

## ***Thankful ... Naturally*** **Psalm 92**

Praise is a normal part of life. At this time of year, the easiest place to see it is the footy finals. What's the talk going to be about tomorrow?

- The great try.
- The last-ditch tackle.
- The kick that changed the game.
- The fearless leap for the ball.

It'll be exactly the same next week – only the names of the players will have changed. The guy we praise this week may blunder big-time next week. We rave to one another about the feats of the footy field. We praise our footy stars. And it's not simply that we talk about them.

- We cheer for them.
- We hang off their every word in interviews.
- Some people even pay good money to go and watch them.

And it's not just footy players. I know some of you aren't really into that.

- We may rave about some actor's performance.
- Perhaps we'll gush about some singer or band.
- We may wax eloquent about some doctor who's made a medical breakthrough.
- Perhaps we'll marvel at some heroic deed.

We praise those who do things out of the ordinary. It just seems to come naturally.

Thanks is also a normal part of life.

- We thank those who do things for us.
- We especially thank those who go out of their way

to do things for us.

- We thank those who rescue us from danger or who save us from making bad blunders.

Often thankfulness too comes naturally – especially with the big things. That feeling of gratitude just wells up inside us and bubbles to the surface. We're just so grateful for what they've done for us.

We actually think thankfulness is such an important concept that we teach it to our children. We realise children can be so self-centred and so self-absorbed that they sometimes need some encouragement to see they should appreciate others. They just think it's the most natural thing in the world:

- that food appears on their plates at each meal;
- that everyone wants to spend time with them;
- that people would give them presents.

### **Thanking God**

Now, if we think praise and thanks is such an important part of life – even a natural part of life – should it be any different in relation to God? The Psalmist doesn't think so. Look at verses 1 to 3:

*It is good to praise the LORD  
and make music to Your name, O Most High,  
to proclaim Your love in the morning  
and Your faithfulness at night,  
to the music of the ten-stringed lyre  
and the melody of the harp.*

It is good to do three things – there are three verbs following the word *good* – and the different translations can give slightly different senses:

- first, to *praise* Yahweh (NIV) or to *give thanks*

(ESV);

- secondly, to *make music to Your name* (NIV) or to *sing praises* (ESV); and
- thirdly, to *proclaim Your love and faithfulness* (NIV) or to *declare* (ESV).

But overall, you get the general drift without too much trouble. It's good to thank God. It's good to praise God.

Is there any difference between the two? Technically, yes. The *Macquarie Dictionary* defines:

- praise – to express approval or admiration; and
- thank – to give thanks to (which seems a strange definition to me – to use the word to define itself) or to express gratitude to.

Some people talk about praising God for who He is and thanking God for what He's done. But is it really all that easy to keep the two distinct? Go back to the example of the footy hero from the weekend.

- Why do we praise the guy? Is it because of who he is? In a sense yes – because that's why he's out there playing footy and not me. I'm not a footy player. That's just part of who I am. But when we praise him tomorrow morning, it's because of what he's done – the tackle he made or the ball he caught or the kick and chase he did.
- And when we praise him, is it praise pure and simple? Is there no element of thanks involved? Part of it is we're thanking him for the spectacle he put on – for the amazing feat of human skill he gave us; for entertaining us so well.

When it comes to God, can you really separate out who God is from what He's done? You can do it at an intellectual level. You can talk about God's infiniteness:

- about God being everywhere – that there's nowhere you can escape His presence; and
- about God knowing everything – that nothing can take Him by surprise.

And you can praise Him for simply being those things – without there being any element of thanks involved. Indeed, there are some people who are very unthankful about those things – they wish to hide things from God so He doesn't know what they're up to.

But, more often, we think of who God is in terms of how He relates to us. We think of qualities where praise and thanks tend to overlap. For example, God's love.

