

SABBATH THOUGHT 2024-11-30—BLESS THE LORD!

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

This past week, many people in the USA celebrated the day of Thanksgiving. Formally established as an annual holiday by Abraham Lincoln in 1863 during the horrors of a Civil War, it has historically been a day when the nation acknowledged God, His providence, and His blessings. But times change. Even the best intentions of people these days fall far short in sincerity for giving thanks to God. This is especially true when compared to times of the ancient Israelites. For example, did you know they even appointed Levites whose sole job was to give thanks to God on behalf of the entire nation¹?

1 CHRONICLES 16:41 and with them Heman and Jeduthun and the rest **who were chosen, who were designated by name, to give thanks to the LORD**, because His mercy *endures* forever;

NEHEMIAH 12:24 And the heads of the Levites *were* Hashabiah, Sherebiah, and Jeshua the son of Kadmiel, with their brothers across from them, to praise *and give thanks*, group alternating with group, **according to the command of David** the man of God.

In the days of Nehemiah, he even appointed two choirs of the priests and Levites for the sole purpose of giving thanks to God:

NEHEMIAH 12:31, 38 So I [*Nehemiah*] brought the leaders of Judah up on the wall, and **appointed two large thanksgiving choirs**. *One* went to the right hand on the wall toward the Refuse Gate. ... 38 **The other thanksgiving choir** went the opposite way, and I *was* behind them with half of the people on the wall, going past the Tower of the Ovens as far as the Broad Wall,

Can you imagine keeping weekly Sabbaths and annual holydays in those times? How glorious, beautiful, and uplifting it must have been to hear the prayers, music, and singing dedicated to giving thanks to God! I doubt anyone has heard or seen the like of those days even though the ancient Israelites struggled at times to be faithful to God.

Today, prayer is the most common way people give thanks to God but, sadly, many are nothing more than dull words. I think many prayers are missing something. In ancient times, prayer involved much less form and a great deal more emotion. There is not a single biblical record of King David's prayers that were not intense and sincere. He prayed and sang with a heart that was bursting with passion whether of joy and elation or grief and sorrow. His prayers of sadness were just as powerful as his prayers of joy and that is why he was a man after God's own heart—he had a zeal for God that was profoundly real and obvious to everyone:

¹ Also 1 Chr. 25:3; 2 Chr. 31:2.

ACTS 13:22 "... He [*God*] raised up for them David as king, to whom also He gave testimony and said, '**I have found David the son of Jesse, a man after My own heart, who will do all My will.**'

The will of God is motivated by what is in His heart. The same is true of us. What is the desire of God's heart? To dwell forever (in Zion) with His people!

PSALMS 132:13-14 For the LORD has chosen Zion; **He has desired it for His dwelling place: 14 "This is My resting place forever; Here I will dwell, for I have desired it.**

David was a man after God's own heart because he longed to be WITH God with every fiber of his being. This was a reflection of God's desire to be with *us*. When it comes to prayer, the heart matters. The kind of zeal David had is captured in a unique biblical phrase that you might have overlooked even though it is found throughout Scripture. That phrase is "*bless be the LORD*" or "*bless the LORD God*"²:

1 CHRONICLES 29:10, 20 Therefore **David blessed the LORD** before all the assembly; and David said: "**Blessed are You, LORD God of Israel, our Father, forever and ever.** ... 20 Then David said to all the assembly, "Now **bless the LORD your God.**" So all the assembly **blessed the LORD God** of their fathers, and bowed their heads and prostrated themselves before the LORD and the king.

PSALMS 103:1-2, 21-22 **Bless the LORD, O my soul!** and all that is within me, *bless* His holy name! 2 **Bless the LORD, O my soul!** and forget not all His benefits: ... 21 **Bless the LORD, all you His hosts,** *you* ministers of His, who do His pleasure. 22 **Bless the LORD,** all His works, in all places of His dominion. **Bless the LORD, O my soul!**

When you think about it, it is hard to understand how flesh and blood can *bless* the LORD God—*Yehovah Elohim*. He is eternity. He is power without measure. He is wise beyond all understanding. He embodies kindness, mercy, compassion, loyalty, and love. How can flesh and blood *bless* HIM? And what does it mean to *bless* GOD? Literally, it is to kneel before Him. But it also infers an act of ADORATION. **To "bless the LORD God" in ancient times was a common phrase describing love, respect, worship, and veneration of God.**

Today, prayers are usually either a plea for God's help (supplication) or to praise and give thanks to Him. But neither of these really embrace the intent behind "*bless the LORD your God.*" Adoration of God is much more than simply kneeling and bowing before God to utter a few words. After returning from captivity in Babylon, the ancient Israelites celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles with great rejoicing.

² Also Exo. 18:10; Deut. 8:10; Josh 22:33; Judg. 5:9; 1 Sam. 25:32; 2 Sam. 18:28; 22:47; 1 Kings 1:48; 5:7; 8:15, 56; 10:9; 1 Chr. 16:36; 2 Chr. 2:12; 6:4; 9:8; 20:26; 31:8; Ezra 7:27; Job 1:21; Ps. 16:7; 18:46; 26:12; 28:6; 31:21; 34:1; 41:13; 66:8; 68:19, 26, 35; 72:18; 89:52; 103:102, 21-22; 104:1, 35; 106:48; 113:2; 115:18; 119:12; 124:6; 134:1, 2; 135:19-21; 144:1; 145:10, 21; Dan. 2:19-20; 3:28; Matt. 21:9; 23:39; Mark 11:9; Luke 1:68; 13:35; 19:38; John 12:13; 2 Cor. 1:3; 11:31; Eph. 1:3; 1 Tim. 6:15; 1 Pet. 1:3.

