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Here we are on the last Sunday of the year, two days before the new year. If you are into trivia, the next time a new year starts on a Sunday will be in 2023, and the next time the year ends on a Sunday will be 2024! Over the past decade, we have spent the last Sunday of the year, with a thanksgiving service, grateful to God for all He does for us.

Let me start by sharing a reflection to set the ball rolling. Later in the service, Alan will read Psalm 103 and we shall focus on that Psalm to learn about thankfulness and gratitude.

The storyline of God, the history of God in this world, is full of expressions of gratitude and thankfulness to God. Adam and Eve's son **Abel** was the first to bring a gift to God, the best portions of the firstborn lambs of his flocks¹, which he offered with a grateful heart and a thankful spirit. After his floating zoo touched down on *terra firma*, **Noah** built an altar to the Lord and there he sacrificed as burnt offerings, the animals and birds that had been approved for that purpose, the aroma from which so pleased God, He promised never ever to destroy the earth by flood waters². And so it went. Abraham gave thanks by offering the best he had, and everyone, in every successive generation offered God the best of what they had, from a grateful heart and a thankful spirit.

Perhaps you have thought about this, perhaps not, but have you considered the difference between **thankfulness** and **gratitude**? Many think the words are interchangeable, but there is a meaningful difference between them.

Gratitude is an emotion, whereas **thanksgiving** is more of an action. If someone does something for me, I can feel grateful. My offering of thanks to that person is an action. One can feel gratitude without thanksgiving, but one cannot be thankful without feeling grateful. Thanksgiving is gratitude in action.

The person who lives the grateful life counts his or her blessings privately. The person who is thankful honours the giver of those blessings. For instance, I'm grateful that I woke up feeling healthy this morning; I'm not sick, nor am I in hospital. Now what if I take my healthy day and squander it doing bad things; what if I eat or drink to excess? What if I drive without consideration to the rules of the road, act abhorrently

¹ Genesis 4:4

² Genesis 8:20-22

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at work, and ignore the needs around the house? I may have gratitude for my health, but where is my thankfulness for my health? I have taken a healthy day and I have made it into a self-serving day. Again, thanksgiving is gratitude in action, the two are meaningfully interrelated.

Let's take Jesus response to the arrogant teacher of the law who asked, *Of the 613 laws, which is the most important?*

Jesus' reply sets the record straight: ***Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul and all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment, but it goes on, another which is equally as important, which is, love your neighbour as yourself. The entire law and the demands of the prophets are based on, rooted in, these two commandments.***³

Jesus says, *the starting point is your TOTAL being (heart, soul and mind) is living in perpetual gratitude to God, without whom we can do nothing. The result of this life of gratitude, is to love your neighbour as yourself, seen in acts of thanksgiving.*

But sadly, many of us think, we can start with acts of thankfulness, and God will be pleased we are doing something worthwhile, and He will reward us by drawing us closer to Him, which gives us a grateful heart! Often we end up doing things **for God** which is not according to His plan for this world!

We don't have time this morning to go through the Psalms but to highlight two examples, and you can read find many more.

- Psalm 9:1 - *I will praise You Lord with my whole heart.* i.e. I am grateful to You my God, with my whole being.
- Psalm 86:12 - *I will praise the name of God with a song; I will magnify Him with thanksgiving.* i.e. Praising the Name of God with a song, is the way I express my thankfulness for what God has done, for all to hear and know who God is!

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³ Matthew 22:36-40

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PSALM 103

This Psalm is one of my favourite songs of praise! I'll walk us through the structure and highlights of the Psalm and then have you do some work!

This one of David's many Psalms. See how naturally and wonderfully He expresses His relationship with God, and gives us a framework for our own prayers offered from a heart filled with gratitude, and a spirit oozing with thankfulness!

David starts by summoning all his spiritual and emotional energy, to **praise God ... praise His Holy Name**. Why? That, "**may I never forget the good things He does for me!**" This is a conscious act of will, that by praising God with my whole being, I wouldn't forget what He has done for me!

We have so many distractions around us, if it's not family, its government (forms to fill, income to report and taxes to pay), household chores and repairs, and the list goes on. It is so easy to get bogged down and forget, even take God for granted!

One sure way to keep God at the top of our agenda is to create a lifestyle of praising Him; by doing this, I will never forget the good things he does for me!

And what exactly are the good things God does for me?

David lists them: He **forgives all** my sin, **heals all** my diseases, He buys my **freedom** from death **AND** crowns me with love and tender mercies, he **renews** my youth, and if I, or anyone I know, has been treated unfairly, He **restores** them with Righteousness and Justice.

Then starting at v.7, David explains, it is God's character to restore me to my original creation, through forgiveness, healing, buying my freedom, renewing my youth, and restoring any injustice done to me.

To understand why **He revealed His character to Moses, and His deeds to the people of Israel**, we must understand, we have been stolen from God by a sly lie. The one who stole us, plays a dirty, double-handed game: to us he says, we cannot trust God, and to God he says, we are inherently bad, because look at the bad things they are doing!

In v.14, David reminds himself (and us), that we are weak, we are powerless to deal with a wicked and duplicitous enemy. Which explains why God is slow to anger, He will not constantly accuse us, nor remain angry against us forever! For anyone who

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holds God in awe (proper translation of **fear**), God removes any thought of our wrong from His memory. How far does He remove the memory of any wrong we do? As far as the east is from the west! You try and measure that!

The benefits of what God does, do not end there!

In v.17, David reminds us again, ***those who hold God in awe, those who faithfully obey God's laws, God's love will never fail them. Not only that, the salvation received by one generation, can be passed onto next several generations, through conscious teaching and by example.***

The last four verses describe the activity in Heaven where worshipping angels and armies of angels, listen to God's every command and carry out His every instruction!

David ends this song of thanksgiving with an interesting phrase: ***Let all that I am, praise the Lord!*** David wants to surrender his total being to be among those who are continually praising God in Heaven!

All this might sound a bit strange and alien to us. Our reality is so different from what is being described, isn't it?

As you leave from this place of worship and settle into a delicious shared lunch, I would like to give you a little exercise. You can make it into a little workbook for yourself.

Start by describing for yourself the person and character of God as you read it in this Psalm. Then put yourself through a four step process. Start by:

Looking back with thanks - *In all things give thanks*

Releasing the past with thanks - *as far as the east is from the west, God has removed all memory of your wrong.*

Embracing the present with thanks - 1 Chronicles 16:34-36

Committing the future with thanks - *Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good! His faithful love endures forever.*

Finally, list the names for whom you wish to pray, alongside their need, and let's watch God answer prayer!

AMEN