

Giving thanks for steadfast love * Psalm 107

Thanksgiving * October 10, 2021 * Langford Community Church * Graham Gladstone

Since it is Thanksgiving today, I thought we would take a break from Genesis this week to do something a bit more 'Thanksgiving' specific. In the flow of Genesis, the next thing that we would naturally talk about would be Cain and Abel and that doesn't really strike me as a good 'Thanksgiving' topic – so, we're going to look together at Psalm 107 instead.

Why Psalm 107? Well, for one, Psalm 107 opens with the words 'Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good...' but not only that; Psalm 107 invites us to think about HOW God is good and invites us to reflect on our lives, to see the ways in which God is working in our lives. And it gives us a model, a template for how we too can give thanks for His goodness in our lives.

So let's turn together to Psalm 107 and think about how to give thanks on this Thanksgiving Sunday. Psalm 107.

Psalm 107 starts like this:

1 Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever.

That's a theme that you hear over and over in the OT; it's a basic tenet of faith for the people of God. If you're looking for a verse to memorize that sums up God's character – it's this. God is good. His steadfast love never ends. He is utterly committed to His people, to guide them, to guard them, to watch out for their wellbeing. That's the meaning of that word 'steadfast love' or 'loyal' or 'unfailing love' that you might have in your Bible. It's the Hebrew word *hesed* that you might have heard before and it means that God is committed in love to the wellbeing of His people forever.

And so it makes sense that we would thank Him for it. 'Give thanks to the LORD *FOR* He is good; since He is good, give thanks to the LORD.'

And that's what the psalmist calls us to in verse 2 -

2 Let the redeemed of the LORD say this-- those he redeemed from the hand of the foe,
3 those he gathered from the lands, from east and west, from north and south.

Do you remember just after 9/11, there was this slogan – 'if you see something, say something'? I kept thinking about that this week because that's what the psalmist says here – if you see the goodness of God expressed in your life, then say something. Give thanks! If you have been redeemed by God, then bear witness to it - that God is good and His steadfast love for His people endures forever.

Now we as followers of Jesus have been redeemed by the LORD and so this applies to us and I'll say more about that later, but in this psalm, 'the redeemed' has a very specific meaning.

Think back to last year at this time; we were talking about God's low fidelity people and God's hi-fi love for them. Because they disregarded God, they went into Exile in Babylon and suffered greatly. But eventually, sometime after Daniel's lifetime, the people of Israel were delivered from Exile. They are the ones that this psalm talks about, those who were 'redeemed from the hand of the foe,' and 'gathered up from north and south and east and west.'

And whoever wrote Psalm 107, wrote it down to remind them to say ‘thank You God for bringing us home from the Exile.’

To do that, the psalmist gives us four examples of what life was like for the Exiles, before and after God stepped in to rescue them. We get four vignettes that describe what was going on and the ways in which God redeemed His people and brought them home. You’re going to see some repeating themes here – let’s look at the vignettes one by one and see if you can spot the pattern.

Verse 4 - 4 Some wandered in desert wastelands, finding no way to a city where they could settle.

5 They were hungry and thirsty, and their lives ebbed away.

6 Then they cried out to the LORD in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress.

7 He led them by a straight way to a city where they could settle.

8 Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for men,

9 for he satisfies the thirsty and fills the hungry with good things.

Now the psalmist is being really clever here. He’s using the language of the Exodus years to describe the experience of the Exile years. Sure, the people were in Babylon, but it was just like they were in the desert with their ancestors, all those years ago. They felt like they were wandering, homeless and lost. They were hungry and thirsty and tired and exhausted, at the end of their rope.

And so what did they do?

6 Then they cried out to the LORD in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress.

I’ll bet them some of them were wondering whether or not God was with them in this. They looked at the circumstances and said ‘God must not be here if things are this bad’ – they let their circumstances drive them from God. Others though, the ones in verse 6, went the other way. They looked at their circumstances and said ‘Only God can help in this situation.’ And so they cried out to Him in their trouble. And He intervened and led them home, back to a place where they could settle in safety.

James Mays (a scholar that I respect for the psalms) points out that ‘What sets the *hesed* [‘steadfast love’] of the LORD in motion in every case is the cry to the LORD in trouble’ (Mays, *Psalms*, Interpretation series, 347). God hears their cries and He is moved to help.

