



# Thanksgiving

## Psalm 65

Rev. Jerry Hamstra  
Riverside ARP Church  
October 7, 2018

Thanksgiving. We're going to think about thanksgiving from the perspective of Psalm 65. Psalm 65 does not use the word thanksgiving, but that does not matter because thanksgiving in the Bible is not clearly distinguished from praise and from the life of faith in general. Think of the way that the Heidelberg Catechism uses the idea of thanksgiving as a way of summarizing the Christian life. One of the three things that we need to know in order to live and die happily is "how we should express our gratitude to God for" delivering us from our sins and miseries." That is a profoundly biblical idea. Gratitude or thanksgiving in the Bible is a very multifaceted thing which includes such things as praise and obedience as a response to God's spiritual and physical blessings. So even though this Psalm does not use the term "thanksgiving" the responses of God's people to God that it describes are parts of thanksgiving.

One of the things that we must understand about thanksgiving in the Bible is that it is part of the covenant relationship between God and his people. That is not stated in so many words in this Psalm, but it is the context of the Psalm, as it is of all the Psalms. This Psalm is about the relationship between God and his people. This Psalm is a response of the people of God to the God who has chosen them as his own. And as such it places the wonderful acknowledgement of God's provision in the harvest in the broader context of the covenant relationship between God and his people.

This is important for our understanding of thanksgiving in the Bible. It is focused on God and it is part of an ongoing relationship with God. The only thanksgiving that qualifies as thanksgiving in the Bible is thanksgiving as a response of God's people to his grace shown in

salvation and thanksgiving for the harvest and material- blessings in general are part of that. For God's people the harvest is a blessing that belongs to the blessings of salvation, because, for God's people, it is a blessing that comes from the God who loves is in Jesus Christ.

One of the ways that the Bible distinguishes between those who are God's people and those who are not his people is that God's people are thankful and those who are not God's people are not thankful. Unbelievers can use the language of thanksgiving, but what they consider to be thanksgiving is a form of ingratitude in God's sight because the heart of thanksgiving is acknowledging God as God and praising and loving and serving him. In Romans 1 when Paul describes the unbelieving world he says in verse 21, "For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him." That is part of the definition of an unsaved person and, by contrast, giving honor to God and thanking him belongs to the definition of a saved person.

So, Psalm 65. I chose it because it has that wonderful thanksgiving feel to it. The last part celebrates God's gift of the harvest. When we read, "You crown the year with your bounty; your wagon tracks overflow with abundance", we think of driving through the countryside and seeing the crops in the fields or seeing what is left on the fields after the crops have been harvested or we think of the thanksgiving table laden with the bounty of the harvest." Thanksgiving has a feel to it and verses like Psalm 65:9-13 fit with that thanksgiving feeling.

Now that thanksgiving feeling may or may not be part of true biblical thanksgiving. For it to be part of true biblical thanksgiving, we must also find ourselves in the rest of this Psalm. And that is one of the lessons of this Psalm. It shows how acknowledging God's gift of the harvest belongs to the larger category of acknowledging God as God and acknowledging him as the God of our salvation.

The first four verses praise God for reconciliation and the relationship with God that belongs to that. It seems that the Psalm is a response to answered prayer. It seems that the background to the Psalm is some kind of affliction or trouble. The Psalmist talks about vows being performed. People tended to make those vows when they were in some kind of trouble and they would vow to God that they would come and

bring a sacrifice or something like that if God would deliver them. The Psalm speaks of God as the one who hears prayer. That fits with the idea of the Psalm being a response to some kind of trouble. If that is so then the trouble as seen as God's displeasure because of sin because the Psalm also celebrates God's atonement for sins and the blessing of being brought near to God to dwell in his courts.

Now there is a difference between the meaning of trouble in our lives in the new covenant situation and trouble in the lives of God's people in the old covenant situation. In the Old Testament, when the people were disobedient God would send an enemy nation to defeat them or a famine or some other punishment. The New Testament is different that way because it teaches that, for God's people, suffering is not a sign of God's displeasure - for God promises that he works everything together for their good. The difference between Old and New Testaments on this score is not absolute, but for the most part what I have described is the emphasis.

