

Psalm 107
A Holiday Test for Our Hearts
A Thanksgiving Sermon

Preached by Pastor Glenn Durham at Dominion Covenant Church, Omaha, Nebraska, on November 19, 2006.
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Main Idea: *God's people are to marked by thankful hearts and lives.*

Introduction

A man living in Budapest, Hungary, went to his rabbi, complaining, "Life is unbearable. Nine of us must live in the one room of my house. What can I do?"

The rabbi answers, "Take your goat into the room with you." The man is incredulous, but the rabbi insists: "Do as I say and come back in a week."

One week later the man returns, more distraught: "We cannot stand it; the goat is filthy, it stinks and it destroys everything."

The rabbi pauses, thinking deeply and says: "Go home and let the goat out. And come back in one week."

When the man returns the next week, he is absolutely radiant: "Life is beautiful! We enjoy every minute of it now that there are only the nine of us in our house."

Perspective—a different perspective often transforms our attitudes. We must see the world as God does to become joyful and grateful people.

[This illustration was inspired by John Piper, *A Godward Life, Book 2*, chapter 4, 28-30.]

The number of hours of daylight is nearing its ebb. Nights lengthen as the cold squeezes heat and life from the land. Soon the snow will begin and with it a disease known as SAD, Seasonal Affective Disorder. These "winter blues" bring feelings of depression that may not lift until spring. It is cold, dark and dreary and we may need a new perspective in order to give thanks. Verse 43 of our text asks us to meditate on the many mercies of God: "Whoever is wise, let him attend to these things; let them consider the steadfast love of the LORD" (Psalm 107.43). Is God's abundant kindness evident in winter and snow?

According to the census bureau, there are 116 square miles in Omaha. In an average year, there will be 30 inches of snow, which is, about 3 inches of water. Does not seem like much, does it?

But 116 square miles is 3,233,894,400 square feet. 3 inches of water is ¼ of a foot, so covering Omaha with 30 inches of snow requires 808,473,600 cubic feet of water. There are about 7½ gallons per cubic foot and each gallon weighs 8.33 lbs, meaning that 50,509,388,000 pounds of water will be dropped on Omaha this winter. The maximum liftoff weight of a 747 jet is 875,000 lbs; thus a weight equivalent to 57,725 fully loaded jumbo jets will press down on us.

Now let's think about where this snow came from, which your children will place in their mouths. Before it began its journey, it was water sitting in a pig's lagoon in western Nebraska; it was water washing over the rotting carcass of a dead deer in Colorado; it was water floating in an ocean of waste, both animal and industrial. But God lifts 50,000,000,000 pounds of water from its putrid surroundings, filters it clean, floats it here, and drops it on your daughter's waiting tongue.

But not at once. Such weight could crush and kill. Instead, he flings this mountain of water, clean and pure, and sets it down with the gentle touch of Rembrandt. Flakes large enough to fall a mile without evaporating, and small enough to delicately kiss your cheek. A change in perspective turns another “dreary day” into cause for amazement and thanksgiving.

William Shakespeare has King Lear say: “Sharper than a serpent’s tooth is a thankless child.” For those of us desperately seeking to tame our “serpent offspring,” we understand Lear’s sentiment. A mother may labor hours over a hot stove, and a father rise three or four times during a meal to refill glasses and plates, and not a peep of gratitude is uttered. “Sharper than a serpent’s tooth is a thankless child.” The bite hurts when our children, for whom we do so much, seem to appreciate it so little. Unfortunately, King Lear’s curse may describe more than our children; it may describe us.

Scottish Presbyterian Pastor, David Dickson (c. 1640): “There is no duty to which we are more dull or at which we are more awkward than the praise of God and thanksgiving unto Him; neither is there any duty for which we are in more need of being stirred up.” (Quoted in Spurgeon’s *Commentary on the Psalms, in loc*).

