

Live with Thanksgiving • Psalm 100:4

As a college student I spent a summer studying and traveling in Europe. It was during the Cold War when tensions between the Communist bloc and western nations were at their height. One of the places I visited was Berlin. Several other college students and I traveled by bus through the long corridor in what was then Communist East Germany to West Berlin. Later we crossed through the Berlin Wall into East Berlin. While it was an interesting experience, it as eerie and ominous. There was a sense of fear and evil. It felt like I didn't belong there.

At the end of our brief visit we walked through the re-entry point called "Checkpoint Charlie" and into the American sector of West Berlin. The soldiers were Americans. The Stars-and-Stripes flew over the gatehouse. It was a great feeling of "coming home".

Imagine how much better it is to pass through a checkpoint called Christ and to "Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; (to) give thanks to him and praise his name." It must be the ultimate sense of "coming home". And while we won't fully experience this until we enter the gates of heaven itself, we can experience that sense of God's presence here and now.

Psalm 100 is the thanksgiving Psalm with three great invitations. The first invitation is to come to God's place and presence: "Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise." How wonderful and amazing to be invited into the presence of God! We might compare it to the privilege of being invited to the home of another person. To each of us home is a special place, that private place most closely connected to who we are. To be invited to someone's home is to be considered special.

God has invited us into his place. Ultimately that means his heaven. Immediately it means into God's spiritual presence and those places he most identifies with himself. For the ancient Jews who first sang Psalm 100 that meant the Temple in Jerusalem. After all, they were called "God's chosen people". As God's chosen people they had access to the designated place in the world where God was to be met and experienced.

But there were limits. Ordinary Jews were al-

lowed only in the outer courts of the Temple. They were not permitted to go into the Holiest Place where God's presence was greatest. It was open only to the High Priest and then only on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. Anyone else or any other time meant certain death.

The Jews worried that the high priest might have a heart attack and die as a result of the awe of standing in the presence of God. If he died, how would they get his body out since no one else was allowed in? So they tied a rope around the high priest's ankle so they could drag out his body if he died in the Holiest Place.

I don't sense that the people were offended that they could not go there. They were satisfied that they could have the outer courts. To them being that close to God was itself so awesome that no one expected anything more or better.

Several years ago our family vacationed in Washington, D.C. While there we were the guests of lifelong friends Bob and Lynn Dugan, staying with them in their home. Months in advance we made arrangements through our local congressional office to get six tickets to tour the White House as part of our visit. It was a big deal. It was fun and exciting. We were grateful for the experience.

At the end of the day we went back to the Dugans' house to stay overnight and we told them about our tour of the Executive Mansion. Then I said to Bob, "What did you do today?" It was then that we learned that he, too, had been to the White House that day, having a private lunch meeting with the president!

I was not envious; I really wasn't! I was still grateful for where we had gone and what we had seen, although we had not made it as far inside or as close to the president as did our host.

That's the difference between the way we read Psalm 100:4 and the way the people of ancient Israel read Psalm 100:4. They were only allowed to go through the gates and into the outer courts. But as Christians we are allowed to go all the way into the Holiest Place.

Do you remember the story of Jesus' crucifix-

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ion? At the instant Jesus died the long thick veil that kept everyone out of the Holiest Place ripped completely in half from the top to the bottom. When Jesus died it was as if God shouted to the entire human race, “Come on in!” No restrictions! No limitations! No distinctions based on race or gender or status. Everyone is invited into the presence of God now and into God’s place forever. It’s no wonder that those who enter his gates and come into his courts are filled with thanksgiving and praise!

There is something that we dare not miss, even though it is very subtle. This fourth verse from Psalm 100 is linked to the first verse. The psalm starts out, “Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth!” God’s invitation to enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise is an open invitation to everyone on the earth. But Israel was content to be God’s special people. They never learned to invite other people into God’s Temple or into God’s presence. What a sad commentary on those ancient people that they were unwilling to share what God had given them.

Major US airlines periodically have “companion fares” that allow passengers to take along anyone they want for little or no expense. Airline employees can also fly stand-by for little or no cost. Imagine being able to fly anywhere in the world for little or no fare and to be able to take anyone you choose along with you. Who would you take? A family member? Someone from work? One of your best friends? Your neighbor next door who treats you rotten?

God has companion fares into God’s presence and into God’s heaven. You can invite anyone you know to come along with you. And not just one person, but as many as you choose.

