

Lessons in Giving Thanks

Psalm 21

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In many ways, the sermon this morning picks up where we left off last Sunday. While the Psalms are arranged in a divine order, the connections between each Psalm are not always evident or easy to identify. This is not the case this morning. King David wrote Psalm 20 and Psalm 21 as companion Psalms.

Before I get into the connection between these two Psalms, I want to coach you up on how to read the Psalms. When we come to any of the Psalms, especially those written by King David, they can be understood on three levels. First, David wrote them in the historical context of his time. We should always consider the text in its original setting. Second, successive kings would take what he wrote and apply it to their experiences. So, as David's line followed him, they took his songs and applied them to themselves in their context. Third, and ultimately, the Psalms find their final fulfillment in Jesus Christ. He is the King to whom they point.

Think about it this way:

- Psalm 20:9 ends with King David and the people requesting salvation, and Psalm 21:1 opens with King David giving thanks for salvation given.
- Then, the kings who followed David would pray or sing these two Psalms together during their reign and lead the nation in giving thanks to the LORD with David's words.
- Ultimately, these two Psalms point forward to Christ. If Psalm 20 is Christ's humiliation on the cross and an appeal to the Lord to save the King, then Psalm 21 is the answer to that prayer, for we are greeted in v. 1 with the resurrected Christ, giving thanks and praise to God for His victory.

It is not just King David and the person of Christ that link these two Psalms. They are also deliberately linked by repeated words.

- Psalm 21:2 says, "*You have given him his heart's desire.*" Psalm 20:5 says, "*May the LORD fulfill all your petitions.*" Then the second line of Psalm 21:2 says, "*You ... have not withheld the request of his lips.*"
- Here's another connection. Psalm 20:7 says, "*Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the LORD our God.*" Psalm 21:7 declares, "*For the king trusts in the LORD . . . he shall not be moved.*"¹ The call to trust was answered.
- Finally, if Psalm 20 is the prayer before the battle, which says, "*May the LORD answer you in the day of trouble,*" — then Psalm 21 is the song of thanksgiving after the battle has been won.

This morning we will work through Psalm 21 in its original historical context and then see how it is ultimately fulfilled in Christ. Ultimately, we should hear King Jesus speaking in Psalm 21. Let's get to work on Psalm 21. I have two points this morning to guide us through these thirteen verses.

I. Give Thanks to God for His Past Thankfulness (vv. 1-7)

We're just going to work through vv. 1-7, verse by verse. In v. 1, we hear the king rejoice in God's Strength:

*O LORD, in Your strength the king rejoices, and in Your salvation how greatly
he exults!*

Psalm 21 begins with praise and thanksgiving—not for what David has done, but for what God has done. David rejoices in God's strength, not his own.

¹ James Montgomery Boice, *Psalms 1–41: An Expositional Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005), 184.

He recognizes that his true source of victory is in God. David was a skilled warrior. He had faced lions, bears, giants, and armies. He had killed the giant Goliath with nothing but a sling and a stone. Yet after every victory, he consistently said, *"The battle belongs to the Lord."* David knew where his strength and victory came from – it came from the LORD. So, as he looked back on his life, he was exceedingly thankful for God's faithfulness to save him.

In v. 2, we hear how David was thankful that God answered his prayers. Look in v. 2:

You have given him his heart's desire and have not withheld the request of his lips.

David says God has not withheld the desires of his heart that he prayed for. Psalm 20 lists out those requests: *prayer for protection, guidance, success, and victory*. Then in Psalm 21, we hear David give thanks to God for answering his prayers. God is shown as one who listens to His people. He is attentive, compassionate, and faithful to them.

Verses 1-2 should prompt us to ask some questions. Are you rejoicing in your own ability or in God's strength? Do you see your answered prayers as gifts from God or as the result of your own effort? When God answers prayer, do you remember to thank Him?

Here's the bottom line: David's joy is not in what he has done, but in what God has done. God answers the desires of the king because the king's desires are aligned with God's will. David models the heart of the ultimate King – Jesus Christ. Jesus delighted perfectly in the will of the Father. He endured the suffering of the cross under the weight of the wrath of God for our sin. He was buried, and on the third day, He rose from the dead.

Here's the good news: When God saved Jesus by raising Him from the dead, He saved us. Our lives are bound up in His. His victory is our victory. If you belong to Jesus, then you are united with Christ in His life, death, and resurrection. Your identity as a Christian is bound up in His. You are a son or daughter of the King. Jesus' salvation is your salvation. For this, we should give great thanks.

Next, in vv. 3-6, we see God's gracious blessing on the King. First, look in v. 3:

For You meet him with rich blessings; You set a crown of fine gold upon his head.

These verses describe not just the victory but the abundance of blessings God pours out on His king. Look at what v. 3 says: *"For You meet him with rich blessings."* God meets the King – not grudgingly, not reluctantly, but with rich, deep love and affection. Friends, the imagery of this verse is of God running toward His servant with generosity.

