



## THESE THINGS I PRAY

**T**his five-week series will be an exploration of the power of prayer, using the book of Psalms as a guide. Dietrich Bonhoeffer called the Psalms the “Prayerbook of the Bible.” While we don’t necessarily pray for everything the Psalms pray for, we do learn from the Psalms the mode of prayer – how to come to God in prayer. Through this series we’ll explore the simple acronym for prayer – ACTS – which stands for Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving and Supplication. Prayer changes things and every prayer has power. Our hope is through this series you’ll be better connected to the power of prayer.

## THANKSGIVING • Psalm 116 • Tim McConnell • November 20, 2016

The more I pay for things the less I like them. Have you ever noticed this? Abigail has stopped asking me if I liked my meal at a restaurant. After twenty years, she knows I didn't. I never do! For one thing, I'm fed so well at home... But it is just something in my head. If I paid \$35 for a steak (and, by the way, you always have to pay \$8 more for a pile of green beans on the side), I expect it to match or exceed the best steak I've ever had! And it never does. The more I pay the less I enjoy. This is why I never want to buy an expensive new car. I would only be dissatisfied with it. No matter how much you pay for a car, it's still a car and is going to do what cars do—break down, get dinged, fade and rust and rot. Now, if I find a bargain—that I can enjoy! Wow, and this steak was only five bucks! I guess it's my Scottish blood, but sometimes it makes it hard to practice gratitude, simple enjoyment with thanksgiving.

Today we enter Thanksgiving week, and as we worship we are surrounded by signs and symbols of fullness, of bounty, of the generous hand of God. We finish our study of the simple pattern of prayer we can use to shape our daily quiet time with the Lord. We can pray the pattern, ACTS – Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication. Which one should we spend the most time on? Adoration can fly by with a sentence or two, one verse in the Psalms maybe. Confession—no need to linger here! Get it done. Supplication is probably where I spend the most time, asking God to move and change things. But I love having Thanksgiving before Supplication, because it does take a big chunk. I get going with Thanksgiving, and before I know it the minutes fly by and there's a little less time for asking for things. I'm full from the things I've already received. It's good to take Thanksgiving first.

"Count your blessings, count them one by one." What do you think about the practice of gratitude? Is it something for children? Does it seem flowery or superficial? Ann Voskamp's breakout best-seller was her book *One-Thousand Gifts*. She started a journal listing one thousand blessings for which she could give thanks to God. And doesn't that seem sweet, and nice, and flowery? We'll leave that kind of thing to the potpourri and ribbon types. You know what I like about the book? It's not flowery and saccharine. It's serious business. Ann didn't just think, "Oh, wouldn't it be nice to live in gratitude." As the book begins you see where her practice of gratitude came from. As a child on a farm, she saw her little sister

hit and killed by a delivery truck. Her parents hardly recovered and Ann grew up in an environment of despair. She grew deeply depressed and turned to cutting herself and self-destructive behavior. Gratitude was no Pollyanna trip through the tulips. Ann realized, by God's grace, the only way out of the pit of despair was to look up.

Gratitude is serious business. It's a hard fight. William Barclay picked up on the word "ungrateful" in 2 Timothy 3:2. It's a description of a potential future godless society, "People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy." I don't know. Sounds a little familiar to me. Barclay said, "The strange characteristic of ingratitude is that it is the most hurting of all sins because it is the blindest." Once we are blind to our blessings, we are blind to our ingratitude. Once we are blind to what others around us are doing for us, we stop saying thank you to them, we take those around us for granted and start to see ourselves as deserving their service, their devotion, their sacrifice. When we are blind to our debts to those around us, we are also blind to our own ingratitude and thanklessness. Like disobedient and spoiled children, we too easily forget what we have received from others; we forget what we have received from God.