And so what does the psalmist say they should do? Verse 8 -

8 Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for men,

9 for he satisfies the thirsty and fills the hungry with good things.

God heard their prayer and out of his steadfast love, He answered and delivered them. God’s unfailing love expressed in the lives of His people is reason to give thanks. That’s vignette 1; now let’s look at vignette 2 and keep your eyes open for some repeated themes.

Verse 10 –

10 Some sat in darkness and the deepest gloom, prisoners suffering in iron chains,

11 for they had rebelled against the words of God and despised the counsel of the Most High.

12 So he subjected them to bitter labor; they stumbled, and there was no one to help.

(This is a pretty clear reference to the Exile – God was utterly faithful to His people and yet His lo-fi people were faithless towards Him and so He said – ok, if that’s how it’s going to be, off you go – and so He let them be carried off into the darkness and gloom of Exile. It was like they were in the deepest of prisons.

But even then, He was still faithful, and when the faithless people dared to hope that maybe God was more faithful than them – Verse 12 -

13 Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and he saved them from their distress. (Sound familiar? And notice that even though they were the ones to blame for the Exile, the LORD heard their cry and was motivated to act with unfailing love towards His people).

14 He brought them out of darkness and the deepest gloom and broke away their chains.

15 Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for men,

16 for he breaks down gates of bronze and cuts through bars of iron.

Do you see what’s happening here? The psalmist is looking at the real life trials that people are going through and the ways that God worked in their lives to say ‘Look how God has expressed His love for you in these wonderful works in your lives.’ God’s unfailing love expressed in the lives of the redeemed is reason to give thanks.

Vignette #3 – Verse 17 - 17 Some became fools through their rebellious ways and suffered affliction because of their iniquities.

18 They loathed all food and drew near the gates of death. (Again, Exile language, but this time it seems to lead to sickness, because....)

19 Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and he saved them from their distress.

20 He sent forth his word and *healed them*; he rescued them from the grave.

21 Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for men.

22 Let them sacrifice thank offerings and tell of his works with songs of joy.

God’s unfailing love expressed in the lives of the redeemed is reason for thanksgiving.

Then vignette 4 – verse 23 - 23 Others went out on the sea in ships; they were merchants on the mighty waters.

24 They saw the works of the LORD, his wonderful deeds in the deep.

25 For he spoke and stirred up a tempest that lifted high the waves.

26 They mounted up to the heavens and went down to the depths; in their peril their courage melted away.

27 They reeled and staggered like drunken men; they were at their wits' end.

28 Then they cried out to the LORD in their trouble, and he brought them out of their distress.

29 He stilled the storm to a whisper; the waves of the sea were hushed. (You can see why Jesus’ calming the storm was such a big deal to the disciples, because this verse told them that God alone could still the sea).

30 They were glad when it grew calm, and he guided them to their desired haven.

31 Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for men.

32 Let them exalt him in the assembly of the people and praise him in the council of the elders.

(Psa 107:23-32 NIV).

Again, God's unfailing love expressed in the lives of the redeemed is reason for thanksgiving. They were in danger and they called out to the Lord; He did a wonderful work to redeem them and that calls for praise on the part of the people He has redeemed. God's unfailing love expressed in the lives of the redeemed is reason for thanksgiving.

The psalmist gives us a pretty clear model here for giving thanks.

First, he describes some dangerous situation that God's people are in. Lost in the desert, locked up in prison, sick to the point of death, overwhelmed by the storm at sea; the psalmist uses vivid language to describe the trouble the people were in.

Then we get that first theme. 28 Then they cried out to the LORD in their trouble, and he brought them out of their distress. That's a good lesson for us; when we get in over our heads, when we reach the end of our ropes; that's not the time to dig in our heels and say 'God helps those who help themselves;' it's the time to say – God, you alone can help, and I need your help.

And in each of these vignettes, He does. And we get some description of what His deliverance was like. He fed the wilderness people and gave them a home. He healed the afflicted and rescued them from death.

And then the all important second theme - 31 Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for men. The psalmist says – God has done something wonderful in your life as an expression of His commitment and love for you; give thanks for His love and His wonderful works.

