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Psalm 34
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Gratefulness is a Heart Matter

I have to confess, that I'm not feeling very grateful today. Honestly, I've been surrounded by so much loss recently that my heart is heavy and sad. On top of that, I'm also feeling a bit grumpy that our days with those I loved were cut too short too soon and there is nothing I can do to get them back. Now my head tells me that that anger is part of grief and that I should be able to set those emotions aside. My heart reminds me that grief work isn't that easy. It takes time and we need to allow ourselves the freedom to go through the grieving process.

No. Gratefulness isn't where I'm at. But that's ok. Because I also know that though "mourning lasts for the night, rejoicing does come in the morning." We aren't supposed to dwell in the valley of the shadow of death. We eventually move through it to embrace a new life on the other side of our grief. David's Psalm 30:5 reminds us of that.

I think it's no surprise that today we find ourselves back in David's words of poetry as we continue learning about Gratefulness. Psalm 34 exhorts us to be grateful at all times. To extol the Lord always...even when we don't feel like it.

Would you open up with me to Psalm 34 or just listen to these words and them wash over you like refreshing water.

Let us pray. Prayer of Illumination.

There are several questions that I want to explore today as we consider gratefulness and its connection to the heart. So first, I ask what is the heart? How does it influence our gratitude? What should we do if we don't feel grateful? How can we rise above ungratefulness and be transformed by the renewing of our minds?

The Bible mentions the heart over 1,000 times. When it talks about the heart it primarily refers to the ruling center of a person. The heart is the spiritual part of us that contains our deep seated desires and emotions, our gut feelings, that make us who uniquely who we are. Scripture also informs us that the human heart can be both good and evil. While others cannot see what is in our heart, we know that God sees it all. Nothing is hidden from God's sight. But by our words, the state of our heart, grateful or not, will be revealed.

Proverbs 4 exhorts us to, "To guard your heart, for it is the well spring of life."¹

¹ Proverbs 4:23

Jesus referred to the heart in the Greatest Commandment and how we are to love God with all that are... heart, mind, soul, and strength and to love others as we love ourselves.”²

So clearly, the heart, or our emotions, play a big part in our ability to be grateful.

Diana Butler Bass in her book *Grateful, The Transformative Power of Giving Thanks* states that there are two kinds of gratitude. Targeted gratitude and untargeted gratitude. With targeted gratitude, we receive a particular benefit or gift from someone. We know the giver and we can say thank you directly to them. Bass suggests that “knowing from whom a gift comes surfaces an array of emotions from appreciation to humility or feelings of dependence and the obligations of debt.”³

However, with untargeted gratitude, we don’t always know the giver and we can only offer a general thanks. Bass writes, “Life and health, unexpected good luck, or awe and wonder - experiences like cuddling a newborn baby, finding a twenty-dollar bill on a sidewalk, or seeing a dazzling sunset.”⁴ For these things, we may feel grateful but not to a particular person.

So whether or not our gratitude is targeted or untargeted, our feelings or heart play into our ability to give thanks. But sometimes we Christians try to divorce feelings from what we believe.

Diana Butler Bass describes it in this way. Sometimes we see theology like a train pulling a railcar and a caboose. The engine is what we read in scripture. The railcar follows as our faith. And the caboose is our feeling.

Take Psalm 136 for example, “Give thanks to the Lord for He is good, his love endures forever.” This is good and true. But if this is the sole scripture driving our train, then it can espouse a “suck it up buttercup” theology that says God is good regardless of how we feel. We just need to have faith, choose gratefulness and let the feelings follow.

And yet for some people gratitude can be tricky because it’s so entwined with the heart. People who experienced trauma, violence, abuse, or loss can often struggle with feeling grateful. Telling them to be grateful can cause more harm than it may good.

Psalm 137 voices the heart of God’s people who were struggling understandably so to be grateful while in Babylonian captivity. In other words, they weren’t very grateful for this season of life...because it was terrible!

² Matthew 22:37

³ Dorothy Butler Bass, *Grateful, The Transformative Power of Giving Thanks* (Harper Collins Publishers: NY, 2018), 24.

⁴ Ibid, 25.

