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The Worship of God • November 21, 2021



The Scripture
Psalm 78:1-8

*Give ear, O my people, to my teaching; incline your ears to the words of my mouth.
I will open my mouth in a parable; I will utter dark sayings from of old,
things that we have heard and known, that our ancestors have told us.
We will not hide them from their children; we will tell to the coming generation the
glorious deeds of the LORD, and his might, and the wonders that he has done.
He established a decree in Jacob, and appointed a law in Israel, which he commanded
our ancestors to teach to their children;
that the next generation might know them, the children yet unborn, and rise up and tell
them to their children,
so that they should set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God, but keep his
commandments;
and that they should not be like their ancestors, a stubborn and rebellious generation,
a generation whose heart was not steadfast, whose spirit was not faithful to God.*

The Message
“If You Are So Inclined”
Mark Briley

Have you ever had an off day? It’s rhetorical, I know. Of course, you have. I’m not talking, necessarily, a “*worst day ever*” sort of day, just one of those – woke up on the wrong side of bed sort of starts? Maybe a day that you wake up, look in the mirror and think, “*This is going to take longer than usual.*” Somebody once said it this way. “*Do you know how long people, on average, stand in front of the mirror getting ready in the morning?*” Everyone was waiting for some sort of statistic that had been determined by some research study out of Duke University or something. He says, “*Do you know how long people, on average, stand in front of the mirror getting ready in the morning?*” The answer? “*UNTIL IT GETS BETTER!*” Well...

Maybe you’re out of your favorite cereal, and traffic was bad getting into work. Maybe your mind was distracted because of something your friend said the day before, or you missed your work-out at the gym for the fifth day in a row. Maybe you got a bad paper cut, and the dog got loose in the neighborhood again. It’s an off day; not the worst day ever kind of stuff – just a day you say, “*I’m just not feeling it, today!*”

We don’t like off days. We want those days where we say, “I am feeling it today!” Boom. Boom. Gettin’ things done. Living the dream! Winning! We are creatures that long to be whole. We want it all to bounce our way. We count on feelings more often than discipline to carry us through the day. What does it mean to praise God even when we’re not *feeling* it? Is that authentic praise? Can our souls still be fed? Can our understanding and sense of mercy grow deeper? What if we said, “*Hallelujah!*” anyway?

DeMarko Coleman set up our attitudes for such a spirit last Sunday. As we find our way to Thanksgiving this week, I’m asking if it’s possible for you to be having a *day*, one of those days Momma said would come, and say “*Hallelujah anyway!*” Can you lean in, or will you tap out? Are you inclined to praise when things are a little off, or are you inclined to take a hard pass on the praise when your bingo numbers in life are never getting called, and your card is looking pretty empty?

As human beings, we have leanings, inclinations, proclivities, predilections, and preferences. That’s how you decide what to do and when each day. How do we position us to lean into God? In today’s Psalm reading, the Hebrew word for “lean” or “leaning” is translated “*incline.*” It opens Psalm 78 and becomes a motif for the whole piece. God has been good, but God’s people have replaced their sense of gratitude for God with a case of the grumpies. Lord, help me! I’ve been there. Rather than inclining toward God, we often lean in any number of other ways. How are you so *inclined*?

Psalm 78 is one of the longest of all the Psalms. It is a wisdom Psalm that is similar to what we experience in some other works of wisdom literature in Scripture – Ecclesiastes, Proverbs, for example.

“Give ear,” the Psalmist begins. “*Lean in...to what I’m about to say.*” This matters, and it should have an impact on the way we’re going about our lives. A follower of Jesus inclined to his ways is leaning into the words and example of Jesus Christ. Sometimes, however, we feel more like *reclining* Christians, don’t we?

I’m serving on an advisory committee for our denomination and was on a ZOOM call last week with the team. The Rev. Dr. Bill Lee was on the call. He and I have served together in a number of ways the last 15 years or so. We first met as invited preachers at a National Disciples Men’s Conference. We were reminiscing this week about the time we roomed together in Chicago serving on the Week of Compassion Advisory Committee. Bill is a powerful orator, his voice, and I kid you not, a mix of James Earl Jones and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. I loved every minute of every conversation we had in those two days, and I soaked up his wisdom while I had the chance. He had just retired from Loudon Avenue Christian Church – a strong church in our denomination in Roanoke, Virginia. Bill served for 39 years, transforming the neighborhood around the church. He shared it had been five years now. He said, “*I can testify to retiring healthy instead of waiting too long.*”

