

Sunday 14th October 2018
Ephesians - Thanksgiving

Last week we looked at two key priorities and principles in Ephesians 1.1-14.

1. We exist for God's glory, it's all about God and Christ, He is God, we are creatures! – The ultimate goal of God is His glory.
2. We glorify God in this life by pursuing the path of holiness, by being and becoming holy. God's goal for our mortal life of three score years and ten is that we become holy, conformed to the image of Christ.

We also said that the fruit of this process being worked in us is the speaking well of God – praise, and thanksgiving. The cause of our response of praise to God is that God has spoken well of us in Christ. We do not praise God primarily because of feelings or circumstances, but because of who He is, what He has done, and what He has promised. Faith, not sight, even though we want sight! God brings us to spiritual birth to enable us to grow spiritually, not to live in this world as if it were the be-all and the end-all!

A terrible consequence of the fall was the loss of the image of God in humanity. In losing this, we died to God, we were no longer able to relate to Him because we were spiritually dead. We will come to this in Chapter 2. In Salvation, God is birthing us anew to have the God given capacity to know Him. We exist, 'to glorify God and enjoy Him fully forever.'

A person who is spiritually alive will become more concerned about God's Glory, and our holiness of life, because this is what God desires and requires of us. God desires this, and we are conforming to the prayer, 'Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.' When we read the passages in Scripture that give us a glimpse of the heavenlies, the angels and the glorious creatures are praising and obeying God in joy and wonder. This is God's will for us also.

However, there is more in these verses. We are to bless God because He has blessed us. We speak well of God, because He has spoken well of us. We need to look at what He says. God does not complement us and say that we look nice, or look happy and well, or that we do so much for Him that He doesn't know what He would do without us! What God says is mentioned in the text. What God says is regarding what He has done for us, and it is this that we are to focus on. We are chosen, redeemed, adopted and so on, and these we will look at soon. We are told that God has blessed us with every spiritual blessing, it is spiritual blessings which are to be the main stay of our meditation and response of praise.

So then, what is it that Paul has in mind that we should be doing?

We are to praise God in response to these spiritual blessings. This does not mean that we do not thank God for temporal things, we are to thank Him for His providences to us. For example, it is acceptable to thank God for food, health, holidays, family and so on,

but we are not limited to these, neither are they of primary importance to the Christian. Luther had a hymn that includes these words,

‘and though they take our lives,
Goods, honour, children, wife,
Yet are their profit small, these things shall vanish all,
The City of God remaineth.’

However, we focus first on what God has done for us in Christ, because what are we to do if temporal blessings wither and go? We turn first to the spiritual blessings which are in fact the most solid realities, but only perceived by faith. ‘On Christ the solid rock I stand,’ remember that hymn? The spiritual blessings as given in chapter 1, are the solid blessings, health and wealth, home and family, will all pass away.

From the earliest days of the Church there was persecution. The Bible says of some that they suffered the loss of their earthly goods with joy. Why? Because the spiritual blessings could not be taken from them. An illustration of this is the sort of songs that arose from the believing slaves of past years, the so called ‘Negro Spirituals.’ These songs were full of words which showed that the singers were looking to the future heavenly realm, and could praise God for these spiritual blessings in promise, even though their earthly conditions were often brutal, cruel and short lived.

To be able to praise God for what He Has done, we need to know what He has done and have some understanding, spiritual insight of what these things mean. Not only do we need to know what God has done, but it needs to be lodged in our hearts as well as our heads. Not only do we need to know, but we are to keep these blessings in our view.

Scripture is full of reminders and instructions about remembering what God has done. For example, in Old Testament times, and even today, the Jews were, and are to remember, recount and celebrate the Passover. Other examples of instructions to remember are,

Psalm 103 v1-5. We are to bless the Lord and not to forget all His benefits. This praise is to arise from our inmost being, this is sincere, reverent praise from our hearts. David then lists some of God’s acts on our behalf, forgiveness, healings, redemption, and God crowning us with love and compassion and so on. Read it and see.

