

Taking Stock

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[0 : 00] Thank you, Sabina. Well, let me pray for us. Loving Father, we confess in faith that your love does endure forever. We thank you that you've gathered us here this morning in your presence and we ask that you'd open our hearts and minds to receive what you would say to us.

We ask you to meet us at our point of need and indeed that you would reap a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving from our lips by people that confess your name. We ask all these things knowing that it's the end of the year and we thank you, Lord, for the year that has passed and we pray that you would let us receive from your hand the year that is to come.

In Jesus' name we pray these things. Amen. Well, how do you feel at the end of a year? If you're a glass half full type, maybe the prospect of a new year, 218, it's like an unwritten book.

It's like one of those mildly pretentious diaries, those moleskin diaries. You know, the pages, the pristine pages open up and they're just waiting to be filled and you can't wait to put pen to paper.

But if life isn't so positive for you at the moment, you might not be feeling so eager. You might have an inkling about how next year might pan out and frankly it fills you with anxiety.

[1 : 17] If this is you, then the end of the year might just bring a sigh. For a lot of us, though, there's not much space in our lives for these kind of emotions, feeling particularly positive or particularly negative.

Many of us are just ready to collapse on the lounge after all the busyness and the shopping of getting ready for Christmas. But however you're finishing up 2017, I'd like to suggest that there is another way of seeing in the new year.

In the commercial world, it's standard practice to take stock at the end of a year. Ledgers are sorted out, books are balanced, taxes paid. And of course, in the commercial world, this happens in the UK in April, something hard to discover.

In Australia, it's in the end of June. But at the end of a calendar year, I'd like to suggest it's equally helpful, a good exercise to take stock of our personal lives.

Psalms 136 isn't exactly about the new year specifically, but it's a great reminder to run a green pen over the past, to take stock of all that has happened, to take an audit of your life.

[2 : 28] It's a reminder to Christ's church to do this regularly. And I think the end of a calendar year presents a perfect opportunity for us to do just that. Psalm 136, as many of you know, is one of the set prayers that the people of Israel sang in their temple and in their synagogues.

Like many of the psalms, it would have been sung as a conversation between the cantor and the congregation. The cantor would have sung the main lines and the congregation would have answered with the refrain, much in the way that we have just done now.

This call and response way of praying is actually a wonderful way, I think, of internalizing the reminders of the psalms. It kind of gets you to do it on the spot rather than just hear the reminder and forget about it as you walk home.

But perhaps the best thing, I think, about this psalm is that it doesn't just remind us to take stock. It also provides a very simple model for how to do this.

The psalm shows us really clearly three line items that should make up a retrospective of the year, three line items on the stock take of our lives. And I'd like to give some thought to these three so that when we walk out the door, each of us will be better equipped to do what the psalmist is telling us to do, to take stock.

[3 : 57] First, Psalm 136 reminds us that true thanksgiving is a confession of God's goodness. When we cast our eyes over all the good things of the past year, we are to regard them as a mirror in whose reflection we see God himself.

In the gifts, we must see the giver. And that's the very first thing we see the psalmist writes. He says, give thanks to the Lord for he is good. This is the first place that the psalmist's green pen stops.

And it's such an important reminder. Thanksgiving is to be focused on the giver, but not merely the gifts. You see, the psalmist doesn't say, give thanks to the Lord for his gifts are really cool.

No. He says, give thanks to the Lord for he is good. True thanksgiving can only properly begin when we see the giver in his gifts.

It begins with this confession, God, you are good. But this potentially brings an unexpected halt to the proceedings. If you really grasp what he is saying, it could put an end to your stock take before it even begins.

[5 : 09] Does God seem good to you? This might not even be a question you can fully answer in the space of a few minutes. It's a question, though, that you cannot ignore.

Does God seem good to you? You cannot ignore this question because you cannot give thanks in spirit and in truth when underneath you think God actually isn't all that crash hot.

He might be good to others, but he's dealt me a fairly lousy hand. In fact, this question might raise a great many deeper questions.

It might raise complicated problems that we've been wrestling with or difficulties we've been carrying for years. It potentially raises a bunch of questions, very serious questions, but ultimately it forces us to consider these questions through a very narrow lens.

Is God good? Or is he not? It actually forces us to bring a very simple yes or no answer.

[6 : 11] The one answer is worship. The other answer is a refusal to worship. See, true thanksgiving can only properly begin when we see the giver in his gifts and we answer this question one way or the other.

Anything less than this falls short of true thanksgiving. As we embark on our stock taker, it's well worth posing this question to ourselves. This kind of self-examination is actually a really good thing.

It can stop us from simply going through the motions, which is so easy to do. Not engaging with God directly and truthfully. It can allow light to shine on some of these complicated problems and difficulties with which we must wrestle.