- I can certainly think of God's love in the abstract. I've got theology textbooks sitting on my shelf at home that help me do just that. They go into great detail about the various aspects of God's love – and at times they can get quite technical in how they do that. And, after I read one of them, I can certainly sit down and praise God for the wonders of His love – in the abstract.
- But it's much more usual for me to praise God for His love for me. I want to know how God's love relates to my life – what it means for me. And when I discover that, it seems the only appropriate response is to praise Him in wonder and awe and to thank Him profusely for what He's done for me.

The two overlap. And you can go through that exercise with God's other qualities.

Why have I gone through all that? Because, while there are three verbs that follow this word *good*, I don't think it's overly helpful to try to draw hard and fast distinctions between the three – which may be why the different

translations seem to alternate between the words they use. I don't think the psalmist makes huge distinctions. I think he's simply saying: adore, praise, admire, honour, eulogise, thank, be grateful – whatever positive word you can find to describe it, do it.

And do it in whatever way seems appropriate. When it comes to the footy player, people find all sorts of ways.

- If they're at the game, they shout and cheer and stomp their feet and leap in the air and call out his name and hold up signs.
- They talk about it at work over and over.
- His picture's on the back page of the paper – or, if it's really special, it may even make the front page.
- The news reports replay the footage again and again. The commentators reach for one superlative after another – trying to outdo each other.

And so it goes on.

And that's how it should be with God. Praise Him and thank Him in whatever way seems appropriate.

- That may involve singing.
- That may involve simply telling it out.
- That may involve using musical instruments.
- That may involve special ceremonies.
- That may involve all sorts of things the psalmist doesn't mention here. Some are mentioned in other psalms.

Don't feel limited. This is too important. Whatever is appropriate – that is, whatever is not inconsistent with God Himself – go for it. For example, if in your exuberance, you suddenly had the urge to make a statue of God because you wanted to show how great He is – don't. God tells us not to make physical representations of Him-

self – so that's out. But, as long as God hasn't forbidden it and it's not going to bring dishonour to Him, go for it.

Now, if you're like me, this is an area for improvement. It's something we do when we come to church.

- We sing of God's greatness in many of our songs.
- Often we'll acknowledge God's greatness in our prayers.
- We focus much of our time hearing His Word and thinking about that – implicitly that declares His greatness.
- In a sense, just coming to church acknowledges God's greatness – we acknowledge that God's important enough for us to give up what we want to do on a Sunday morning to do what He says.

Yet, we don't seem as excited about it as the footy crowd.

Now, I know there's a difference between a footy crowd and a church congregation.

- Different expectations as to how they behave.
- Different rules about what you can and can't do.
- The action on the field is visually more exciting than the action at church.

There are differences – and you can come up with all sorts of excuses as to why church shouldn't look like a footy crowd. But, if you can stop looking for excuses for a minute and simply focus on the important question: Should we have more of a sense of excitement about God's greatness when we gather? Should that somehow be expressed more Sunday by Sunday? Have we become so familiar with who God is and what He's done for us that the excitement's worn off? And has it worn off in everyday life – and is that why we don't see it much on Sunday mornings?

## The Particular Situation

The psalmist says:

*It is good to praise the LORD*

Why? Verse 4:

*For You make me glad by Your deeds, O LORD;*

*I sing for joy at the works of Your hands.*

Now that's quite a general statement – and there's nothing wrong with it as a general statement or with thinking about it as such.

But here, I think the psalmist has a particular situation in mind. He's been in trouble and God's delivered him. Verse 10:

*You have exalted my horn like that of a wild ox;*

*fine oils have been poured upon me.*

*My eyes have seen the defeat of my adversaries;*

*my ears have heard the rout of my wicked foes.*

He's faced these adversaries – these wicked foes. We have no idea who they are – and it doesn't matter much. The point is: the psalmist was in trouble because these people were against him – but that isn't the case anymore. God's intervened.

- The people against him are now defeated.
- He himself has been exalted or vindicated or lifted above his enemies.

The *horn* symbolises strength and power. Having *oil poured on* indicates blessing.

