

When Things Have Gone Your Way

DAVE BAST

When are you more likely to pray seriously, when you are in real trouble and need God's help desperately, or when things are going great for you? For most of us, if we are honest, the answer would probably be the former. We usually turn to prayer when we need help in a crisis, but when things are going our way, then maybe not so much. How can the Psalms help us learn how to pray in times when things have gone our way? Stay tuned.

BOB HEERSPINK

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Bob Heerspink.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast; so Bob, we are in this brief series of programs on the Psalms, and we are approaching the Psalms as a way of showing us how to speak to God in the various circumstances of life. There is a wonderful comment that someone made: In most of the Bible, God is speaking to us, but in the Psalms, we are speaking back to him, and using words that he himself gives us.

BOB HEERSPINK

Exactly. The Psalms help us to know how to respond to so many parts of life, so many experiences of life. What do you say to God? The Psalms tell us.

DAVE BAST

And so today we want to think about the positive experiences of life. So often we are drawn to know what to say when we have sinned – we talked about that in a former program – or when we are feeling down or discouraged or lamenting; but the Psalms are full of joy and thanksgiving as well, and that is a good thing to look at.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes, and I think this is really an important area to explore, because when things really go well, those are the times when we probably have a tendency *not* to talk to God; really to say there is nothing that has to be expressed because, well, life is going on just fine.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right; I don't have any problems right now, so no reason to go to him.

BOB HEERSPINK

Talk to you later.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right; let me alone for awhile, you know; but so, you know, think about it. What would make you feel thankful? What would trigger gratitude in you?

BOB HEERSPINK

You know, I was thinking about that, and looking back over my life, what were moments of just extreme thankfulness; and I think about the birth of our first child. You know, we waited a number of years for that first child, and that meant his birth was a remarkable reason for thanksgiving, but it is was a tough delivery, and after the baby was born, the doctor is in the room with my wife and myself, and he says to my wife: You know, we almost lost you back in Delivery. And I thought, “Yes, wow. Here I have my wife and my child, and they are both healthy. They are going to be okay.” That was just a moment of extreme gratitude for me.

DAVE BAST

Yes, well if you think that is great, wait till you start having grandchildren.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes, there you go.

DAVE BAST

But, clearly, answered prayer – experiences when we have really prayed in some need – I think there is a connection between need and thankfulness; and well, the psalm we want to look at is Psalm 116, and the psalmist has exactly that experience. He is in some kind of trouble – even life-threatening, like the experience you went through with your first child – and he says:

³The cords of death entangled me. The anguish of the grave came over me. I was overcome by distress and sorrow. It is like death has him by the throat. It has him bound.

BOB HEERSPINK

When I read that psalm I think of Jonah, just going down...

DAVE BAST

Yes, that is a good image, right.

BOB HEERSPINK

Into the deep; just being pulled down.

DAVE BAST

Yes, and he is wrapped up in the seaweed. It is like he cannot escape. Imagine being tied up and you are sinking, and that is the feeling that the psalmist has; and then he adds in the next verse:

⁴Then I called on the name of the Lord, “Lord, save me,” and he did.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes.

DAVE BAST

That was his experience.

BOB HEERSPINK

You know, the other image that comes to mind in this psalm for me is like the psalmist is involved in a tug of war, and he is losing. You know, when you do a tug of war, you station the strongest member of the team at the very end, and it is like he calls for the Lord to anchor him, you know, because I am just going to go right over to the other side. I am going to drown in this river that is between the two teams unless I have an anchor; and here comes God and he grabs ahold of the rope and he anchors the psalmist in such a way that he is saved.

DAVE BAST

Yes; so, lying behind this psalm... and we don't know exactly what it was; he doesn't say. Maybe it was a serious illness; maybe he was in danger in war. It was a foxhole prayer, you know; but it is kind of a mayday. I don't know if you know the story behind that, but that is the emergency cry in a plane, you know, if they are in trouble, they get on the radio and say: Mayday! Mayday! And I have heard – I have been told that that actually goes back to the early French voyageurs, who were canoeing, and if they got in trouble in the rapids they would cry out: Mayday! Help me! It literally means help me; and that is what this guy...

BOB HEERSPINK

It is some kind of French... those are French words.

DAVE BAST

And this guy throws out a mayday to God: Help me! Help me! And God does. He delivers him. And so, he begins the psalm this way:

¹I love the Lord, for he heard my voice; he heard my cry for mercy. ²Because he turned his ear to me, I will call on him as long as I live. What a beautiful psalm.

