Three Responses to God’s Goodness

Second in the series; Humble Prayers for Thanksgiving

# Scripture: Psalm 139

# Key thought: David’s Psalm provides an excellent response to who God is.

# Intro:

JoAnne has been writing inspirational devotional posts that talk about our response to God as we meet him in nature. David’s Psalm 139 is that kind of reflection too. Here are some thoughts from a recent post of JoAnne’s.

## Gentle as a Butterfly

*Jesus said, "l am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your soul."*

*(Matt. 11:29)*

*Sitting on the back step one early-fall afternoon, I watched orange butterflies randomly fluttering from flower to flower. One settled, wings resting upright, on the golden center of a bright white daisy. In the background insects hummed, accompanied by crickets chirping, "Sweet-sweet!" Tall grasses swayed slightly in the breeze. Across the lawn, sunshine illuminated crimson leaves into even brighter shades of flame.*

*Here in my walk-side garden, I was enjoying a small Eden of tranquility, crafted just for me. It was a gift from my heavenly Father. What did it tell me about Him? The scene spoke to me of quiet rest and gentleness. I heard His gentleness in the sweet cricket song and whispering breezes. I saw His gentleness in the flutter of fragile butterfly wings.*

*God also revealed His gentle side to the prophet Elijah, who had fled to a mountain cave. God spoke to him, not in the wind, fire, or earthquake, but in a gentle whisper. He reminded Elijah that he was not alone in serving God (1 Kings 19:12-18). God had a plan for him.*

*God continues to call us, when we stop to drink in the gentleness we feel in His world created for us. He reminds us, "This is Me, your heavenly Father, telling you that you're going to be okay. Rest in my quietness. I will be with you wherever you go.*

*(Prayer) Calm me, God, with Your gentleness.*

*October 26, 2017 JoAnne Jones*

JoAnne helps us to think about the gentleness of God in her reflection upon that quiet moment beside a garden walkway. David had a similar purpose in his poetic reflection in Psalm 139 upon the wonders of God’s creation of the human body. How was David affected by his reflections? Thanksgiving is coming and we will be remembering and counting up our blessings. What happens in our lives in moments when we are inspired by God’s goodness to us? I’d like us to look today into Psalm 139 for ideas. I find there three ways that David responded to God.

# We respond with praise (v. 14).

His first response is praise. The specific trigger for the Psalmist’s praise to God in this instance is a renewed consciousness of the wonder of the creation of the human body. There are so many aspects of the wonder of the human body that still lead us to be in awe of our creator. One that impresses me lately is the wonder of coordination. Maybe it’s because I’m one of those guys who was always a little challenged in this department growing up. I can’t even conceive of the type of coordination required for gymnastics or for skateboarding, for that matter. Then there is the kind of ear-hand coordination that my wife displays in her musicianship. The brain God has created that is able to coordinate body and mind like that is amazing.

But David’s admiration for God’s creation in the human body is only one example. It is only the beginning of our discovery of the goodness and greatness of God. The list goes on and on. Maybe we are touched by a very spiritual moment in a service of worship. Maybe the goodness and power of God is revealed to us in a healing miracle for someone we love. Maybe we are meditating on the gift of forgiveness of sins that we enjoy in Jesus. Perhaps we are overwhelmed by how God has met our financial needs. Perhaps we are giving thanks for providential circumstances.

Whatever it is that calls forth our reaction to God’s goodness and power, praise is the most natural and usually our first response. This kind of praise is not just a shallow liturgy of empty words. Rather it arises from a warm heart, inspired and tuned to adore the One who is the source of every good and perfect gift (James 1:17).

Genuine praise can happen any time or any place. This last week in our Bible study in the Gospel of John chapter 4, we ran across the dialogue between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well. Jesus was instructing her about how genuine worship is not about certain places, but about worshiping “in spirit and in truth” (John 4:24).

Pastor Rick Warren, in his best-selling book, The Purpose Driven Life, discusses what it means to really praise or worship God (Chapter 13). He teaches us that real worship or praise to God has four characteristics.

1. First, it is accurate; which means that it is tied to the truth of Scripture. Our praise to God is based on the truths about God that we know from Holy Scripture.
2. Second, Pastor Warren reminds us that, “God is pleased when our worship is authentic” (p. 101). Authentic means that it is “genuine and heartfelt.” On some level, it will engage our emotional selves--though this will be experienced differently by people of different personalities.
3. Third, real praise and worship is thoughtful. Rev. Warren warns us, “If worship is mindless, it is meaningless. You must engage your mind” (p. 103).
4. And finally, worship is practical. Genuine praise and worship affects our actions, our giving, our time choices, our volunteering, etc. When we are truly worshiping God and praising God, we want to express it in God-pleasing action on behalf of others.

# We respond with zeal (vv. 19-22).

The second response to God’s goodness that David points out to us is something that we don’t notice when we first read this Psalm. Indeed, I have to admit that the first twenty years or so that I read this Psalm, verses 19-22 seemed horridly out of place. They seemed to be an island of hatred incongruently inserted into a Psalm of praise. Since I, like most Christian disciples, had mostly studied the NT, these hate-filled verses seemed a sick contrast to the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus taught that we should love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us (Matt. 5:44). The Psalmist’s diatribe against his enemies certainly doesn’t rise to that standard. Should I be dismissing these verses as a hopelessly out of touch bronze-age artifact? Or have I been missing something?

