

A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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A Table in the Wilderness

Psalm 78:9-20

The empty table has become a symbol of coronavirus struggles, especially for restaurant owners. Dining establishments have made all kinds of adjustments to the realities of COVID-19. Some have shifted most of their business to take-out or delivery. Others have removed some of their tables or spaced their tables further apart or have installed plexiglass barriers around the edges of tables. Some have focused more on outdoor dining. They've moved their tables outside under tents or canopies. In some cases, customers have even been out on the sidewalk, seated within plastic bubbles. During a pandemic, all sorts of options are on the table, so to speak.

"Can God spread a table in the desert?" This is the question God's people ask in today's text. It's not a polite inquiry about the possibility of outdoor dining. It's a complaint, an expression of ingratitude from the very people whom God rescued from slavery in Egypt. We shouldn't minimize the hardships and challenges they face during their journey through the wilderness. But we also shouldn't minimize their disobedience, or our own, especially our lack of faith and our failure to remember what the Lord has done for us.

That's why this particular psalm spends a lot of time recalling and reciting Israel's history with God. The events of the past are retrieved and presented as a lesson for the present generation. The aim is that the hearers "would put their trust in God and would not forget his deeds but would keep his commands" (v. 7). So the ultimate aim is obedience and faithfulness to the Lord. And that obedient faithfulness is bound up with remembering. And where there's remembering, there's gratitude.

"Can God spread a table in the desert?" This is the kind of wilderness grumbling that stands in the way of gratefulness. The Lord didn't bring his people out of Egypt so that they could assemble for a liturgy of complaint. He brought them out to be his people, to offer him praise and thanks, and to be a living embodiment of his power to redeem and to make new. Yes, the people's suffering was real, but so was God's goodness. He had guided them and provided for them. When they were thirsty, he "gave them water as abundant as the seas; he brought streams out of a rocky crag and made water flow down like the rivers" (vv. 15-16). "But they continued to sin against him,... They willfully put God to the test by demanding the food they craved" (v. 18). God's goodness was met with ingratitude.

A reporter once described how a South African man was surprised by nine men robbing his home. Eight of the robbers ran away, but the homeowner managed to shove one into his backyard pool. After realizing the robber couldn't swim, the homeowner jumped in to save him. Once out of the pool, the soaking wet thief called to his friends to come back, then pulled a knife and threatened the man who had just rescued him. The homeowner said, "We were still standing near the pool and when I saw the knife I just threw him back in. But he was gasping for air and was drowning. So I rescued him again. I thought he had a cheek trying to stab me after I had just saved his life."¹

Even after he has rescued us from the power of sin and death, we're still prone to turn on the God who has dealt with us so mercifully and lovingly. Our continued rebellion may take

many forms, but most of them are largely grounded in our failure to give thanks. That's one of the reasons why we as God's people gather in worship, to help us remember, over and over, the goodness of God, revealed most of all in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. By recalling and reciting the faithfulness of the Lord, individually and together, we cultivate greater reliance on God. And by cultivating this reliance, we strengthen our defenses against the power of temptation and sin, especially the sin of ingratitude.

I came across an editorial in a Christian magazine, in which the writer was reminding the readers that there's more to give thanks for than we often think. He said:

Thanksgiving ... is marred by incessant grumbling over problems in national and international life. The "murmuring" among Americans is reminiscent of that of the children of Israel in the wilderness....

We rightly sorrow over world hunger and oppression, but we need to thank God for our increasing ability to meet these problems....

Millions of Americans are dejected over the ... election results, but is there not more than small consolation in the very fact that there was an election?...

We deplore urban unrest and campus turmoil, but should we not be grateful that these movements have uncovered some of our deep problems and laid bare the extent of man's alienation from man and from God?

Though much of this sounds like it could have been written recently, it was actually written in 1968, in the midst of all sorts of domestic and international struggles and turmoil. But how familiar it sounds, and how much it resonates with our current experience. The one thing they were missing back in 1968 was a pandemic. The same editorial went on to quote John Henry Jowett, who said, "Gratitude is a vaccine, an antitoxin, and an antiseptic." Then the writer commented:

What God prescribes is good therapy for man, and there is no danger of overdose. Instead of implicitly blaming him for adversity by thinking, "Thanks a lot, God," those who truly hold to the sovereignty of God are challenged to rest assured that he knows better than we what is good for us, and to be thankful.²

Thankfulness in the midst of peace and prosperity is one thing. But thankfulness in the midst of suffering and sorrow is a different matter. Or is it? According to the Scriptures, that's what we as God's people in Christ are called to. I'm mindful of Paul exhortations to the Thessalonians, and to us: "Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus" (1 Thess. 5:16-18). The emphasis here is on constancy. Constancy of joy. Constancy of prayer. Constancy of gratitude.