BOB HEERSPINK

You know, it is a sign that this psalm really begins with the salvation. It is not enough to merely cry to God and he saves you; now there is more to say to God. The psalm really is about what you say after you experience that redemption – after you receive that grace.

DAVE BAST

The point of the psalm is not the prayer for help. We probably don't need the Psalms to teach us to do that. Most of us instinctively...

BOB HEERSPINK

That comes naturally.

DAVE BAST

Even, you know, you hear people say, oh my God, all the time. Oh, my God. Do they really know what they are saying? That can be an honest prayer, even; an exclamation in the midst of trouble: Oh, God; help me! That is exactly what this guy has prayed; but what he wants to say to us – what he wants to teach us is what to say when God answers. An amazing thing happened. God delivered him. Maybe he didn't even deserve it. Maybe he didn't even expect it; but it happened.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, the psalmist needs to teach us to say thank you, and those are really, really tough words to say. As parents we spend so much time teaching our kids to say thank you. Something is done for them that is really nice, and we say: Now, what do you say? Say: Thank you. But we have the same problem as adults.

DAVE BAST

Well, let's look at that, and learn what we can from the example of this believer. When we return after a break we will take look at how to say thanks from Psalm 116.

Segment 2

BOB HEERSPINK

Welcome back to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. Dave, before the break we were talking about how difficult it is to say the simple words: Thank you; and we have that from our own experience how tough they are, but the Bible teaches how tough those words are, too. I think of the story of the lepers. Ten lepers are healed, only one comes back to Jesus to say thanks, and Jesus says: Where is everybody? Where are the other nine?

DAVE BAST

Exactly, yes; that is an incident that we read in the Gospel of Luke, I think it is Chapter 17; and Jesus is walking through the countryside and here are these ten lepers; and of course, they could not go into any town or city. They had to keep distant from everybody. They had to, according to law, warn people of their approach because leprosy could be contagious and there was no way to treat it; and so, here these people are, and they come up to Jesus and he welcomes them, of course, as he always did. He is not afraid of being infected by them; and he heals them, and he says: Go show yourself to the priest that you are clean; and they go off and run off and do that and they get their clean bill of health and they are so happy and they are so excited; they can go back home, go back to their families; and the one who remembers to come back and thank the Lord is a Samaritan – a Samaritan, of all people; and Jesus is sort of incredulous, so he says: Where are the nine? Were not ten cleansed? Where are the other nine?

BOB HEERSPINK

And it is so easy for us to think: Hey, you know, God is God, and why would he even expect us to say thank you? You would expect Jesus, maybe, to say to the Samaritan: Hey, you didn't have to come back. Get out there with your family. Go celebrate. And yet, it was a big thing to Jesus that they come back and show gratitude.

DAVE BAST

Yes; or, you know, maybe we will be very perfunctory about it; we will have a quick: Oh, thank you, Lord, for all your blessings; but where is the deeply rooted, cultivated sense of expressing gratitude? It is just so good for us to have that. I think it is for our sake. God does not need...

BOB HEERSPINK

No, he doesn't....

DAVE BAST

Anything that we can give; yes, he is not a touchy egotist who is upset because we are not sufficiently appreciative:::

. It is for our benefit that he wants us to be grateful.

BOB HEERSPINK

But I think, Dave, the reason we have such a hard time showing gratitude is because when we show gratitude, we are really admitting dependency. We are saying: Hey, we cannot do this all by ourselves. Someone has done something for us. And I think that is really hard for us to admit, that I need other people; ultimately, I need God. I think that is one of the reasons why it is so hard for us to really be a grateful people in our relationship with God, because it is really saying it is all about grace, and grace is the hardest thing for us really to accept.

DAVE BAST

And I also think that there is something about us that sort of presumes that everything *should* be going our way. That that is the default position – that is the normal life should be full of blessing, life should be good, things should be going our way; and when they are not, something is wrong and we get angry, as if: Wait a minute, I am not getting what I should be getting; I am not getting what I deserve.

BOB HEERSPINK

This whole idea of entitlement just kind of spills over into our lives.

DAVE BAST

Right; that is what I am trying to say, yes; and so, there is not sufficient gratitude or sense of wonder. You know the great hymn, *Amazing Grace*; we sing it all the time, but do we really believe it? Does it really amaze us that God is gracious to us, that God is good to us?

