

Psalm 107

Expressing Gratitude

**The redeemed give thanks to the Lord
because He is always good, loving and faithful**

In Scripture we read of many of God's people who marked their most significant experiences with poetry and song. Moses and Miriam lead the whole nation in celebrating the Exodus with a joyful song (Ex.15). When sterile Hanna is blessed with a child, she expresses her gratitude in a song (1Sam.2). When David hears about the death of his best friend Jonathan, he composes and sings a song of lament (2Sam.1). Kings and prophets write and sing songs. Mary, the mother of our Lord, expresses in a song her wonder at being chosen to bear the Messiah (Lk.1). How do you mark significant events in your life?

In the hallway of our home hangs a small board with the words: "Life moves pretty fast. If you don't stop and look around once in a while you could miss it". We bought that board because my wife and I often need that message. It is so easy to walk without enjoying the scenery, to eat without savouring the flavours, to talk without enjoying the relationship, to read without enjoying the new insight. Some call this fuller way of living 'mindfulness' – a way of living that enjoys the journey as much as arriving at the destination. The process of marking an experience by writing, painting, celebrating or creating something forces us to reflect on that experience. It is so easy to miss God's hand in the events of our daily life. In doing so, we have less reasons to be thankful. I notice that *thankful* people are usually *happier* people.

Psalm 107 starts with a clear call to all those who have been redeemed to recognize God's goodness in their life and the to express their gratitude (v.1-2). Must we *feel* thankful before we say 'thank you'? Expressing gratitude is an act of obedience. I notice that when I express gratitude in prayer or song that I often begin to *feel* more thankful! In this Psalm, which is a song, the singers reminded themselves that God had redeemed them from the hand of the foe, that He had gathered them from the East, West, North and South (v.3). It is not difficult to imagine this narrative, where many Jews are returning by road and by boat to Israel after years in exile. They have left much behind. Their journey must have been dangerous and exhausting. They arrive! For them, like for us today, it would be easy to focus on past accomplishments and what still needs to be done and miss God's involvement in their lives. If we don't see His hand, we shall not thank Him. We do not know who wrote this Psalm, but its timeless message is very relevant for us today: "see and rejoice" (v.42).

This Psalm is made up of 6 parts. The first part (v.1-3) is a call to see God's goodness and give Him thanks. The last part (v.33-43) is a call to see God's sovereign hand as He sometimes turns "the desert into pools of water and the parched ground into flowing springs" (v.35). Sometimes He does the opposite, turning "rivers into a desert, flowing springs into

thirsty ground” (v.33). These acts of sovereignty reflect God’s involvement in our world, sometimes an expression of His love and sometimes His judgement. Those who see or recognize God’s sovereign dealings with His creation are called ‘upright’ and ‘wise’ (v.42-43). The body of this Psalm consists of four stanzas. These are recognized because each consist of four movements: first a group of needy people are described, then these cry to the Lord, then the Lord delivers them, and each stanza then ends with a call to express gratitude. Let’s now look at each stanza in turn.

1. ‘My life lacks meaning and direction’ v.4-9

“Some wandered in desert wastelands, finding no way to a city where they could settle. They were hungry and thirsty, and their lives ebbed away”. In this first stanza the Psalmist could have been thinking of an historical event, such as when the Israelites wandered for many years through the desert after leaving Egypt. But this picture can also describe a human life that lacks purpose. Yes, we get up early and we go to bed late, we work hard, we play hard, we keep busy. In times of lockdown, sickness or forced stillness we may begin to wonder what our life is all about. We hunger and thirst for significance. Without becoming aware of this inner thirst we shall never seek the living water. “Then they cried out to the LORD in their trouble and he delivered them from their distress. He led them by a straight way to a city where they could settle”. Why does the world have so many troubles? Very few humans cry out to the Lord while trouble-free.

While chained in prison, the apostle Paul described the meaning and direction of his life like this: “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings... I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me” (Phil.3:10-12). That is what satisfied Paul’s thirst! You and I are willed, created, desired, loved, called and redeemed with a purpose. We are not created to wander aimlessly through desert wastelands: “For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (Eph.2:10). Our heavenly Father is interested in the way we live and in the choices we make. This fantastic truth is easy to forget. This stanza therefore ends with a call to express gratitude: “Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for men, for he satisfies the thirsty and fills the hungry with good things.” Perhaps right now is a good moment to thank the Lord for creating you, for being interested in you and for even preparing good works for you to do!

2. ‘I feel enslaved and lack hope’ v.10-16

In this second stanza the Psalmist could have been thinking of those Israelites taken into captivity. “Some sat in darkness and the deepest gloom, prisoners suffering in iron chains, for they had rebelled against the words of God and despised the counsel of the Most High. So he subjected them to bitter labour; they stumbled, and there was no-one to help.” This picture could also depict those who find themselves prisoners of alcohol, drugs, pornography, social media, growing debt, a religious group, social expectations or some other form of “iron chains”. Our own passions and pleasures can also enslave us (Tit. 3:3). God wants humans to be free to choose to love Him and to choose to live for His glory. Lack of freedom is always caused by sin - our own sin or the sin of others. If you have struggled for a long time, it is possible to lose hope, to think that your chains can never be broken.