True thanksgiving is a confession and only a confession of God's goodness. But the second thing we need to see is that this thanksgiving then is very specific.

Thanksgiving is never in the abstract. It's always in the concrete. We thank God for individual things. We call them to mind. We number them one by one, like the old hymn that I'm sure many of you would remember, Count Your Blessings.

- [7 : 22] Now if you look at verse 4 to 24 in your Bibles, you'll see that it's just a list of stuff. That's how the psalmist is praying. It's all the stuff that the psalmist thanks God for.
- He doesn't just say, give thanks to the Lord, give thanks to the God of gods, give thanks to the Lord of lords. No, he then moves on to say precisely what he is thankful for.
- And this is where I think a good many of our contemporary songwriters need to take a lesson from the psalms. A lack of specificity is a genuine shortcoming of many of our contemporary praise songs.
- A lot of them just get stuck in verses 1 to 3 and never seem to make it to verses 4 to 25. They say, give thanks to the Lord, give thanks to the God of gods, give thanks to the Lord of lords.
- You are so awesome. But then they never get on to list the benefits of God's immense goodness toward us. And this can be a shortcoming of our own prayers.
- [8 : 25] And there's a very important reason why our thanksgiving must be specific. And it's one that we actually easily forget. Being specific in our thanksgiving increases our enjoyment of what God has given us.
- Thanking God for friends and family makes their company more precious. Thanking God for food and drink makes it taste better. Thanking God for beautiful weather increases our pleasure in it.
- And when we don't do this, the opposite is actually true. When we don't thank God for friends and family, we no longer cherish them. When we fail to thank God for food and drink, we begin to take it for granted.
- And so on and so forth. John Calvin put his finger on what the problem is when he wrote that every blessing that God confers upon us perishes through our carelessness.
- If we are not prompt and active in rendering thanks. That is a real gem to think about. Every blessing that God confers upon us perishes through our carelessness if we are not prompt and active in rendering thanks.
- [9 : 44] Superhero of all theologians, Calvin makes a very simple point. We waste much of God's goodness. We waste it. We don't derive the enjoyment that we could because we don't take the care.
- It's an interesting word, isn't it? The care to thank him. It's also a very important point that there's a very concealed danger in not enjoying God's goodness to us.
- See, a big part of discontent is actually carelessness in thanksgiving. You see, we become thankless and then we experience less and less joy and this leads to growing discontent and discontent is poison.
- It is poison in difficulties. Yes, there are difficulties in our lives. In some of our lives here, there are immense difficulties. The Christian life is not about an absence of difficulties, but it is about an enjoyment of God in the midst of those difficulties.
- And carelessness in thanksgiving is perhaps the greatest threat to the enjoyment of God's goodness. And that's why thanksgiving must be specific. It must move beyond this general vibe of thankfulness to detailed itemizing of accounts.
- [11 : 06] And that leads us to the third thing that the psalmist shows us. And that is that this specificity has a very particular shape. We see in the psalm that thanksgiving begins in creation and that it ends in redemption.
- The psalmist is just in awe of God as creator. I think my favorite is the image in verse 6. It's particularly powerful.
- Give thanks to the Lord of Lords who spread out the earth upon the waters. It's an image of God as a metal worker pounding out a sheet of bronze.

It's an amazing mental image. He looks upon the mountains and the valleys and pictures God hammering out the earth like a craftsman planishing his masterpiece.

I think we should find praying like this really easy in this part of the world. Beauty surrounds us. I mean, the Solisby crags are just so astonishingly beautiful and particularly this time of year when they're under snow and the sun starts to fall on them in the mornings.

[12 : 18] There's simply so much to thank God for in creation. We don't even need to move on to some of the other good things we enjoy from creation. But as much as we might marvel over these things, the crucial thing is that we follow the lead of the psalmist.

You notice that he moves very quickly then and spends the bulk of his prayer meditating on redemption. See, the psalmist knows that he could not enjoy God as creator if God were not a redeemer.

As an Israelite, the psalmist's great experience of redemption was the rescue of God's people from Egypt. And verses 10 to 24, they recap the elements of the story of the Exodus.

Here we can watch how the psalmist recalls that the same hand that beat out the shape of the earth also struck down the firstborn of the Egyptians. The same hands that spread out the heavens also divided the Red Sea.

Now, we might not feel particularly connected to the Israel's rescue from Egypt, but if we have put our faith in Christ Jesus, we have experienced the even greater salvation that the Exodus foreshadowed.

[13 : 37] Through Jesus' death and resurrection, God has brought immortality to light. Death no longer stands in front of us as the last enemy. Because Jesus bore the guilt and punishment for our sins, we will be raised as he was raised.

Now, if you've put your faith in Jesus Christ, you have part in this much greater salvation than Israel's deliverance from Egypt. And we marvel at this salvation because of what it costs.