Well, this guy was amazed by grace, and he says it. Here is the heart of his expression of thanks to God from verse 5 and following. He says:

⁵The Lord is gracious and righteous. Our God is full of compassion. ^{6b}When I was in great need, he saved me. ⁷Be at rest once more, O my soul, for the Lord has been good to you. ⁸For you, O Lord, have delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling, ⁹that I may walk before the Lord in the land of the living.

God, you saved my life. Thank you.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes, and in that psalm, God really helps us to get to the very heart of where blessing comes from. You know, we are blessed by a lot of people around us. You know, the grocer who sells us our groceries, the farmers who bring goods to market, the doctor who does my checkup; but the psalmist here really pushes past all of that and says: Okay, all those people who are blessing you, there is one who stands behind all those blessings, and that is God.

DAVE BAST

Right. Part of the charm of the Psalms, I think, is that they ignore by and large secondary causes...

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes, they do.

DAVE BAST

In fact, that is the biblical view of things, really. You don't pay as much attention to secondary causes, which is not to say we should ignore them. We should be grateful of other people...

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes, we have to say thank you to...

DAVE BAST

Say it vertically...

BOB HEERSPINK

To those around us.

DAVE BAST

And horizontally as well; but to the Psalms, it is really God all the time. It is not the doctor who heals us or the medicine or the surgery. It is God. It is not, you know, the policeman who gets us out of the wreck and saves us from the criminal or whatever; it is God. On the other hand, it is not just others that we sin against, it is God. It is always that primary relationship.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right; the primary relationship right here is with God, and we have not... If we haven't shown gratitude to God, we failed in the most key act of gratitude that we are called to give as God's people.

DAVE BAST

Okay; he teaches us to say thank you to the Lord, and what he does is actually just recite what has happened – just to say it over again. That is another thing that strikes me about the Psalms; how constantly they are rehearsing the great things that God has done, whether for us individually when it is a matter of delivering us from death, or the great acts of the exodus when God delivered the whole people out of the land of Egypt and the house of bondage; or in the New Testament how we rehearse the saving death and resurrection of Jesus at the Lord's Table. It is just telling again and again, to God, the great things that he has done.

BOB HEERSPINK

One of the key ways in which we show gratitude is by not forgetting. You know, we are such forgetful people, and blessing comes and it is past... and that is the story of the ten lepers, of course – at least of the nine. To remember and to retell the story is one of the key ways in which we show that we are grateful people.

DAVE BAST

Yes; and retell our stories. Let's rehearse all the things that God has done for us, going all the way back, as much as we can remember. That is how you say thank you; but, you can also show gratitude, and I love where this psalm heads next. After verbally expressing his thanks, the psalmist goes on to say some other things about how he is going to *show* his thanksgiving. Let's look at that when we come back.

Segment 3

BOB HEERSPINK

Welcome back to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. Dave, before the break, we were talking about what this psalm gives us in terms of some directions as to how to put gratitude into practice; and that comes out later in Psalm 116. Let me start reading at verse 12:

What shall I return to the Lord for all his goodness to me? ¹³I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord. ¹⁴I will fulfill my vows to the Lord in the presence of all his people. And then in verse 17: I will sacrifice a thank offering to you and call on the name of the Lord.

DAVE BAST

So this guy does not want to just say thanks to God, he wants to do thanks. He wants to live his thanksgiving, which is a beautiful thing; and he starts with this expression: What shall I return to the Lord for all his goodness? What can I do? Or, as we might say – and have said, actually, in a popular, contemporary song: How can I say thanks for all the things that you have done for me? Meaning not just say it verbally, but show it.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes, and in this call to response what I think is so powerful is that he says: I need to engage in public worship. I need to go with God's people; and here it is going to the Temple, offering a thank offering to God. You know, sometimes we only think that the sacrifices in the Old Testament were about guilt. You know, I want something so I am going to give a sacrifice to God and then maybe God will give me what I want. Here we see another kind of sacrifice being illustrated. Once God answers prayer, come back; come back into worship and offer your thanks.

DAVE BAST

Well, and he even begins by taking something else from God, because the first thing he says is: How am I going to respond? How shall I say thanks? I will take or lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord; and as you point out, the context of that is public worship. He is going to go and share with God's people in worship, but he begins with this image of a cup of salvation that he is also going to take... or receive.

BOB HEERSPINK

He is going to receive.