As roomies five years ago, we shared hopes for the church and laughed about life and its obscurities. After the first eleven-and-a-half hours of meetings, we were going out to dinner as a committee. Bill and I stood in a parking space in a busy area of Chicago as our colleague, who was driving, circled the block in desperate search of a parking space. We held it down until our colleague could find her way to us. It was a bonding experience for sure. We woke early the next morning. Bill turned on the news, which was sort of peripheral to our sense of waking up in our small, dorm-room-like, tiny, twin beds. Neither of us had spoken a word yet; both of us still laying in our beds in the wee hours of the morning, looking over our agendas for the day of meetings. A television commercial came on that was mostly nondescript. I didn’t even think about either of us paying much attention to its content, but I noted enough that it spoke very casually about something he and I had spoken very seriously about the night before. When the commercial ended, I heard Bill’s first words of the morning... in that deep and powerful voice say... “*We mean well sometimes...*” It was a gracious answer to what he and I were both thinking. This commercial was promoting a *reclining* view... an unfair, poorly considered, arm-chair-quarterback-lazy-approach to the matter. And I thought about my own life when it comes to living the faith... especially when I’m honest about being in a reclining mode of faith. “*I mean well sometimes...*” but I’m not living out a life of gratitude. Do we have a faith of good intentions, or do we have a good faith?

The psalmist was concerned with this lackadaisical approach to thanksgiving. God's beloved had not held fast to their inclinations to be faithful. They were reclining in their faith, and it showed. The psalmist says, *"Is this the faith we are content to pass along to the next generation?"* We will say things like, *"Kids these days,"* from time to time, as if we have not had any part in shaping those inclinations and attitudes by our own example. Kids certainly see what division looks like. They see how anger becomes violence and how we refer to people on the other side of any matter, issue, or situation. It's not overly gracious, is it?

We see these phases of grief sweep across even our own city. Some retract. Some opt out. Some become apathetic to all of it. The weariness you may feel... if you've been saying of late, *"I don't have the energy, the brain space, the bandwidth for it anymore,"* may be grief. Somebody said it this way: *"On HGTV, people can flip a whole house in a month. Meanwhile, I've been 'getting ready to vacuum' for a week now."*

In such a space, it's hard to get on with gratitude, right? And instead, we mean well sometimes but we're really just lashing out in anger. I've been trying to allow greater space for people right now. I know people are fed up and looking to hold someone responsible for the grief they are holding whether that's a COVID-related issue, a political issue, a personal issue, or some combination of all of it. If I'm a place they can direct those feelings, so be it. I'll take it. I've got a dog at home that loves me either way.

I was reading a word this week about a guy who was in this sort of frustrated funky space himself and trying to figure out how to engage people from a place of gratitude when most people he was dealing with were in negative and critical frames of mind. Here's what he said. *"I learned to preemptively forgive. [A counselor] had previously explained to him that people attack out of fear. Life, to many, is a game of 'King of the Mountain' and when you stand up, they are inclined to take you down. But here's a thing I've noticed,"* he continued. *"The greatest leaders, the ones who impact the world the most, are somehow able to turn the other cheek. It's as though they believe so solidly in love, so robustly in forgiveness, they have the ability to forgive and even love those who attack them."*

While his leadership profile rose, he became a bigger target for criticism, but he didn't want to shrink down or become too careful with what he was finding to be worth risking vulnerability. To remind himself that he would never go back to being careful, he made a list of new freedoms. *"I am willing to sound dumb. I am willing to be wrong. I am willing to be passionate about something that isn't perceived as cool. I am willing to express a theory. I am willing to admit I'm afraid. I'm willing to contradict something I've*

*said before. I'm willing to have a knee-jerk reaction, even a wrong one. I'm willing to apologize. I'm perfectly willing to be perfectly human."*¹

And what's better? It was much easier to be grateful when he made space for others to be perfectly human, too. Together, we are shaping the world in which we live. And the psalmist pleads, *"Don't be a reclining generation... one who is without a steadfast heart, not faithful to God."*

Risk gratitude ahead of the gravity of negative criticism around you. What does that mean for us? We persevere. We don't recline in our faith. We lean into God. When others point to the negative, we point to the hope. We make strong the love of the Lord. And we won't all do that in the same way, but we make good on what we believe most about God – that God is love and we are to embody love in the world, even amid uncertainty.

Love, and a spirit of gratitude for that love, is a discipline. You may not always *feel* it but that may be when you need to express it most. The psalmist shares that God established a creed with Jacob that was to be taught to a generation of children so that their unborn children would rise and be taught as well to hope in God, live in gratitude, keep God's commandments. And you're thinking, *"Easier said than done."* It's like making yourself go to the gym on leg day or practicing your piano scales when you really just want to play classical masterpieces. Sometimes you have this picture of what you think life is supposed to be like but, in reality, you're holding a handful of strange-looking puzzle pieces that look nothing like the image on the front of the box. I heard someone speak to this once.² He said, *"What do you do when the picture doesn't look like all the pieces you're holding? When the pieces of your life don't compare to the picture you have in your head? What do you do when the process doesn't look like the promise?"* Sometimes we get bitter about the little pieces – about our lives in pieces. When we bought that puzzle, we bought it for the completed picture on the front – not the headache of a bunch of jagged pieces that don't seem to go together. Isn't life like that? We're dealing with challenging pieces of our lives, and we think, *"I didn't pay for this."* *"This wasn't the plan. I bought the full and finished picture."* But maybe life is given in pieces on purpose.