Then one time when I was reading this Psalm every day for a week, the Holy Spirit must have helped me to think about it differently. Instead of looking at how unlike Jesus these were, I was led to ask a much better exegetical question. It is the kind of study question that we always should be asking when reading in the OT. I should have known to ask it right here too, but somehow I never had. The question is this. What was the author’s intention? What feeling was the author trying to express?

This question helps so much. It is clear that David considers his attitude and actions in these verses as commendable even though we today do not. Why could he consider hatred commendable? It was because he was expressing hatred for the enemies of God who had proved themselves to be such by “wicked” and even “bloodthirsty” behavior (Ps. 139:19). So his hatred and abhorrence of the enemies of God were for David an expression of zeal for God. This is why he saw his hatred for God’s enemies is a good thing.

Now I was making progress in interpreting these verses. For zeal, being inspired and fired up about who God is, and how much he loves us, and how great he is, is very much a New Testament approved feeling as well. But since Jesus came, we know to express it much differently. So being zealous for God is the second way David responded to God in this moment of inspiration. His first response was praise. His second response was zeal.

Now suddenly, these verses become understandable, even commendable. We can relate to a response of zeal, of being fired up for action. It is when are fired up for a cause that we get into action. Now we have to admit that sometimes, our zeal for action gets us in trouble too. We might be like Paul’s description of some of the Jewish leaders of his day. He described them as having a “zeal for God, but it is not enlightened” (Rom. 10:1). Paul described himself as having this zeal before he was converted. He acknowledged that he was zealous to the point of persecuting the church (Phil. 3:6).

Yet zealous action is often good too. The Bible records that Jesus cleansed the temple because he was zealous for God’s house. The Corinthian church had shown their zeal by giving to the offering for the saints in Jerusalem, and Paul used their giving as an example to others to spur others churches on to good deeds as well (2 Cor. 9:2). Epaphras expressed his zeal by praying diligently for the Colossian and Laodicean churches (Col. 4:13 KJV).

The Bible instructs us plainly,

Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord.   
Rom 12:11 NIV

So apparently, zeal is something we need to feel in our response to the goodness to God. It’s not an option just for the excitable types. All of us need to feel excited, to feel stirred to action when we consider the greatness and the goodness of God.

Now I daresay that is not one of the responses we typically think of at Thanksgiving time, is it? But this Psalm helps us see it.

# We respond in contrite humility (vv. 23, 24).

Then as if David was prescient that God had more insights for his children in the future, he opens his mind and heart for the correction of God.

Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.   
(Psalm 139:23, 24)

There is a wonderful and slightly longer parallel passage in Psalm 19—also from the pen of David –so we can use that to expand and expound his thought here in Psalm 139.

But who can discern their own errors? Forgive my hidden faults.  
Keep your servant also from willful sins; may they not rule over me.  
Then I will be blameless, innocent of great transgression.  
May these words of my mouth and this meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer. Psalm 19:12-14

Looking at these two passages together, the essence of this third response of David to the goodness of God can be summarized concisely as contrite humility. It involves three attitudes.

1. David was praying for, listening for and open to the convicting Spirit of God pointing out his moral failings.
2. He prayed for God to guide the thoughts of his mind and the words that were produced from those thoughts.
3. He prayed for and relied upon the keeping power of God to give him willpower and help him walk in the right paths.

Let’s look at each one of those briefly.

First of all, David’s response is to open his mind and heart to the correcting spirit of God. Let me ask you a question? What is your attitude when a sermon convicts you? How do you respond when a preacher’s words make you feel guilty? The Holy Spirit might bring correction in various ways – through our own mind and conscience or through a Sunday school teacher, through reading of Scripture, through a radio or television speaker, through a Christian song, or through a pastor’ message. How do you respond? Do you bristle and blame the messenger? Do you brush it off and push down any uncomfortable feelings? Or do you approach it with an open heart and mind as David did in this Psalm? This kind of approach acknowledges our sin, seeks forgiveness from God and desires to change our way of life. This is the only life-giving response to the very healthy process of spiritual correction which the Holy Spirit faithfully brings into our life.

The second part of David’s contrite humble response involves a recognition that sin begins in our mind. So if we are going to avoid offending God and others, we will need the Holy Spirit’s help in keeping our thoughts in the right channels. We will need the Holy Spirit’s help in judging our thoughts, before the Holy Spirit is needed to judge our actions. If our thoughts are holy, our actions will be holy. This is why we need to pray David’s prayer for guidance in the “meditations of our heart (Psalm 19:14).”

Finally, David recognizes that we need one more type of help from God if we are to truly walk in God’s ways. How many times have we found out in our struggle to be Disciples of Christ that we want to do something, we even know what the right thing is, but for whatever crazy reasons, we don’t do the right thing. We need some holy God-influenced willpower. The apostle Paul recognized this problem as well. So we don’t need to feel that it is just us.

I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. Rom 7:15-17 NIV

But Paul also recognized that we can have the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!   
Rom 7:24-25 NIV

If we pray as David did that God would, “Lead to me in the way everlasting” (Psalm 139:24). Or in the words of Psalm 19, “Keep your servant also from willful sins; may they not rule over me” (Psalm 19:13), then we can have the victory.

# Conclusion

Contrast story – Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life by Donald S. Whitney p. 79