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Thankfulness in the Heart of the Christian

Mark Baham¹

Israel's Psalmists worshipped Yahweh with heart and pen. The writers memorialized Yahweh's influence in their lives, recording passionate songs of praise and gratitude. They sang of the blessings that had been received both personally and as representatives of national Israel. The roadmap of thanksgiving and devotion recorded in the Psalter is an important reminder of the significance of genuine worship.

Among the poignant passages in the hymnbook of ancient Israel is the shepherd song of David. The beloved Psalm where he clings to the Lord in humility speaks powerfully: "He makes me to lie down in green pastures, He leads me beside the still waters. He restores my soul; He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake" (Ps. 23:2-3).² David's heart cry echoes across the centuries. The son of Jesse, the shepherd who became Israel's great king, the man God chose for his inner quality (1 Sam. 13:14), was able to recognize the gentle care of a shepherd in the Lord of the heavens. David observed his own life and could see the times where God had led him and cared for him. His thanksgiving to Yahweh marked his personality, guiding him.

The shepherd could recognize a shepherd's care. From his own context and life experience, David understood that there were some periods where he had been led beside quiet waters and where his own life had been restored by a gentle hand that was outside of himself. For an ancient warlord, a man acquainted with war and bloodshed for most of his adult life, to

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²Unless otherwise noted, all scriptural passages referenced are from the *New King James Version*.



acknowledge such tender need is profound. His thanksgiving is instructive to all who follow Yahweh.

Recognition of need, knowledge, and humility are enlightening. Teresa of Avila wrote: “self-knowledge is so important that, even if you were raised right up to the heavens . . . so long as we are on this earth, nothing matters more to us than humility.”³ A realistic and humble understanding of the relationship with an ultimate benefactor keeps perspective sharp. The Psalmist sang: “enter into His [Yahweh’s] gates with thanksgiving, and into His courts with praise. Be thankful to Him and bless His name” (Ps. 100:4). Genuine thankfulness cements appropriate behavior in connection with those to whom gratitude is owed. With the Christian’s deep indebtedness to Jesus Christ, true and heartfelt thankfulness should be a hallmark of the life of every believer.

Pondering Thankfulness

Gratitude is deeply ingrained in the human psyche. A humble attitude when receiving help is an appropriate response. Edward Hapham wrote that gratitude: “is an important dimension of life as we interact with one another in our everyday affairs . . . [it] is one of the building blocks of a civil and humane society.”⁴ It seems natural to acknowledge those to whom thanks is owed. Webster defined ‘thanks’ as “an acknowledgement of favor, gifts, or benefit.” Thankfulness is so instinctive in interpersonal relationships that when it is absent, the void is noteworthy. Thomas Aquinas wrote: “it is evident that a benefactor, as such, is cause to the beneficiary. Hence the natural order requires that he who has received a favor should, by repaying the favor, turn to his benefactor according to the mode of each . . . a man [or woman]

³Teresa of Avila, *Interior Castle*, 38.

⁴Edward J. Hapham, “Gratitude in the History of Ideas,” in *The Psychology of Gratitude*, ed. Robert A. Emmons and Michael E. McCullough, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 21.



owes his benefactor, as such, honor and reverence, since the latter stands to him in the relation of principle.”⁵ Among other things, thankfulness as a mindset is a bulwark against pride, greed, and ingratitude.

The words patron, servant, donor, recipient, parent, child, master, and subordinate classify some of the ways that human beings interact with each other. The interactions of human beings are complex and may take unexpected turns. The delicate balance of giving and receiving creates subtle expectations of behavior but relationships are ultimately buoyed by gratitude. Jonathan Edwards pointed out: “the Author of human nature has not only given affections to men, but has made them very much the spring of men’s [and women’s] actions.”⁷ Individuals communicate, collaborate, and connect in a variety of ways. Peter Liethart wrote: “from archaic Homeric times through classical Greece and beyond, it was common sense that *charis* [grace] would beget *charis*. That meant ‘favor begets favor,’ ‘pleasure begets pleasure,’ and also ‘gift begets gift.’ Not only the generous giver but also the grateful recipient was graceful, and gifts flowed from grace to grace.”⁸ The importance of a properly grateful attitude has been identified from ancient times, even without the benefit of modern psychology and physiology,¹⁰ and continues to be important today.

⁵Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II, Question 106, Article 3.

⁷Jonathan Edwards, *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections: In Three Parts* (Grand Rapids: Generic Freebook Publisher), Part I, II.2.

⁸Peter J. Liethart, *Gratitude: An Intellectual History* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2014), 20.