Creation costs God nothing. By the breath of his mouth, he simply commanded, let there be light. And there was light. But redeeming the world cost him dearly.

Redeeming the world came at the cost of his one and only Son. And so in the same way as the psalmist was filled with awe at God's salvation of the people of Israel, a pride of place in our thanksgiving will be held by our great salvation.

In the same way the psalmist lists all the elements of God's deliverance of Israel from Egypt through their journey in the wilderness into their entry into Canaan, so too we can list what God has done for us in Christ.

[14 : 49] We can thank God for the forgiveness of sins, how precious that is. For being saved from judgment, what a terror has been taken away from us.

For being reconciled to our Heavenly Father, what intimacy there is for us. For the promise of the resurrection, what hope there lies before us. For the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, what warmth there exists amongst us.

So in this psalm, the psalmist we see lists these 22 separate things. And you know what? It took us the sum total of three minutes to say them out loud.

His words are such depth, but they're so compact. In our thanksgiving, we could take a leaf out of the psalmist's book, couldn't we? Before you go to sleep tonight, try that, listing 22 things you've received from God's hand this year.

And discipline yourself to shape your thanksgiving in the way that the psalmist does. Beginning with all the good things God's given you in creation, you might have even enjoyed this very day. But then moving, as he does, to what he has given you as Redeemer.

[16:01] And let your thanksgiving follow this particular shape. The psalmist doesn't overlook the goodness of creation. He spends most of his time dwelling on God's goodness to him in redemption. This is the psalmist's very simple lesson in how to take an audit of your life.

Begin with the goodness of the giver. Be specific in your thanks. And worship him as your creator and as your redeemer. Pray like this, and it will bring rich communion with your heavenly Father.

There is, however, one last element in the psalmist's lesson on how to use a green pen. And this is possibly the most important reminder of Psalm 136.

In fact, it's so important to the psalmist that he makes the congregation repeat it after every single thing he says. In fact, he made a, we've got you guys to repeat it after everything Sabina says.

With each line, the psalmist makes the congregation remember that thanksgiving isn't just about remembering the past. It's not just about God's goodness to us yesterday, last month, or even in the course of the year.

[17:14] Rather, everything that God has done in our past reminds us, reminds us of what? That we can have confidence for the future.

Because each instance of God's goodness, God's goodness, yesterday, last month, last year, it's a testimony of God's ongoing commitment of love to us.

At the end of each line, the psalmist makes us call to mind, his love endures forever. This is really big. You need to take it in.

Each kindness of God that we celebrate in thanksgiving is a sign of God's unyielding commitment to our future. God's love doesn't just last until you're 64. It doesn't just last until you've used up all your chances.

There will never come a time when God ceases to express his kindness towards those in Christ Jesus. There will never come a time when he doesn't extend his goodness to those in the Son whom he loves.

[18:19] No, God's love endures forever. This is the great truth that lies at the heart of thanksgiving. God's goodness in our past is a pledge of his ongoing and never-failing faithfulness for the future.

And if we take this to heart, it really settles us. When we face the unknown, it releases whatever fears we harbour. This is the jewel of the psalm, and you can't leave this morning without taking this with you.

If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all, how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?

So says the Apostle Paul, basically saying the same thing. Everything that God has done in our past reminds us that we can have confidence for the future, because his love endures forever.

So as we come to the end of the year, the beginning of a new one, let's do what the psalmist says. Let's take up a green pen. Let's take stock. Let's run a green pen over a year.

[19:36] Let's remind ourselves of God's goodness to us. Later today, either by yourself or as a family, begin with the goodness of the giver. Be specific in your thanks.

Worship him as your creator and redeemer. Giving thanks to God like this honors him, but more importantly, it renews us in a confidence that actually honors him much more.

When we thank God, we praise him for the blessings we can see. When we entrust ourselves to him for the future, we praise him for blessings that remain as yet unseen.

So whether you're going to celebrate with the Hogmanay concerts, or you're going to watch the fireworks, or just welcome the new year quietly at home, take the time to recall all the kindnesses that God has shown you this year and bring these to God in prayer.

Do this both to kindle a joy in his blessings and renew a confidence that the blessings will await you in the year to come. There will be difficulties to come, as there are difficulties in the year that's passed, but there will also be an enjoyment of God, and we can be certain of this because God's love never fails.

[20 : 45] His love endures forever. Amen. Let's pray. Loving Father, we worship you as the God who is constant, whose love toward us never fails.

And we ask, Lord, that you would renew us in a fresh appreciation of this, that you would draw our eyes to all the benefits that you have given us, Lord, as our creator and as our redeemer.

And we ask this, Lord, that you would just reap a harvest of praise from our lips, that we would be a people who brings a sacrifice of praise to you constantly and honours you and worships you, Lord, with words that are fit for you, according to your great goodness toward us.

Amen. Amen. guys.