

Blueprint for Prayer: Thanksgiving
Week 4 of the Prayer Series
11/30/14

Good morning/welcome/intro—hope you all had a great Thanksgiving celebrating the three great gifts of food, football and family!

And before we get into what we're going to talk about, I want to highlight the opportunity for us as a community to rally together in prayer during our 24-hour prayer event coming up in just a couple of weeks

A couple of weeks ago we looked at a passage of Scripture that talked about this golden bowl in heaven that captures the prayers of all God's people

For 24-hours, we're going to do our best to fill the bowl over Chatham County and ask God to pour it back out over our homes, neighborhoods, our work places, our church, and our families

We thought it would be silly to spend 5 weeks TALKING about prayer without creating some space for us to DO prayer together in different ways

The way it works is that everyone who's willing and able signs up for a time slot—half hour increments, and then you come down to the church office at Chatham Mills.

There will be a space carved out for prayer with creative and artsy stuff, Bibles, spaces to write down what you find yourself praying for or to share how God meets you during this experience

You can choose to pray however you want to during your time slot, for whomever, in whatever ways you feel comfortable or want to try

We'll kick off Saturday morning, Dec. 13th, with some opening ceremonies and some worship and close it up here on Sunday, Dec. 14th.

I want to especially encourage the men to consider signing up for the middle of the night slots

and all you night owls who are just getting going around 11 or 12 and staying up or coming into the prayer room at 1 or 2 isn't that big a deal for you

or if you're a REALLY early morning kind of person and getting up at 3 or 4 isn't that big a deal to you, please feel free to sign up

If you've never done anything like this before—I can just say that it's a uniquely wonderful experience to join in prayer in this kind of way

And we meet the Lord in a different kind of way as we carve out space to do this along with others

And what happens is that these themes start to emerge as God calls people to pray for stuff in our larger community that we would have not predicted

So sign-up today at www.24hourprayer.info or give us your name and email and tell us what time you'd like to sign-up to pray and we'll put you on the sign-up genius.

We're a couple weeks into a series of messages talking about prayer

And we're using a very simple, clear, and light framework for prayer that we're working through, one letter at a time, one week at a time called ACTS:
Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving and Supplication

The idea being that if we touch base on these four elements of prayer over the course of a couple of days or over the course of a week or every couple of weeks they provide healthy anchors for a healthy, well-developed life of prayer

And today it's very appropriate that we're covering Thanksgiving today!

And again for this element of prayer, for some of us this comes really naturally and for others of us it's much harder.

Growing up as a kid in church, there was a lot of talk about gratitude and how essential it was to living the Christian life

Almost to the point where it almost felt cliché or trite—and I'm a Gen X'er and my whole generation sort of majored on cynicism

I remember we sang this song in my church growing up that was all about when life gets hard and the storms billoweth upon your soul

We should counting our many blessings, name them one by one, count your blessings and see what God hath done

And we had to use the old English word "hath" because if we use words that sounds like the old King James version of the Bible than obviously we're much more spiritual.

Now, for many people over many years, many generations, this call to count our blessings and give thanks to the Lord for what he HATH done has been a tremendous source of comfort and encouragement

But I have to confess that as a slightly jaded and cynical Gen-X'er that sometimes this whole idea felt kind of like a giant cover-up

It sounded like the song was basically saying, “when life gets hard, just do your best to live in denial of how hard it is by making as long a list as possible of anything nice that God’s done for you”

And somehow that was supposed to sort of cover-up the pain and hard stuff that you were dealing with

I thought that the truer, more authentic, more “real” thing to do was to deal with the hard stuff

not try to cover it up with a list of other things that might or might not have anything to do with what’s “REALLY” going on

And of course to the cynic, what we mean when we say we’ve got to deal with the “real” stuff almost always means the hard stuff, the painful stuff

That’s what’s REAL and if we’re not as raw and honest as we can be about those realities, then we’re just living in denial

Well fast forward to sometime in the past year or so when I was in a day-long internal dialogue rehearsal of things that I wasn’t happy about

