

How To Celebrate Thanksgiving This Year

Text Psalm 65:1-13

Series: The Psalms [#24]

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Introduction

Thanksgiving is usually a happy, festive time. In addition to the long weekend itself, many people celebrate the *Big Three*— food, family and football. Others also take some time to think and be thankful. As Christians, we know that God is the source of all our material, personal and spiritual blessings. We enjoy the long weekend, the food, family and football but also, hopefully, frame and fill this weekend with true thankfulness to God.

We do that in many different ways. Sometimes by following long established family and church traditions. At other times we may break the mold and do something different. When I was in my teens, our family did that one year. My Dad came up with the idea that we should take the trailer and go to the mountains for Thanksgiving. To understand this you have to know that we weren't big time campers, especially my Mom, and that the trailer was used almost exclusively as a base camp on hunting trips. Somehow Dad convinced Mom. The weather was great. Mom planned and pulled off preparing a full Thanksgiving feast in that trailer, turkey and all. While we never did it again, we enjoyed the mountains, food, time together *and* we gave thanks to God in a unique way that year.

What about your Thanksgiving this year? How are you going to, how *are you* celebrating? No matter how well planned or how much celebrating you have already done, today's Psalm gives us some good ideas of how we can and should celebrate this year. The inscription tells us Psalm 65 is a Psalm of King David. We don't have any other details about the when and why. But God has given us all we need in the Psalm itself as David promises to, and actually does praise God. He begins with praising God for ...

His Grace Of Forgiveness And Fellowship.

First we should note some differences in the translation of verse 1 in our English versions.

- The NASB we read, "There will be silence before You, and praise in Zion, O God, and to You the vow will be performed."
- The NIV says, "Praise awaits you, O God, in Zion; to you our vows will be fulfilled."
- In the NKJV we read, "Praise is awaiting You, O God, in Zion; and to You the vow shall be performed."

- The ESV states, “Praise is due to you, O God, in Zion, and to you shall vows be performed.” A *footnote* suggests the first part could also be “Praise waits for you in silence.”

The reason for the differences lies in the sparse and unclear wording, which literally could read, “To you silence praise.” David’s thought is probably not *silent praise* since praise in the Old Testament is vocal, not silent, although it has been suggested that at the height of praise worshipers can be moved to silence.¹ More likely, looking at the verse as a whole, he is saying that the praise he promised God is still coming, that he will fulfill his vow to praise God.

The first aspect of his praise is for God’s grace in forgiving his sins. Look at verse 3. “Iniquities prevail against me; as for our transgressions, You forgive them.” King David knew, he experienced “sin which so easily entangles us,” as the writer of Hebrews described it.² He knew all too well sin that had prevailed over him.

So he prayed, pleaded with God in Psalm 51,

“Be gracious to me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness; according to the greatness of Your compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against You, You only, I have sinned and done what is evil in Your sight, so that You are justified when You speak and blameless when You judge.”

He knew that God is gracious and forgives those who come to Him confessing and repenting from their sin. Psalm 86:5, “For You, Lord, are good, and ready to forgive, and abundant in lovingkindness to all who call upon You.”

He also experienced the peace and joy of God’s forgiveness. He opened Psalm 32 with “How blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered!” and then later testifies, “I acknowledged my sin to You, and my iniquity I did not hide; I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the LORD’; and You forgave the guilt of my sin.”

David did not lose sight of God’s great *grace* of forgiveness, nor did he take it for granted. While he lived a thousand years before Christ, he knew God’s grace was costly, not cheap, and he praised Him for it.

Everyone of us needs to remember that God’s grace of forgiveness is costly, not cheap. All of us have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. All of us deserve God’s just judgment rather than His gracious forgiveness.³ God’s grace is freely available to us because eternal God the Son humbled Himself, became one of us and then, as the spotless Lamb of God, took all our sin upon Himself, was made sin for us so that in Him we might be fully forgiven, thoroughly washed clean of our sin and made the righteousness of God in Him. Everyone of us needs to remember this whether we have stayed on the straight and narrow

path or have wandered off on the path of the prodigal. And so everyone of us can and should celebrate this Thanksgiving by praising God for His grace in forgiving us of our sins.

Because of this grace of forgiveness, we have the privilege of personal fellowship with eternal, holy God. And for this grace too we should join the king in praising God. Let's continue at verse 4, "How blessed is the one whom You choose and bring near to You to dwell in Your courts. We will be satisfied with the goodness of Your house, Your holy temple."

Aren't you glad that Christ freed us from wondering, wishing and trying to know if there is a God, and if there is, that somehow, sometime—even if only after this life—we might know Him personally? King David knew and experienced the reality of being called into a personal relationship with God. He wrote in Psalm 4:3, "know that the LORD has set apart the godly man for Himself." Then in Psalm 16:11, "You [God] will make known to me the path of life; in Your presence is fullness of joy; in Your right hand there are pleasures forever."