However, we can look at the first 4 verses of this Psalm in the light of God delivering us from the greatest trouble of all if we are believers. The great trouble that we all have known is the trouble of the sin and misery of being born sinners and under the wrath of God. If we are saved, we can think of these first four verses in the light of that most fundamental deliverance of all. "Praise is due to you, O God, in Zion, and to you shall vows be performed." We don't make these kinds of vows much anymore although our Westminster Confession of Faith does deal with vows, "in the way of thankfulness for mercy received, or for the obtaining of what we want, whereby we more strictly bind ourselves to necessary duties, or to other things, so far and so long as they may fitly conduce thereto."

This is one of these things that is not commanded in the Bible and gets very little attention in the New Testament and so this type of vow is not required of us and so few people today make them. However, we do make vows when we join the church or if we were baptized members, when we became communicant members of the church. It belongs to the covenant relationship that we make commitments in response to God's saving mercies. And we can see these Old Testament vows in the

light of our vows of membership. They're not exactly the same, but there are enough similarities that we can think of our vows when we read of vows in the Old Testament. They are made in response to God's initiative in our salvation and we must keep them.

So, we can think of verse 1 in the light of our salvation and the commitments that we have made as God's covenant people. "Praise is due to you, O God, in Zion, and to you shall vows be performed."

Thanksgiving is our response to God's saving initiative in the covenant relationship and it has the interesting characteristic of being both freely offered and a binding commitment. This is the nature of covenant relationships. We can only be in them rightly if we love to be in them and yet we are required to make commitments at the same time. That is why we have profession of faith vows. They belong to the covenant relationship that we have with God.

The first four verses describe aspects of the relationship between the people of God and their God. It begins with praise. "Praise is due to you, O God, in Zion." Praise is due to God. That means that it is our obligation. God has a right to our praise and we have an obligation to give it. There are many reasons for this. God is worthy of our praise. God is perfect and glorious and wonderful and awesome in every possible way. And he has made us to praise him. He has made everything for his glory. The reason that the creation exists is that God may be praised. And that is a good thing because praising God is the most satisfying and delightful and life-giving thing that we can do. This is what we were made to do, and this is the greatest good that we can know.

But all of those wonderful things about God which are so praise-worthy are revealed in and through God's interactions with his people. They are revealed in the history of God and his people. God's perfections are not revealed to us as abstract perfections, but in the way that he interacts with his creation and with his people in history. God is praised because of his power and wisdom in creating and sustaining the world and in his love and mercy and justice and wrath and all the other ways that he is made known to us in the story of his interactions with his people and

the human race both in the biblical story and outside of the biblical story. We know what God is like largely by what he does.

And praising God for all that he is and all that he has done and continues to do and will do is at the heart of the relationship between God and his people. "Praise is due to you, O God, in Zion." This is also at the heart of thanksgiving. Thanksgiving is the proper response to all the good things that God has done for us, but integral to any thanksgiving is praise.

So is the rest of what the first four verses of Psalm 65 describe. They describe different aspects of a relationship with God. God hears prayer. Verse 2 "O you who hear prayer, to you shall all flesh come." Prayer is part of a relationship with God. It is speaking to God. It conveys our praises and it conveys our requests. A real relationship requires communication, and prayer is how we communicate to God. The God who made us to praise and glorify him, intends that we should speak to him and that he should listen to us and care about what we say to him and even do things for us and others in answer to our prayers. So, God involves us in his life. The glorious God who to whom praise is due does not receive our praise in icy aloofness, but as a God who loves and is loved and as a God who speaks and who hears. For all of eternity, God has enjoyed the fellowship within himself in the love between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, but in time, he has opened up that fellowship to his people so that we become part of God's life. That is what it means to have a relationship with God and it is an awesome thing to consider.

Verse 3 brings in the reality of sin. Sin is a thing in God's world and it is an important reality in our relationship with God. We are a sinful people and sin causes distance and separation. Sin turns a good relationship with God into a bad relationship – a relationship of rebellion from our side and just wrath from God's side. The biblical term for this is death as opposed to life which is fellowship with God.