I had a friend who had come through some hard moments in the past. Reflecting back on those very difficult times she said, *"I wanted to see it all at 20-years-old. I wanted to see the full picture of my life. But,"* she said, *"if God would have revealed it all to me at that time, I would have run away."* Maybe it's best that we get life in pieces; that we learn to be grateful with a piece even when it's not complete. Not easy, but we've seen

¹ From *Scary Close* by Donald Miller. Nelson Books. 2014.

² <https://www.facebook.com/elevationchurch.org/videos/1632992566721439/>. The quote noted here as well as the next two paragraphs are influenced by this piece.

this before and we know for the big picture to come together, we've got to be faithful with the pieces. God calls to Abraham. Do you remember? "*Abraham, come out of your tent and count the stars.*" "*Count the stars? You got to be kidding me,*" he mumbles under his breath, but he goes outside, "1, 2, 3, 4..." "Now," God says, "*as many are the stars in the sky, so shall your descendants be.*"

What? Abraham knows the issues he has. You *know* the issues you have, right? Abe *knows*. There is no way he's going to have a family like that. He couldn't know that one day, we'd be singing a song about him, "*Father Abraham, has many sons... and many sons have Father Abraham.*" All he knows is that he and his wife can't have kids. "*You show me one full and amazing picture, God, but then you give me a piece. You show me an image of grand family reunions but all I'm holding is this one little piece that says, 'You are **not** the father,' and biology says it ain't happening for me and the Mrs.*"

Our own lives are like this. You get married picturing the 50th anniversary cruise you'll take with all your children and grandchildren, but you start marriage by getting to share one vanity in a small bathroom and assuming each other's debt. Can you say hallelujah even then?

You come out of school, and you picture that corner office in the high rise, but you land in a cubicle next to the boiler in the basement and somebody keeps stealing your stapler. Hallelujah?

Or you become a parent. You have this grand picture of raising children. "*I'm gonna raise a world changer!*" Okay. Here, change a diaper.

The list goes on. You have a picture of retirement; you have a picture of church... you have a picture of a civil society, of a peaceful world... and yet all we have are these pieces, these, at times, tragic fragments that look nothing like the big picture of God's kingdom. And so, what do we do? Sometimes, we give up on the picture because we can't see anything but this little piece we're holding right now. But if we stay after it, the pieces will start to take shape. If we throw our hands up too soon... if we quit singing the praises of God when we only have the pieces, I can't imagine that the full picture will ever come into our view – in our generation or in the generations to come. And so, we say hallelujah, anyway. And not in an "*Oh well,*" sort of way – but with faith and discipline and a *determined* grace... not a grace resigned for less than the stars of the sky.

We keep after it with the pieces we have today, stepping forward faithfully into the greater vision of Christ. I saw it last Sunday. I saw you making good with the pieces of the picture you have in your hands. I saw it in worship as friends and strangers came together with grateful hearts because a picture of unity is worth holding before us. I

saw it in a slew of action teams who met this week and said, “*I think God can do this! I think we can be this!*” I saw it at a restaurant this week where a group of friends from our church laughed in the face of age, celebrating one among them who was celebrating a big-numbered birthday. I saw it in my son’s face when he came home from Broadway’s *Youth Make a Difference Day*, raking leaves and talking with long-time saints of the church of whom he served saying, “*I don’t know why, but I really love doing that.*” Their work that day didn’t put an end to falling leaves, but the effort was one step closer to a picture of God’s desire for us to be a grateful, human family whose set point is *for* each other, not *against*. And those kids – generationally learning what it means to be a piece of God’s puzzle – filling out once piece at a time, the picture of the kingdom of God.

In every one of those scenarios and perhaps many of your own, I’m guessing not everyone felt up to the task at the time. Not everyone was ready to shout, “*Hallelujah!*” going into the effort, but thank God they showed up anyway. They persevered all that attempts to drag us away from praising God, from showing gratitude, from living the faith and sharing it with the next generation.

How are you so inclined? Will you lean into Thanksgiving with a spirit of gratitude? You’re always one decision away from a totally different life. Any of you who struggle with anything in life know the stakes are high with that one, totally-different-life decision. But what if it’s not always about the negative choice, but about choosing gratitude? If we want to be remembered generationally for passing something forward, I pray it will be a story of gratitude. I pray our inclination is to praise: “*Hallelujah, anyway!*”

Song of Focus

“Living Our Thanksgiving”

WORDS AND MUSIC BY ED VARNUM

Let our life of thanksgiving,
go beyond our songs of praise,
and may gratitude lead us to follow Christ’s way.
In God’s grace forgiving, serving in Christ’s love,
living our thanksgiving on earth, as above.

BROAD HEARTS BROAD MINDS BROAD REACH