In their desperation, the enslaved look upwards: “Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble and he saved them from their distress. He brought them out of darkness and the deepest gloom and broke away their chains.” The Lord Jesus put it this way: “I tell you the truth,

everyone who sins is a slave to sin... So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed" (John 8:34-36). With Jesus there is always hope. He invites us to come to Him. He is the only one that can break our chains and set us free - free to love, follow and serve Him. But once we taste some freedom, it is easy to follow our own dreams and serve other purposes. This second stanza therefore ends calling the redeemed to remember what He has done for them: "Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for men, for he breaks down gates of bronze and cuts through bars of iron."

3. 'I find happiness but it doesn't last' v.17-22

We humans, like sheep, can easily wander away from the good Shepherd. We become distracted or engrossed in secondary matters. But sometimes, like the prodigal son, we consciously choose to reject God or rebel against His will and authority. We think we know what life will make us happy. These are the type of people addressed in this third stanza. "Some became fools through their rebellious ways and suffered affliction because of their iniquities. They loathed all food and drew near the gates of death." It is easy to think that we can rebel and not live the consequences. But sin and death are always connected. They are inseparable like sun and warmth, or like water and wetness. Scripture is clear: when we sin, something always dies. It's a law. But some effects of sin may not be immediate. In his younger days, Moses enjoyed the good life of the upper classes in Egypt. It satisfied his soul for a couple of decades. But then his self-centred joy dried up. There came a day when he realised he had to make a decision. "He chose to be ill-treated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time. He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward" (Heb.11:25-26). Like drug use, the pleasure connected with sin is always temporal.

The third stanza is about those who have discovered this law. They feel depressed. They have lost even pleasure in eating. They found themselves "near the gates of death. Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and he saved them from their distress. He sent forth his word and healed them; he rescued them from the grave." Thankfully our God is a good God. He forgives the repentant. He heals the broken hearted. He redeems the slave. Is there some sin in your life that is limiting the joy and the blessing the Lord wants to give you? The "rebellious ways" never have a good destination. Recognize, confess and set right what is wrong. Turn to Him. There is healing in forgiveness! The stanza ends with a happy call: "Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for men. Let them sacrifice thank-offerings and tell of his works with songs of joy." With a healed heart they were able to sing the "songs of joy" again!

4. 'I am disillusioned and afraid' v.23-32

This fourth stanza is about a group of positive, adventurous business people. They have big dreams and are not afraid to take risks. "Others went out on the sea in ships; they were merchants on the mighty waters." Given how the stanza follows, some suggest that the Psalmist may be thinking of the sailors Jonah travelled with. "They saw the works of the LORD, his wonderful deeds in the deep. For he spoke and stirred up a tempest that lifted high the waves. They mounted up to the heavens and went down to the depths; in their peril their courage melted away. They reeled and staggered like drunken men; they were at their wits' end." The image of frightened men in a dangerous storm can also speak to those of us who set out with good plans for our life, dreams about studies, career, business, travel, friends, marriage, family, retirement... and as long as our expectations are being fulfilled we

feel that God is blessing us. It is easy to express trust in the Lord when the sea is calm and the winds are blowing in the right direction. In fact, in such times it is difficult to distinguish between trusting in the Lord and trusting in our own skills and cleverness. But the storms will come. We all experience those difficult moments when some of our dreams shatter, our courage melts, our simple theology does not match reality. We feel disillusioned and confused, like “drunken men” and sometimes even at our “wit’s end”. Have you been there? Perhaps somewhere close?

In their distress, these ship merchants turned their eyes away from their ropes and waves and looked upwards. “Then they cried out to the LORD in their trouble, and he brought them out of their distress. He stilled the storm to a whisper; the waves of the sea were hushed. They were glad when it grew calm, and he guided them to their desired haven.” We read of a similar story in the Gospels. When the disciples of the Lord Jesus felt their boat was sinking, they cried out, “Teacher, don’t you care if we drown?” In stressful moments, we can also doubt the goodness of the Master! After calming the storm, He asked His disciples, “Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?” (Mk. 4:38-41). Sometimes the Lord calms the storm. Sometimes He chooses to accompany us in what feels like an unending storm. Each journey provides us with an opportunity to know Him better, to trust Him more fully. But even after fearful storms and great deliverances, we are prone to forget and move on. This last stanza, like the other three, ends with the same call to express gratitude. “Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for men. Let them exalt him in the assembly of the people and praise him in the council of the elders.” Here the ship merchants are encouraged to express their gratitude together with others. Thankfulness spreads. Thankfulness unites!

Conclusion

The call to express gratitude found in Psalm 107 is regularly repeated in the New Testament. We Christians are called, for example, to “be *thankful*, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe”, to present our requests to God “with *thanksgiving*”, to be devoted to “prayer, being watchful and *thankful*”, to “sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with *gratitude* in your hearts to God”, to be “overflowing with *thankfulness*” (Heb.12:28; Phil.4:6; Col.2:7;3:16;4:2). And that not only when our prayers are being answered in the way we expect or when we feel that things are going well for us. “Give thanks,” writes the apostle Paul, “*in all circumstances*, for this is God’s will for you in Christ” (1Thes.5:18). What is God’s will for you in your current circumstance? Paul and Silas chose to thank and praise God while still in prison (Acts16:25). Is it now the time for you to express your gratitude by singing a hymn or composing a new song? Or by writing, painting or making something? Or by calling some friends or sharing a meal with others? Choosing to believe and embrace the fact that our Lord is always *good*, *loving* and *faithful* will help us give thanks even when living adverse circumstances. And as we *express* gratitude the *feeling* of gratitude will grow. And a grateful attitude, like a virus, is contagious!

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