

## THE SACRIFICE OF THANKSGIVING

- A. Introduction: The Bible instructs Christians to live our lives with our attention on Jesus (Heb 12:1-2). We are talking what that means and how we keep our focus on the Lord, especially in the hard times when our thoughts and emotions are raging because of our circumstances.
1. The key is learning to praise God. This has nothing to do with music or corporate worship. Praise in its most basic form means to acknowledge God in the midst of your situation by talking about who He is and what He has done, is doing, and will do.
    - a. When you praise or acknowledge God it puts your attention back on Him and helps calm your emotions and bring peace to your mind
    - b. Isa 26:3-4—You will keep in perfect peace all who trust in you, whose thoughts are fixed on you. Trust in the Lord always, for the Lord God is the eternal Rock (NLT).
      1. This passage acknowledges God by likening Him an everlasting Rock (boulder, cliff). At that time, in that culture, a boulder or cliff (a huge rock) was an immovable strength. Trust comes from knowing the character, ability, strength, or truth of someone or something.
      2. The Hebrew word translated thoughts means imagination, thought. Fixed means to lean upon or take hold of. When you fix your mind and thoughts on the fact that nothing can come against you that is bigger than God, who is with you and for you, it brings peace to your mind.
  2. In the last several lessons we've referred to Paul the apostle, a man who faced many hardships yet had hope and peace in the midst of them. Paul talked about being sorrowful yet rejoicing. II Cor 6:10
    - a. Paul learned to respond to challenging, painful, frightening circumstances by rejoicing (Acts 16:16-26; Acts 27:21-25). Rejoice means to be “cheer”ful as opposed “feel” cheerful. To cheer means to give hope, urge on, shout with approval and enthusiasm—to rejoice.
    - b. Paul learned to cheer or encourage himself in the face of trouble. We have more to say about how he did this—and how he exhorted others to do cheer themselves—in tonight's lesson.
- B. The New Testament doesn't give many specific examples of how Paul cheered or talked to himself. But we do have an example in David, one of Israel's most famous kings, whose life is chronicled in some detail in the Old Testament. As a Pharisee schooled in the Old Testament, Paul would have been familiar with David.
1. David wrote a number of the psalms. Many of his psalms were written while he was being relentlessly pursued by Israel's first king, Saul, a man intent on killing David. Saul was extremely jealous of David because he was slated to be the next king of Israel.
    - a. We've looked at several of David's “on the run” psalms. In these psalms we find some common traits as to how he cheered himself. Ps 34:1-3; Ps 42:5; Ps 56:3-4; Ps 57:1-2; Ps 63:6-7; etc.
      1. David made a choice to praise and acknowledge God in the midst of his circumstances and the corresponding anxiety and emotional pain he was feeling.
      2. He got control of his emotions and thoughts through his mouth by proclaiming the bigness and goodness of God. He recounted God's past help, His present provision, and His promises for the future.
      3. It was a battle for him sometimes. David would get some emotional and mental relief and then be overwhelmed by thoughts and emotions. But David continued to acknowledge God.
    - b. Knowledge from God's Word was key to David being able to encourage himself. Ps 119:97—Oh, how I love your law! I think about it all day long (NLT).
      1. This doesn't mean that David went around reciting Bible verses all day. His view of reality (his perspective) was shaped by God's Word. He was convinced that God was with him and for him and that nothing could come against him that is bigger than God. He was persuaded that God would get him through until He got him out.

