once before, and that happened because the flight was overbooked and they were the only seats left. This was another circumstance where we both felt like we were pretending to be first class customers. Our experience has been that there is a

veil drawn between first class and steerage where we sit. First class is the Holy Place and unclean people like us are not allowed in. But it was a real treat. The airline people kept announcing that we needed to download the airline's entertainment app before the flight in order to access any entertainment options. As first class passengers we boarded first. I kept trying to download the app and it kept not working. I was getting frustrated because we had a 4 and a half hour flight ahead of us and really wanted something to watch. But it was getting close to departure and it was not looking good. So when a flight attendant brought me some orange juice I asked her what I needed to do to make it work. She said, "Don't worry about it. We make that announcement for the people in coach, but we are going to give you both iPads with everything already loaded on them, so you don't need to stress over it." It sort of had the tone of, "Those announcements are for the commoners in the back, not for you Nobles in first class. I turned to Laurie and said, "This is so cool." The truth about us is we are coach section kind of people. That's what we can afford. We can't afford to buy first class tickets when we travel. As we were getting off the airplane Laurie said, "You know, I don't think the other people in first class appreciated the things we had there as much as we did." She was right. We were thankful for every little perk, and it reminded us of how greatly blessed we were to have what we did. That's what giving thanks does for us. It reminds us that we are people incredibly blessed, who have not earned the blessings we have been given.

Because it is good for us.

The reason God commands us to do some things is because he loves us. It is because he wants us to experience good. Studies consistently show that people who are grateful are healthier than those who do not continually express gratitude. One study showed that grateful people have on average 23% less cortisol in their system than those who are not grateful. Given that cortisol plays a role in creating belly fat, that seems like a good thing.

A study at the University of Georgia of 468 married people looking at their marriages said that gratitude plays a big factor in creating a good marriage. Allan Barton, a researcher on the study, said, "the key to a happy and lasting marriage might be as simple as regularly expressing gratitude." The simple truth is there really is nothing that can more powerfully impact your spiritual health, your outlook, your joy and satisfaction in life than simply giving thanks on a continual basis. In everything give thanks always.

WHAT SHOULD WE DO?

It is pretty simple. Give thanks. Yes, by all means, this week when we observe the Thanksgiving holiday we should give thanks. But beyond that we should make it our habit of life. Scholar Peter O'Brien in one of his commentaries said that giving thanks pretty much sums up the Christian life. It is our right attitude and response to everything. And it is the motivation for everything we do as believers. As we give thanks we are continually reminded that we have already been given a great gift, and we don't need to and cannot earn it. It's already ours by grace.

To help you I would like to challenge you to practice giving thanks this week by every day taking 5 minutes at some point, the same time each day if possible, and write down 3 things you are thankful for. Make them specific. Thank you, Lord, for the amazing dinner we had last night. Thank you, Lord, for the hug from my child or grandchild. Thank you, Lord for the words of praise from a friend.

Here's something interesting that might motivate you. Shawn Achor, a psychology professor at Harvard, led a study in which they asked the subjects to do exactly what I have challenged you to do. Each day at the same time write down 3 specific things they were thankful for. They did a follow up with the subjects a month later. They discovered that those who did as they were asked were happier and less stressed than the control group. This was true even if they only did the gratitude thing for one week. It gets more interesting. They followed up again after 3 months and found that the grateful people were still happier and less anxious. They followed up once again at 6 months and found that those who had written down what they were grateful for were still happier, even if they'd only done it for 1 week! If you want to be happier and less stressed, and we all do, then practice giving thanks.

We were standing at baggage claim waiting for our luggage to be returned to us after our flight home. Once the bags started dumping out onto the carousel we didn't have to wait very long. Ours were some of the first to arrive. As I picked them up I noticed a red tag had been placed on each bag. The tags all said, "Priority." For all I know that could be like waving a red flag at a bull. Maybe it tells the baggage handlers to give it their own unique kind of special attention and vent their frustration at the first class fat cat that owns the bag. But the reality was our bags came out very quickly and when we left the baggage area the commoners were still standing around waiting for their bags. It was one last chance to be thankful. The amazing thing is you have a red tag on you that says priority, everywhere you go. God gives you his special attention and treatment. That's what this Psalm tells us. Let's never take anything for granted. Let's not be demanding

people who have ridiculously high expectations. Let's be people who are grateful and thankful for every little stream from the fountain of God's goodness.