¹⁰There is much research into the physiological mechanisms behind emotional response. It appears that the heart is one of the centers of the emotions, of which gratitude is key. Rollin McCraty and Don Childre wrote: “Recent work in the relatively new field of neurocardiology has firmly established that the heart is a sensory organ and an information and processing center, with an extensive intrinsic nervous system sufficiently sophisticated to qualify as a ‘heart brain.’ Its circuitry enables it to learn, remember, and make functional decisions independent of cranial emotions.” Rollin McCraty and Don Childre, “The Grateful Heart: The Psychophysiology of Appreciation,” in *The Psychology of Gratitude*, ed. Robert A. Emmons and Michael E. McCullough, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 232.



The internal attitude of thanksgiving has made its presence felt in mankind's artistic expression. Thankfulness finds lasting representation not only in the worship of the faithful, but in the pen of the playwright and the verse of the poet. The Bard wrote: "I can no other answer make but thanks, and thanks; and ever thanks."¹¹ Thankfulness forms an expected refrain to the giving of gifts and favor both in art and in everyday life. The poet Anne Porter wrote: "Give praise with water, With storms of rain and thunder And the small rains that sparkle as they dry, And the faint floating ocean roar That fills the seaside villages, And the clear brooks that travel down the mountains."¹² The poet and the artist capture the elusive, often nuanced attitudes of thanksgiving powerfully.

Thankfulness in Scripture

The details of the struggles of national Israel and the characters in the Bible are instructive. Solomon Schimmel wrote: "Israel's gratitude to God for his beneficence and love is expected to generate fidelity to him, obedient fulfilment of his commandments, and reciprocal love of him."¹³ Remembering their expressions of need and thanksgiving for blessing in relationship with Yahweh teaches important lessons about how to relate to God. The Torah is a record of Yahweh's benevolence and His grace towards Abraham's descendants.¹⁴ The Christian Scripture takes the foundation of worship and thanksgiving established in ancient times and transforms it in a powerful way. The New Testament lays a structure for the new life inaugurated by the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. Joshua Choonmin Kang points out: "every experience and

¹¹William Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, Act III, Scene 3.

¹²Anne Porter, *Living Things*, (Hanover: Zoland Books, 2006), Poem: *A List of Praises*.

¹³Solomon Schimmel, "Gratitude in Judaism," in *The Psychology of Gratitude*, ed. Robert A. Emmons and Michael E. McCullough, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 39.

¹⁴The specific institution of the relationship between Abram, his seed, and Yahweh can be found in Genesis, Chapter 12 and following. That it is a relationship of mutual covenant is a complex issue in and of itself and is beyond the scope of this writing.



incident can be an opportunity for discovery and understanding. Sufferings make life hard, but they can be very good teachers.”¹⁵ The expressions of the human nature of the biblical characters look very much like the people that you may meet on the street today. Their situations, failings, and successes reflect the normalcy of real people living real lives.

The faithful returned to Yahweh when they were faced with difficult and tumultuous situations.¹⁶ Qoheleth wrote: “in all your ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct your paths” (Prov. 3:6). The Hebrews recognized that Yahweh had rescued national Israel in the past¹⁷ and that realization motivated an enduring attitude of thanksgiving among the faithful. Paul the apostle, intimately acquainted with the ways that Yahweh had blessed Israel, wrote to a struggling congregation: “be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God” (Phil. 4:6). An acknowledgement of Yahweh and an appreciative mindset in the Hebrew people was critical to a proper relationship with their God. The prophet Micah wrote: “He has shown you, O man, what is good: and what does the Lord require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8)? Keeping Yahweh’s blessings before Israel’s eyes and establishing a structure for regular thanksgiving and praise was a restraint to the people. For the faithful, temple worship kept them from pursuing the false gods of the cultures around them.

¹⁵Joshua Choonmin Kang, *Spirituality of Gratitude: The Unexpected Blessings of Thankfulness* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2015), 61.

¹⁶Ravi Zacharias wrote: “All of life is a version of wandering in the wilderness so that we may discover that we do not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God and that, no matter the trial, he will guard and protect us with the values that are confirmed in his character.” Ravi Zacharias and Vince Vitale, *Jesus Among Secular Gods: The Countercultural Claims of Christ* (New York: FaithWords, 2017), 179.

¹⁷The recitation of the circumstances of their rescue from slavery in Egypt became a refrain in many of the Jewish ceremonies and yearly feasts. The Passover celebration includes liturgies that recall Yahweh’s divine providence and grace to the people of Israel. The rehearsing of the salvation experience that marked national Israel was an important touchstone that has endured into the modern Passover Seder.