There were some challenges and disappointments and my problems were getting center stage in my life

And that song that I sang growing up from like 5 lifetimes ago, bubbled up into my internal dialogue and interrupted my rehearsal

And so I decided to try it: okay, let me see if this whole counting my many blessings and seeing what God HATH done helps me one bit with my real problems here and now

So I started listing: my loved ones, friends, things that were sweet here at the church

I recounted the milestones that had been significant to me in the past, some in the more recent past some that were many, many years in the past that had been important for me along my path

I thanked God for the people he’s put in my path that have helped and encouraged and mentored me along the way

And after a couple of minutes of doing that, much to my chagrin, I had to admit it: thanksgiving had re-sized my problems and had lifted my spirits

And what I found was this deliberate engagement with the discipline of thanksgiving was NOT about living in denial about what was hard here and now

Actually, when we do thanksgiving the way that God designed it, rather than it being about AVOIDING the hard stuff it EQUIPS us for the hard stuff

And this invitation into true Thanksgiving is for all of us no matter where you are spiritually today—whether you've been a Christian your whole life or this is your first time ever in any kind of Christian setting

Thanksgiving is the command of God that, like every other command of God, is a gift to us when we walk in it rightly

Now two weeks ago we talked about Adoration and there's a lot of similarity between Adoration and Thanksgiving, but I think that there's an important distinction to name before we get too far along

ADORATION has to do with WHO SOMEONE IS: "You are a great cook!"

It has nothing to do with us or anything that they've done for us, it is simply a description of their character or nature or skillset quite apart from it impacting or affecting us at all

THANKSGIVING has to do with WHAT SOMEONE HAS DONE: "Thanks for making this great yam soufflé!"

Both are important and both kind of run together in the Scriptures and in the songs we sing that are praising God—praise and thanksgiving in our everyday use of them kind of run together and that's okay

But if we ONLY do one or the other of these things it can skew things a bit—if we ONLY did Thanksgiving and never got around to PRAISE and ADORATION of who God is

Then at an extreme it can become all about us. It's not about God, it's about what God does for ME!

At its worst, I'm the customer and God has served me in the ways that I deem appropriate, so I'll give him a good review on Yelp.

Adoration keeps us rooted in the fact that God is good and God is God even if we're not currently experiencing his goodness in the way that makes us happy in this given moment.

Thanksgiving is great, but if we miss out on adoration alongside it, it keeps us focused on ourselves.

On the other hand, adoration without thanksgiving keeps God super-distant: he's the far off, great and almighty God who can't be bothered to meddle in our small affairs

We miss out on the fact that God's greatness and hugeness is SO big and SO all-encompassing that it has the power and ability to be very, very small.

So we need both, even as we see them running together in all of Scripture which we'll see today—we're going to look at Psalm 136 to help us to see what thanksgiving can look like

Bible/no Bible/free Bible—now, there's a repeated line in here over and over again and when I hear someone reading something with lots of repetition sometime I can tend to start to check out

So to keep you from drifting off into thinking about where you're going for lunch after the service, I want to invite you to read the repeated italics with me as I read it!

Psalm 136:

Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good.

His love endures forever.

² Give thanks to the God of gods.

His love endures forever.

³ Give thanks to the Lord of lords:

His love endures forever.

⁴ to him who alone does great wonders,

His love endures forever.

⁵ who by his understanding made the heavens,

His love endures forever.

⁶ who spread out the earth upon the waters,

His love endures forever.

⁷ who made the great lights—

His love endures forever.

⁸ the sun to govern the day,

His love endures forever.

⁹ the moon and stars to govern the night;

His love endures forever.

One of the things that is a real distinctive and strength of many of the folks who live here in Chatham is the love for nature

There's a deep love and respect for the earth, for woods, for fields, for space

Many of you work in RTP, Chapel Hill, Durham, Raleigh or Cary but you don't want to live in a cul-de-sac in Cary, Raleigh, Durham or Chapel Hill

Because you love land and woods and space—you like being able to actually see the stars, not just read about them in books or on the internet!

