

**Altavista Presbyterian Church
Rev. Eduardo Soto, Jr.**

**“Speaking With God:
Prayers of Thanksgiving”
I Corinthians 15:12-19
Psalm 138:1-8**

**Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time
February 10, 2019**

I Corinthians 15:12-19

Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.

Psalm 138

Of David

I give you thanks, O Lord, with my whole heart; before the gods I sing your praise; I bow down toward your holy temple and give thanks to your name for your steadfast love and your faithfulness, for you have exalted above all things your name and your word. On the day I called, you answered me; my strength of soul you increased.

All the kings of the earth shall give you thanks, O Lord, for they have heard the words of your mouth, and they shall sing of the ways of the Lord, for great is the glory of the Lord. For though the Lord is high, he regards the lowly, but the haughty he knows from afar.

Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you preserve my life; you stretch out your hand against the wrath of my enemies, and your right hand delivers me. The Lord will fulfill his purpose for me; your steadfast love, O Lord, endures forever. Do not forsake the work of your hands.

“Speaking With God: Prayers of Thanksgiving”

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the Word of the Lord remains forever. Friends, this is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing and acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Thanksgiving. We have a month dedicated to it. While the Thanksgiving holiday is only two or three days, many people spend the weeks before preparing for meals, guests, and travel. While Thanksgiving is not a major gift-giving holiday, it is one where a majority of families and friends gather together. As many of you know, the Thanksgiving meal might not always be the most pleasant, which is kind of ironic when you think about it. Often times when large amounts of people gather there arises differences of opinions and tastes. Some folks despise cranberry sauce. Some only want turkey. Others always want to talk politics. If things go out of hand or are lubricated by a little too much alcohol, a time for family and fellowship dissolves into arguments and upset stomachs.

Whether this sounds like your family or not, Thanksgiving is still a good holiday, for it forces us to remember that we do need to be grateful. But if we're honest, we need that reminder more than just once a year. Indeed, giving thanks is something that should be so foundational to us, that it comes naturally in our speaking both to one another and with God. And, like prayers of confession, God

provides for us models for our prayers of thanksgiving. But before we look at the model presented to us in the 138th Psalm, I'd like to take the time to further discuss gratitude.

In the first chapter of his Letter to the Romans, the Apostle Paul sets out to describe the sinful nature of the human race. In verses eighteen through twenty-three, he essentially asserts that all of mankind, regardless of his culture and regardless of his interaction with Jews or Christians, every human knows about God because his eternal power and divine nature are perceived by them. In verse twenty-one he says, "For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God," and this is what I'll focus on today, nor did they "*give thanks* to him." The difference between an unrighteous person and a righteous person isn't just honoring God as God, but also recognizing that we owe him our fullest gratitude.

Now, if it is true that all of us were made to glorify God, then our failure to give thanks to him is not simply a failure of manners, like forgetting to write a thank-you note. Instead, it's more like adultery, murder, or sedition. You might be thinking, "Pastor Ed, how can this be so? Sometimes I just forget to thank God. That's not rebellion, is it?" Well, the failure to be grateful is actually a symptom of a far greater sickness. Ingratitude is grounded in the conviction that we are owed much better than we are given. The folks who've been coming to Bible study know that this is the main condemnation of Ecclesiastes. The Preacher knows that everything is under God's control and God's design, so it is vanity to chase after the wind of arrogantly thinking you deserve more than what God has given.

The truth is, we Americans are all born with an expectation of a certain level of comfort. Society says we should have a high level of fulfillment, "I can do anything I want!" The world around us tells us that we ought to have a high expectation of pleasure. We take our constitutional right for a pursuit of happiness to an unbiblical level. And when our experience falls short of these expectations, we grumble, complain, and demand societal changes, because the government needs to ensure my happiness. Gratitude is not the fruit of happiness. We don't become gracious once we're happy. Gratitude is the root of happiness. Without first having thanksgiving for God, we can never know what true happiness is.

When our worldview is shaped by God and our relationship to him, we remember what he has given to us and what we have been promised in Christ, and we are astonished. We are overwhelmed. We are overjoyed. I have a wife who loves me and her Lord. We have a baby on the way, who will learn of God's love. I have a church where God and his word are preached and lived. And most importantly, I am beloved of the Father. How could I ever even begin to think this isn't enough, that I need more. Thanksgiving isn't a holiday to be observed, but a lifestyle to be practiced. This is the very reason why, if you've ever noticed, that I begin every extemporaneous prayer with thanksgiving to God.

Opening my prayers with giving thanks to God is something a mentor once taught me, and it forces me to remember who I am and who God is and what he has done for me and for us. The 138th Psalm opens in this manner. "I give you thanks, O Lord, with my whole heart..." Much of Western culture follows Plato's distinctions of the heart being the center of our emotions, the mind being the center of our intellect, and the body being the center of our passions. This is not the understanding of the ancient Hebrews.

The Old Testament has this word, *lavav*, which is often translated as “the heart.” This is the word David uses in verse one. When the Hebrew talks about the whole heart, it’s much broader than we understand. David is not giving thanks with just his heart, it’s not simply an emotional response to God. Rather, the *lavav* is the whole self: body, mind, will, heart, soul, and understanding. David is giving thanks to God with his entire being. How often do we do that? How often do we truly give thanks with the whole self? It’s easy to mindfully give thanks to God, but it takes more creativity to use the whole self. One example that I see here is this church has a willingness to give thanks by giving back. Some of you have volunteered your time and your talents. Many of you give thanks through your treasures as well. These are tangible, real-life examples of thanksgiving with the whole self.

