

9.8.24

If You Desire Life, Do This

Psalm 34:1-22

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This past week I was in Omaha, Nebraska for three days of meetings with the Executive Committee of the American Baptist Churches Board of General Ministries which I serve as Chaplain. We met in Omaha because that's where the next ABCUSA Biennial Mission Summit will take place July 3-6, 2025, and part of our time was spent touring the convention center and envisioning where everything will take place. I took it as a good omen when I walked into my hotel room on Wednesday evening, and this was the view I had (show photo). I was looking right at Charles Schwab Stadium, the home of the NCAA Men's College World Series. Having been to Omaha, I'm excited about returning for the Biennial next year with Jill, and our son Greg and his family, and anyone from BBC who chooses to go and experience the large family reunion that is our ABCUSA family gathering for worship, fellowship, and inspiration.

Today we're continuing our series on *End of Summer Songs* from the Book of Psalms by learning from Psalm 34, and it is still technically summer even though Labor Day has passed, and school has resumed. Psalm 34 is an **acrostic** which means if it had been written in English the first line would have started with the letter A, the second with B, the third with C, until the last would start with Z. In English it would be a 26-line poem. In Hebrew there are 22 letters in the alphabet so there are 22 verses in this psalm. Psalm 34, like all the Psalms we've heard from these last three weeks, could be examined for 8-10 weeks and we wouldn't exhaust all it has to teach. My focus for today shifted a bit as I was preparing, and I'm going to focus this morning on **lighting the flame of the thankfulness.**

There are a couple of magic words that are among the first we're taught, they are...*"Please,"* and *"Thank you."* *"Please"* is a word we use when making a request. *"Thank you"* is a phrase we speak when we've received something, when a request has been granted or a kindness has been done. We say *"Thank you"* when we're thankful for someone or something. ***"Saying thank you is more than good manners. It is good spirituality."* Alfred Painter**

I like the movie *Groundhog Day* and in it, Bill Murray's character is stuck in Punxsutawney PA reliving Groundhog Day over and over. In one scene he makes sure

he arrives at the same place every day just in time to catch a boy who falls out of a tree he's climbing. Murray catches him, and the kid runs away. Murray yells after him, **"You have never once thanked me!"** And reaches for his aching back and says, *"See you tomorrow...maybe."* I wonder if the Lord feels like that sometimes. When we keep falling out of trees and the Lord keeps showing up to catch us, do we remember to say, *"Thank you."*

I grew up with the family motto, *"Do good and forget it."* But the truth is, when we do something good, we like to be thanked for it. I'm not saying that's right or the way it should be, I just know it's true, at least for me, much of the time. For example, when you kindly let someone make a turn or merge in summer traffic, you wait for a wave of thanks or gratitude, like a seagull waiting for a French fry outside a clam shack. We hunger for it. When someone waves and smiles and is grateful, we're happy we made them happy. When they ignore us and don't even acknowledge our kindness, we're still happy we made them happy...well actually sometimes we aren't, sometimes we're disappointed or even a little upset. I mean for goodness sake, how much time and effort does it take to wave and say, *"Thank you!"* **"Feeling gratitude and not expressing it is like wrapping a present and not giving it."** -William Arthur Ward

Human nature is such, that we want people to be appropriately grateful and thankful to us and we're sometimes hurt when they aren't, yet we also frequently fall short in thanking others for what they do for us. This same dynamic is also at work in our relationship with God and it's illustrated in the Book of Psalms in an interesting way. Fully about a third of the Psalms in our Bible, **close to 50, are laments**, they're complaints, they're requests, they're, *"Please, God..."* How many of the psalms are Individual Psalms of Thanksgiving, are basically, *"Thank you, God."* Only **10** out of 150. So, in a sense, in the Psalms, **people are four to five times more likely to ask God for something or to complain than to thank God for having responded.**

Do we imagine God to be that different from ourselves when it comes to being thanked? God loves to hear, "Thank you," just as much as we do, perhaps even more, because the Lord hears "please" a whole lot more than we can imagine. In the movie *Bruce Almighty* Jim Carrey's character gets to see what it is like to be in God's position, and he's overwhelmed by all the prayers asking for help. There aren't many "Thank you"

prayers filling his inbox. What about you? What would you say your ratio of “Please, God” prayers to “Thank you, Lord,” prayers is right now? Is there room for you to grow in expressing thanksgiving and gratitude, to have a little more balance in your prayer life and your attitude?

