

5-17-09 sermon – Cherish Our Blessings (Stewardship Sunday) (Psalm 98)

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Today is a day for rejoicing! We are celebrating the blessings of our lives. We cherish our blessings – we hold them dear. Come hell or high water, we know who our Lord is, we trust his saving power, and we are prepared to face his judgment. Right? Well, that's what the Psalm says. Let's take a look at it.

Psalm 98 is a marvelous song. It is found in the songbook of the Bible – smack in the middle of the Bible. As I tell folks when I'm walking them through the Bible, you open the Bible in the middle, and there are the Psalms – the songs of faith, lament, and joy – smack in the middle of the Bible. Then you open back half in half, and there you should find the book of Matthew, the opening of the New Testament. (Depends on how many study helps your Bible has.) At any rate, we are in the middle of the Bible today – in the Psalms. And we are rejoicing – singing to the Lord a new song, because of all the marvelous things the Lord has done.

One commentary notes that this is remarkable because this Psalm is part of a section that was written for people who had been carried off into exile in Babylon and through the difficult days of their return from exile to rebuild Jerusalem. In the midst of tough times, the people are instructed to sing to the Lord about the marvelous things the Lord has done.

Are you facing grave difficulties? Do you wonder how you can possibly get everything worked out? Then think back to times when you knew that the Lord was blessing you. The Jews, far from their homeland, could remember the mighty Act of God to get Pharaoh to let their ancestors go from slavery in Egypt and bring them into the Promised Land. Those who returned from the Exile to clear off the rubble and rebuild Jerusalem could celebrate how Joshua was victorious against the mighty walls of Jericho. The Lord has indeed done marvelous things! He has saved his people before – and the people cherish the memories of God's salvation in the past as they looked forward to all that the Lord will yet do to bless them.

Philippians 4:6 gives us very similar instructions, I think – reading from the Good News Bible: *“Don't worry about anything, but in all your prayers ask God for what you need, always asking him with a thankful heart.”* When we need something, we ask God for what we need – with a thankful heart – a heart that remembers how the

Lord has been our help in earlier situations, and therefore we pray with faith, trusting that the Lord will be our help now as well.

Several years ago I told you a story about a worship service in Yolatown EYN that amazed me. I hope you don't mind my telling you again. It was a *celebration of thanksgiving and it amazed me*. The Pastor had told me there would be a special Thanksgiving Offering that day – by a fairly well-to-do man who was donating a *plexi-glass pulpit* behind which I would preach (very interesting to stand behind a *see-through* pulpit – no place to hide). He also donated a matching *plexi-glass collection box* – a beautiful see-through offering box. It is EYN's custom for each person to bring forward his/her offering – they are always so glad that they are able to give something – and in this case, *everyone could see* exactly what *each* one gave, as well as being able to see what they *all* had been able to gather together in their collection. It was *impressive*.

I was amazed at how visible the EYN Brethren let their thanksgiving be. I was *even more amazed* to hear why this man was thankful.

The service was in the Hausa language – so an officer of the church came to sit beside me to translate, as the donor presented his fervent testimony:

*I was traveling on the road in remote area (dangerous to travel alone) and was attacked by thieves who robbed me, stole my car, and left me dying from my wounds. But God sent someone to take me to hospital.*

*I was not a strong believer, I was not active in God's work in the church as I should have been. But my wife died. And my son got sick and died. And my father died. And my brother died.*

(terrible illnesses and accidents – short life span in NE Nigeria)

I began to wonder why he listed these tragedies as part of his testimony of thanksgiving. Then came the bottom line –

*Through it all, you, my brothers and sisters in Christ, prayed for me and cared for me. When my faith wavered, yours did not. You prayed for me and God helped me, and so I GIVE THANKS for God's saving grace, I give thanks for God's people, and for a stronger faith in the Lord because of going through all of this, and I present this pulpit and offering box to give thanks to God.*

