

## Giving Thanks Psalm 111

Why do we give thanks? At this season of the year, we usually start first with the sorts of things in a cornucopia, and we have indeed been blessed with bountiful crops and fertile pastures this year. While a record-breaking number of hurricanes hit the United States, southwest Mississippi has largely been spared. As a result, our pantries and freezers are full of vegetables, our barns are full of hay, our pastures are full of cattle, and our woods are full of wild game.

Now, it's true that we live in one of the poorest states in the Union, with the second lowest median household income of \$43,500. But we are all so richly blessed when we compare ourselves with the rest of the world, where the median household income worldwide is only \$9700 – in fact 70% of the global population lives on \$10 per day or less.

And unlike so many people around the world, we have no trouble meeting our basic needs: even in little ol' Port Gibson, we have two grocery stores, and they have never run out of food even during the COVID crisis – though toilet paper has gotten a bit scarce at times. Truly, all of us can sing along with the psalmist in verse 5, affirming that God has given food to those that fear Him.

Now, it's true that the COVID crisis has cast a pall over this bounteous season, with many of us shying away from group meetings, and for good reason. But as we've had to stay apart from one another for a time, we Mississippians have been reminded that our low population density is in fact a great blessing. With woods and fields only a few steps away, we have so many opportunities get outside in the fresh, healthy air, don't we?

And whenever we venture out of doors, we wonder anew at the beauty of God's creation. Our relative lack of light pollution allows us to marvel at the glory of the night sky, the stars so brilliant that it seems you can reach up and touch them. And this time of year our forests dazzle us, dappled as they are with red, green and gold. And as the leaves fall, those impossibly high bluffs can be more clearly seen, soaring tall and straight into the sky. And most impressive of all is the mighty Mississippi, inspiring awe even at this season when it is far from its peak, as its unimaginable amount of water glides by, discharging almost 600,000 cubic feet of water per second into the Gulf of Mexico. Oh yes, we can all sing along with the Psalmist in verses 2 and 3 – Great, splendid, majestic are the works of the Lord in Creation.

But God's works didn't stop when He raised up the Rocky Mountains in the west and the Appalachian Mountains in the East to form the Mississippi River Valley. No, in verse 6 the Psalmist reminds us that God made people, male and female in His own image, in order that He might show all of us the power of His works. And it is true that among all of God's creatures, only we human beings have the ability, if not to understand exactly how God made everything, at least to appreciate His handiwork and to applaud His artistry. Since we ourselves are indeed fearfully and wonderfully made, we have many reasons to give God thanks.

But what is even more amazing is that our Creator would seek to be in relationship with us. In fact, verse 5 reminds us that God went so far as to make a covenant, a solemn, unconditional promise to bless His people. God first revealed this covenant some 4500 years ago in the days of Abraham, who lived first in Ur and then in Haran, near the Euphrates River which runs through the country we now call Iraq. God promised that He would give Abraham as many descendants as there are stars in the sky and sand on the seashore. God also promised that He would give all these people a place in which to live.

And God even promised that in Abraham's seed, in His descendants, all the families of the world would one day be blessed.

And God needed to make such unconditional promises to us because of our sin. For the sad truth is that even after God promised him such rich blessings, Abraham continued to sin, putting His wife Sarah in grave danger in order to protect himself. And in spite of the many gifts God has given all of us, and in spite of our own best efforts, we also continue to sin in so many ways, don't we? We continue to put our own desires ahead of God's plans for us, and ahead of the wants and needs of other people. Even though God has made a covenant with us, we have broken it in thought, word and deed, whenever we turn aside from God's law of love to do whatever makes sense or feels right to us.

But the good news, as the Psalmist indicates in verse 4, is that God is gracious and compassionate, even toward unworthy sinners like us. For the good news is that, as verse 9 says, God has sent redemption to His people in Jesus Christ. For Jesus provided the perfect sacrifice that all our sins deserve. On the cross, He shed the blood of the covenant on our behalf so that we might receive all the blessings that God promised to Abraham, so that we might be adopted into God's family, so that we might become God's very own people. Yes, in Jesus the promised Messiah, truly all the families of the earth have been blessed.