Psalm 42 v5. When downcast and in a pit of despair, two hand holds will secure us from slipping deeper into the quicksand of darkness, hope and remembrance. Remember what God has done for us in Christ. Hope in what He has promised us in Christ. ‘When all around my soul gives way, He then is all my hope ant stay.’ It’s that hymn again!

A couple of examples from the New Testament now.

Philippians 3 v1. We are to rejoice in the Lord, in who He is, has done and has promised. Our state in life may change for the better or the worse, but this does not mean that our praise of God should be any the less. If it is the Lord we are rejoicing in, then we are secure, because who God is, what He has done, and what He has promised does not change and cannot change. Our circumstances may change, but He does not, therefore we have as much reason to rejoice in God in prosperity as in want and even death.

Romans 8v35-39. These are well known verses. They apply only to believers, as indeed the other verses do, but the meaning of them is this. We can always be thanking and praising God, because nothing, once we have been enfolded in the love of God in Christ Jesus, can separate us from that love, from this spiritual blessing. The list that is covered of things is not only earthly, but heavenly. If our rejoicing and praise is firstly in Christ, in the Lord, we will always be able to bless God. However, if our praise is dependent firstly on our earthly and mortal blessings, then when these are absent, we will be up against it!

To be focused firstly, or even mostly on this earthly life, we will be ruled by our emotions, feelings, the state of our health and ruled by circumstances. We will be victims of life and circumstances. We actually see this happening all the time with people. I am sure you have heard people say that this person or that, this event or that, has ruined their lives. This is so sad, because one of the spiritual blessings of God is redemption. This is the Romans passage and Psalm 103. God is able to take anything that has happened to us in this life, and it is everything, failour, hurt, loss, injury, abuse, poverty, war, sickness, joy, pleasure, wealth, success, and use it all to sanctify us. David even says that it was good for him to suffer in his youth.

We must think about this. This is not positive thinking, it is not denial, but it is faith. It is the opposite of becoming dominated by an attitude of being a victim. It is not about surviving, it is about benefitting, redeeming, sanctifying, of being more than a conqueror! How? Through Christ Jesus. This is how God works it in us, by looking firstly and mostly at the spiritual blessings!

Is this an easy thing to do? No, but how many worthwhile things are easy to do? Is this just wishful thinking? No it is not, it cuts across our desires and our natures. Is this some sort of self-inflicted severity? No, we have a whole book that deals with the subject of what to do when our prayers are not answered, when justice fails and the world is unfair to us, when all our comforts and goods are lost, and God does not seem to be doing anything about it. It is the book of Habakkuk.

Over my life so far, I have known many people who have faced severe and heartbreaking events, and we have had a few as well. I will never forget the young couple who only discovered their daughter had a genetic condition after her birth. She died in their arms three days and a few hours old. There was a family who waved goodbye to friends, but never made it home due to a drunk driver. There was a surgeon who passed over his own daughter in triage the night several bombs explodes in

Belfast, and on we could all probably continue. There are no trite answer for any of these things, but when the pain and shock has begun to diminish, and we are no longer asking why with no ability to hear an answer, then Habakkuk sheds light on matters for a believer.

In Habakkuk 1v1-4 we hear the complaint of the prophet. Everything seems to be going wrong. God is not answering prayer. God is not behaving as He was expect to behave or had behaved in the past. He was not intervening in the affairs of the nation. It seemed that He was allowing the bad to rule over the good. It seems as if faith had failed, as if God was deaf to the desperate cry of the prophet and left the nation to the world systems!

God replied that this is not so, but He is actually about a greater work. It was not a work that Israel would welcome because He was raising up a mighty nation against Israel, 1v5-11, which in turn would be judged. Not only were things bad, but God tells Habakkuk they were going to get a whole lot worse, such that it would be beyond their belief, 1v5, difficult days of uncertainty, destruction and loss were facing Israel.

The response of Habakkuk is noteworthy. We see this in chapter 3. In a very stylized way, he recounts the dealings of God with the nation of Israel, the Exodus, the Red Sea, the crossing of the wilderness and the entry into the land. He calls to mind the acts of God and the promises of God. This is remembering and hoping.