Because we are sinners, the only relationship with God that we can have by nature is the relationship between a condemned rebel and an offended God. And we do not have what it takes to fix that relationship. We do not even have what it takes to want to fix that relationship. We are locked into the stance of antagonism towards God by our perverse

instance on living for ourselves as we please. And without divine intervention, the only outcome is eternal death and condemnation.

But verse 3 is light into that darkness. “When iniquities prevail against me, you atone for our transgressions.” Notice that iniquity is an enemy that prevails against us. At the same time comes from inside of us. But the hope is God’s mercy which is expressed by atoning for our transgressions. In the Old Testament it was through the sacrificial system that God provided as a means for the atonement of sin. But all of this was pointing to Jesus Christ who would actually atone for sin – God himself in the person of Jesus, taking our sin upon himself so that we might be forgiven.

And that atonement makes nearness to God possible. Verse 4 “Blessed is the one you choose and bring near, to dwell in your courts.” Being near to God is the heart of blessedness. Blessedness is true wellbeing rooted in God’s favor. And blessedness is nearness to God. And we are especially near to God when we are in the temple worshipping God. In the Old Testament it was the temple at Jerusalem. In the New Testament the temple is Jesus and the body of Christ and even our own bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit. We are near to God as believers in Jesus because we are in Christ and the Holy Spirit dwells in us and that is especially true of the gathering of God’s people for worship.

And that blessedness involves the ultimate satisfaction. Verse 4b, “We shall be satisfied with the goodness of your house, the holiness of your temple.” Goodness and holiness are satisfying. And the pinnacle of satisfaction for humans is being caught up in the worship of God’s goodness and holiness.

This is the heart of thanksgiving. Thanksgiving is rooted in praise and praise is rooted in our relationship with God and our relationship with God is the most satisfying thing that we can know in this life.

Verses 5-8 are expressions of praise and at the same time expressions of thanksgiving because the things for which we praise God are at the same times blessings for us. Verse 5, “By awesome deeds you answer us with righteousness, O God of our salvation....” Praise and thanksgiving

involve remembering the awesome deeds that God has done in the past. When the Old Testament speaks of God's awesome deeds it often is referring to God's great acts of delivering his people particularly the great deliverance of their deliverance from Egypt. That idea, applied to New Testament Christians, refers to remembering God's great deeds in Jesus Christ by which we are delivered from the slavery of sin and death and Satan.

Thanksgiving involves remembering. It involves remembering what God has done for us. It involves especially remembering the awesome deeds that God has done in Jesus Christ for our salvation. But at the same time thanksgiving involves hope for the future. God is the God of the past. He is also the God of the future. And the great things that he has done in the past are the foundation for the hope of his people concerning the future. According to verse 5, God is the "God of our salvation, the hope of all the ends of the earth and of the farthest seas."

Now it is obviously not so that God is actually the hope of all the ends of the earth. Many people in the world, the majority of the people of the world do not hope in God. But in another sense, it is so that God is the hope of all the ends of the earth. It is true in this sense that God is the only real hope for every human being who ever lived whether they realize that or not. They may not actually hope in God, but he is their only hope. Outside of God there is no hope for anyone. Apart from God the future is very dark for everyone who does not hope in God. We can say to anyone, "God is your only hope." The future for those who reject God is completely and utterly dark and horrible. God alone is the only hope for all the people of the world.

Next the might of God is celebrated. God is "the one who by his strength established the mountains, being girded with might; who stills the roaring of the seas, the roaring of the waves, the tumult of the peoples, so that those who dwell at the ends of the earth are in awe at your signs." The mountains are awe-inspiring. And so are the roaring of the seas. Everyone in the world is awe-struck by the grandeur of the mountains and the ferocious power of the seas. Well - both of these things reveal the strength of God because he established the mountains and he stills the roaring of the seas.

And the reference to the stilling the roaring of the seas points to Jesus. Because that is exactly what he did. This is one of the ways that Jesus revealed to us his divinity by doing things that showed the connection between passages like the one before us and himself. By stilling the sea, Jesus showed himself to be the God of Psalm 65 among other things.