DAVE BAST

Yes; and I think the first and most important thing we need to do is make sure we don't leave the best gift in the box; you know, when God gives us something – when he answers our prayer – it is one thing even to have your life spared, that is fabulous; but the ultimate gift God wants to give us is full salvation in every sense of the word.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, I cannot read this psalm and read those words without going to the last supper and seeing Jesus lift that cup, and saying, “This is my blood shed for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” That somehow this psalm is pushing forward right to the very core of our reason for gratitude in the sacrifice, the death, the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

DAVE BAST

And to receive him – to receive his salvation, I should say, is to receive him. The best gift of all is the gift of the giver himself that God gives us, and if we don’t receive that gift, in the end nothing else matters, you know. We are all going to die anyway.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes, this psalm really forces us to look at why should you be grateful; and it is wonderful to be grateful for all God’s physical gifts and all the blessings that he gives, but ultimately, if we have not received the cup of salvation – if we do not have Christ – we have missed the ultimate reason for giving thanks.

DAVE BAST

Yes; so, better than children, better than grandchildren, better than deliverance from physical death is this wonderful gift of God himself in Jesus Christ, and taking the cup of salvation and receiving him. That is the old acronym for faith, you know. Forsaking all, I take him. So, don’t miss out on that, whatever you do.

BOB HEERSPINK

But I think this psalm really confronts us in terms of responses that are not common today with regard to gratitude, because this psalm calls us to worship; and I think worship is denigrated today. You know, people say: I have a relationship with God, and yes, I am thankful, but why should I go gather with God’s people on Sunday morning to go through some ritual? That doesn’t matter.

DAVE BAST

Yes; give me Jesus, I don’t need the Church. That is not biblical, frankly. Worship, yes, you can have personal times of prayer and thankfulness and communion with God – quiet time, we sometimes call it; but ultimately worship has to be corporate to be true, full, biblical worship. You have to join with the people of God and engage in his public praise. That is what it says here. That is what he does.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, and I think this drives us to really a new view of worship because a lot of people who I talk to think about worship in terms of what they are going to get out of it, you know; or they will say: I don’t go to church because I don’t get anything out of the sermon. The question isn’t what are you getting out of it, first of all. The question is, what are you giving? The background to the word, *worship* comes from old English, which means *worthship*. You are giving your *worth* to God; you are celebrating his worth. So the first aspect of worship is this notion of praise – of thanksgiving.

DAVE BAST

To quote the Psalms again: Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name; or here in Psalm 116, look at the second thing that he says: ¹⁴I will fulfill my vows to the Lord now in the presence of his people; and I don’t think that refers to the thing that we commonly do, which is to try to bargain with God when we are in trouble, you know. “God, if you get me out of this, I promise I will never do it again.” I think he is talking, again in the presence of God’s people, he is talking about the vows that he made to go to Jerusalem and participate at the Temple in the public worship of God.

BOB HEERSPINK

I am going to be there and I am going to tell everyone else that is in worship what God has done for me. This notion of coming back to public testimony to give expression to how God has blessed me.

DAVE BAST

Right; and then there is this third thing he says: ¹⁷I will sacrifice a thank offering to you and call on the name of the Lord. Again, this is in worship, but it is the idea of... there was another kind of offering than a sin offering, right? There was this thank offering, which was voluntary.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, and I think there is where, for us today, now we are pushing to the issue of having received so much from God, what do we give? There is a point at which we say: How do I respond in such a way that I bless other people? How do I respond in service to God? It wasn't just words that the psalmist expresses to God. This gratitude is going to cost him something.

DAVE BAST

Yes, and not only that, but the interesting thing about the thank offering, if you go back and dig through all the regulations, is that basically it went for other people; for the priest and his family, for their maintenance. So, you know, God doesn't need anything that we could give him. He doesn't need our money. He doesn't need our grain or our animals.

BOB HEERSPINK

But his church needs things, and people need things.

DAVE BAST

Exactly. It makes me think of the great line... I have heard it attributed to Woody Hayes: You can't pay back; you can only pay forward. And that is how, ultimately, the psalmist is going to express his thanks. He is going to pay it forward by giving something – sacrificing something for those who really need it – in the name of the Lord.

BOB HEERSPINK

So here is a psalm that confronts us as people who are so blessed and says we've got some incredible things to say and to do if we are really going to put our gratitude on display.

So, thanks for joining our *Groundwork* conversation, and don't forget, it is listeners like you asking questions and participating that keep our topics relevant for your life. So tell us what you think about what you are hearing and suggest passages or topics that you would like for us to discuss on future *Groundwork* programs. Visit us at groundworkonline.com and join the conversation.

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Printed on August 16, 2025