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THE KEY TO A THANKFUL HEART

Psalm 33

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The Key to a Thankful Heart Psalm 33

Katherine Mansfield was a brilliant writer, but she did not know God. Because of health reasons, she moved to Switzerland, where she found herself rejoicing in the bracing mountain air and the beauty of the mountains. She wrote to a friend, “If only one could make some small grasshoppery sound of praise—thanks to someone, but who?” How empty for a person to feel thankfulness and praise for the beauty of God’s creation and yet not know the Creator so as to render thanks to Him!

If I were to ask, “Would you like to develop a thankful, worshipping heart?” I would guess that all of us would say yes. We recognize that it’s right to be thankful to God for His blessings. It’s even American, in that we have a national holiday once a year to give thanks, although many would be like Katherine Mansfield—give thanks to whom? But as Christians, we realize that it is right thank God in everything (1 Thess. 5:18).

But before we jump on the thanksgiving bandwagon, we need to realize that genuine thankfulness is inextricably bound up with trust. We will never truly thank God until we first truly trust Him. We will not be grateful to God for all that we have until we first recognize that we’re dependent on Him for all that we have.

By nature, we’re not trusting creatures. We’re creatures of necessity. We trust God when we’re *forced* to trust Him because our problems go beyond our abilities. The rest of the time, we get along just fine by ourselves. If we can solve the problem by ourselves, we don’t resort to prayer and trusting God, because we don’t *need* to trust Him. But it’s only when we come to the end of ourselves and cast ourselves in total dependence on the Lord that we begin to experience genuine praise and thanksgiving.

Psalm 33 was written to those addressed as “righteous ones” and “the upright” (v. 1). That is, it is written to those who know God personally and who are seeking to please Him by living obedient lives. But even these people need to be exhorted to “sing for

joy in the Lord" (v. 1), to "give thanks to the Lord" and "sing praises to Him" (v. 2). The psalm tells us that...

The key to a thankful, worshiping heart is
to rely completely on the Lord.

We don't know who wrote this psalm. It is sandwiched between two psalms of David, so perhaps he wrote it. David certainly had learned the lesson that the psalm communicates. David was a man of praise and thanksgiving because the Lord had put him in so many situations where every prop was knocked out from under him, *forcing* him to trust in God alone for deliverance. When God did deliver him, he was flooded with thankfulness and praise.

The psalm begins with an exuberant call to praise God in song and with musical instruments (vv. 1-3). Then, the psalmist gives the reason to praise God (vv. 4-5), because of His word and His work. Then verses 6-12 develop the theme of God's word as seen in His creation (vv. 6-9) and in His counsel (vv. 10-12). Verses 13-22 then develop the other theme of how God works. He does not work through man's strength or schemes (vv. 13-17), but rather through those who fear and trust in Him (vv. 18-19). The psalm ends with a final affirmation of trust in the Lord (vv. 20-22).

If the key to a thankful, worshiping heart is to rely completely on the Lord, then the question arises, "How do I learn to rely completely on the Lord?" This is developed in the two main sections of the psalm:

1. We learn to rely completely on the Lord by recognizing the power of His word (33:6-12).

The psalmist is referring primarily to God's spoken word, but it applies no less to His written word.

A. The power of God's word is seen in His creation (33:6-9).

John Calvin (*Calvin's Commentaries* [Baker], on Ps. 33, p. 542) insightfully points out that the psalmist brings before us God's creation of the world, because until we believe that He created all that is, we won't believe that the world is controlled by His wisdom and power. In other words, believing that God created the world also leads us to the truth of His providence in ruling the world, which the psalmist develops in verses 10-12. This relates directly to

our believing that He controls the circumstances of our lives, working everything together for good for us according to His purpose (Rom. 8:28). So to develop a thankful, worshiping heart, we must bow in awe before the Lord as we realize His immense power in speaking the universe into existence (Ps. 33:8-9).