2. There is no indication that David had a bunch of supernatural experiences where he saw and felt God. He simply chose to bring to his mind and speak out of his mouth the fact that God was with him, and that God with him was what he needed to make it through his troubles.
  - A. Ps 119:49-52--Lord, never forget the promises you've made to me, for they are my hope and confidence. In all of my affliction I find great comfort in your promises, for they have kept me alive...I refuse to budge from your precepts...I am encouraged every time I think about your truth (v49-52, TPT).
  - B. Ps 94:19—In the multitude of my (anxious) thoughts within me, Your comforts cheer and delight my soul (Amp); When my busy thoughts were out of control, the soothing comfort of your presence calmed me down (TPT).
2. Consider another incident in David's life. At one point during the years when Saul was pursuing David, he and the men who sided and traveled with him, lived among a tribe known as the Philistines for a year and four months (lessons for another day).
  - a. During part of that time, a Philistine king gave David, his band of men, and their families the town of Ziklag to be their home. During this period David and his men traveled with the Philistine army.
  - b. Upon returning from an expedition with the Philistines, David and his men found their town raided and burned to the ground. The raiders (Amalekites) also carried off all the women and children, including David's two wives. I Sam 30:1-8
    1. David and his men wept until they had no more tears. Then his men began to blame David for what happened and talked about stoning him to death.
    2. David was greatly distressed (v6). The word literally means to press. Distress means great suffering of body or mind, pain, anguish, misfortune, trouble, sorrow (*Webster's Dictionary*).
  - c. What kind of thoughts and emotions did David experience in that moment? Fear, sorrow, guilt, anger, confusion—everything we'd feel in that situation, everything we've felt at times in our lives. But David encouraged and strengthened himself in the Lord his God (I Sam 30:6, Amp).
    1. The Hebrew word that is translated encouraged means to fasten upon, hence to seize, be strong, to strengthen. David fastened himself to, strengthened himself in, the Lord.
    2. This account doesn't tell us what David said or how he encouraged himself, but we have many examples in his psalms of how he encouraged himself in other dire circumstances.
      - A. In Ps 56:3-4 David wrote: But when I am afraid, I put my trust in you. O God, I praise your word. He chose to trust God, remembered God's Word, and began to speak it out.
      - B. Praise is translated from the Hebrew word *halal* which means to shine or make a show; to boast, praise, commend. It can mean to shout.
  3. David called for the high priest Abiathar, who was traveling with David and his men (lessons for another day), to ask the Lord what he should do.
    - A. One translation renders this: But with renewed trust in the Lord his God David said to Abiathar...bring the ephod (I Sam 30:6-7, NASB). The ephod was a garment worn by the high priest when he approached God to ask for direction.
    - B. Note that David calmed himself before he sought direction. When you are stirred up emotionally and mentally, it's very hard to hear clear direction from God. God gave David direction and told him to pursue the Amalekites and recover their families.
    - C. When you are stirred up emotionally and mentally, it is hard to hear direction from God.
3. When we read David's psalms we find an important step in encouraging himself: Remembering God. David talked about remembering the Lord in one of his "on the run" psalms.
  - a. Ps 63:5-7—My soul will be satisfied as with fat and rich food, and my mouth will praise you with joyful lips, when I remember you upon my bed, and meditate on you in the watches of the night (ESV); I think about you before I go to sleep, and my thoughts turn to you during the night (CEV);

for you have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings I will sing for joy (ESV);

b. Note that David's satisfaction (contentment) came from the fact that he knows God and from recognizing what God had already done for him.

c. The Hebrew word translated remember implies to mention, recall, think about, acknowledge, make known. *Webster's Dictionary* defines remember as: to bring to mind or think of again.

1. Meditate means to murmur or to ponder. Ponder means to consider carefully. Murmur implies a continuous flow of words or sounds in a low, indistinct voice (*Webster*).

2. The idea is that a person makes an effort to recall something or bring it back to their mind and then keep it there by murmuring what they recall.

4. To keep our attention on the Lord in the hard times we must develop the habit of recalling or bringing back to our mind who God is and what He has done and will do for us.

a. That's easier said than done because we're talking about keeping our attention on someone we can't see or feel, and what we see and feel has the stronger influence on us in the moment.

1. Our senses constantly give us information about our circumstances that triggers our emotions and fuels our thoughts. Then we begin to talk to ourselves and draw conclusions about our situation based on what we see and feel.

2. We bring to our mind every detail about what is happening and begin to consider every possible outcome (almost always bad). We speculate about what other people are doing, why they are doing what they're doing, along with what they're thinking as they do it.

A. We don't actually know (we can't know) what the outcome of our situation will be nor can we know peoples' motives or thoughts. Yet we meditate on all of it over and over.

B. None of this pondering produces a solution or a change in our circumstances. The only change is that we feel worse—more afraid, more agitated, angrier, etc.

b. Consider two examples that both David and Paul would have familiar with. Don't hear this as a Bible story. This is a historical account of actual events involving real people, many of whom we'll one day meet in Heaven and then live with on the new earth. They show us that the memory of God's past help and promise of future provision quickly fades in the face of formidable obstacles.

1. Thirty-five hundred years ago God supernaturally delivered His people (Israel) from Egyptian bondage. They witnessed Almighty God part the waters of the Red Sea and then bring them safely through on dry land. Ex 14

A. Three days later, as they journeyed back to their homeland (Canaan), they reached a place with undrinkable water and began to murmur: What are we going to drink? Ex 15:23-24

B. God helped them anyway and made the water drinkable. But surely someone in the group could have, should have recalled God's help with a water problem three days earlier.

