

Thanks for our God
I Chronicles 16

We Americans have so many reasons to give thanks during this season, don't we? Yes, our economy is sputtering, after many years of steady growth. But however slow things might be for us, the US economy is still larger than the next four largest economies in the world combined. We may not be as wealthy as we once were, but we still have plenty. Most of us have never known what it's like to wonder where our next meal is coming from. Of course we should pause during this season to thank God for all our blessings.

David also had lots of reasons to give thanks. After years of his own wilderness wanderings in which King Saul was trying to kill him, David had finally been recognized as the king over all Israel. Moreover, the Ark of the Covenant, which had been captured by the Philistines in battle many years before, had been restored to its rightful place in the Tabernacle of the Lord. And the Ark and the Tabernacle had both been brought into the City of David, symbolizing God's presence with and support of David and his dynasty. What a wonderful occasion for David to write a psalm of thanks!

But what a strange sort of thanksgiving psalm this is. If we Americans were writing a song of thanks to God, it would probably sound more like "America the Beautiful." We would talk about the spacious skies and the amber waves of grain and the purple mountain majesties. In Mississippi, of course, we would probably sing of the white fields of cotton and the ponds brimming with catfish. In our more elevated moments, we might go on to give God thanks for our freedoms, especially the freedom to worship. And in this thanksgiving season, we might thank God for the sacrifices of our ancestors which made so much of our wealth and freedom possible.

But David's thanksgiving psalm doesn't focus on these sorts of things. Yes, he mentions his ancestors, but not because they were heroes. In verses 20-22, they are simply wanderers in the wilderness on their way to the promised land. In verses 16-17, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob appear only as recipients of God's promise.

And what about the beauty and the bounty of the promised land? There's nary a peep about the milk and honey, or the green pastures or the still waters or anything else. The only beauty David mentions is the beauty of holiness in which God's people should worship Him.

For that's the whole point of this psalm, after all. It's not about us, or even about the things God has given us. It's about God. First and foremost, it's about Who God is. Secondly, it's about what God does. And it's only thirdly about how we respond to God and His mighty acts. David thus shows us how we should give thanks – in a God-centered way.

So who is this God to whom we should give thanks? In verses 10 and 35, at both the beginning and the end of the psalm, David says that God's very name is holy. That means God is high and lifted up, separate from the world. But it also means that God is perfectly pure, separate from sin, set apart from anything that is contrary to God's will.

Moreover, David says in verse 11, that God is strong. He is mighty and powerful, and nothing is too hard for Him. It's no wonder then that in verse 25 we learn that God is great both in extent and in importance. So of course in verse 24 David says God has great glory and splendor, that He should receive honor everywhere in the world.

So, think about it. God is pure and powerful. God is great and glorious. Given our own weakness, it is therefore obvious that we should fear God, as verse 25 says. In fact, as verse 30 says, the whole earth should tremble in the presence of the One Who made the heavens, the One Who spoke everything that is into existence with but a word. Surely such power and might are worthy of our awe and respect, and even our fear.

So, given God's awesome purity and power, given God's fearful greatness and glory, and given how reasonable our fear in God's presence would be, why shouldn't we just run away from God? Knowing what we know about God, why should we instead come before Him, giving Him thanks and praise? Because of something else we know about our God. Look at verse 34. Yes, God is strong and mighty, but we give thanks to the Lord because He is also good and kind.

That's why David spends a good portion of this psalm talking about his ancestors in verses 15-22. It's not because David's ancestors were so great, or so faithful. David mentions Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob because God made promises to them and because God kept those promises. The way God dealt with David's ancestors showed David so clearly that God is good.

Think about it. God made an oath to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, a solemn promise that their descendants would have a Promised Land, a place to call their own. Neither Abraham, Isaac, nor Jacob ever saw the fulfillment of that promise. Yes, they lived in the promised land, but not as landowners. All their lives they were strangers in the land, surrounded by people who didn't know the true God or love Him.

But God did keep His promise to the patriarchs. As their descendants in David's day stood before the Ark of the Covenant and the Tabernacle of God, they saw that God's promises had been fulfilled. In fact, every day that they lived and worked in the land which God had promised their ancestors, they were demonstrating the truth of God's Word. Thus, David and the other people who worshipped God with him were living proof of God's faithfulness. So of course they were thankful for the land in which they lived. But they were even more thankful for the faithful and good God Who had given it to them.

This is why David can rejoice and give thanks to God for God's power and greatness and glory. It is because God had chosen to use His might and majesty for the good of His people, not for their harm. That's the reason David gives thanks to God.