The immensity of the universe is staggering! This week I was listening to the "Star Date" feature on NPR. They said that astronomers are discovering vast regions of space that are completely empty. One such space is a billion light years across. That is 10,000 times greater than the distance across our Milky Way galaxy! And there are billions of huge galaxies like our Milky Way! Truly, with David (Ps. 8:3-4) we can exclaim, "When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars, which You have ordained; what is man that You take thought of him, and the son of man that You care for Him?"

God didn't have to struggle and strain to create the universe. Rather, He did it by His bare word (v. 6). As Genesis 1 records (eight times), God said, "Let there be..." and it happened! As our psalm puts it (33:9), "He spoke, and it was done; He commanded, and it stood fast." Creation is a miracle of God's power. He created everything out of nothing by His word alone. As with all miracles, you cannot prove it; you must accept it by faith in God (Heb. 11:3). But the only alternative is that nothing produced everything, or that matter has always existed, but in some miraculous manner by sheer chance alone it came to have the intricately ordered form that we now observe. Which view takes more faith?

The psalmist then goes on to consider the oceans (Ps. 33:7). God "gathers the waters of the sea together as a heap; He lays up the deeps in storehouses." The only ocean that the psalmist may have seen would have been the Mediterranean Sea, or perhaps the Red Sea at the Gulf of Aqaba. He would not have known that the world's oceans cover two-thirds of the earth's surface. The Pacific Ocean alone covers almost 64 million square miles at an average depth of over 14,000 feet, with its greatest depth almost 36,000 feet! If you've ever flown over it or sailed it, you know that it is huge! But the psalmist pictures God as piling the water together as a farmer would pile a heap of grain in a barn. This could be a reference to God's stacking up the waters of the Red Sea when He

brought Israel safely through, or it may be a poetic description of God keeping the mighty oceans within their boundaries.

But either way, when you consider the grandeur of the heavens and of the oceans, the conclusion is (33:8-9): "Let all the earth fear the Lord; let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of Him. For He spoke, and it was done; He commanded and it stood fast." There is no way to harmonize or reconcile this text with the view that the universe and life on earth came about by random chance over billions of years. Nor is there room for the view that God guided the process of evolution over billions of years. Rather, God spoke and it was done instantly! The obvious application is that we should fall on our faces before such a powerful Creator. Who are we to vaunt ourselves in pride against Him?

The apostle Paul applies the doctrine of creation to our salvation. After saying (2 Cor. 4:4) that Satan "has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ," he adds (2 Cor. 4:6), "For God, who said, 'Light shall shine out of darkness,' is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ." In other words, if you know Jesus Christ as Savior, it was not your doing. You were in utter spiritual darkness; furthermore, you loved it (John 3:19)! Just as He spoke the sun into existence, even so God spoke light into your dark heart.

You may be thinking, "But didn't I have to choose to believe in Christ?" Yes, of course you did. But the question is, "*How were you able* to choose to believe in Christ?" The Bible is clear, if you have believed in Christ as Savior and Lord, it is because God first opened your blind eyes to see. That is the *only* doctrine of salvation that causes us to humble ourselves in awe before the Creator.

But the human race is prone to pride. We band ourselves together in nations and assemble powerful armies to conquer kingdoms and control our destiny. So the psalmist goes on to show...

B. The power of God's word is seen in His counsel (33:10-12).

"The Lord nullifies the counsel of the nations; He frustrates the plans of the peoples. The counsel of the Lord stands forever, the plans of His heart from generation to generation. Blessed is the

nation whose God is the Lord, the people whom He has chosen for His own inheritance." Contrast these words with the proud words of poet William Ernest Henley, "I am the master of my fate; I am the captain of my soul." God says, "No, you're not!"

A story is told of a newly-elected politician who had just arrived in Washington, D.C. He was visiting at the home of one of the ranking Senators. The two men stood looking out over the Potomac River as an old, rotten log floated by. The older Senator said, "This city is like that log out there." "How's that?" asked the younger man. The Senator replied, "Well, there are probably hundreds of bugs, ants, and other critters on that old log as it floats down the river. And I imagine that every one of them thinks that he's steering it."