I remember hearing a brilliant speaker once share how a man had approached him after he spoke once and told him

‘I LOVE working with wood—there's just something about the texture, the firmness, the earthiness, the make-up of all kinds of different woods that I just love. Is it okay to worship the wood?’

Maybe some of you resonate with that guy—you feel the same way about your garden or your lake or the stars or whatever or wherever your favorite spot is in nature

When we were out in Arizona a couple of weeks ago around the Grand Canyon, it was so beautiful and so awe-inspiring

That it was not surprise to see how many people had made whole worship ceremonies and creeds and lives worshipping the beauty that was all around them.

Is it okay to worship the wood? Or the stars? Or the forests? Or the lake? Or the canyon? Or the earth in my hands?

As David writes this Psalm, David here helps us to answer that question: ***he celebrates the gift but he worships and gives thanks to the giver***

David is a HUGE nature-lover. He would have fit right into Chatham County. He loved, loved, loved nature

And he starts this psalm of thanksgiving by reciting the creation story found in Genesis 1—he recites this because he LOVES the wonder of the stars and sky and earth and seas all around him

David is in total awe of the created order

But those things are not worshipped for themselves—rather they are brought as evidence of a good and gracious and perfect Giver

David calls us to GIVE THANKS and he recites over and over again that God's love endures forever

And he names the skies and the earth and the sun and the moon as people's exhibit A, B, C, and D of the goodness of this God

This was so crucial for David and for the biblical understanding of God because ALL AROUND David are these other nations with their gods

And many of their gods are TIED to the sun, moon, seas, and stars. There's the sun god of Egypt and the goddess of fertility and the god of the harvest and rains

All around him are these peoples who are taking the gift of nature and enthroning it as worthy of worship

And what David does here that was so shocking and revolutionary in his time is he celebrates the GIFT of nature but he declares that there's someone who is bigger than nature, behind nature, and he enthrones the GIVER and the giver alone as worthy of worship

And this is super-helpful for us because even if you're not a nature person, even if you're ambivalent about wood or sun or stars

There is a PERPETUAL temptation to take God's gifts and mistake those for God himself

We are ALWAYS taking the good gifts of God and attempting to make those our god, our focus, the place of our worship

We do this with nature, we do this with money, we do this with work, we do this with pleasure, we do this with sex, we do this with power, we do this with approval or applause of other people

All of us are tempted along the way to take the good gifts of God and enthrone them as God rather than God himself

THANKSGIVING is the spiritual work of LIMITING our affections and love for the gifts of God so that we might more appropriately pour out all our affections and loves to the giver who IS God

My son Davis turned 11 this past week—love this kid, he's a total joy and gift to me. One of the presents we gave Davis was a UNC Tar Heels comforter—it's important to keep the right color blue indoctrination going well into middle school!

Now he was very grateful for the comforter and a comforter used rightly and appropriately should keep him warm on cool nights and provide him an appropriate level of comfort as he goes to sleep at night

However, it would go all wrong if he took the comforter and said, 'this is all the comfort I need for the rest of my life!'

And if he never spoke to us ever again, never came to us when he was hurt or upset or needed help

but simply relied on the comforter to bring all the comfort he needed

Then it's clear that something has gone wrong in his relationship with both the comforter and with us!

The comforter was given to him as an EXTENSION of my provision for him as a parent, it's just ONE expression of my love for him

it was never intended as a replacement of my parenting, it was intended as an expression and extension of my parenting

We do this with God all the time.

He gives us great gifts, and maybe initially we relate to them in such a way that they give us an appropriate and right level of comfort, encouragement, help

But at some point along the way we make the mistake of putting the gift in place of the giver and when we do that we lose BOTH the right use of the gift AND the right relationship with the one who gave us the gift in the first place

The discipline of Thanksgiving keeps the main thing the main thing. Thanksgiving roots us in the larger reality of the Giver who has given us all kinds of good gifts

So we look at the wood, we look at the canyon, we handle the money, we receive the applause or approval of people, we get the promotion

And if there's a God who gives gifts this good, how good must he be?!? The gifts are intended to be signposts that teach us about the character and goodness of God

And Thanksgiving keeps us from taking the money and running! Thanks for this sweet present, I'm out of here to go and do whatever I want to now with it!