George Washington and the 1789 Congress understood the need to stir up grateful hearts in the people: Washington’s first Thanksgiving Proclamation reads: “Whereas it is the duty of all nations to acknowledge the Providence of Almighty God, to obey His will, to be grateful for His benefits, and humbly to implore His protection and favor: and whereas both Houses of Congress have...requested me ‘To recommend to the People of the United States, a Day of public Thanksgiving and Prayer, to be observed by acknowledging with grateful hearts the many signal favors of Almighty GOD...,’ Now therefore, I do recommend and assign Thursday the 26th of November next to be devoted by the People of these States, to the Service of that great and glorious Being, who is the beneficent Author of all the good that was, that is, or that will be: That we may then all unite in rendering unto Him our sincere and humble thanks for His kind care and protection of the people of this country....”

As we prepare for a national day of Thanksgiving, we may not feel particularly thankful. We are easily discouraged; life is difficult; things do not always go the way we plan. We may not appreciate God because we do not feel appreciated by God. But that is the wrong perspective! God would have us “bring a goat in the house” and learn again thankfulness.

I have entitled today’s message “A Holiday Test for Our Hearts.” This test has four questions which we must learn to answer correctly in order to be thankful.

1. Question 1: Am I Naturally Thankful?

Most people consider themselves grateful for blessings received. But is our gratitude more socially conditioned or is the music of our hearts truly tuned to thanksgiving?

Psalm 107 is written precisely because Israel needed reminding to be thankful for God’s redemption—His redemption from wandering in the desert, from imprisonment, from sickness and sin and from being lost on the sea. Though experiencing God’s help and favor again and again, the people were not grateful. Their attitude was: “What have you done for me lately?”

Do not those of us who claim to be Christians have far more reason for grateful hearts than even the church of the Old Testament? Yet we may be quick to leave off thankfulness when God’s providence includes a bit of a frown.

I admit that thanksgiving is not my ready response to trials and troubles. James reminds me: “Count it all joy...when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be

perfect and complete, lacking in nothing” (James 1.2-4). But I typically see trials as pure misery, not pure joy!

When I was in a particularly difficult time in ministry, I called one of the elders from Harvest, Jim, a valued friend and wise counselor. I told him of the struggles and of how being a pastor threatened to overwhelm me, and of how inadequate I felt for the task. I said, “Jim, I’m not sure I know how to find God’s will anymore.” Jim immediately responded: “1Thessalonians 5.16-18: Rejoice always; pray without ceasing; give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”

Jim nailed it; when we doubt and despair and don’t know what to do—that is when we most benefit from giving thanks with rejoicing!

Romans 1.21 is an important passage to consider in studying for Test Question #1: “Am I naturally Thankful?” Paul has just announced that he is not ashamed of the gospel for it is the power of God for salvation. That proclamation compels him to explain why we need saving and from what. We need saving from God’s wrath because we all stand before him guilty. But of what are we guilty?

Paul notes that one thing which condemns all mankind, one proof of our fallenness, one testimony to original sin, is our lack of thankfulness!

Romans 1.18-21: “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him...”

Maybe you imagine God too severe in that accusation? Maybe you believe people are naturally grateful. Yet listen to some modern thinkers:

Josef Stalin: “Gratitude...is a sickness suffered by dogs.”

Dorothy Parker (author, poet, critic for *Vogue* and *Vanity Fair*): “Gratitude—the meanest and most sniveling attribute in the world.”

William Faulkner: “Maybe the only thing worse than having to give gratitude constantly...is having to accept it.”

The Bible is accurate: we come from the womb naturally ungrateful. We owe God infinite thanks, but as **Elizabeth Barrett Browning** penned:

“This race is never grateful: from the first,
One fills their cup at supper with pure wine,
Which back they give at cross-time on a sponge,
In bitter vinegar.”

How might a lack of thankfulness manifest itself in our lives?

- We may never thank God for the many mercies we have received: life and health, water and food, clothing and housing, friends and family, God’s revelation and his redemption. Has God heard our voices singing praise?
- We may dwell most often on what we do not have: yes we have bread, but no fish; fish, but no vegetables; some cash but not wealth; a car but not a new one; a computer, but not a Mac. Has God heard our voices singing sorrowfully?
- We may fret too much over our ills. The scriptures insist that afflictions are for our good; does God hear our thankfulness in troubles? I have told you this before, but it is good

enough to repeat. Pastor Matthew Henry was robbed one day and wrote in his diary the next: “Let me be thankful. First, because I was never robbed before. Second, because although they took my wallet, they did not take my life. Third, because although they took my all, it was not much. Fourth, because it was I who was robbed, not I who robbed.”