And it is because God the Father has provided Christ the Lamb to die in place of all who would trust Him as Savior and bow the knee to Him as Lord, God's righteousness can endure forever, as verse 3 says. For the good news is that Jesus didn't just take the penalty for all our sins upon Himself. He also kept the Law of God perfectly on our behalf. So that means that when the Father looks at all those who are in Christ, He no longer sees all our sin – instead He sees us robed in the perfect righteousness of Christ, as all the selfless obedience and love of Christ have been credited to our account. So we can truly give thanks, not only for God's great work of Creation, but also for His great work of redemption.

But how can we know all of this is true? For even during this season of thanksgiving, when we look around us, there is still so much wrong with the world, so much that is broken in our lives and in our culture. There are so many people who are sick and dying. There is so much dishonesty and distrust within our governmental systems. There are still so many people who suffer from the broken promises of others, people who fall victim to all sorts of wickedness.

Moreover, as we've learned in our recent election season, we no longer know what we can believe – with mass media shilling for candidates instead of objectively reporting the truth, with pollsters wildly miscalculating margins of victory and with the trustworthiness of the ballot box itself called into question. So, how can we possibly believe what verse 7 says, that the works of God's hands are truth and justice?

Because of what else verse 7 says – because all God's precepts are sure. In other words, we can trust God not only because of His awe-inspiring work of creation, and not only because of His gracious work of redemption, but because of His inerrant, infallible Word.

For let's face it. Without God's Word, we aren't really able to understand anything God has created. For example, scientists who discount God's Word have come to the crazy conclusion that organic life, in all its wondrous complexity, just happened to spring into existence all by itself. In contrast, ancient cultures without access to the Bible came up with all sorts of even stranger ideas about the origin of the universe – many of their myths involved gods fighting or having sex with each other, with the world and its people being born out of some sort of cosmic conflict or accident.

And so for anyone, ancient or modern, who is not walking in the light of God's truth, there can thus be no meaning or purpose in God's creation. So, it's no wonder that so many people, both ancient

and modern, have lived in fear and dread of either random accidents or of the caprices of evil gods or spirits.

In contrast, the Bible's explanation of God's work in creation is as simple as it is elegant – God simply made everything. God spoke everything into existence, using languages such as astrophysics and DNA, but above all through the Person of Jesus Christ, the Living Word of God. And it is because God's Word tells us that God made the world that we can be free to give thanks for it, living in awe and wonder of what it reveals to us of God's power and glory, His majesty and beauty. In fact, it is only such a Biblically-based confidence in the regular order of God's creation that has made any of the marvels of modern science possible.

In the same way, unless we stand on the Word of God, it is so easy to come to the wrong conclusions about God's plans for redeeming the world. On the one hand, if we ignore God's sure precepts, if we ignore what both Scripture and experience teach us about the evil and selfish desires that reside in all our hearts, we can convince ourselves that human beings are basically good, or that we can improve or even perfect ourselves by our own merits. Many of the world's great religions are based on exactly this sort of delusion, constructing as they do elaborate but understandable systems of rituals and ethics. They then congratulate themselves on doing all the right things, and on avoiding all the wrong things, all the while ignoring the radical need that all of us have for a Savior to put the power of sin to death in our lives.

On the other hand, many people look at the obvious brokenness in ourselves and in our world and fall into the depths of despair and depression. Ignoring the promise of redemption and freedom offered in Christ, these people seek to drown their sorrows in booze or drugs or sex, or try to ignore their problems through the distractions of work or entertainment. Some even go so far as to take their own lives.

But instead of living in fear of the random happenstances of a chaotic world, instead of falling into despair at the forces of wickedness and corruption all around us, wouldn't it make more sense for us to fear God, as verse 10 calls us to do? For the same God Whose awesome power called the mountains and the rivers and all of us into existence has also chosen to redeem our fallen world through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. And because God's Word bears unchanging, infallible, inerrant witness to God's creation and redemption, shouldn't we respond to His gracious promises with our awe and wonder, with our thanks and praise, especially during this season of celebration?

But why should we stop there? For shouldn't our awe of our creating, redeeming, truth-telling God move us to seek the greater wisdom mentioned in verse 10? Shouldn't we not only try to learn more and more about Him through His Word, but also to put what we learn into practice? Shouldn't we try to live according to His sure precepts, loving Him with all our heart, our soul, our mind and our strength and loving our neighbors as ourselves? For what better way could there be for us to give Him thanks than to devote our lives to His glory? What better way could there be to give Him praise than to devote ourselves to the good of all those whom He made in His image?