And then the rejoicing began – with powerfully stirring music from electric guitars and drums and keyboard – and voices raised jubilantly in praise to God, faces beaming, bodies bouncing with the song’s beat as the entire congregation danced forward in long, streaming rows of people filled with thanksgiving and exulting in praise, coming to the front to place their offerings (big or small) into the glass container – their souls alive with giving thanks to God. Out the side doors the rhythmic procession moved, out and around the church with percussion and drums, singing their loud song of praise to the Lord for all of the townsfolk to hear – Giving Thanks with jubilant hearts, as if to say:

*Our brother has experienced God’s saving power and we give thanks to God – his faith in Christ and his love for God’s people has grown and matured!*

And we gave jubilant thanks to God – for this man’s testimony and for the saving grace of God that we could see at work in his life.

That is the joy of the Psalmist, who invites *all* who gather for worship to give thanks. The command form of the verb is plural: “(Y’all) *sing to the Lord a new song!*” Cherish the blessings of all that the Lord has done. Celebrate the salvation of God, which all the ends of the earth have seen – for God has remembered to show love and faithfulness to his people. That is the first section of the Psalm – in vss. 1-3.

Then in vss. 4-6, “*all the earth*” is invited to join in and “*shout for joy,*” “*burst into jubilant song.*” A full orchestra is invited – which instrument would *you* play? – “*Make music to the Lord with the harp ... the sound of singing, with trumpets and the blast of the ram’s horn.*” “*Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth!*”

Now we don’t generally go out around the block in a processional of singing to invite everyone to join in the rejoicing, the way the Nigerian Brethren do ... but maybe we should. It would be an exuberant way to invite everyone to rejoice in God’s saving grace and Life-giving power! All peoples everywhere are to be invited! (vss. 4-6)

Finally, in vss. 7-9, the Psalmist invites the Creation itself to rejoice – “*Let the sea resound, and everything in it!*” [“Joy to the fishes in the deep blue sea”] “*Let the rivers clap their hands ... the mountains sing together for joy!*”

And then the grand conclusion:

*“Let them sing before the Lord, for he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples with equity.”*

Do you connect the final Judgment Day with joy? Psalm 98 does. Isaac Watts did. This Psalm 98 is the source for his beloved carol: *“Joy to the world!”* You will notice that our hymnal places it in the section proclaiming the coming Kingdom of Christ instead of in the Christmas section proclaiming Jesus’ birth. That is as it should be, because it proclaims the coming of the Lord to get rid of sins and sorrows, and to make blessings flow far as the curse is found. It is rejoicing in the Day of Judgment, which will bring great joy to God’s faithful people – when all evil is removed and wrongs are made right, injustices overcome. The people will be judged with equity – everyone the same. No more special favors to those who can cover things up because they are well-to-do or well-connected. Everyone will be held accountable. And it will be a day of great joy for those who are ready. A day of rejoicing – because God will fully bless his faithful people.

Do you look forward to that day? Are you ready to rejoice?

If not, this is good opportunity to open your soul to the Lord and simply ask that he forgive you, strengthen you to make wrongs right, help you turn from all entanglements with evil, and guide you in the way of truth and righteousness. All of us – without exception – all of us need to do this, day by day, moment by moment. As 1 John 1:8-9 teaches: *“If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”* Let the Lord purify you – cleanse you, make you ready to *“stand faultless before his glory with exceeding joy,”* as Jude 1:24 prays. *“With exceeding Joy!”* Because of knowing God’s power to save, God’s desire to save ... and to bring us beyond the judgment of death into Life forever!

Now that’s a blessing to cherish! Along with all the blessings of earthly life, family, friends, work, church family, faith, hope, and love – we cherish the blessing of knowing that the Almighty God is our Savior and our Lord! And we rejoice in his love and faithfulness forever.

Benediction from Jude vss. 24-25 KJV

“Now unto him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy, to the only wise God our Saviour, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever. Amen.