Notice what the Levites said to the children of Israel two days later when they were fasting because of their sins.:

NEHEMIAH 9:1-3, 5-6 Now on the twenty-fourth day of this month the children of Israel were assembled with fasting, in sackcloth, and with dust on their heads. 2 Then those of Israelite lineage separated themselves from all foreigners; and they stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers. 3 And they stood up in their place and read from the Book of the Law of the LORD their God *for one-fourth* of the day; and *for another fourth* they confessed and worshiped the LORD their God. ... 5 And the Levites ... said: **“Stand up and bless the LORD your God forever and ever! “Blessed be Your glorious name, which is exalted above all blessing and praise! 6 You alone are the LORD; You have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth and everything on it, the seas and all that is in them, and You preserve them all. The host of heaven worships You.”**

Imagine being present at that time. The entire assembly was gathered before God at the temple mount, humble and contrite (ashamed) after being in captivity in Babylon for seventy years because of their sins. The Levites came out and stood before them and loudly proclaimed, **“Stand up and bless the LORD your God forever and ever!”** Actually, this was the beginning of a prayer of repentance. I picture them raising their hands toward God with tears, both of shame for their sins and of joy as they were once again in the presence of God! Standing before God, they listened to a highly emotional prayer of repentance given by the Levites. Their words were filled with great passion because of what was in their hearts!

What does God desire most from us? The things that reside in a heart filled with a desire and need for Him. While words matter, it is the unspoken words of the heart that touch God the most. If our hearts have no ‘words’, then how much can the words of our lips mean much to God?

On the day of Pentecost when the apostles were inspired to speak, they were given words directly from *God*:

ACTS 2:4 And **they [the disciples] were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak** with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.

While they spoke in other languages, the words that they spoke were profound because they were a mirror of God’s heart via the Holy Spirit. God’s words moved the multitude that was present. That is plainly evident because those who heard them were literally overcome with the godly sorrow of repentance³: “Now when they heard *this*, **they were cut [pierced] to the heart**, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Men *and* brethren, what shall we do?” (Acts 2:37). The words of God, through the apostles, *pierced* their hearts; so much so, that 3,000 were baptized as a result of hearing what God did for them through the blood sacrifice of His Son, Jesus.

If our hearts are empty, it is likely our words have little impact with God. In fact, the ‘words’ of our heart are much more influential than those of our lips:

³ 2 Cor. 7:9-10.

ROMANS 8:26-27 Likewise **the Spirit also helps in our weaknesses**. For **we do not know what we should pray for** as we ought, but **the Spirit [itself] makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered**. 27 Now **He who searches the hearts** knows what the mind of the Spirit *is*, because He makes intercession for the saints according to *the will of God*.

If our prayers are only pleas for help with poverty, healing, suffering, disease, illness, and other aspects of this physical life, then perhaps we are missing the whole point of God. Prayers that “bless the LORD your God” are a passionate response to the whole purpose of this life and our calling by God the Father.

It may sound odd, but consider putting aside, for a moment, supplications for your pain, poverty, grief, sorrow, affliction, and trials of this life to give sincere, heartfelt THANKS that you can suffer after the example of our Savior⁴. The Son of God endured an unknowable torment so that we can dwell together with God the Father and Jesus Christ for eternity. Thank Him for the honor to have a small part in those sufferings. And then “**ble**ss the LORD God” with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength. Let it be known in the heavens above how much you adore—love, respect, worship, and venerate—God the Father and Jesus Christ. Do not be afraid to “stand up” with arms raised. Dance if you are so inspired. Let your HEART speak through the whole of your being as well as your lips! Be bold and shout, “Praise the LORD!” Tell of your love for Them. Their love is evidenced by Their sacrifice, Their forgiveness, Their grace, Their mercy, and Their help in time of need⁵. Rejoice and cry out to Them so they know how much you long to see Their faces in the eternal Kingdom of peace and joy!

PSALMS 115:1, 11-16, 18 Not unto us, O LORD, not unto us, but to Your name give glory, because of Your mercy, because of Your truth. ... 11 You who fear the LORD, trust in the LORD; He *is* their help and their shield. 12 The LORD has been mindful of *us*; He will bless us; He will bless the house of Israel; He will bless the house of Aaron. 13 He will bless those who fear the LORD, *both* small and great. 14 May the LORD give you increase more and more, you and your children. 15 *May* you *be* blessed by the LORD, who made heaven and earth. 16 The heaven, *even* the heavens, *are* the LORD’s; but the earth He has given to the children of men. ... 18 [And] **we will bless the LORD from this time forth and forevermore. Praise the LORD!**

God has shown you His heart—will you show Him yours?

May God’s grace and peace be upon you!

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⁴ 1 Pet. 2:21.

⁵ Heb. 4:16.