They lamented, “By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. There on the poplars we hung our harps, for there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, ‘Sing us one of those songs of Zion!’

How can we sing the songs of the Lord while we are stuck here where we’d rather not be?”⁵

What this tells us is that sometimes we need to let people grieve and not try to fix them. Psalm 34 tell us that “The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.” God is near. We can trust that God will minister to them as they need. He will move them through grief in his time to where they are grateful once again.

There are a wonderful set of books written by the Stephen Ministries organization on grief. I usually take them as I visit with people who have just lost a loved one. From what I hear from these folks is how they appreciate the books’ simplicity and how they normalizes grief as part of the human experience. We all go through it, none of us can avoid it. How we go through it, is different for each person.

Jesus said, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.”⁶

But how?

By the community of faith that gathers for worship.

David issues a call to worship in Psalm 34 encourages us to be in worship even when we cannot worship ourselves. “I will extol the Lord at all times, his praise will be on my lips. My soul will boast in the Lord, let the afflicted hear and rejoice.”

The Hebrew is translated as “I will Extol. I will bless. I will kneel before. I will praise. I will salute...the Lord at all times.”

Let the afflicted, the oppressed, the poor, the humble, the meek, the needy or the lowly... in other words those who aren’t feeling very grateful at the moment... hear and rejoice.

As I’ve watched some of us grieve terrible losses here, one of the most important things I believe we should do is to keep coming to worship no matter how hard it may be. We need to be surrounded by our brothers and sisters in Christ who can sing the songs of faith with joy and hope when those words will not rise up naturally from our hearts. Overtime as we surround ourselves by those who are feeling grateful as their act of worship, the waters from our wellspring of life will be influenced for the good.

⁵ Psalm 137:1-4

⁶ Matthew 5:4

But David is clear, we extol the Lord and boast in the Lord not because of what he has done for us, but mostly just for who God is.

The next thing we need to do is listen to the testimony of those around us. We need to hear of the good things that God has done for them. Their positivity will influence our minds. But if we simply wallow in our negativity thinking, it will take us much longer to be transformed by the renewing of our minds.

Listen to David's testimony.

When I was fearful, God delivered me from those fears.

When I called, God answered me.

When I sought the Lord, I lacked no good thing.

When I did evil, God was against me.

When I was brokenhearted, God was close.

When I felt crushed in spirit, God saved me.

When I was in trouble, God protected me.

When I took refuge in God, God redeemed me and did not condemn me.

And then David adds this simple invitation. "Taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the one who takes refuge in him."

Oprah Winfrey once conducted an interview with Holocaust survivor and novelist, Elie Wiesel.

"OPRAH: There may be no better person than you to speak about living with gratitude. Despite all the tragedy you've witnessed, do you still have a place inside you for gratefulness?"

ELIE: Absolutely. Right after the war, I went around telling people, 'Thank you just for living, for being human.' And to this day, the words that come most frequently from my lips are, 'Thank you.' When a person doesn't have gratitude, something is missing in his or her humanity. A person can almost be defined by his or her attitude toward gratitude.

OPRAH: Does having seen the worst of humanity make you more grateful for ordinary occurrences?"

ELIE: For me, every hour is grace. And I feel gratitude in my heart each time I can meet someone and look at his or her smile."⁷

So what about my grumpiness? How does God meet me through all of this?

Well, anger is a part of the grief process that we all go through. It's ok to feel angry when we feel like the days we had with someone were taken away from us too soon. But the truth that we must resign ourselves to is that people are gifts from the Lord to hold for a season until we must give them back.

⁷ Butler Bass, *Grateful*, 44.

Psalm 139 says, “All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.”⁸

Psalm 90 says “Teach us to number our days so we may gain hearts of wisdom.”⁹

We can be grateful but also feel incredibly sad in our heart for what was lost. And yet God doesn’t intend for us to stay there. Instead, rejoicing, praying, giving thanks will do their work in us, in God’s time to bring us out of our grief.

“Mourning may last for the night, but rejoicing comes in the morning.”¹⁰

Amen!

⁸ Psalm 139:13-16

⁹ Psalm 90:12

¹⁰ Psalm 30:5