**The Psalms teach us our response to God’s presence, guidance, comfort, and deliverance is thanksgiving, praise, and gratitude.** God gives you a gift of 86,400 seconds every day. Have you used one to say, “thank you?” **Meister Eckhart wrote centuries ago, “If the only prayer you said in your whole life was, “thank you,” that would suffice.”**

Psalm 34 is a psalm of thanksgiving for deliverance from trouble. It’s saying, “Thank you, Lord.” We pick it up at verse 11.

- 11 Come, O children, listen to me; I will teach you **the fear of the Lord.**
- 12 **Which of you desires life, and covets many days to enjoy good?**
- 13 **Keep your tongue from evil, and your lips from speaking deceit.**
- 14 **Depart from evil, and do good; seek peace, and pursue it.**

A world without thankfulness would not be a world any of us would want to live in. It would be awful. John Henry Jowett (1864-1923) an excellent preacher at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries wrote,

**“Life without thankfulness is devoid of love and passion.**

**Hope without thankfulness is lacking in fine perception.**

**Faith without thankfulness lacks strength and fortitude. Every virtue divorced from thankfulness is maimed and limps along the spiritual road.”**

Thankfulness adds love, passion, perceptiveness, strength, and fortitude to our life, hope, and faith and enables us to move confidently along the spiritual road of life. We see this described in Psalm 34 which begins, **“I will bless the Lord at all times; his praise shall continually be in my mouth.”**

Is this our practice? Do we find this easy to do? Of course not. There are times in life when our first thought is not going to be “Thanks, God.” When someone we love dies, when our hopes are dashed, when a relationship ends, when a loved one is struggling and we can’t help them with their issues or choices, when we face financial circumstances that don’t add up, when we’re in pain, when our body doesn’t work like it

used to – these are just a few situations where it can be difficult to thank the Lord. Yet choosing to look at life through eyes of thankfulness will color our perspective even in those difficult moments.

When I was a young child one of the coolest things to get was a new box of Crayola Crayons. You'd open it and there were all these bright shiny colors all sharp and brand new just waiting to be used. A friend wrestling with challenging circumstances wrote me saying, "If the good and bad "things" of life are like colors, most of us may need a little help to be grateful for the whole spectrum...and help for our eyes to see the bright colors and the good even when it appears there are none; when we don't "see" anything to be grateful for; when life hurts and each day seems to hurt more; when there are too many curveballs and it feels dark and lonely. There is "good" all the time, even when we feel good is invisible and we are experiencing so much hard stuff, we are unable to see past it."

Gratitude and thankfulness expressed continually, changes and colors how we see the world because our focus is on what is good rather than what is bad, on what we have rather than on what we lack, on what we can still look forward to rather than on what we have lost. What do you see when you open the box of crayons that is your life? Where is your eye drawn? What do you focus on?

Psalms 34 acknowledges that even if we fear the Lord, even if we seek to have a relationship with God and to be good, godly women and men there will be challenging times. We will have "fears, troubles, and afflictions." There will be times when we're broken hearted or crushed in spirit, yet the Lord will be near us in our troubles and fears. Verse 8 is a favorite of mine, "***O taste and see that the Lord is good; happy are those who take refuge in him.***"

How does one taste the Lord – that sounds a little strange doesn't it? The phrase, "taste and see" is trying to convey **the importance of religious experience.** Can God comfort us in our sorrow? Try the Lord and see. Can God give us victory over sin? Try the Lord and see. Can God deliver us from our fears? Try the Lord and see. Taste and see, means, try the Lord and see if God is faithful as the Lord says.

When we can say, *"I turned to the Lord and this is what God did for me,"* that strengthens our faith and the faith of other people. It lights the flame of thankfulness. **G.K. Chesterton wrote, "I would maintain that thanks are the highest form of thought; and that gratitude is happiness doubled by wonder."** Thankfulness and gratitude tend to be infectious as are ingratitude and thanklessness. Maybe it takes more effort to work at being thankful and expressing gratitude, but it feels better, and it makes us much more pleasant to be around. We don't want to give the impression that we work for the international conglomerate Thanklessness Incorporated, whose purpose is to stamp out feelings and expressions of gratitude and thankfulness and instead go through life grumping, complaining, and taking good things for granted. Numerous passages in the Bible tell us some people choose to live that way (Exodus 17:1-7; Numbers 20:1-17; Psalm 95:7b-11; Psalm 106:32-33; 1 Corinthians 10:9-11), but the scriptures teach us that should not be our way of life. We're to be people of praise, thankfulness, and gratitude. The importance and power behind expressing heartfelt gratitude for the many blessings in life that are often overlooked and taken for granted is hard to overstate. Choosing a consistent focus of heartfelt gratitude and appreciation elevates and enhances the quality of our life.