How often do you conceive of God coming to you and even running to you with open arms filled with His rich blessing and His sweet presence? Probably far too often we think of God being stingy and not delighting to bless His people. Where is your heart when it comes to v. 3? How do you conceive of God – stingy or bearing rich blessings for you?

Next in v. 4, we learn that God grants life—and even more than physical life, He grants eternal life:

He asked life of You; You gave it to him—length of days forever and ever.

David asked God to protect him so he would live through battle. God preserved his life. But this verse looks beyond the battle. The phrase *"forever and ever"* stretches beyond David—it lifts our eyes to Jesus Christ, who died in our place and for our sin, and won the battle. Death could not hold our King. He lives eternally.

Then, in v. 5, we see that God surrounds the king with glory:

His glory is great through Your salvation; splendor and majesty You bestow on him.

The word “*glory*” means to be heavy and, by extension, “*to be important*.” God has not only preserved the king but elevated him, honored him, and clothed him with dignity.

The LORD did this for King David, but the fulfillment of v. 5 is found in Christ. God made Jesus Christ the *King of Kings and Lord of Lords*. He is the One who possesses all the weight of glory of Almighty God.

The ultimate display of the glory of the King is found in Jesus’ cross and resurrection from the dead. It is no accident that Psalm 22, with its graphic description of the crucifixion of Christ, follows Psalm 21. Jesus is more glorious because of the cross, and His resurrection from the dead is the capstone of that glory. The glory Jesus received would not have been possible if God had not allowed Him to suffer, die, and then raise Him from the dead with His glorious power.

God works the same way in our lives, too. God gives glory to those who belong to Christ by saving us through His power, not through our own strength. Then God allows suffering in our lives so that His power can be clearly displayed in us. God allows hard things in our lives to make clear that we follow Him because we genuinely love Him, not because our obedience has earned blessings. So, remember, God’s power and glory are made perfect in us in our suffering.

In v. 6, we see that God gives the King joy in His presence:

You make him most blessed forever; You make him glad with the joy of Your presence.

The presence of God is the highest blessing anyone can receive. Sadly, God’s presence does not seem like a great blessing to those who do not love Him. For them, it’s kind of like receiving a fruitcake at Christmas. When they get it, they have this disappointed look and say, “*Uhhh . . . thanks, I think.*”

Here’s the deal: Many people tend to love the things God gives them, but not God Himself. They want God to provide for them, forgive them and appease their guilty conscience, protect their children, heal them when they are sick, and give them countless other blessings, but they do not want God Himself. The fact is, they are not excited at the thought of being in God’s presence, and because of that, these people wouldn’t be happy in Heaven, because Heaven is about being in God’s presence.

However, God’s people love God and long to be in His presence in worship and, eventually, for all eternity in Heaven. They are thankful for the good things He gives them, but their hearts are set on God Himself.

I always remember the question John Piper asked in order to help people test their hearts to see whether they loved God and longed to be in His presence. Piper asked: What if you could have a nice life, nice house, good marriage, all the money you need or could want, no aches and pains, and really no problems, but you don’t have God – would you be happy or content with that?

Now, apply this scenario to going to Heaven. If you were able to go to Heaven, and it was more amazing than you could imagine. All your family and friends were there, you met all your heroes in life, and you have a great place to spend eternity with no problems or anything ever going wrong, and it’s fun to be there, but there is no God – would you be happy? If the answer is “yes,” then you really don’t love God – you love His gifts and not the Giver of the gifts.

Friends, God’s presence in our lives is the greatest blessing we can hope for and desire. Without Him, the best things we can imagine are nothing. To be in God’s presence is, according to v. 6, to be “*most blessed forever*.”

Loving and longing to be in the presence of God is a strong weapon with which to fight sin and temptation. Listen, when we are tempted to sin because the enemy is baiting us with something we want or something we want to do, there is no use pretending we don’t want to sin.

So, what should we do? How should we fight that temptation to sin? We must face it head-on. We must admit that we desire to sin, confess it, and seek a greater desire – Jesus. Jesus must be the greater love and presence in your life. King Jesus will help you. He will fight the battle because He has already won the war.

One of the goals of our worship services is to help us all see Christ and His gospel more clearly. We strive to exalt our Savior so that His beauty and glory shine as clearly as possible. We desperately need the glory and majesty of our Savior to be our greatest desire and long to be in His presence. Remember, worship is war, and it helps us fight sin by getting us into the blessed presence of Christ.

Verse 7 concludes our first point with rich covenant language:

For the king trusts in the LORD, and through the steadfast love of the Most High he shall not be moved.