We could list other manifestations. Instead, note this: if we are to learn the joy and contentment of a thankful heart, we must begin by confessing our lack of thankfulness and asking God’s forgiveness. We are all, by nature, ungrateful.

2. Question 2: Should I Be Thankful?

This psalm seems to *command* thanksgiving: Psalm 107.1: “Oh give thanks to the Lord, for he is good....”

Additionally, at least 23 other Psalms mention thanksgiving. Psalm 30: “Sing praises to the LORD, O you his saints, and give thanks to his holy name.” Or Psalm 79.13: “But we your people, the sheep of your pasture, will give thanks to you forever....”

Genuine gratitude characterizes Jesus’ prayers. Paul, in his 13 letters, mentions giving thanks forty-five times.

Revelation tells us that thanking God is characteristic of worship in heaven. **Revelation 7.11-12:** “And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying, ‘Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.’” **Revelation 11.16-17:** “And the twenty-four elders who sit on their thrones before God fell on their faces and worshiped God,¹⁷ saying, ‘We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, who is and who was, for you have taken your great power and begun to reign.’”

1 Thessalonians 5 reminds us that it is God’s will that we give thanks in all circumstances. Ephesians 5 insists that a result of being filled with the Holy Spirit is that we “give thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Should we be thankful? Look at Psalm 107.2: “Let the redeemed of the Lord say so, whom he has redeemed from trouble.” Have you been redeemed from destruction and damnation? Have you been saved from sin and sickness and sorrow. Say so! Give thanks to the Lord.

Now in order to do obey this command, we must realize that thankfulness is both an attitude and an action.

Since we are coming up on the gift giving season, it might be good to remind our children of this. Sometimes kids are not grateful if it is not what they want. Parents then prod their children to say, “Thank you,” but often end up with an action that does not match the attitude. Such may happen because we consider ourselves more important than others: “My wants are critical; if it receive what I want then I am grateful.” An attitude of gratitude, however, is other oriented. Instead of asking, “Is this what I want?” we learn to ask, “Did that person do something nice?” Our perspective must change on who is most important.

But thankfulness is more than simply an attitude, is it not? Suppose tomorrow is your wife’s birthday. You arrange for babysitting and make reservations at a fine restaurant. You spend several hours shopping for the right gift. You leave work early and surprise your wife with flowers and the special evening you had planned. How will you like it if your wife says nothing?

You assume she enjoys your attention to detail, the dinner and the gift, but she never offers a word of thanks, never gives a hint of appreciation, or even says, “You did better than last year.” She expresses no gratitude. Any husband treated that way would be angry. We expect thankfulness when we do something special for another.

Why should we be thankful people?

- We have ample reason to be—God is good
- It is commanded
- We demand it from others
- It is our joy.

Did you hear about the farmer known for complaining? A neighbor stopped by for a visit, and noticing the wonderful crop, said, “You must be delighted with this year’s harvest!” The farmer grudgingly admitted: “Well, yes, it does look like the best I’ve ever had.” “But,” he added, “a bumper crop is awfully hard on the soil.”

We have a bumper crop of blessings, but a failure of gratitude will make us bitter before our time. “Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever!”

3. Question 3: Where Will I Get a Thankful Heart?

I am not naturally thankful, though I should be. How will that gap be bridged? One place to see the answer is in Jesus’ miraculous healing of ten lepers.

Luke 17.11-19: “On the way to Jerusalem he was passing along between Samaria and Galilee. ¹² And as he entered a village, he was met by ten lepers, who stood at a distance ¹³ and lifted up their voices, saying, ‘Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.’ ¹⁴ When he saw them he said to them, ‘Go and show yourselves to the priests.’ And as they went they were cleansed. ¹⁵ Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice; ¹⁶ and he fell on his face at Jesus’ feet, giving him thanks. Now he was a Samaritan. ¹⁷ Then Jesus answered, ‘Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine? ¹⁸ Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?’ ¹⁹ And he said to him, ‘Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well.’”

Returning and giving thanks to Christ did not save the man; his faith saved him. But the reality of his faith was evident in his grateful heart.