Proud man thinks that he is steering the course of history. But the Bible is clear that God sets up and takes down the most powerful kings in history for His own sovereign purposes. Whether it was Pharaoh, Nebuchadnezzar, Cyrus, or Artaxerxes, God used them to further His purposes for His chosen people. Of course, none of those men knew God or were seeking to follow God. They were making decisions that they thought would further their own agendas. But behind the scenes, God providentially used their decisions to further His agenda. They were responsible for their decisions and they will answer to God for those decisions. And yet God used those decisions to implement His own counsel and plans.

We see this plainly illustrated in the most important event in human history, the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. This was Satan's and proud man's most serious attempt to cast off God's rule. Yet in Acts 4:27-28 the early church prays, "For truly in this city there were gathered together against Your holy servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose predestined to occur." These self-centered, proud rulers were responsible for crucifying the Lord's Anointed One. And yet, in so doing they inadvertently carried out God's eternal plan of redemption. God nullified and frustrated their plans and established His plan.

The power of God's word as seen in His counsel is further stated in verse 12: "Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord,

the people whom He has chosen for His own inheritance." This refers to Israel, whom God chose as distinct from all other peoples to be His people (Deut. 7:7-8). Although they were often disobedient and rebellious, He used them to bring the Savior into the world. As I understand Romans 11, although God has set them aside for these past 20 centuries because they crucified the Savior, He will yet graciously bring a widespread revival among the Jews, to the praise of the glory of His grace. Meanwhile we (the church) are " a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession" (1 Pet. 2:9). The reason that any of us are a part of God's people is His sovereign choice of us.

So the point of verses 6-12 is that we will learn to rely completely on the Lord when we see the power of His word as seen in His creation and in His counsel or His sovereign plan. Because His word stands against all opposition, we can confidently rely on Him. But, also,

2. We learn to rely completely on the Lord by recognizing the pattern of His working (33:13-22).

In verse 4, the psalmist says that we should thank and praise the Lord for His word, but also because "all His work is done in faithfulness." So after developing the theme of God's word (33:6-12), he now shows that God does not work through man's strength or schemes (33:13-17), but rather through those who fear and trust in Him (33:18-19). Therefore, we trust and hope in Him (33:20-22).

A. God does not work through man's strength or schemes (33:13-17).

"The Lord looks from heaven; He sees all the sons of men; from His dwelling place He looks out on all the inhabitants of the earth, He who fashions the hearts of them all, He who understands all their works. The king is not saved by a mighty army; a warrior is not delivered by great strength. A horse is a false hope for victory; nor does it deliver anyone by its great strength."

The psalmist pictures God as looking down from heaven as you or I might look down from a tall building on people below. But God sees everyone on earth. He sees the woman bent over her rice paddy in Thailand. He sees the Indian in the loincloth hunting for food in the jungles of South America. He sees the executive at

his desk on the 44th floor of the skyscraper in Manhattan. He sees us sitting here. But more than seeing everyone, God knows what they're thinking in their hearts. He made every heart and He understands not only *what* we do, but also *why* we do it.

There is the king going out to battle with what to him is a "mighty army" (v. 16). Is he trusting in that army for victory? God knows. There is the soldier, his muscles rippling with strength, mounted on his impressive horse (vv. 16b, 17). Is he trusting in his own strength or in the strength of his horse? God knows.

The fact is, our human tendency, even as redeemed people, is to perfect our methods and then to trust in them. We live in a day that is awash in methods and techniques for how to live the Christian life or how to have a happy family or how to build a successful church. Of course, many of these methods are helpful because they are based on Scripture. Granted, God's normal way of working is not through faith plus nothing, but rather through faith plus using certain methods or means to accomplish His will. But the ever-present danger is that we plug in the methods and *trust in them* to work, instead of using the methods while we *trust in God* to work. The psalmist is saying that God does not work through man's strength or schemes, because then man gets the glory.

B. God does work through those who fear and trust in Him (33:18-19).

The psalmist just said (v. 13) that the Lord sees everyone on earth. But now (v. 18) he states that the eye of the Lord is on those who fear Him. What does he mean? He means that God looks with favor on those who fear Him and trust in Him to deliver them from overwhelming situations. In other words, God's means of working is not to find people with slick methods and bless them, but rather to find people who trust in Him and bless them.