The Torah implemented a system of physical devotion that assisted the ancient Hebrews in maintaining their relationship with Yahweh. After they reached the Promised Land the sacrificial system reminded them of where they had come from and what they had to endure on the way to blessing. Willem VanGemeran wrote:

The OT practice of bringing offerings and sacrifices was carefully regulated . . . the prescriptions were to teach Israel that (1) God has ordained ways in which to approach him; (2) because of sin and guilt, one cannot freely approach the Lord; (3) all that one possesses has been received by from the Lord, and consequently one owes continual recognition to the Lord for his mercies.¹⁸

The sacrifices, offerings, feasts, and festivals provided a physical manifestation of an inner devotion to Yahweh. These acts provided a standard, a kind of ancient sacrament, that aided the Hebrews in right relation to Yahweh. The requirement that each Israelite return to Jerusalem and perform their obedience was an important unifying force in Israel, providing continuity from the years of wandering in the past.

The ministry of Jesus added profound dimension to the relationship between mankind and Yahweh. Jesus pointed out that he had not come to abolish the old systems of approaching the holiness of God, but to fulfill the intent to which they had been pointing. He said: “God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth” (John 4:24). The Torah alluded to a profound intimacy between Yahweh and Israel by implementing a cyclical system whereby the imperfect could approach the divine in thanksgiving and gratitude. Jesus bridged that gap with his sacrifice. The significance of the tearing of the veil in the temple (Matt. 27:51) during the crucifixion narrative is addressed by the writer to the Hebrews: “therefore brethren, having boldness to enter the holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which he

¹⁸Willem A. VanGemeran, “Offerings and Sacrifices,” in *The Evangelical Dictionary of Theology 3rd Edition*, ed. Daniel J. Treier and Walter A. Elwell, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017): 610.



consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, his flesh” (Heb. 10:19-20). The sacrifice for the payment of the sin debt of humanity was satisfied by Jesus Christ at the cross.

The shed blood of Christ replaces the blood of sheep, bulls, doves, and goats forever. The sacrificial system found its ultimate culmination at Golgotha. There is no longer a requirement to bring blood to the altar to have right communion with Yahweh. The seat of that communion has moved from the external ceremony in Jerusalem, the center of Hebrew life, to the internal devotion in the heart of every follower of Jesus.¹⁹ Aquinas wrote: “humility, insofar as it is a virtue, conveys the notion of a praiseworthy self-abasement to the lowest place . . . this is done by an inward movement of the soul, and in this way, properly speaking, humility is reckoned a virtue, because virtue does not consist of externals, but chiefly in the inward choices of the mind.”²⁰ According to Jesus, it is the humble and pure heart that will be able to truly witness the grace of God (see Matt. 5:8). That humility and purity can be seen in thankfulness to the God from whom grace has been received.

Thankfulness in the Life of the Christian

The Christian should not be searching for the physical handout of a corporeal benefactor in response to a good deed. The relationship between the follower of Christ and their Heavenly Father is not one of direct physical reciprocity.²¹ Instead, it is one of grace given out of proportion to the sinfulness of mankind. The Psalmist wrote: “though the Lord is on high, yet he regards the lowly; but the proud he knows from afar” (Ps. 138:6). Daniel Estes wrote: “in

¹⁹The New Testament ministry of the apostles following Jesus’ resurrection made it clear that the relationship that Yahweh had inaugurated with national Israel in the days of the Torah was forever expanded to the Gentiles under the New Covenant. The apostles Peter and Paul both saw great success in ministry to the nations outside of Israel.

²⁰Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II, Question 161, Article 1.

²¹Hapham wrote: “the ideal model of a giver is God, who bestows his many gifts upon mankind with no thought of any return. Because God needs nothing, when he bestows a benefit he is only concerned with the advantage of the recipient.” Hapham, *Gratitude*, 24.



contrast to many powerful humans who disregard people in desperate need, Yahweh's exalted glory does not blind him to the needy."²² The relationship between grace, humility in the heart of the Christian, and gratitude in the life of the follower is one of the defining aspects of the Christian walk. Lisa Fullam amplified this idea: "humility is truth simply, and it is the imitation of Christ and it is the foundation of the whole edifice of prayer. It is the virtue that should be avidly pursued by deliberate practice, but it is also pure unmerited gift- it is God's first gift to those who pray."²³ The Psalmist echoed this thought: "but you [Yahweh] are holy; enthroned in the praises of Israel" (Ps. 22:3).²⁴ The profound intimacy of the devotional relationship takes place in the deepest seats of emotion through the vehicle of the believer's thanksgiving and acknowledgement of God's blessing.