So, we come to the wonderful description of the connection between God and the harvest. “You visit the earth and water it, you greatly enrich it; the river of God is full of water; you provide their grain, for so you have prepared it. You water its furrows abundantly, settling its ridges, softening it with showers, and blessing its growth. You crown the year with your bounty; your wagon tracks overflow with abundance. The pastures of the wilderness overflow, the hills gird themselves with joy, the meadows clothe themselves with flocks, the valleys deck themselves with grain, they shout and sing together for joy.”

There is no need to say anything about this directly. Its meaning is clear enough. God sends the rain. God causes the growth of the crops. When there is abundance, it is because God has crowned the year with his bounty. And when that happens the pastures and the meadows and the valleys, “shout and sing together for joy.”

Now this is what is known as personification. The pastures and the meadows and the valleys are personified and are described as singing for joy. There is a lot of this in the Psalms and also in Isaiah’s poetry. Rivers clap their hands. Mountains and hills break forth into singing. Trees join the rivers in clapping their hands as well. What does that mean? Well there is a sense in which the creation does speak. “The heavens declare the glory of God and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.” Psalm 19:1. The creation reveals the glory of God. And so here with the meadows and the valleys shouting and singing for joy, the creation, which is the medium through which God blesses his people with abundance, is conveying the idea that God’s blessing brings joy. The bounty of the creation conveys joy – a joy that is associated with God’s blessing. It certainly produces joy in the hearts of the people of God as they are the recipients of God’s bounty as the fruit of God’s blessing.

What is emphasized in this section is that the bounty of the harvest comes from God. But the Psalm as a whole and its place in the Bible as a



whole makes it clear that the meaning of the bounty is very different depending on who is receiving it. As I mentioned earlier the context of this Psalm is the covenant relationship between God and his people and the bounty of the last few verses is the bounty of the Promised Land. This is not talking about the bounty of nature in some general way. This is God's blessing upon God's people – people who praise him, who pray to him, who are forgiven by him and who dwell in his courts and are satisfied with his goodness.

We must understand that a good harvest in our society is not a sign of God's favor in the sense that it is in this Psalm. It is a sign of God's common grace – his general benevolence. Jesus says that we are to love our enemies because God "sends rain on the just and on the unjust." Paul in Acts 14:17 says to the philosophers at Athens, God, "did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness." So, a fruitful harvest is a witness from God of his being and his goodness. And it is a call to unbelievers to acknowledge God and to give him thanks.

This atmosphere of joyful blessing that is reserved for God's people. God is generous and benevolent to the people of the world and his goodness is intended to lead them to repentance, but the bounty of the harvest in this Psalm comes in the context of the relationship with God that is described in the first four verses. Nature rejoices in the context of God's salvation.

And it is an anticipation of the new heavens and the new heavens where the abundance will be like nothing this world has ever seen. God speaks of this in Amos 9:13ff when he says, "Behold the days are coming, declares the LORD, when the plowman shall overtake the reaper and the treader of grapes him who sows the seed; the mountains shall drip sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it."

Thanksgiving in the Bible is part of the response of God's covenant people to God's salvation and it is part of praise and part of a relationship of prayer and forgiveness and dwelling in God's courts and being satisfied with the goodness of God's house and the holiness of his temple. And it is in the context of that relationship that we are to think

of the bounty of the harvest and celebrate the fruitfulness that is rooted in God and his favor.

The great focus of thanksgiving is on the meaning of the harvest as an expression of God's favor upon his own people – a favor which is motivated by grace for an underserving people. It is the relationship with God which is at the heart of the wonderful description of the harvest in Psalm 65. And that relationship is rooted in God's grace as expressed by the atonement. This people sang, "When iniquities prevail against me, you atone for our transgressions." This, of course, is fulfilled in Jesus and his atonement.

And so, as we celebrate thanksgiving – another year of God's rich provision for us which is symbolized by the bountiful harvest, let us think of it in the light of Psalm 65. The joyful expression of acknowledgment of God visiting the earth and watering it and crowning the year with his bounty are part of a relationship where the greatest satisfaction comes from the blessing of the nearness of God and dwelling in God's courts and being satisfied with the goodness of God's house. And it is that relationship and delight in the God who initiates that relationship that provides the joy and the delight that is expressed in the celebration of the harvest. What is most significant about the bounty of the harvest is that it comes as an expression of God's love for the people with whom he is reconciled in Jesus Christ.