And there is much to oppose proper gratitude. I will say again this is a fight. The Devil doesn't want you expressing gratitude. He knows that gratitude leads to joy, and the joy of the Lord is our strength. Once we are in God's joy and feeling our own joy, the Devil has lost the game. The world around you doesn't want you expressing gratitude to God. That would only lead to your satisfaction, and the world doesn't want you satisfied. Do you know this? If you are satisfied, to put it bluntly, you might stop buying things! The world wants you participating in Black Friday, maxing out your credit cards. Your sense of gratitude might quell your purchasing power. Our own flesh doesn't want us expressing gratitude. "We have more important things to do," says our disobedient flesh, "like chasing after lusts and unholy desires to satisfy our thirst for pleasure!" Gratitude might just push you to a place of holiness, godliness, and peace. Our disobedient flesh doesn't want that. Count your blessings, count them one by one. It starts to sound less like a nursery rhyme on a grandmother's knee, and more like a battle plan for a soldier in the middle of a life and death campaign.

It certainly meant something to David. It certainly means something in the Psalms. One of the categories used to organize the 150 Psalms is "Psalms of Thanksgiving." There are about thirty or so. This is one of them. "I love the Lord, for He heard my voice; He heard my cry for mercy." (Psalm 116:1) For what should we give thanks? I love the Lord. What is it to pray, what is it to praise, what is it to worship if not to fall more and more deeply in love with God? What should we thank God for, we who have everything we need and almost everything we want and live in the lap of luxury? Do we thank God as Chuck Swindoll says, "when the cream of the cup of prosperity seems to flow into our homes and our lives"? Do we thank God? What can we thank Him for? Well, material blessings are the least of it. "I love the Lord," says the Psalm, "for He heard my voice." "Because he turned his ear to me, I will call on him as long as I live. The cords of death entangled me, the anguish of the grave came over me; I was overcome by distress and sorrow. Then I called on the name of the Lord: 'Lord, save me!'" (Psalm 116:2-4) Our first thanks is due to God for hearing our cries and being our Savior. Thank you, God! I'm grateful.

Then verse 5, "The Lord is gracious and righteous; our God is full of compassion." God is "gracious and righteous." Jesus came "full of grace and truth." God is full of compassion. This is about forgiveness. We thank God for forgiveness. God is gracious and righteous, grace and truth. God doesn't let go of what is right; God is just and righteous and full of truth. But at the same time, God is compassionate and full of grace—and so God has made a way of forgiveness possible for us. Thank you, God! I'm grateful. I have leaned from time to time in my devotions on old prayers, some that emerge from liturgies so old no one can trace where they came from. One prayer comes from the Eastern Orthodox tradition and begins: "Arising from sleep I thank You, O Holy Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit; because of Your abundant goodness and longsuffering mercy You were not overcome with anger at me, slothful and sinful though I am; neither have You destroyed me in my transgressions and sins, but in Your compassion raised me up as I lay in despair, that at dawn I might sing of the glories of your majesty." The first time I read that, I thought, "This guy has some serious problems with self-esteem!" But the more I thought about it, and prayed it myself, the more grateful I became every morning. God is righteous, and God is compassionate and gracious. It is the unvarnished truth—God had every just cause to end my life last

night, or any night, to run out of patience with my sins and snuff the little candle of my life right out. He would have had every right. But He didn't. Thank you, God! I'm grateful. Start each day with humble gratitude for forgiveness.

We are grateful God hears us. We are grateful God forgives. Then verses 7-9: "Return to your rest, my soul, for the Lord has been good to you. For you, Lord, have delivered me from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling, that I may walk before the Lord in the land of the living." I do love how Eugene Peterson interprets this in the Message: "I said to myself, 'Relax and rest. God has showered you with blessings. Soul, you've been rescued from death; Eye, you've been rescued from tears; And you, Foot, were kept from stumbling.'" Can we be grateful? Relax, God's got this! Abigail and I were at the North Springs Young Life banquet on Sunday night, and we got to hear a pile of stirring testimonies to God's grace. One young man stood up and said, "Even though my heart was beating, in every other way I was totally dead. Then I met Jesus, gave him my life, and now I know what true life is!" Thank you, God, for life instead of death. I'm grateful. Billy Graham said, "We should not let a day go by without thanking God for His mercy and grace to us in Jesus Christ."