Psalm 34:12 is a rhetorical question, ***"Which of you desires life, and covets many days to enjoy good?"*** The answer to that question is **most people** would like to have many years to enjoy a good, full, and contented life. We've had so many people celebrating significant birthdays at church recently including Jeannette Louth turning 100 yesterday, Dud Blanchard, Kathy Estes, and Bob Lindquist just to name a few people have been blessed with many days to enjoy good and we're grateful for all who get to experience that. We wish it were true for everyone.

In answering the question in verse 12, like many passages in the Hebrew Bible verses 13 and 14 affirm the belief that **worship without obedience is not pleasing to God**. It says if you want to have a good and long life, then live obediently. ***"Keep your tongue from evil, and your lips from speaking deceit. Depart from evil, and do good; seek peace, and pursue it."*** This speaks to three areas of our behavior and our ethics – our speech, our actions, and making peace a priority. Will Rogers said, ***"So live that you would not be ashamed to sell the family parrot to the town gossip."***

Perhaps it would be helpful to write Psalm 34:13-14 on a Post It note and to keep it on whatever device you use to go online or to send emails and post to social media, so you see it every time you go to post or send something. It might be a helpful reminder.

Psalm 34 speaks repeatedly about the importance of the fear of the Lord, regarding the Lord with the awe and respect that God deserves – which motivates us to live as God desires and to draw near to our Creator. Verses 9-10 say, *“Those who fear him **have no want**...those who seek the Lord **lack no good thing**.”* We must confess that is not a realistic picture of life - there are millions of Christians around the world who fear the Lord yet face poverty, hunger, and homelessness. Those verses are balanced by verse 19 that states directly, *“Many are the afflictions of the righteous.”* Regardless of our circumstances our hope lies in the same kind of trusting, thankful faith in God that Psalm 34 expresses. Concentration camp survivor and Nobel Prize winner Elie Wiesel wrote, *“**No one is as capable of gratitude as one who has emerged from the kingdom of night.**”* When thanksgiving and gratitude are shared, they encourage those who are still in the darkness of “night.” **Albert Schweitzer said, “At times our own light goes out and is rekindled by a spark from another person. Each of us has cause to think with deep gratitude of those who have lit the flame within us.”**

The fact that the Bible says so much about how we are to live tells us that our lives on earth are crucially important and each life impacts so many other lives. Author George Bernard Shaw wrote, *“I am convinced that **my life belongs to the whole community**; and as long as I live, it is my privilege to do for it what I can, for the harder I work **the more I live. I rejoice in life for its own sake. Life is no brief candle for me. It is a sort of splendid torch which I got hold of for a moment, and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before turning it over to future generations.**”*

Psalm 34 is a song of thankfulness that seeks to **light the flame of thankfulness** in each of us reminding us how expressing gratitude helps us, encourages others, and pleases the Lord. 19<sup>th</sup> century American preacher Henry Ward Beecher put it well, *“**Gratitude is the fairest blossom which springs from the soul.**”* **Blessing:** *“Be such a man (or woman), and live such a life, that if every man (or woman) were such as you, and every life a life like yours, this earth would be God’s paradise.”* Phillips Brooks

### Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. What does it mean to bless the Lord “at all times?” How is this possible? Why is corporate praise and worship important?
2. Psalm 34 is a Psalm of David, and the title of the psalm mentions a specific moment in his life. What kind of fears may David have been facing at this time? What fears are you facing?
3. Is there a time in your life or a moment when God delivered you from a fear or circumstance?
4. “How do we taste and see that the Lord is good” (Psalm 34:8)? Why is experiencing God important to a life of trust and faith?
5. What does Psalm 34 say we should do if we desire a good life? What connection do you see between how we speak, doing good or evil, and seeking and pursuing peace?
6. How does the Lord comfort the brokenhearted and save the crushed in spirit? Has there been a time in your life when you experienced this?
7. What does it mean for the Lord to be a refuge for us?