Having been delivered from these enemies, the psalmist reflects on life. The first part of this reflection has to do with the wicked. Verse 5:

*How great are Your works, O LORD,*

*how profound Your thoughts!*

*The senseless man does not know,  
fools do not understand,  
that though the wicked spring up like grass  
and all evildoers flourish,  
they will be forever destroyed.  
But You, O LORD, are exalted forever.  
For surely Your enemies, O LORD,  
surely Your enemies will perish;  
all evildoers will be scattered.*

It has some similarities with Psalm 73. We're tempted to envy the wicked.

- They spring up like grass. Some plants take a while to grow – and when they do grow, it seems to be slowly. Grass isn't like that. It comes up quickly – maybe not during the cold winters in Bathurst, but we'll soon have to get out the lawnmowers on a regular basis. When it springs up, it looks like there's a lot happening.
- It looks like evildoers flourish. They get ahead. They make a name for themselves. They get what they want. Everything's happening for them.

Maybe the psalmist felt like that before God intervened.

But look how he describes them now – senseless; fools. In psalms, the *fool* is not the dumb person – in the sense of the person with the low IQ. The fool could boast a genius IQ – be a member of MENSAs or an academic with several PhDs. The fool is the person who ignores God – who lives and makes decisions without any refer-ence to God – who simply does what they want as if no God will call them to account.

These people simply don't understand reality. They think

they do. They look at the world and think they've got it all figured out.

- They know how to make money.
- They know how to enjoy themselves.
- They know how to get what they want.
- They know how to manipulate people.
- They write all the "how to" books that sell so well.

It looks like they're cruising through life without a care in the world. And they may not have a care in the world – but they should. For this is God's world and they haven't taken Him into account. That's wicked – to ignore the owner and simply treat His world and His resources as if they're yours. That's to set yourself up as God's enemy. And God will call such people to account. They will perish.

The second part of the psalmist's reflection has to do with the righteous. Verse 12:

*The righteous will flourish like a palm tree,  
they will grow like a cedar of Lebanon;  
planted in the house of the LORD,  
they will flourish in the courts of our God.  
They will still bear fruit in old age,  
they will stay fresh and green,  
proclaiming, "The LORD is upright;  
He is my Rock, and there is no wickedness in Him."*

Not grass, but a palm tree and a cedar. Grass may start off well and get going quickly and look pretty good for a time – but compared with a palm tree and a cedar? It just doesn't have the staying power. It doesn't have the desirability or the strength or the fruitfulness. It's the same contrast that's made in Psalm 1. Those who pay attention to God – those who relate properly to God – they're the

ones who truly last. This is God's world. It's His order of things that ultimately matters. Ultimate success comes from conforming to His order. This is the stuff of true wisdom.

The psalmist experienced God's deliverance from his enemies. He used that experience to reflect further on the realities of life – on the ways of God and the destiny of the wicked. And the outcome of all that is:

- his own praise and thankfulness to God; and
- this statement that this is a good thing to do – encouraging others to also do this.

### **Thanking God Today**

So, is this something we should do? Is there anything in this psalm that's peculiar to Israel? At one level, yes. There's a sense in which God had made His thoughts and His deeds known to Israel in a way that He hadn't made them known to other nations. They had real privileges being God's people.

- So when the psalmist says how profound are your thoughts – he has God's words in the books of Moses to contemplate.
- When the psalmist says how great are your works – he has the plagues of Egypt, the parting of the Red Sea, the conquering of Canaan and things like that in the back of his mind.

These things were the history of God's covenant people.

Yet, there's nothing in this psalm that specifically relates to the covenant. It's simply wisdom. This is reality in God's world – because it is God's world.

- The wise thing is to pay attention to the Maker. It's to recognise His rights of ownership. It's to live as

if He truly is the Owner.

- The senseless person doesn't pay attention to their Maker. They treat this world as if He doesn't exist. They may very well say they believe in His existence – but, for all practical purposes, they live as if He's not there. That's not wise.

Suppose I get a job in your company. You've built this company from scratch. You've made it into a thriving business. You hire me. You give me a job description. You give me an office. You give me a computer. Each day, I come to work and go to my office. The job description sits in the centre of my desk – but I've never opened it. Each day I turn my computer on and play Spider and surf the internet all day. Each day I go home and tell my wife how much fun I've had at work. Is that a wise approach to my job? Will I grow like a palm tree or flourish like grass?

