

Pausing to Give Thanks
Joshua 12

Sometimes, it's hard for us to be thankful, isn't it? Maybe your to-do list is long and getting longer and you have no idea how to get everything done. Maybe you're juggling so many responsibilities that you can't keep all those balls in the air and you're starting to let people down. Maybe you're stuck in a difficult relationship and you have no idea how to make things right. Maybe you've been trying to overcome a besetting sin or bad habit or addiction for years, and you're just not making very much progress. Or maybe you're in the middle of a crisis – caring for a loved one or wrestling with your own failing health – and you just feel overwhelmed.

Well, believe it or not, that's exactly where God's people found themselves in today's passage. For however long this list of victories may look, however comprehensive this list of conquests may seem, the people at the time knew their task was nowhere near complete. After all, we are only at the halfway point in the book of Joshua. And the first verse of chapter 13 makes this point explicit: even by the end of Joshua's life, God said, "there remaineth yet very much land to be possessed."

So, why does the author of this book stop in the very middle of things and list all the victories of God's people up to this point? For the same reason we all need to stop and give thanks this week – no matter how much work we have left to do, no matter how many of our problems remain unresolved, no matter how helpless and overwhelmed we may feel in the face of life's circumstances, we all need to thank God for the blessings He has given us up to this point.

That's certainly true where it comes to spiritual things, isn't it? For of course, none of us are perfect. We all fall short of God's expectations for us. None of us love God with all our hearts, as He calls us to do. None of us loves other people just as much and in the same way that we love ourselves. Where it comes to obeying God, we all have a long way to go.

But what did we read responsively from Romans chapter 5 this morning? Christ died for the helpless. Christ died for the ungodly. It was while we were still sinners that Christ died for us. It is by God's grace alone that we are saved, and we need to give thanks for that good news even while we continue in our struggle toward greater sanctification, even while we are still doing our best to become more like Jesus.

And the same thing is true for all those other difficult areas of our lives. Yes, we may feel overwhelmed by our responsibilities, but shouldn't we be thankful for profitable employment and for having people who trust us to help them out? No, we may not have all the nice things we might want, but shouldn't we be thankful for the things that we do have? Yes, it's hard to work through difficult relationships. Yes, it's hard to care for needy people. But shouldn't we be thankful that we have someone to love? Yes, it's hard to deal with chronic illness in ourselves or our loved ones. But shouldn't we be thankful for the life God has given us, and for the measure of health and strength that has allowed us to come to worship today (or to tune in on Facebook)?

So even though life is not perfect, even though we are not perfect, we all need to stop and give thanks for all the ways in which we have been blessed. That's the only way to keep everything in our lives in proper perspective.

But as we give thanks, we need to remember that God is ultimately responsible for all of our blessings. In other words, while we should keep in mind all the reasons we have to be thankful, we must also remember the One to Whom we should always give thanks.

That was certainly true of God's people, for look at the last verse of chapter 11: "So Joshua took the whole land, according to all that the LORD said unto Moses." Yes, Joshua and his army had achieved all the victories listed in chapter 12, but they were only able to win them because the Lord had promised Moses that all this would happen. You can find this promise back in Deuteronomy chapter 1, verse 38 where God told Moses, "Joshua the son of Nun, who stands before you, he shall enter there; encourage him, for he shall cause Israel to inherit it." Joshua won those battles because God said he would.

But that wasn't the first time God had made a promise about the land the Israelites were to receive. Hundreds of years earlier, back in Genesis 28:13, God had told Jacob that He would give the land to him and his descendants – and those descendants were the twelve tribes of Israel that returned to the land in the days of Joshua. But God had made the same promise still more years before that to Jacob's father Isaac: "Sojourn in this land and I will be with you and bless you, for to you and to your descendants I will give all these lands" (Genesis 26:3). And of course God had first made this promise all the way back in Genesis chapter 12 to Isaac's father Abraham, saying, "To your descendants I will give this land." Thus, in recording all the victories of chapter 12, God's people were giving thanks for the way that God had kept His promises.