The truth of an individual's relationship with God will be partially revealed in their attitude toward his blessings. Whether the follower of Christ thinks that the blessing is deserved or if they are thankful for the grace of God on them as undeserving, their attitude will betray them. Speaking of the various visible outworkings of a true relationship with God which he calls 'true religion,' Edwards wrote: "another affection often mentioned [in Scripture], as that in the exercise of which much of true religion appears, is gratitude; especially as exercised in

²²Daniel J. Estes, *Handbook of the Wisdom Books and Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 164.

²³Lisa Fullam, "Teresa of Avila's Liberative Humility," *Journal of Moral Theology* 3, no. 1 (January 2014): 180.

²⁴This is a beautifully applicable picture of the nature of praise. Israel praised Yahweh and for them, he was enthroned in that praise. The same is true of the praises and thanksgiving of the Christ follower. The poetry of the Psalms gives voice to the emotion that the worshipper feels in a way that very little else can accomplish. Estes explains it well: "there are aspects of the human experience, and aspects of the knowledge of God, for which the mundane language of prose cannot provide adequate expression. Poetry is, among other things, an attempt to transcend the limitations of normal (prosaic) human language." Estes, *Wisdom Books and Psalms*, 144.



thankfulness and praise to God.”²⁵ Gratitude and thankfulness focus the eyes on a proper point of view when regarding the God of Heaven.

The follower of Christ brings nothing of value to the transaction beyond praise and thanksgiving. Martin Luther wrote:

Now since: all that we possess, and, moreover, whatever, in addition, is in heaven and upon the earth, is daily given, preserved, and kept for us by God, it is readily inferred and concluded that it is our duty to love, praise, and thank him for it without ceasing, and, in short, to serve him with all these things.²⁶

An appropriate basis is essential when approaching God. The believer brings nothing to God that was not already his.²⁷ All that the worshipper can bring is the content of their praise, their emotional reaction to the grace of God. VanGemeran pointed out: “the prophets often called for obedience rather than sacrifices, for praise of the Lord rather than offerings, and for humility.”²⁸ The response of the believer is at once powerful and simple.²⁹ All that God requires of the believer, based on Scripture, is humility and an acknowledgement of the grace and blessing that they have received.

The life of the believer is one of thanksgiving. The attitude of humility and an awareness of the presence and blessing of Yahweh should temper the follower of Christ’s every action. Estes pointed out: “in contrast to the inconsistencies that typified the false deities of the ancient

²⁵Edwards, *Religious Affections*, Part I, II.4.

²⁶Martin Luther, *The Large Catechism*, The Apostle’s Creed, 1st Article.

²⁷The apostle Paul addressed the depraved condition of the human heart: “for I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find” (Rom. 7:18). Coupled to this are the words of the Psalmist, who recorded the futility of whatever humanity might try to bring to Yahweh: “I [Yahweh] will not take a bull from your house, nor goats out of your folds. For every beast in the forest is mine, and the cattle on a thousand hills. I know all the birds of the mountains, and the wild beasts of the field are mine” (Ps. 50:9-11). What could a human being bring to such a Deity? What does He need from us?

²⁸VanGemeran, *Offerings and Sacrifices*, 610.

²⁹Psalm 51 is a magnificent and moving picture of the repentance of David and the restoration of Yahweh through Nathan.



world [and our ‘idols’ today]³⁰, Yahweh has exalted his name and his word to a transcendent position.”³¹ Thanksgiving creates a stable foundation upon which to build the rest of the follower’s relationship to God.

The human was designed to be in relationship with God. Spero wrote: “the very act of creation must be seen as an act of lovingkindness on the part of God who lacks nothing. He brings into existence something that is described as ‘very good’ because to be good includes doing good for others.”³² God has created this environment and he populates it with blessings and trials that help the believer grow in their relationship with him.

Thanksgiving is the appropriate reaction to the benefits that God brings to our lives. Thanksgiving is also the appropriate reaction, although painful, counterintuitive, and not altogether coherent from our point of view, to the trials and the difficulties that humanity faces regularly. Brother Paul pointed out: “we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to his purpose” (Rom. 8:28). Like a mosaic, the benefits and the suffering, the blessings and the trials, all provide little bits of colored tile that fit together to show the grand design that he is working out in our lives. It is thanksgiving that helps us see that picture.

³⁰What is it that drives you? What aspect of your life is in command of your affections and your reactions? In the current political climate, does your internal mood and overall attitude change with the latest crisis? Could this be an indication that something external, something other than Jesus Christ, is your most important focus? This author is guilty of this very failing, as the secular world has very strong allurements and it is a daily struggle to reorient myself to the compass needle that points over Jordan to my heavenly home.

³¹Estes, *Wisdom Books and Psalms*, 164.

³²Schubert Spero, “Serving God out of Gratitude,” *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 37, no. 3 (July 2009): 194.



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