"Give thanks in all circumstances." That doesn't mean giving thanks by overlooking or dismissing circumstances. No, we face the circumstances squarely and honestly. We face the reality that new COVID-19 cases are upwards of 150,000 or more per day. We face the reality that more than a quarter of a million Americans have died of the disease, and well over a million worldwide. We face the reality of strained hospitals and exhausted health care workers. We face the reality of a struggling economy, with small businesses going under and millions unemployed or lacking the basics of life. We face the reality of ongoing divisions and injustices regarding race and class. We face the reality of children who are struggling socially, emotionally, and educationally as they try to learn from home. We face the reality of other problems and pain that are right there in your home and your heart on a daily basis.

But while we deal honestly with the circumstances, we also declare that our thankfulness is not governed by the circumstances. Rather, our gratitude is governed by an even deeper reality, the reality of God's mercy and his sovereign will that has already begun a new creation, a redeemed world, in Christ, and has promised to complete it when Christ comes again. On that basis, we give perpetual thanks, including thanks for signs of God's goodness in the midst of present hardships. We give thanks for God's strength and comfort for the sick and the grieving. We give thanks for progress toward a vaccine. We give thanks for technological tools that have enabled us to work and learn from home. We give thanks for local groups working to distribute food and pay for rent and utilities. We give thanks for a democratic system that gives us a voice and a vote in the condition and governance of our nation. We give thanks for those who work for reform in our society.

Preacher Fleming Rutledge writes:

The life of thankfulness—biblically speaking—is lived in view of the hard things of existence. As the life of thanksgiving deepens, we discover that the more mature prayers of thanksgiving are not those offered for the obvious blessings, but those spoken in gratitude for obstacles overcome, for insights gained, for lessons learned, for increased humility, for help received in time of need, for strength to persevere, for opportunities to serve others.³

It takes a fellowship of believers to cultivate this deepening life of thanksgiving. So we especially offer thanks for the gift of God's people, the church, a community in which we can gather to remember and reflect on God's saving action in Christ. A community where gratitude is built into the way we do things. A community where giving thanks takes shape Sunday after Sunday, week after week, through singing, praying, giving, preaching, and serving.

One of the songs we sing contains words written by a German pastor named Martin Rinkart, who served in the town of Eilenberg during the Thirty Years' War of 1618-1648. The town became an overcrowded refuge for the surrounding area, with fugitives arriving suffering from epidemic and famine. At the beginning of 1637, the year of the Black Plague, there were four ministers in Eilenburg. One of them fled. Eventually Pastor Rinkart buried another two on the same day. As the only pastor remaining, he conducted funeral services for as many as 40 to 50 people a day and 4,480 within one year. In May of 1637, his own wife died, and by the end of the year, the refugees had to be buried in trenches without services.

And yet Martin Rinkart is best known for writing, in the midst of war and such immense suffering, the great hymn that triumphantly proclaims: "Now thank we all our God, / with hearts and hands and voices / Who wondrous things has done, / in whom the world rejoices; / Who from our mothers' arms / has blessed us on our way / With countless gifts of love, / and still is ours today."

"Can God spread a table in the wilderness?" In our text, it's meant primarily as a complaint. But the answer to the question can actually become the basis of gratitude. Yes, God can spread a table in the wilderness, including the kind of wilderness that we're journeying through right now. Even in the desert experiences of life, God's goodness remains, his mercy abides, and his faithfulness shows up in a multitude of ways. So whatever table you end up at this Thursday, even if you're small in number, may you be great in gratitude.

¹ Kashiefa Ajam, "Homeowner Threatened by the Robber He Saved." *The Cape Times* (March 23, 2004).

² "The Underside of Thanksgiving." *Christianity Today* (November 22, 1968) <<https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/1968/november-22/editorials.html>>.

³ Fleming Rutledge, *The Bible and the New York Times* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) n.p.