Thanksgiving keeps us rooted in the fact that all of God's gifts are intended to **enrich** our relationship with God, **not replace** our relationship with God [REPEAT]

Let me ask you, what are the gifts of God that you're tempted to make gods in your life?

All of us have this, we talked last week about the importance of confession—it's just a part of being embodied souls, we just have to shower regularly to keep from smelling bad!

All of us are tempted in one area or another to take a gift from God and make it our God and worship it

thanksgiving keeps us from making that mistake and helps us to enter into the proper and right relationship with God and with God's gifts

I'd encourage you this week to take some time to put something back in its rightful place by giving thanks to God for it and worshipping him as the good and perfect giver of good gifts.

David goes on from here to recount some more specific things that God has done in Israel's history, he's going to recount what God did in Exodus and afterwards to care for his people Israel

I'm going to invite you again to read the repeated refrain as we read this next section:

to him who struck down the firstborn of Egypt

His love endures forever.

¹¹ and brought Israel out from among them

His love endures forever.

¹² with a mighty hand and outstretched arm;

His love endures forever.

¹³ to him who divided the Red Sea^[a] asunder

His love endures forever.

¹⁴ and brought Israel through the midst of it,

His love endures forever.

¹⁵ but swept Pharaoh and his army into the Red Sea;

His love endures forever.

¹⁶ to him who led his people through the wilderness;

His love endures forever....

²³ He remembered us in our low estate

His love endures forever.

²⁴ and freed us from our enemies.

His love endures forever.

²⁵ He gives food to every creature.

His love endures forever.

²⁶ Give thanks to the God of heaven.

His love endures forever.

I have a small confession to make: I have selective amnesia. I seem to selectively remember things in my life, stuff that I've done, things that I've been told to do

I call it selective because there are some categories of my life where my memory is VERY STRONG, some experiences and some things that I can remember like it was yesterday

While my amnesia seems to affect a different category of things

I think it's genetic, my children seem to also have selective amnesia, they forget any time we ask them to do anything

And my selective amnesia seems to particularly set-in when it comes to stuff God has done for me.

I forget all the time how many gifts God has given to me, but it becomes especially acute when I'm in a crisis or angry or disappointed or stressed about something

I have selective amnesia flare-ups whenever difficult times come.

The nice thing about this is that the Scriptures seem to anticipate this condition being wide-spread

And so there are all kinds of places where we see God calling his people to build memorials to what he's done

OR we see someone like David who engages in the discipline of Thanksgiving like physical therapy to help him develop that spiritual memory muscle
And to rehab our selective amnesia.

So David here just recites, remembers, and gives thanks to the Lord—his love does indeed endure forever

And that love doesn't only get expressed in the abstract or removed from people's experience through things like creation or nature

That love gets expressed in our histories, in our lives, in real-time in ways that really do impact us or affect us.

In Israel's history, God had acted in these specific ways to deliver his people! And if God has indeed done all of this stuff and even more that we cut out of this Psalm

Then thanksgiving is the sane, rational thing to do!

David and the rest of the people who are writing these Psalms regularly rehearse the history of Israel

And it always strikes me in these psalms that they're celebrating something that didn't happen to them personally but has benefitted them personally!