I love this Psalm, and probably chose it for us because of the turn in verse 12: "What shall I return to the Lord for all his goodness to me?" What can I do? I have so many blessings from God. What can I give back? Gratitude is what we give in response to a gift we cannot possibly return in kind. What can I give you God, for life and forgiveness and healing and grace and love and beauty and joy and laughter and song and...? What can I do? What should we do? "I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord. I will fulfill my vows to the Lord in the presence of all his people... I will sacrifice a thank offering to you and call on the name of the Lord. I will fulfill my vows to the Lord in the presence of all His people, in the courts of the house of the Lord—in your midst, Jerusalem. Praise the Lord." (Psalm 116:13-14; 17-19) What should we do? Lift the cup! Praise the name! Receive what God has prepared! You want to return something to God for all His love and favor? What can you offer that God doesn't have? The answer certainly isn't to walk away and forget God and turn your back and refuse the gift. No! Take the cup, lift the cup of salvation, drink deeply, and take a breath and give praise! Great

praise! Powerful praise to the name of God Almighty, right in the middle of the city. Right next to people who don't know God at all. Make the name of God great, right there! Praise the Lord! Praise His Holy Name. Come to worship. Bring a sacrifice of thanks and praise. That's all He wants.

Gratitude may seem like a little thing. But it's a little thing that makes a huge difference. It tilts the wing. It tilts the wing just enough so that as we careen through life, as we feel the thrust of time and the drag of our burdens and the weight of our sorrows, there is just enough tilt in gratitude to produce lift. Lift for our souls. Give thanks. It is no small matter.

And as we close our series on prayer, let me say in the end: Pray – however you can, wherever you can. Pray using this model, ACTS. Or pray using another form. Use the Lord's Prayer. Pray through some Psalms. But pray. And when you do, remember the cost of prayer. Prayer isn't free. We have access to God the Father in Heaven, the Maker of all things, the Almighty One! We have access to God whenever we want. That access didn't come free. It came at a cost. Jesus bought it. When you pray, remember you have access through the sacrifice of Jesus. It's Jesus who prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, "Father take this cup from me," and it's Jesus who cried out from the cross "Oh God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Jesus' prayers were not answered, so that yours could be. God said "No" to His own Son so that in Him, we could experience God's "Yes." Pray with joy and thanksgiving. Christ has opened the door and granted you access to approach the throne of grace.

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## STUDY GUIDE "Thanksgiving" • Psalm 116

### Start It

- You can get far with an "Attitude of Gratitude." That may sound like something to print on a mug or t-shirt, but it's actually very true. Think about the people around you. Notice how they treat servers at restaurants, co-workers or fellow students, friends and relatives. Do they say "Thank you" for small things? Now take notice of who you like to be around and who you don't like to be around. I suspect you like to be around people who are easy and comfortable with expressing gratitude.

### Study It

- Read Psalm 116. Where do you find gratitude expressed?
- What are the grounds for thanksgiving in the psalm? What has God done? What has the psalmist experienced?
- Look at verse 12. Have you ever asked this question? What should we return to God for all that God has done for us?
- What does it mean to "lift the cup of salvation" (v. 13)? How about to "call on the name of the Lord"? What do you think it means to "fulfill my vows to the Lord in the presence of all His people" (v. 17)?
- Joyce Meyer says, "I have discovered that there is no positive power in complaining. Complaining is filled with power, but it is negative (evil) power. If we want God's power to be released in our lives, we will have to stop complaining and be thankful." (*Everyday Life Bible*, p. 925). It is okay to be honest and complain to God about our struggles but it is also critical to learn to give thanks. When do you know the complaining needs to stop and the gratitude needs to take over?
- If you and I think little of people who fail to express gratitude toward us, how do you think God regards ingratitude?

### Pray It

*Almighty and Everlasting God, from You I have received every good thing. Open my eyes to see my many benefits and gifts, open my lips to give thanks openly to those around me, fashion my prayers in thanksgiving to You, and teach my heart to live in gratitude. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

### Live It

Count your blessings; count them one by one. Make a list!