That’s what evangelism is. That’s what Wooddale Church is all about. Every week we gather together and worship and praise God. We enter into his presence with thanksgiving and praise. Then we spread out for the rest of the week to invite our friends and relatives to join with us. We are “inviters” on the best companion fare that’s ever been offered: “Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise.”

When we enter God’s gates, thanksgiving comes to our minds and to our mouths. Anyone who thinks should thank; the two always go together. It is so obvious that God has done great good things for us and given lots of great gifts to us. We have life when others are dead. We who are Christians have eternal life while others will die forever. We each have long

lists of God’s gifts, and no two lists are alike. For some the list includes a good job, good health, friends, marriage, children, parents. Other lists contain education, wealth, nice clothes, a lovely home, musical talents, emotional sensitivity. Still other lists include divine healing, deliverance from terrible addictions or the promise of an absolutely terrific future.

The tragic mistake some make at the gate is to ignore their own blessings from God and look at others’ blessings. They forget what they have and envy what others have. The results are a bitter heart and a saddened God.

If you’re a parent, you know how carefully you choose Christmas gifts or birthday gifts for your children. Imagine how you would feel if your son or daughter totally neglected your gifts and complained about not getting the gifts you gave to others. Would that make you angry? Probably it would make you sad.

God has feelings too. God, who wisely and carefully chooses the gifts that he prepares and presents to us, wants us to be delighted with the choices he has made. His choices are far wiser than anything we could make for ourselves.

I suggest that everyone regularly make a thanksgiving list. Put down everything you have received from God. Think hard about it; be as complete as you possibly can be. When the list is finished remember that you probably have forgotten more than you have included.

Recently I left my office and was driving down the highway when I saw a truck cut over into my lane without signaling. One car a little ahead of me was nearly run off the road. It was close. I thought that if I had left the office three seconds earlier I could have been where that truck swerved and it might have taken my life. I thanked God for what didn’t happen.

Thanks lists are for everything that God has done. They are not only for what we have, but for what we don’t have as well. There are items that could be included in our list that we don’t even remember, much less think to record. I’m convinced that the Bible is true when it says that every good and perfect gift that we have comes from God. I also believe that an attitude of gratitude has comparatively little to do with the specifics of what we have received. I know people who are deeply thankful to God even though they seem to have every little while others are as ungrateful as can be even though they have so much.

Come to God; that is the first great invitation. Thank God; that is the second great invitation. Praise God—the third great invitation.

There is a difference between thanking God for what he has done and praising God for who he is. In reality the two are tied together so tightly that it is practically impossible to split them apart. But, for learning purposes, let's try to make a distinction.

All of us want to be loved and respected for who we are, not just for what we do. Many adult children struggle with questions about their parents' acceptance and approval of them. Childhood memories too often center on moms and dads who seemed to give praise and love only when we worked hard, behaved well and received good grades in school. Often we have interpreted that to mean that we would not be loved or praised if we made a mistake, did something embarrassing to our folks or failed a class in school. We know how much those memories hurt and how important it is to be accepted and loved for ourselves.

God has feelings, too. Surely he loves to hear us say "thank you" for the good gifts he has generously given to us. But God also wants to be loved and praised just for who he is. He wants to know that we will love him no less if we don't get what we want. We will admire and honor him even if he does things we would not choose or do not like. God wants us to praise him for who he is. He is God. He is loving. He has impeccable integrity and consistency. He is truthful. He is kind. He is the best there can be!

Have you ever stood outside on a dark cloudless night and admired the stars? You were awed by how many there were. You were amazed at their beauty. Their vast expanse was dumbfounding. But they have never really done anything for you. They don't feed your children. They don't warm your home. Unless you are a sailor they probably have never helped you find your way. You just admire them for themselves.

Let us also admire their Creator—just for who he is; just because he is God; just because he is beautiful; just because he is the best there can be. Admire him. Praise him.

A short time before Jesus died his friends were getting really stressed at the idea of his leaving and all the uncertainty that included. So Jesus took them aside and spoke to them the words that are recorded in John 14:1-3:

I know people who are deeply thankful to God even though they seem to have every little while others are as ungrateful as can be even though they have so much.

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am."

Jesus was predicting that future day in heaven when every Christian would literally "Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise." It will be a fabulous experience, better than anything anyone can imagine in advance.

Right now is the rehearsal. This brief life is our time to experience the God who has come to us before we go home to him. Now is the time for us to try out our thanks. Now is the time for us to practice our praise.

Do it! "Give thanks to him and praise his name!"

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