Ah, but what about God's holiness? What about the fact that God is high and lifted up, separate from sin and from everything contrary to His perfect will? Even in this psalm we are reminded that God cannot abide sin, and that God must punish sin. Verse 14 tells us that God's judgments, His justice is in all the earth. And in verse 33, we are reminded that God is coming at the end of time to judge the earth.

Should we sinners not fear God because of His holiness? After all, He created each one of us in His image and for His glory, to worship Him and to give Him praise for Who He is and for what He has done. But where is the focus of our lives most of the time? Doesn't the fact that we have to set aside a special day once a year to give God thanks indicate that we don't, most of the rest of the time, live as thankful people? And on that one day we set aside for thanksgiving, doesn't what we do show where our real priorities lie? For unlike our ancestors, we do not gather to worship God on the day set aside to give Him thanks.

So, why shouldn't we sinners just fear God and tremble before Him? Because of something else we know about God. Look at verse 34. Yes, God is pure and holy, but He is also merciful. His mercy, the love He chooses in His sovereign grace to bestow upon His covenant people, endures forever.

God's Old Testament people experienced both God's justice and His mercy, didn't they? In verses 20-22, David recalled the wilderness wanderings of the children of Israel. For 40 years, they travelled toward the promised land, but never reached it. A whole generation died in the desert, kept from entering the promised land because of their faithlessness.

But even in their wanderings, even as they experienced the consequences of their sin, God was demonstrating His goodness towards them. He protected them from hostile kings and nations. And He brought their children into the land, just as He had promised Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. And so as David and those worshipping with him celebrated the kingdom of David and the tabernacle of God in the Promised Land, they were giving thanks for God's grace and for the mercy he had shown to them.

And how did they celebrate God's purity and power, His greatness and glory, His goodness and mercy? How did they celebrate the mighty acts of God done on behalf of His covenant people? Of course they gave thanks to God, as verse 8 says. Of course they prayed to God, calling upon His name. And yes, they brought offerings to the Lord, as verse 29 says.

What they knew about God also moved them to draw close to Him in relationship. Verse 11 calls all worshippers to seek the Lord and His strength and His face. Moreover, in verse 35, we are encouraged to cry out to God for salvation, to draw us together as believers out of all the nations of the world. But why? We ask God to deliver us from the heathen so that we might have more reason to give God our thanks, so that we might have more opportunities to give God our praise. In short, even our greatest needs that we ask for in prayer, even our desires for deliverance and salvation are to be focused, not on ourselves, but on God. All we are, all of life, is to be devoted to God's glory.

How else do we respond to who God is and what God has done? Look at verses 28 and 29. It says we are to give unto the Lord glory and strength. But what does that mean? It's not like in our weakness we can somehow add to God's strength. No, but we can say that He is strong. We can ascribe strength to Him. Just so, in a sense we can increase God's glory through our praise. For as we worship Him, focusing our hearts and minds on Him, as we praise Him for His purity and power, His greatness and glory, His goodness and mercy, we are giving Him

glory. As we sing to the Lord, as verse 23 says, we are giving Him the glory due His name, the glory that He so richly deserves.

But we can also give God glory through proclamation. Notice how many times in this psalm David encourages the worshippers to tell other people about God. In verse 8 we are called to make God's deeds known among all the nations. In verse 9, we are to talk of all God's wondrous works. And in verse 24 we are called to declare God's glory even among the heathen, even among those nations who do not worship God. After all, as verse 26 tells us, the gods those people worship are just fake idols. Why shouldn't we tell them about a God Who is really worthy of their worship and praise?

But in his enthusiasm, David doesn't just call all people, all human beings to worship God. No, he calls all the heavens and the earth to be glad. He calls the sea and the fields to rejoice. He calls for the trees to sing. And why? Because their Lord is coming. He is coming to bring justice to the earth, to set all things right, to restore the world to the way it was in the days of Adam, when God and man lived in perfect harmony in the world.

And so we should join with all nature not only in thanksgiving for who God is, and for what God has done for us. We should give Him thanks and praise, we should seek His face and His salvation, we should worship Him and tell everyone about Him because of what He will do in the future. For the good news is that the greatest reasons for our thanks and praise lie just around the corner, when Jesus comes again. The good news is that we ain't seen nuthin' yet.

So as we wait for our Lord's return, let's give thanks to Him. Let's call upon His name. Let's tell everyone about what He has done. And let's sing praises to Him.