Note that these people are not described as strong and self-sufficient. In fact, they're in grave difficulty. They are facing death and famine (v. 19). People who learn to be thankful must first learn to trust in God. And people who learn to trust in God must at some point be stripped of every human prop so that they look to God alone for deliverance. As Paul put it (2 Cor. 1:8b-9), "we despaired even of life; indeed, we had the sentence of death within

ourselves so that we would not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead." As George Muller said (A. T. Pierson, *George Muller of Bristol* [Revell], p. 437), "It is the very time for faith to work, when sight ceases. The greater the difficulties the easier for faith. As long as there remain certain natural prospects, faith does not get on even as easily ... as when all natural prospects fail." Hudson Taylor said (source unknown), "You have proved the sufficiency of God only when you have trusted Him for the impossible." God works through helpless people who trust in Him.

C. Therefore, we trust and hope in Him (33:20-22).

Verses 18-22 are filled with synonyms for trust in the Lord: "fear" (v. 18); "hope" (vv. 18, 22); "waits" (v. 20); "our help and our shield" (v. 20); "our heart rejoices in Him" (v. 21); and "we trust in His holy name" (v. 21), which means, "in His holy character." The psalms, which emphasize praise and thanksgiving, also emphasize trust. The Hebrew word for "trust" occurs more frequently in the Psalms than in any other place (50 out of 181 times). Again, it's not that methods are wrong, but rather that *trusting in methods is wrong*. Our trust must be in God alone. What is the result? Go back to the beginning of the psalm:

3. Complete trust in the Lord results in a thankful, worshipping heart (33:1-5).

Thankfulness and worship are bound up with trusting in the Lord. When you have no human means of escape and you cry out to God as your only hope and He delivers you, your heart overflows in thankfulness and praise to Him. When a slick method works, the method gets the praise. When God works, then He gets the praise.

And it's rather exuberant praise that the psalmist calls for (vv. 1-3): "Sing for joy in the Lord.... Give thanks to the Lord with the lyre; sing praises to Him with a harp of ten strings. Sing to Him a new song [i.e., one that celebrates some new deliverance or victory]; play skillfully with a shout of joy." You don't get the impression that he would be pleased with folks reading their bulletins or sitting stoically through the singing! Calvin (p. 538) describes this as "the vehement and ardent affection which the faithful ought to have in praising God."

You may protest that your personality is too reserved to get excited about worship. But we all get excited about that in which we delight. If you're watching a close football game and your team makes a spectacular catch in the end zone, do you sit there stoically eating potato chips? You'd probably fling the bowl of chips in the air! Why? Because you *delight* in football.

The secret to heartfelt praise and thanksgiving is to recognize that you were in a desperate situation. You could not save yourself from God's righteous judgment. You cried to the God who spoke the universe into existence, the God who sent His Son, to save you by His grace. Because now you have experienced His great love and grace, you delight in Him and His great salvation and you can't help but sing for joy!

Conclusion

Matthew Henry (*Matthew Henry's Commentary* [Revell], 3:351) comments on verse 5, "What a pity it is that this earth, which is so full of God's goodness, should be so empty of his praises, and that of the multitudes that live upon his bounty there are so few that live to his glory!" I hope that that cannot be said of us. As God's "righteous ones," let's lean hard on Him to work through us for His glory. When we see Him deliver our souls from death and keep us alive in famine (v. 19), our response will be to sing and praise Him exuberantly with thankful hearts.

Application Questions

1. Why does evolution fly in the face of biblical Christianity? Can one believe in "theistic" evolution and still believe the Bible?
2. How does affirming God's sovereignty over all (Ps. 33:10-12) help us to be thankful, worshiping people?
3. Where is the balance between using human methods versus trusting in God alone? How can we avoid putting our trust in the methods? When are we presuming on God?
4. Is worship style a matter of personality or of being thoroughly delighted in God? Give biblical examples.

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