And that's it. A model for giving thanks for the love of God expressed in your life.

Now there's more to the psalm, but I'm going to leave it here so that we can take this first part and apply it in our own lives. Because we too are redeemed by God. We haven't been exiled from our homeland, but certainly, sin has separated us from God. So let's apply this psalm and thank God for the way that He rescued us from sin. So what's first? The trouble.

All of us were dead in sin, following our selfish desires as they led us away from God. We were weak and heavy laden, loaded down with the burden of sin and the knowledge that we were made to be so much more.

And so we cried out to the LORD in our trouble, and he brought us out of our distress.

He sent His Son to die in our place, to reconcile us to God, to give us life and make us new. He lifted the burden of our sin and gave us the privilege of being sons and daughters of God, precious treasures in God's eyes.

So...

31 Let us give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds in our lives.

32 Let us live not for ourselves, but for Him who loved us enough to die for us. Let us fix our eyes on our Saviour and on the eternal life that He has freely given.

Let us give thanks to the Lord for His wonderful works in our lives.

Simple, right?

Let's try another one. Let's apply this to COVID-19.

When COVID-19 hit, we were stricken with fear, all too aware of an invisible killer on the loose. We made sacrifices and kept our distance and some of us even lost friends in the midst of it. So we cried out to the LORD in our trouble; we had no power to save ourselves. But He is bringing us out of our distress. He protected and guarded us; He maintained the food supply; He gave researchers insights and patterns in the created order to follow so that they could create a vaccine and then saw it roll out to the world, so that things are 'getting back to normal.'

Let us then give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love and His wonderful works in our lives. Let us praise Him for His healing hand and His unshakable commitment to us.

Let us give thanks to the Lord for His wonderful works in our lives.

God loves you and cares for you deeply. He expresses that love for you in a million little things every day and in big things too. So I want to give you a little homework to do on this Thanksgiving weekend. I want you to write your own vignette, thanking God for the way He's worked in your life.

You have the template there and there's a template online as well; I would love for you to fill that out, and I would love to be able to share some of them with the congregation next week. It's not hard; you don't need to be a poet. It's really a matter of looking and seeing the love of God expressed in your life.

So identify a difficult situation you've been in. Describe it in a sentence or two. Then theme one – they cried out to God – and maybe if you're in that situation right now, you need that reminder – cry out to God and invite Him to rescue you from distress. And when He does, write a couple sentences about how He did it, and then theme 2. Let us give thanks for His unfailing love and His wonderful work in our lives. And then a further 'let them' in light of what God has done.

God not only loves you with a steadfast love; He expresses that love in the details of your life; give thanks to the Lord for His steadfast love and the ways He works in your life.

Now just in closing, I wanted to share with you something I found through the 'Greater Good Science Center' at University of California, Berkeley. Researchers there have found the gratitude has four parts and I think that this psalm helps us get at them all.

According to the 'Raising Grateful Children' project, gratitude is made up of what we notice in our lives for which we can be thankful; how we THINK about why we've been given those things; how we FEEL about those things and what we DO to express appreciation in turn. What we NOTICE, how we THINK, how we FEEL and what we DO.

I think Psalm 107 helps us to get at this, because it calls us to slow down and NOTICE the wonderful works that God has done in our lives. It prompts us to think about why God has done those things and

how deeply He must care for us. Actually, the very last verse of this psalm, verse 43 says - 43 Whoever is wise, let him heed these things and consider the great love of the LORD. (Psa 107:43 NIV). We need to meditate on the faithfulness of God. And then we need to let that impact how we FEEL. Does the knowledge of God's love for you expressed in His wonderful works give you peace, joy, confidence? Let God's love for you affect your emotional state. And then DO. Give thanks. Be thankful. Notice the ways that God works and let what you do be an expression of thanksgiving for the way God's worked in your life.

Give thanks to the LORD for His steadfast love and His wonderful works in your life.

TEMPLATE

Identify a difficult situation you've been in. Describe it in a sentence or two.

Then we cried out to the LORD in our trouble, and he delivered us from our distress.

Describe in a sentence or two how God delivered you from distress.

8 Let us give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds in our lives.

In a sentence, how will you respond to this act of unfailing love?