In the very following verse, David details why he is giving thanks. This is the orientation or the stance we are to have when we approach God with thanksgiving. There are three things that gives cause for David’s gratitude: God’s steadfast love, God’s faithfulness (to his promises), and God’s exalted name and word. We talked about God’s steadfastness last week. His immutability, his unchanging and inerrant ways are what give credence to his steadfastness in love. Likewise, God is faithful, and I add, to his promises, to his covenant. God relates to his people through a covenant, and that covenant is extended to us through Christ. We are naturally incapable of following through on our end of the covenant; this is the story of the Old Testament and of the Gospels. Again, that’s because of sin. And yet, though we fail in our promises, God continues to uphold the covenant. Why is that? Well, that’s because of his unchanging and un sinful nature. God will uphold his promises because of who he is.

The third reason for David’s thanksgiving is for God’s exalting above all things his name and his word. These two are lumped together because they are inseparable. In the Hebrew context, to know someone truly is know their name. This is why Moses asked God to give him his name so that he could tell the Israelites the God who was taking them out of Egypt. This is the same reason why many people in the Bible get name changes: Abram to Abraham, Jacob to Israel, Saul to Paul. When God truly knows you and you truly know God, that is a life changing moment. And the Bible symbolizes that transformation with a name change. And the only way to truly know God’s name is to know his Word. The Bible is no mere book. It is God’s self-revelation. While God did not pen every word on every page, he did inspire every jot and tittle. And to this we must all give thanks. There is no way for us to know God, and thereby know ourselves, if it weren’t for his revelation in Scripture. If being able to truly know yourself is not enough to produce gratitude, then I don’t know what can.

Not only does David, as an individual, give thanks to God, he proclaims that all the kings of the earth will do the same. I’m pretty sure David knew that at the time of penning this Psalm, not all, if any other kings, truly knew and worshiped the God of Israel. I believe this is both a moment of prayer and a moment of prophecy. David is both praying to God that one day all the nations will proclaim God as Lord and echoing the prophecy of Revelation 7. There the Apostle John sees a vision of a time when a great multitude from every nation, tribes, peoples, and tongues, gather around the throne of the Lamb and worship God with the angels saying, “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.” We, too, ought to long for, pray for, and strive for the day when our leaders, when all peoples, will give thanks to God for his Son, Jesus Christ.

Now, we must not overlook verse six. “For though the Lord is high, he regards the lowly, and the haughty he knows from afar.” While we pray that all people will give thanks to God, this will not be a forced thanksgiving. God doesn’t coerce people into serving and believing in him. Remember what I said earlier? “Gratitude is not the fruit of happiness. Gratitude is the *root* of happiness.” To truly enjoy God requires a true sense of gratitude. And that true sense of gratitude cannot be attained unless we first humble ourselves before our Holy God. When David says in verse six that God regards the lowly but disregards the haughty, he’s not talking about socio-political or economic differences. He’s talking about humility and pride. If the richest person in the world and the poorest person in the world are truly humble before God, then they both can be thankful for what they have. But if the richest person and the poorest person are prideful, arrogant, and think they deserve better from God, then not only are they sorely mistaken, but they are, worse, disregarded by God. The thread of humility, which I mentioned was in our prayers of confession, continues even stronger through our prayers of thanksgiving.

Now, David does something else. He gives to us another reason to be grateful to God. Not only is God steadfast, faithful, and revealed to us, he preserves us in the midst of trouble. In my childhood bedroom there’s a framed poem called *Footprints*. You may have read it. It tells the story of a man who dreamed he was walking along the beach with Christ. As he walked along this beach, he noticed that the events of his life coincided with the footprints in the sand. At times he saw two pairs and other times he saw only one. He noticed that the times when there were only one pair of footprints were the most troublesome times in his life. He confronted Christ about this and inquired as to why, when he needed him most, he would leave him. Christ replies to him, “My precious, precious child, I love you and I would never leave you. During your times of trial and suffering, when you see only one set of footprints, it was then that I carried you.”

This poem, which I grew up reading almost every day, is attempting to echo what David says here in the 138th Psalm and elsewhere. Though we may walk through valleys of shadowy death, we need not fear evil because the Good Shepherd guides and guards us. Over the years I’ve come to understand that the *Footprints* poem, while profound, is a little inaccurate. I don’t think Christ carries us in the sense that the poem illustrates, because that would suggest zero agency on our part. Rather, I like to imagine the same scene, only this time, Christ is walking ahead of us, and when trouble and strife are in our way, Christ tells us to follow in his steps. He walks on ahead of us and shows us the right direction. And in the most strenuous of times, I believe Christ stretches out his hand both against our enemies and pulls us closer toward him.

The very fact that God protects and preserves us should make our hearts fill with gratitude. We should sing with joy at the knowledge that we suffer as Christ did and, therefore, we are victorious as he is. God does and will fulfill his purposes for each of us. And to this we, along with King David, offer to God our prayers of utmost gratitude. Let us pray. Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, we give to you this day and every day our deepest gratitude and heartfelt thanksgiving. We are thankful for the very breath in our lungs, for even life is your gift. We are thankful for the saints who’ve gone on before us and established your church around the world and around the corner. As our gratitude wells up within us, show us ways that we can be thankful in mind and body, so that in all we do, we may glorify Christ our Head. In his name we pray. Amen.