The writer of Psalm 84 picks up this wonderful reality,

"How lovely are Your dwelling places, O LORD of hosts! My soul longed and even yearned for the courts of the LORD; my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God." (1-2)

And, "How blessed are those who dwell in Your house! They are ever praising You" (4). And again, "a day in Your courts is better than a thousand outside. I would rather stand at the threshold of the house of my God than dwell in the tents of wickedness." (10)

While fellowship with God is a natural, ongoing part of life for believers, it is a supernatural, ongoing gift of God's grace. Prime Minister Harper was in Edmonton on Friday. He visited a classroom to give his support to reading, and read to some grade 2 children. The teacher thought it was a great honor to have him there. One little girl was given the honor of sitting beside him as he read. I don't want to diminish that honor but, as special as it was, it does not begin to compare to the honor that you and I have every day, every moment, the honor of being in the presence of God the King, of having fellowship with Him. Celebrate this thanksgiving by praising God for His grace of giving you fellowship with Him.

His Power Of Creating And Controlling The World.

We can also celebrate Thanksgiving by praising God for His power of creating and controlling our world. Drop down to verse 6 which tells us that God "establishes the mountains by His strength, being girded with might." David praised God for His sovereign creating power. The book of Genesis opens by telling us about "the beginning," the origin of the world and ourselves, and that God is the Creator.

God is the Maker of heaven and earth and all that is in them.⁵

- “All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being.”⁶
- “By Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on the earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through Him and for Him.”⁷

Psalm 95 opens with a call to shout joyfully to God, to come before Him with thanksgiving. *Why?* Because “the sea is His, for it was He who made it, and His hands formed the dry land” (5). The apostle John tells us there is a day coming when God will send an angel to herald an eternal gospel to all peoples saying, “Fear God, and give Him glory, because the hour of His judgment has come; worship Him who made the heaven and the earth and sea and springs of waters.”⁸

Whether we see the beautiful fall colors, the pristine white cover of fresh snow, the vivid spring colors, the mountains or the valleys, the seas or the deserts, we can and should praise God for His creative power. The beauty and balance of His creation is something the greatest minds and most powerful computers will never fully understand. God’s great power of creation gave us a wonderful world, even though it was marred by our first parents’ sin and now groans and eagerly waits for its recreation by God.⁹ Yes, praise God for His creating power!

God not only created all that is, He also controls it. For this too we should praise Him. Go back up to verse 5.

“By awesome deeds You answer us in righteousness, O God of our salvation, You who are the trust of all the ends of the earth and of the farthest sea; Who establishes the mountains by His strength, being girded with might; Who stills the roaring of the seas, the roaring of their waves, and the tumult of the peoples. They who dwell in the ends of the earth stand in awe of Your signs; You make the dawn and the sunset shout for joy.” (5-8)

Sometimes it seems that the world, our world is out of control. There is so much anger and hatred, violence and suffering, so many shattered dreams and broken hearts. There are times when we can ask, “Where are You, God?” and wonder if He really does exist. In spite of the seeming chaos, the mind numbing and heart breaking disasters, the ongoing rebellion against God, He *is* there; He *is* here; He *is* in control.

Sailing the seas was and still can be dangerous. And so King David points to God’s control over the roaring waves as well as the tumult of people. Psalm 89:9 says, “You [God] rule the swelling of the sea; when its waves rise, You still them.” Again, in Psalm 107, the writer tells us one of the reasons for giving thanks to God is that “He caused the storm to be still, so that the waves of the sea were hushed.” (29)

This reminds us of the time when Jesus and disciples got in a boat after some intensive ministry. Jesus slept. A fierce storm raged. The disciples woke Him up and said, “Save us, Lord; we are perishing!” Jesus did not respond with smooth, soothing words. He asked them, “Why are you afraid, you men of little faith?” “Then,” Matthew tells us, “[Jesus] got up and rebuked the winds and the sea, and it became perfectly calm.” The disciples were amazed, as each one of us would have been, and asked each other “What kind of a man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey Him?”¹⁰

God does not calm all the raging storms at sea or in our personal worlds, but He *is*—always remember, never forget—He *is* in control of all of them. So praise Him! Praise God for His sovereign power by which He created and controls our world.

His Blessing Of Abundant And Beautiful Productivity.

In addition to teaching us by example to praise God for His grace and His power, King David shows us that we should also praise God for His blessings, including His blessing of abundant and beautiful productivity. David’s word picture brush strokes paint a masterpiece in the last stanza. Let’s pick it up at verse 9.