We read Romans 1 earlier and heard Paul admit that he needed the good news of salvation. We need a supernatural work of God’s grace to save us and make us thankful.

4. Question 4: How Do I Become Thankful?

God stirs up thankfulness throughout the Bible because a person who is redeemed enjoys nothing more than saying “Thank you,” to God. Therefore all true believers desire to be more appreciative. Six steps to happiness.

4.1. Confess ingratitude and ask for a new heart

We begin by agreeing with God: “I am naturally ungrateful.” That will be really hard for some of us, because we pride ourselves on writing thank you notes and showing appreciation. The answer, however, is not simply to “turn over a new leaf” and make a resolution to be thankful in 2007. We must not begin with ourselves, we must begin with God.

Jesus did not die so that we would feel guilty for past ingratitude and promise to do better. Jesus died because we cannot do better. Such thankfulness is not within us; he alone is

perfectly thankful. Apart from him we can do no good work—including giving thanks. Agree with him and ask of the Spirit that which you cannot acquire on your own—a new and thankful disposition.

4.2. Believe Jesus' Promise To Make You Thankful

Do not postpone obedience until you feel like obeying. We obey from faith, not from feelings. A new heart is guaranteed in the new covenant, so let us take God at his word and believe that he is remaking us to be truly thankful people. The Bible tells us that it is our joy to give thanks in all circumstances, and your father loves you too much to deprive you of this great joy!

4.3. Thank God For His Goodness and Grace

Talking about it is not enough. Feeling guilty is not acceptable. Practice the promise—“Let the redeemed of the Lord say so.” Say it; speak it; let the words come from your mouth. It may seem awkward at first, but will get easier and more enjoyable as we spend time in Thanksgiving.

Many of us will find great help if we practice not only thankfulness in word, but also in deed. Puritan Pastor John Flavel made this comment about giving thanks to God through our works of mercy: “Think not what God bestows upon you is wholly for your own use: but honor God with your mercies by clothing the naked and feeding the hungry, especially such as are godly. This is a due improvement of your estates; thus you may make to yourselves friends of the mammon of unrighteousness. Ah, how little do we consider what praise, what glory we may occasion this way, from others, to the name of God.”

4.4. Find Small Blessings over which to Give Thanks

Meditate on creation, redemption and everything else that God does. Teach yourself to enjoy being thankful for snow.

4.5. Meditate on the Freedom from Ingratitude which will be Yours in Heaven

The opposite of thankfulness is slavery to dissatisfaction. Those who believe that God owes them more are never happy with what they have. But such discontent will no longer cling to use when we are with God. We will finally know that every circumstance was and is for our good. We will be freed from ingratitude because what we see now in part we will then see in full!

4.6. Begin to Give Thanks Even in Times of Trouble

Gratitude is often smothered by difficulty. Let us not pretend: life is hard. True gratitude does not come from wearing a plastic smile. Instead, it results from true trust in God's goodness and steadfast love.

We learn thanksgiving at the cross. He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all [good] things? God is for us! Who can be against us? Who can separate us from the love of Christ? In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us! Neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord!

Instead of bringing a goat into the room, bring the cross—it changes your perspective! No longer is trouble a sign of God’s disfavor and cause for grumbling. Now it is the assurance of God’s love and the guarantee that all things work together for out good!

5. Conclusion

Harry Ironside preached in the early 1900s in the famous Moody Church in Chicago. One day he was just sitting down to eat lunch in a crowded downtown restaurant when a man approached and asked if he could share the table (for there were no other places to sit). Ironside welcomed him and then, as was his custom, he bowed his head in prayer. When he opened his eyes, the other man asked, “Do you have a headache?”

Ironside replied, “No, I don’t.”

The other man asked, “Well, is there something wrong with your food?”

Ironside replied, “No, I was simply thanking God as I always do before I eat.”

The man said, “Oh, you’re one of those, are you? What a waste of time. I earn my money by the sweat of my brow and I don’t have to give thanks to anybody when I eat. I just start right in!”

Ironside said, “Oh, you’re one of those, are you? You’re just like my dog. That’s what he does too!” You think about that. Amen.