This has a profound effect on him. 3.16 tells us that he received this revelation of God's plan and it made his heart pound and his lips quivered, he went weak at the knees as he considered what was about to befall the people, but that was not all.

In remembering the acts of God on behalf of the people of Israel he realized two things. Firstly he realized that no matter what was happening on earth, whether good or bad, God was still the same. God is the same God when we are being persecuted and in want as He is when revival fires are burning all around us and victory in God seems to be the order of the day. The love of God, His grace and His absolute faithfulness to everything He has promised has not changed. When things are going well in our lives, we know a certain amount of happiness, and when things are terrible, we fret and struggle and do all we can to get out of the circumstances. Habakkuk did not do this, he saw that God is who He is all the time. Our moods change with circumstances, God does not change. God is as loving when we are in the dark as He seems to us when we are in the light days.

The second thing that Habakkuk realized was that by faith and by looking to who God is, what He has done, and what He promises, even though the circumstances around us are utterly disastrous, 3v18, he can still rejoice in God his Saviour. This is quite astonishing and is the embodiment of that passage in Romans 8. Nothing could separate him from the spiritual blessing of God's love, he will joy in God, and so face the circumstances with the peace which passes understanding. He will face whatever comes, and like Stephen, see Christ even in the face of a brutal death. This is the

overcoming life. It is not stoicism or make believe. If you doubt this, read the book 'The Scottish Worthies,' or 'Fox's Book of Martyrs.'

The book ends with a very different prophetic word. 3v19, read it and compare it with the opening words of chapter 1. The prophet is now in a very different place. By looking at the blessings that God has given, he is taken out of the realm of his feelings and opinions and faith has taken hold of God's hand, and in the arms of his Father, all is well.

The whole subject of praise and thanks giving is so important for our Christian lives. A thankless life with little offering of praise to God is the sign of a Christian with little or weak faith, a baby Christian, even though we may be six foot tall body builder, as tough as nails, and a hundred years old! As we give thanks for the spiritual blessings recounted in Ephesians, as we look at the blessings given us from heaven through the life, death and resurrection of Christ, as we focus on them and meditate on them, we will find our faith growing.

It is faith, according to Jesus, that enables us to overcome the world. As we grow in faith, usually through trials, it will also be good for our emotional, mental and even physical health and wellbeing. It will reorientate the priorities and desires of our lives and fit us for heaven, it will cause us to live by faith and not by sight.

The starting place is seeing the good things that God says to us and putting our attention on this and much less on what our feelings, the world, and the devil wants us to think about.

Application.

Firstly.

All of this is how God works in the lives of believers. If we have not had dealings with God, if we are not born again, if we are not in Christ, or new creation, all descriptions of accepting that we are sinners in need of Christ to be our savior, then none of this is for us. Ephesians describes any like this as alienated from the promises, strangers to God and outside the covenant. We need to repent of our rebellion and sin, ask for forgiveness, and believe in what Jesus has done on the Cross as the way God has appointed to bring us into right relationship with Himself. Apply to God now, today if this describes our state. Do it now, we do not know if we will have a tomorrow!

Secondly.

If we are believers, then we have to act on the faith given us, and look to Christ, look to these spiritual blessings and focus on them.

Are we ill? By all means seek all the prayer we can, but the greater blessing is that we are on the way home to eternal health. Are our children rebels and sinful? This is a great anxiety for parents, but it is not anxiety, manipulation, nagging, or dragging them screaming to events that will do any good. It is our faith in God's promises and our living and modeling faith that will count for more. Our children will remember the times we

have disbelieved more than the times we have prayed! Have faith, so walk in the obedience of faith. Are we in a dead-end job? By all means seek a better position, but if one does not come, be diligent and faithful in the position we have. It is more important that we walk in the obedience of faith Mondays to Sundays, than that we should appear as supper saints on Sunday! A walk of faith should be becoming ever more consistent, and this will be what happens when we bless God for every spiritual blessing He has given us in Christ, that is particularly what God has done by the Cross of Christ.