“You [God] visit the earth and cause it to overflow; You greatly enrich it; the stream of God is full of water; You prepare their grain, for thus You prepare the earth. You water its furrows abundantly, You settle its ridges, You soften it with showers, You bless its growth. You have crowned the year with Your bounty, and Your paths drip with fatness. The pastures of the wilderness drip, and the hills gird themselves with rejoicing. The meadows are clothed with flocks and the valleys are covered with grain; they shout for joy, yes, they sing.” (9-13)

This, clearly, is God’s work. Nine times in verses 9-11 we find in the NASB the word *You* referring to God and His work, and two more times the word *Your*. We see the same emphasis elsewhere, such as in Psalm 104. This abundant and beautiful blessing of productivity is God’s work. Yes, He uses the elements He put into place, but He is directly involved. God is not a *watchmaker* God who has created everything, wound it up and then left it, and us, on our own.

Let’s begin with the abundance of God’s blessing in the earth producing and sustaining crops and herds. Because of Adam’s sin it takes toil and sweat, it takes dealing with thorns and thistles to get the crops that sustain us.¹¹ But God has not abandoned His care of the earth any more than He has abandoned His care of us. He blesses us with abundant production in ways we often cannot see or know.

When Noah and his family left the ark after the flood, God told him, “While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and

night shall not cease.”¹² God promised stability of seasons. He also promised both seedtime and harvest. And God fulfills this promise. Yes, there are floods that destroy crops as well as homes, as we have seen in Pakistan and Ghana recently, but God ensures that there is a harvest, abundant harvests in the world.

This stanza, to borrow David’s term, is dripping with descriptions of abundance. God visits, He comes to the earth to bring abundance by enriching it, watering it and preparing it for crops (9). God gives abundant supply, blesses growth and crowns the year with His bounty (10-11). His blessings drip with fatness so that the end result is the meadows are clothed with flocks and the valleys are covered with grain (11-13). The meadows and valleys, of course, do not have a voice, but nonetheless this abundance fulfills the call of Psalm 98:8, “Let the rivers clap their hands, let the mountains sing together for joy.”

All of this blessing is for our good and beyond that, as Isaiah 41 tells us,

“That they [God’s people] may see and recognize, and consider and gain insight as well, that the hand of the LORD has done this, and the Holy One of Israel has created it.” (20)

We cannot deny God’s bounty here in Canada where wet springs, dry summers and early frosts can leave farmers without a crop and yet we have more food than we need. Yes, we are especially privileged. Yet, while there is famine and starvation in parts of the world, God continues to bless the world with abundant productivity to care for humanity.

God’s abundant blessing to the earth is also overflowing with beauty. The picture in this last stanza is beautiful, perhaps unmatched by any other description of God’s blessing on the earth. But the beauty is not just in the words, it is all around us in our world. We look at the streams, the freshly plowed fields, the refreshing rains, the growing and then golden crops, and we see the beauty of God’s work. We see new calves and lambs and we see the beauty of God’s work. God could have made the world and all the plants and animals drab and monotonous, but He didn’t! *Why?* So that the beauty would cause us to look beyond the plants and animals to Him. So that we could see and know that He is not drab and monotonous, but beautiful.¹²

Conclusion.

So, how are you celebrating Thanksgiving this year? Have you ever wondered what people do who don’t know God through Christ, who want to go beyond the food, family and football of Thanksgiving and somehow be thankful? Neil Plantinga, President of Calvin Seminary, wrote,

“In one of his books, John Baillie tells of a time he attended a religious service conducted by a humanist. The service included a sort of prayer of thanksgiving, in which the humanist avoided

saying ‘We thank you, O God,’ and substituted the words, ‘We are thankful.’”

Then Plantinga reflected,

“It must be an odd feeling to be thankful to nobody in particular. Christians in public institutions often see this odd thing happening on Thanksgiving Day. Everyone in the institution seems to be thankful ‘in general.’ It’s very strange. It’s a little like being married in general.”¹³

Aren’t you glad you can be thankful *in particular*?

As you reflect and talk with God in the next quiet moments,

- Thank and praise Him for His grace of forgiveness and fellowship.
- Thank and praise Him for His power of creating and controlling our world.
- Thank and praise Him for His blessing of abundant and beautiful productivity.

¹ Derek Kidner. *Psalms 1-72*. Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity Press, 1973, page 230.

² Hebrews 12:1.

³ Romans 3:23; 6:23.

⁴ 2 Corinthians 5:21; Philippians 2:8; 1 Peter 1:19; 1 John 1:8-10.

⁵ Psalm 115:5; 146:6.

⁶ John 1:3.

⁷ Colossians 1:16.

⁸ Revelation 14:6-7.

⁹ Romans 8:19-22.

¹⁰ Matthew 8:23-27.

¹¹ Genesis 3:17-19.

¹¹ Genesis 8:22.

¹² Psalm 27:4; Isaiah 33:16.

¹³ Cornelius Plantinga, Jr. *Beyond Doubt: Faith-Building Devotions on Questions Christians Ask*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2001, page 52.

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