And can't we do the same thing? For hasn't God made and kept so many promises to us as well? Think again about all the good news we read responsively from Romans chapter 5 this morning: We are declared righteous, not by anything we've done or left undone, but by faith alone in the Person and Work of Christ alone. Because of God's great love for us, the blood of Christ was shed, saving us from the wrath of God that all our sins deserve. Because Jesus kept the Law of God perfectly in His life and obeyed the Father even to the point of dying on a cross, we have been acquitted, declared not guilty of all our sins, and have received the free gift of eternal life. Thanks be to God that He has kept all these promises, promises to bless those who trust in Christ as Savior and bow the knee to Him as Lord!

And even in the tough times of life, even when we find it hardest to give thanks, we can cling to all of God's promises in the certainty that He will keep them. For what else did Paul tell us? Even in our worst sufferings we can rejoice. And why? Because suffering produces endurance, and endurance builds and tests our character, and proven character increases our hope in God. And doesn't our hope grow as we see His deliverance of us and our loved ones, as we receive answers to our earnest prayers, as we experience His grace over and over in so many areas of our lives? Regardless of what the world may say, it is those who have suffered the most who have the greatest reason for hope, the greatest reason to give thanks for God's faithfulness.

But if we can give thanks even while so many things in our lives remained unsettled and incomplete, and if we can give thanks for God's faithfulness to bless us in spite of the needs we and our loved ones continue to have, we should also give thanks for the ways in which God has already allowed us to help Him accomplish His will.

That was certainly the case for God's people in the days of Joshua. Verse 1 reminds us that it was their armies who smote, who defeated all these kings who lived in the land. Verse 6 recalls that it was their armies that prevailed over Sihon and Og, the kings who reigned over the east side of the Jordan River. And verse 7 reminds us that their armies were just as involved in overcoming all the kings and kingdoms on the west side of the river, whose names are triumphantly listed in verses 9 through 24. In short, in today's passage, the people were thankful for the victories God had allowed them to achieve, and we should give thanks for the same sorts of reasons.

That means parents should give thanks for every instance in which their children behave the way they were taught. Teachers should give thanks every time their students do well on their tests and projects. Mechanics should give thanks every time a car leaves their shop running the way it should. Builders should give thanks whenever the last item on the punch list has been completed and the keys have been given to the new owner. Ranchers should give thanks for every calf they load on the trailer. And especially during this season of the year, farmers should give thanks that all their hard work has quite literally borne fruit. Just as Joshua's army did, we should give thanks to God for every job He has graciously allowed us to finish.

Now, in the process we need to be careful to avoid the sin of pride. After all, there's no way the people of God could have won any of the victories listed in this chapter without God's sometimes miraculous help. God stopping up the flow of the Jordan, causing the walls of Jericho to collapse, and hurling hailstones down on their enemies – these were absolutely critical components of their successes. In the same way, it is the Holy Spirit Who gives us the gifts and talents that we can use to serve and bless others. Moreover, it is only the Holy Spirit Who can help us grow in the way Romans chapter 5 describes, strengthening us to endure our sufferings, building our character and nurturing our hope even as He pours out God's love into our hearts. The only way those who love and trust Jesus can live the life of Christ in this sinful world is by the power and grace of God.

But we should still give thanks that God allows us to participate in His victory over the power of sin and death. For it is as our character is tested, it is as we keep hope alive in the face of our greatest difficulties, it is as we allow God's love for us to form the foundation of our lives, it is as we respond to God's grace with love for Him and for others – that's when we most clearly display Christ to the world. For as we continue to give God thanks and praise even in our most difficult circumstances, we shine the light of His love and truth into the darkness of the world's cynicism and despair. Our thankfulness is the greatest witness of our hope in Christ.

So, even though there's still a lot of work for us to do in the world around us as well as in our own lives, let's give thanks for what God has already allowed us to accomplish. Even though we haven't seen all of God's promises yet fulfilled, let's give thanks for the prayers He has already answered and the grace He has already bestowed on us in the coming of Christ. And may our thanks and our hope and our confidence continue to show the truth and love of Christ to all those around us. No matter what struggles we may continue to face, let's continue to give God our thanks and praise.