Here we reach the theological heart of Psalm 21. Everything in this Psalm has been moving to this point. What we learn is that David is thankful for the covenant God who anchors his life. He understands that it was not his throne, his army, nor his victories in which he trusted. His trust is anchored in God's steadfast love (Hebrew: *hesed*). This word refers to God's unwavering covenant love—steadfast faithfulness.

David knew he was established by and kept by the faithful love of God, grounded in the covenant God made with Him. The bottom line is that because God does not move, the king will not be moved, and His people will not be moved.

Verse 7 leads us to the same question we considered in Psalm 20:7 – what are we trusting in? We all trust something: our savings, our strength, our relationships, or our plans. But anything we trust besides God will eventually crumble.

So, what should we do when we feel like our world is crashing down and the very foundation of our life is falling apart? We look to Christ, who perfectly trusted the Father. We remember that Jesus never wavered and He stood firm through temptation, suffering, betrayal, and even death. We remind ourselves of His confidence and unwavering love of the Father, and it is that same love that holds us today.

Ask yourself: What do I rely on most? What would rock my world if I lost it? Is my confidence rooted in God's unchanging love or in the temporary securities of life? Listen, if your trust is in the Lord, you shall not be moved, and for that we can be thankful.

II. Give Thanks for God's Future Faithfulness (vv. 8-12)

The tone shifts in v. 8. David goes from looking back to God's past faithfulness to him to looking ahead. He begins to thank God for future blessings of protection and justice. Listen to what he says in v. 8:

Your hand will find out all Your enemies; Your right hand will find out those who hate You.

Notice what David says: *Nothing is hidden from God*. He will seek out every enemy—every threat, every deception, and every scheme. God will expose every enemy of the King and his people.

Next, in v. 9, David tells us that God will judge every evil deed and every wicked action committed or harbored in the heart.

You will make them as a blazing oven when you appear. The LORD will swallow them up in his wrath, and fire will consume them.

These verses contain vivid imagery—fire and destruction. This is not a picture of cruelty but of justice. God is holy. God is righteous. God will not allow wickedness to triumph forever. He will bring judgment and justice on His earth.

Verses 10-12 are also challenging verses to understand. Let me read it and then help us get our minds around what it means:

You will destroy their descendants from the earth, and their offspring from among the children of man. ¹¹ Though they plan evil against you, though they

devise mischief, they will not succeed. ¹² For you will put them to flight; you will aim at their faces with your bows.

These verses tell us that God defends His King and His people. For David, the justice of God meant safety for him and the people of God. It meant that the threats around them would not prevail. Eventually, the LORD will wipe away all evil and its offspring from the earth, and His people will live in peace and safety. David is thanking God in advance because he knows that one day the LORD will answer this prayer.

For the believer today, this teaches us that evil will not have the last word. We may not see the end of evil right now, but we can thank God that He will answer our prayers and one day His peace and justice will reign. He will wipe out evil and wipe away every tear. And for those who belong to Christ, God will heal every broken heart. Evil will not have the last word – God will have the last word.

How do we know this is true? How can we know that God will wipe out all evil done against His people? How can we know He will wipe away every tear, and heal every broken heart? We know this because when we look back at the cross and see the sinless Son of God hanging there, we know that justice and judgment have already been enacted and are working themselves out in this world. We know this because Christ died under the curse of sin, bearing the wrath of God, was buried, and rose from the dead victorious over death, which is the ultimate curse of evil. Jesus has already defeated death, and for those who trust in Him, they can with confidence know that justice has been done for them and will be done for them. Now, listen closely to me here. I know there are many sitting in this congregation who have had wicked acts and evil deeds done to you, and justice has never been carried out in this life. It may never be carried out, but you can rest assured that in the end God will see justice done.

Brothers and sisters, you can be sure of this: on the Day of Judgment, every evil act will be brought into light, and those who did not trust in Christ will pay dearly for their sin. Those who continue to oppress, torture, and persecute God's people are on borrowed time, for justice and judgment are coming, and Hell is coming with them.

The bottom line is this: We will be angry at the evil carried out in this world. It may have been or will be carried out against you or someone you love. It may be seeing a news report of an evil act that infuriates you because of the evil done against the innocent. Friends, you may want to take vengeance, but we don't have to take vengeance. We can trust God's justice, rest in His protection, and be assured that He will carry out His righteous judgment in His time. Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the LORD.

Conclusion: Verse 13 leads us to our conclusion:

Be exalted, O LORD, in Your strength! We will sing and praise Your power.

Psalm 21 ends with a shift from the king's voice to the people's voice. The covenant community joins in praise and thanksgiving. They bless their covenant God for His faithfulness past, present, and future.

God's great power saved and exalted Jesus Christ. His power gives joy to His people and judges His enemies. If you belong to Christ, His victory is your victory. His joy is your joy. His triumph is your triumph.

Since this is the week of Thanksgiving, why don't you spend some time alone with God or with your family, thanking God for His past faithfulness in your life, and also give Him thanks for His future faithfulness.