This whole parting the Red Sea thing happened hundreds and hundreds of year prior to this Psalm being written

But part of how David understands God and God's activity is that God's working in his people is both grounds for thanksgiving

as well as fuel for continued faithfulness

David and the people are going to face all kinds of different challenges and part of what equips them for those challenges is spiritual memory of how God has been faithful in the past

And not ONLY faithful to them in like the past two hours or the past two days or the past two weeks or even the past 20 years

But God's faithfulness to his people for hundreds of years is grounds for thanksgiving and praise

I took a class on Christian leadership once and one of the primary soap-boxes of the professor was that Christian leaders needed to read biographies of other Christian leaders

Because knowing and hearing about how God had been faithful to other people is both grounds for our own thanksgiving and fuel for our faithfulness when we face challenges of many kinds

Which brings us all back to where we started: the discipline of thankfulness is mission-critical for us in the midst of crisis and stress and challenges

NOT because it serves as some sort of distraction or creative way for us ostriches to put our heads in the sand

The discipline of gratitude keeps us going, keeps us faithful, helps us to hang on

Gratitude helps us to remember that there's a larger story that we are connected to and a big God who we have already seen and experienced and known to have the power to redeem all things

And while David can look back on the story of God's rescue of his people from slavery in Egypt that took place several hundred years prior

From our vantage point in 2014, we look back 2,000 years ago to not only the defining moment of one nation or one people group

But God's defining act for all of humanity for all time.

We look back to the cross of Christ, the salvation of Christ, his life, death, and resurrection for us and on our behalf.

The moment when God made a way for all peoples to be gathered out of darkness and into light, out of life as an orphan into life as a son or daughter

Even if we had absolutely nothing else to give thanks for, on this side of Jesus, we come back over and over again to the cross, to the empty tomb, and to the gifts of grace they represent

This past week I was reading one morning in my Bible and I came across this passage in Isaiah 64:1: ***O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,***

And it struck me that this is the cry of every person in any crisis or difficult situation
oh, that God would not stay far away, not stay far off but that he would come down and make something right,
the prayer and the cry that God might make someone healthy, clean up some mess around us, fix something that's broken

Ever pray a prayer that sounded something like "God please open up the heavens and come down to fix this mess?"

I sure have

And it struck me as I was journaling and reflecting and praying about this verse that there were a whole bunch of places where I wanted to pray this verse and ask God to do exactly that

to tear open the heavens and come down into situations where I needed his help

And that was a great prayer and a great Scripture to pray and I was invited to pray this prayer

But at the same time, as I prayed this prayer I realized that it had already been answered. God HAS torn open the heavens, he HAS come down

Isaiah 64 is a prayer many hundreds of years before Jesus; and this week I prayed this same prayer 2,000 years after Jesus

But for both me and for Isaiah, God's great YES! Has been spoken in answer to this heart's cry request

God HAS torn open the heavens and he has come down and done what no one could have anticipated or expected in how he came, in what he did, in how he did it, and in what it all means

In David's time, he kept coming back to what God did to deliver Israel from slavery to the Egyptians

In our own prayer lives, we're invited to come back to Jesus who is God's great yes to all humanity for all time

and in the midst of whatever else we've got going on, he is the primary touchpoint and the repeated refrain over and over again of our prayers of thanksgiving.

So what's the Blueprint for Thanksgiving in our lives? How do we actually do this?

1. Confess where we've worshipped the gift rather than thanked the Giver

We talked last week about how confession is a gift, an off-ramp off the cycle of sin and death and hiding and covering up and ONTO the blessed life

We start here with confession because it's important for us to replace wrong-worship with right-thanksgiving, wherever that may be happening in our lives

Take a moment to get brutally honest with yourself and think about where you're tempted to worship the gift rather than thank the Giver

And then re-receive that gift as an extension and expression of the love of the great Giver, and give thanks to the one who gives such great gifts!

If he can give you something that good, can you imagine what other goodness there are available to you in him?

2. We count our blessings and give thanks

Just like I had to do and I was grumpy about it! There is **power** in recounting and giving thanks to the Lord for his faithfulness to us in the past and present

No matter what else is going on or will happen, God has been good and faithful to us in specific ways and thanksgiving is appropriate and right and good

The discipline of this helps us to see all that we take for granted and it helps us to trace the gift back to the giver—**it guards us from falling off the rails into worshipping God's stuff rather than God**

When we engage in this discipline it helps us to **cultivate and develop spiritual memory.**

Thanksgiving helps us to overcome our spiritual amnesia which, just like any type of amnesia, ends up leaving these huge gaps in our understanding of our own stories

When we work to fill those gaps, the whole story starts to make more sense and come together more fully

And as our regular refrain that we **come back to Jesus** over and over again and all that he did for us to deliver us from our own slavery to sin and death.

