

“SUMMER PSALMS, part 2”

Psalm 107:1-22

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How many of you have, at some time or another, had occasion to say, with fervent relief, “Thank God!”?

What prompted that response?

Good news from the doctor about test results

Getting the job you desperately needed.

A healthy baby.

Making it through a trying time.

Getting money you didn’t expect to pay a bill you were worried about

Surviving a scary accident.

Finishing a project that was harder and longer than you ever expected.

Resolving a thorny problem.

The plane safely landed on the ground.

A loved one coming home safe.

A mistake that proved less costly than you’d feared.

An injustice finally righted.

And what was it like to have that response? What did it feel like?

Blessing

Gratitude

Joy

Relief

Freedom

A weight lifted

Surprise, perhaps

A sense of undeserved grace, maybe.

Renewed hope.

A “glad to be alive” feeling.

All of this and more is wrapped up in that “Thank God!”

Someone looking on might well have argued that you can’t really *know* if God had anything to do with the help or rescue or good news you experienced. They might even complain that others, as deserving as you (or maybe even more deserving) faced similar problems and were not delivered from them. They might wonder why you think God would help you and not them. “Doesn’t this imply a rather problematic view of God?” they might ask. “And really,

wouldn't it have been better if God could have arranged it so you never had the problem or fear in the first place?"

You might even, yourself, later, with more distance, wonder about those same questions. They are good questions, worth wrestling with and talking over. But they are for another time. They are not really what this Psalm is for. Like most of the Psalms, this is more an expression of the heart than of the head. It's not a theological treatise but a song of praise. It's an expression of the lived experience of people of faith – a lived experience that includes and accepts the brokenness of the world and of our lives, even as it affirms the goodness of God. It speaks to the pain we have lived through, and the grace that gave us hope.

The circumstances this psalm details are probably meant to allude to the history of the people of Israel – years as nomads in the wilderness, choices that were foolish and faithless, exile and oppression. But at the same time, they evoke universal themes of the human experience:

"Some wandered in the desert...." Have we wandered? Oh, yes, we have wandered.

"Some sat in darkness...." Have we sat in darkness? Oh, yes, we have.

"Some were sick..." Have we been sick? Yes, in body and mind and spirit, and yes, sometimes even, as the psalm implies, through our own foolishness and self-destructive choices.

As much as it speaks to the pain and hardship we have lived through, the psalm speaks to the experience of coming through it, discovering that we are not and were never alone, opening our souls up again to the goodness of our God, responding with that spontaneous "thank God!"

In our summertime reflections on the Psalms, we are focused mainly on psalms whose themes are thanksgiving, and praise to God. Gratitude and praise can take many forms; they can arise from varied reasons; they lead us to see and appreciate God – who God is, what God does, what God is like – from different perspectives.

The particular lens through which this psalm views God is as Deliverer. And the most significant point it makes is – of course – the point that is repeated several times, as a refrain, throughout the Psalm:

"O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;
For his steadfast love endures forever."

The Psalm celebrates God as the One who sees us through trouble and danger and hardship and dark times; it understands that deliverance as a reflection of the character of God. "Steadfast love" (*hesed* in Hebrew) is what the psalm keeps bringing us back to. The enduring, unchanging steadfast love of God is what those "thank God" experiences bring us back to.

We certainly have our moments (or days, or months) when we wonder, when we doubt God's faithfulness. In the struggle of the moment, we forget the times in the past when we've felt

God's nearness, rejoiced in God's goodness, and received God's help. There are times when we are still in the midst of the hurt and anxiety, when we haven't come to the other side, to a place of perspective that allows us to see how God is present. We aren't always in a "thank God!" moment.

The Psalm isn't asking us to manufacture the emotion of that moment; it's simply recalling that moment to our awareness. The Psalms, you know, are mostly corporate expressions of faith. They are sung, or said, *together* by the community of faith, which is to say by those who understand that we have needed and have received the help of God (and will probably need and received it again). When we are wandering, sick, or in the dark, we lean on each other's faith and we still sing and give thanks, in anticipation of that time when once again that spontaneous "thank God!" bursts from our lips. The community and our shared expression of praise help us remember the steadfast love of God, which we have known in the past and will know again and maybe can even glimpse now in the midst of whatever it is.

The writer of this Psalm urges us, as people who know we have needed and have received the help of God, to do three things.

Remember.
Give thanks to God.
And... Tell.

Remember the steadfast love of God that sustains you, the challenges God has seen you through, the help and comfort and surprise blessings and new hope. Remember those "thank God!" moments.

Give thanks. Praise God. Say "thank you" every day for the many ways God's goodness touches your life, for strength and insight and companionship and wisdom, for the mistakes God's gentle guidance has kept you from and the grace for the mistakes you chose anyway. Cultivate gratitude, practice praise, be in awe of God's greatness.

Tell. Bear witness to the steadfast love of God. We have a story of the endless love of God and of Jesus who showed that love to us. And each of us has a story about the ways God has been present to us, delivered us from despair or disaster, redirected our path, or blessed us with gifts we could not have anticipated.

"O give thanks to the Lord, for God is good,
For God's steadfast love endures forever.
Let the redeemed of the Lord (that's us!) say so,
Those God redeemed from trouble."

Amen.

Resources

The Psalms and Their Meaning for Today, Samuel Terrien

Psalms(Interpretation Commentary), James L. Mays
Article by Quinn C. Caldwell, in *Feasting on the Word, Year C, volume 3*