2. When these people finally reached the border of their homeland they refused to cross over and settle because they saw walled cities, formidable tribes, and unusually large people. Num 13

A. In the face of the obstacles they saw and the fear they felt, all but three of the men in charge (Joshua, Caleb, Moses), began to speculate: We will die if we enter this land (they don't know that). We look like bugs these people will crush (in fact, the people in the land were afraid of Israel and their God, Josh 2:9-11). Num 13:31-33

B. Joshua and Caleb tried to turn everyone's attention to the Lord, His presence with them, His promise to defeat their enemies and bring them safely into Canaan. Num 14:8-9

c. Acknowledging God through praise helps you recall, helps you bring back to your mind the way things really are: God with you and for you, ready to help.

1. In the face of overwhelming emotions and thoughts we must choose to recall what God has already done for us and has promised to do for us. We must choose to call to memory (focus our attention on) what we cannot see. We must choose to look away from one thing to another.

2. Our emotions and mental processes are overdeveloped in our fallen flesh. It seems right to focus on what we see and how we feel and then speculate about how bad things could get.

3. Acknowledging God through praise doesn't feel right at the times you most need to do it. But if you want to walk in peace of mind and hope in this very difficult life, you must learn to put your attention back on God and the way things really are according to Him.

d. David also wrote Ps 103. Although it is not an "on the run" psalm (as far as we know), David reinforces the importance of remembering (not forgetting) what God has done.

1. Ps 103:1-2—Bless God and don't forget his benefits. Bless means to praise or glorify. Forget means to mislay, to be oblivious of from want of memory or attention; to fail to be mindful of.

2. Ps 103:1-2—Praise the Lord, I tell myself; with my whole heart, I will praise his holy name. Praise the Lord, I tell myself, and never forget the good things he does for me (NLT).

C. Conclusion: As we said earlier, we don't have many details about Paul's process as he encouraged himself in the Lord. But, we get insight from something he said to people who were facing difficult circumstances. Some had already experienced property loss and physical violence due to increasing persecution.

1. Note one of Paul's final statements to them: Through Him (Jesus) therefore let us constantly and at all times offer up to God a sacrifice of praise, which is the fruit of lips that thankfully acknowledge and confess and glorify His name (Heb 13:15, Amp).

a. A sacrifice of praise was familiar to these people. They were Jewish believers who grew up under the Old Covenant and its system of sacrifices, including a thank offering. Lev 7:12-14; Ps 107:21-22

1. This offering was made to God with a public profession of His power, goodness, and mercy.

The Hebrew word translated thanksgiving in Lev 7 comes from the word *yadah* which means the act of acknowledging what is right about God in praise and thanksgiving.

2. In good times this sacrifice helped them remember God's goodness and mercy. In times of danger, it helped them to be conscious of God's nearness and mercy. It helped them focus.

A. This same word is used in Ps 50:23—He who sacrifices thank offerings honors me, and he prepares the way so that I may show him the salvation of God (NIV).

B. This word is used in Ps 107:1-2—Give thanks to the Lord because He is good. His faithful love continues forever. That's what those who have been set free by the Lord should say (NIrV).

b. Paul defined a sacrifice or gift of praise as lips that thankfully acknowledge God's name (His names are expressions of who He is and what He does). The Greek word that is translated thankfully acknowledge means to say the same thing as or to assent or agree with.

1. In other words, you're saying Who God is and what He does—not based on how you feel or what you see in the moment but on reality as it truly is—Who truly He is and what He has done.

2. It can be a sacrifice (hard to praise God) when everything is going wrong and we feel terrible.

But Paul knew the power of praise and thanksgiving from his own experience and from the example of David. He knew that it's always appropriate to praise the Lord no matter what.

A. Paul wrote much about being thankful and giving thanks in his epistles. I Thess 5:16-18—Always be joyful. Keep on praying. No matter what happens, always be thankful, for this is God's will for you who belong to Christ Jesus (NLT).

B. The Greek word translated thankful means to be grateful, to express gratitude. Grateful means to be appreciative of benefits received (*Webster's Dictionary*).

2. When you remember (call to your memory) God's past help and promise of present and future provision, and then acknowledge Him through praise and thanksgiving (despite how you feel) it makes you grateful and hopeful even in the most difficult circumstances. Begin to develop the habit of praise and thanksgiving. Talk about how big and good God is, not how big the problem is. More next week!