Because this is the stuff of wisdom, it seems to me that it's directly applicable to us. This is what it's like in God's world. We live in God's world. If we want ultimate success in God's world, this is how we should be.

Yet, the reality is we can't be like this without Jesus. In ourselves, we're not righteous – and so we won't flourish like a palm tree. From birth, we've got a bias against God. We want to do our own thing, not His thing. We want to make the rules that we like, not pay attention to His directions. And that bias has issued in acts of rebellion against God. We're the evildoers who'll be destroyed.

In order to be righteous, we need Jesus.

- We need Jesus to pay the penalty for rebellion for us – for that's not something we can successfully do for ourselves.
- We need Jesus to give us the desire to give up the rebellion – for left to ourselves, we'd quite happily continue it to our own destruction.
- We need Jesus to change us so that we desire God's thoughts and God's ways – for the strength of our own self-centred desires is strong within us.

The senseless person's the one who doesn't pay attention to God.

- Doesn't pay attention to God's instructions on life – like the psalmist says.
- Doesn't pay attention to God's assessment of their rebellion – like the psalmist says.
- Doesn't pay attention to God's solution – namely, Jesus. How can a person hope to stand before God if they ignore the only way out God's provided.

This is a far greater deliverance than what was originally behind this psalm. For what are the enemies we faced?

- A sinful nature that enjoyed running life.
- The demise of death that made a mockery of finding any satisfying meaning to life.
- God's eternal judgment that was the just punishment for our rebellion.

And, in Jesus, God's dealt with those enemies.

- Jesus takes God's judgment for us.
- Jesus defeats death and promises eternal life.
- Jesus gives us a new heart that increasingly desires to serve and honour God.

And is not the proper response to that to proclaim:

*For You make me glad by Your deeds, O LORD;*

*I sing for joy at the works of Your hands.*

How much greater are the deeds and works we've seen. How much greater should be the gladness and joy we express.

### Final Comments

I want to make two comments in closing. This is not so much by way of conclusion – we've already got to that point – rather, they're just a couple of additional thoughts that didn't fit in earlier.

The first is to note that this is *for the Sabbath day*. The Old Testament Sabbath wasn't simply for rest – it was that, but it was also more than that. It was a time for remembering God – for reflecting on what God had done. Now, of course, you can do that any day of the week – and should do so. Yet, the distractions of the busy-ness of life often move that into the background. We don't deliberately set out to neglect or forget God – it's just He gets squeezed to the periphery of our minds by other important things.

Having a day set aside for rest and remembering helps counteract this – which leads to the question: How do you approach Sundays?

- Is it a matter of wanting to get church over and done with so you can get on with whatever it is you really want to do?
- Or is it a matter of seeing church as the springboard into further reflection and praise for the rest of the day – or even the rest of the week?

And that leads to a further question: What would cause you to miss church? If part of church is God's gift to stop

us drifting away from Him, what would cause you to neglect that gift? What legitimate activity has a higher priority?

The second thing is to come back to the question I asked earlier: Should we have a greater sense of excitement about God's greatness when we gather? All sorts of things could be put forward as possible reasons why we don't – and it'd be worth contemplating many of them. We don't have time just now. But let me suggest one. There's a hint of it in verse 2:

*to proclaim Your love in the morning  
and Your faithfulness at night,*

*Morning and night* is a way of saying the whole day long. This is whole of life activity. It's an attitude we should cultivate at all times.

If we get into the habit of *not* praising God for His majesty and His great deeds throughout the week, why would we expect the habit to change once we get to church? This is a weakness for me – I need to work on it. Maybe it's something you could work on as well. Now, I know there's a certain tension between this thought and the last one – and there's a certain circularity in what I'm saying:

- Come to church and get pumped up so you can make it through your forgetfulness for the rest of the week.
- Pump yourself up during the week so you'll be better able to pump up others when you get to church.

We need to work on both sides of the circle.