3. Thanksgiving as fuel to remain faithful in the midst of challenges

The discipline of thanksgiving empowers us to stay strong in the face all sorts of challenges and crises that come up in our lives

The God who has been faithful in the past will be faithful in the future. Celebrating God's past grace empowers us to trust in his future grace

We can be honest about our difficult situations—we're not ignoring some the harsh realities

But thanksgiving helps us to locate them in our own larger story that is marked by God's faithfulness and his generosity over and over again

This morning as we close I want to give us some space to not just talk about thanksgiving but to actually roll up our sleeves and do it

Earlier we gave you an opportunity to write down anything that you're carrying into worship that might keep you from entering into worship and experiencing God's grace or hearing his voice

As we close this morning I want to invite you to once again pull out the notecards from underneath your seat

And instead of giving God your burdens or concerns, we've already taken care of those this morning and covered those in prayer

I want to invite you to do some thanksgiving.

Here are these three parts of thanksgiving:

1. confession of where we've worshipped the gift rather than the giver
2. simply naming our blessings and giving thanks (including and especially for the gift of Jesus) and
3. Thanksgiving as fuel to fight for faith in the midst of challenges that you're facing

I want to invite you on this notecard to do ONE of these three on the notecard.

Some of you might recognize a place where you're tempted to worship a gift God's given rather than God himself as the giver.

On your notecard you might write down:

[Thankful for God's gifts, worshipping the Giver]

**"I am THANKFUL for my kids, I WORSHIP the LORD" or
"I am THANKFUL for my work/position/money/title, I WORSHIP the
LORD"**

Others of you, you just need to start rattling off your blessings, **[Simple
Thanksgiving]**

everything and anything that you've got in your life—and maybe you need to especially spend time thanking God for tearing open the heavens and coming to the rescue in Jesus

Some of you are in the midst of a challenge, in a really, really hard time.
[Thanksgiving as Fuel for the Fight]

Here's what I want you to do: in the upper corner of your notecard, write down in one or two words something that stands for the situation, for example: money, health, job or a person's name that's involved

write that down and circle it up in one of the corners of your card

That's real, but that's not the ONLY real thing in your life—there is another, larger reality and that is all that God has already done for you that you have to be thankful for

So for the rest of that part of the card, write down all the things that you have to be thankful to God: **home, wife, husband, kids, good work, he took care of me last year when I was struggling with something else, good health, grandkids, I'm paying the bills, great friends: Willis, Marshall, Daniel, Shane, my small group, etc.**

So that's what we're going to do as we close this morning—going to ask worship team to come up and give us a little quiet music while we do this

You're picking ONE of these three prompts and do ONE of these three things in the next minute or two

2 MINUTES

Options as we close: going to take up the offering now as we move to a time of worship

Going to give you a choice with your notecard: you can either put that in the offering plate as a way of offering your thanksgiving to the Lord—God, here's what I'm grateful for, and I'm offering it up to you

That's one option for you this morning

ANOTHER option for you this morning is that for some of you this is a really important exercise and you need to continue to work out what you've started here on this card

And the best thing for you might be to take this card home with you and continue this conversation throughout the week, to add to the things you've just written on this card

If you need to do that, invite you to NOT put it in the offering plate but to take it home with you and to continue this conversation with the Lord

As we move into our time of offering here and our last couple of songs, there's another option for you—we'll have people in the back who would love to pray for you and with you during these last couple of songs

If you need help this Thanksgiving weekend giving thanks or if there's something that's going on in your life and in your bubble on this card that's really heavy and loud and large and weighing on you

These folks will be glad to pray for you and with you as we close this morning—go and see them at any point during our last two songs

PRAY

Benediction: prayer room, guests, chairs 2nd service