

# “Gratitude, Grief, and Remembering Well”

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*A Reflection for Thanksgiving Sunday, during the Pandemic*

Deuteronomy 8.10-19; Psalm 77

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Thanksgiving is about remembering.

But, what if God seems to have forgotten?

I

We're going to share in two Bible readings this morning. The first fits any Thanksgiving. The second seems especially suitable for this one.

Chapter 8 of Deuteronomy is a staple of Thanksgiving worship.<sup>1</sup> It's set at a hinge moment in God's salvation story. God's People Israel is on the verge of leaving the wilderness, the barren, rocky and arid expanse where they have subsisted for more than a generation.

Wilderness life is precarious: food scarce, water rare, and danger everywhere. Yet for decades they have survived, this multitude of freed slaves. Because God looks after them. Daily, God rains down food for them. Daily, God pours out water for them. Daily, God protects them. Always, God generously gives what they need.

In the wilderness, you cannot help but remember this. God's generosity, God's goodness, God's giving are always in front of you, with every breath you take and every move you make. So you are grateful; you remember where your help is coming from. You are dependent; you remember you cannot make it on your own. You are obedient; you remember that whatever ways God is leading you, and however it is that God wants you to live, will always be good because God is.

Grateful. Dependent. Obedient. This is how you are, when you are the wilderness with God.

II

But that's behind us. Before us spreads out the place of God's promise. Since before Moses led us from slavery in Egypt, we've been waiting to get here. Now we've arrived.

Life's not going to feel precarious anymore. We will be prosperous. We will be filled up with food, well-housed and safely-settled. We will be wealthy. We will thrive. God continues giving generously. So our God-gratitude, our God-dependence, our God-obedience will grow ever more strong! Right?

The Bible knows our human psychology too well, so it knows better.

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<sup>1</sup> It's one of the texts that the Revised Common Lectionary assigns for Thanksgiving Sunday.

Moses is leaving. His God-ordained task is complete, his days done. This prophet has some final words for us. Including these:

Please read Deuteronomy 8.10-19. You can find it [here](#).

### III

We will forget. We will forget that God's generous giving.

Instead, it's I! I have it because I earn it. My hard work. My skill. My ambition. My cleverness. Even my luck! It's "Greg" who's brought me safe thus far, and "Greg" will lead me on!

I am making it on my own; I am autonomous. I'm doing it my way; forget God's ways.

That's how we go. You know this isn't just a story from centuries ago.

We're strange, us humans. When life is precarious, we realize it's all a gift, and we receive. When life is abundant, we suppose it's a possession that we achieve. And when we forget it's a gift, we forget the Giver (except maybe when we Zoom into church on Sundays).

Where does this take us? Life gets swallowed up by death.

Walter Brueggemann gets it so right. He says,

*Autonomy produces death, because the self-sufficient think they live without limit, without accountability. That illusion in the long run is not sustainable.<sup>2</sup>*

Growth without limits. Exploitation of resources. Scraping and poisoning the oceans. Turning up the temperatures. Moses might be horrified at how we're fulfilling his terrible prophecy.

What's the remedy? Remember. Remember, God generously gives life. Remember that, and you'll be thankful. Remember, you depend on God. Remember that, and you'll live God's ways.

Thanksgiving is about remembering well, remembering God.

But, what if God seems to have forgotten?

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<sup>2</sup> Walter Brueggemann, Deuteronomy, Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries, edited by Patrick D. Miller (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 110.

## IV

This Thanksgiving seems different.

As I said, Deuteronomy 8 is often read during Thanksgiving worship. Not Psalm 77. This year, though, it might fit. Psalms teach us to pray, and Psalm 77 might give us some good prayer words for week 31 of the pandemic.<sup>3</sup>

Please read Psalm 77. You can find it [here](#).

## V

Ah, how this Psalm describes the sorrow, the grief, the anxiousness. It doesn't say what specifically was wrong for this guy, so this can work for us whatever day we're in trouble.

Literally it says, "*when I was under pressure.*"<sup>4</sup> These days it feels to me like some spiritual/mental/social high pressure system has settled over us.

"*My hand is stretched out without wearying.*" The only thing that doesn't tire out is my grief. My soul stubbornly refuses to turn this lemon-of-a-year into lemonade. The Psalm has us lying away at night, like God's locked open our eyelids.

Instead of sheep, I'm counting questions.<sup>5</sup>

Will the Lord walk off and leave us for good?

Will he never smile again?

Is his love worn threadbare?

Has his salvation promise burned out?

Has God forgotten his manners?

Has he angrily stalked off and left us?<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> I'm counting from the week before March 15, which was the first Sunday when we cancelled in-person worship.

<sup>4</sup> John Goldingay, *The First Testament: A New Translation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2018), 565.

<sup>5</sup> Water Brueggemann and William H. Bellinger, Jr., *Psalms*, New Cambridge Bible Commentary (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 333.

<sup>6</sup> Eugene Peterson's *The Message* translation of Psalm 77:7-9.

These days can feel like that, right? This is the Bible! So it's okay to say this. If it's what we're truly feeling, well, prayer is being true to God.

Yes, these questions verge on blasphemy. But they are spoken from faith, a faithful remembering of what God *was* like and what God *has* done. We remember! Has God forgotten?

## VI

What do we do, lying awake, worrying, wondering?

Remember! Remember more! Go deeper in your remembering.

The Psalm remembers. It swims back, back to before Israel's wilderness time, back to when God broke them out of the slave pens. The riders of death were crashing down to destroy them. God pushed aside the waters, and brought them safely through. You're worried God has forgotten? Remember that! God saves!

The Psalm plunges even deeper back. It remembers the Exodus from Egypt with words that recall the very beginning when God created heavens and earth.<sup>7</sup> Sometimes the ancients conceived creation as God defeating chaos. For them, the unfathomable ocean deeps symbolized that chaos. God brought order to disorder. God stilled the storms, bridled and tamed those powers, and used them to fashion a theatre for life. This You're worried God has forgotten? Remember that! God defeats the chaos monsters. God creates! God orders! God gives life, generously.<sup>8</sup>

Remember, God creates! Remember, God rescues! Remember, and hope! Remember, and give thanks!

One line from the Psalm especially catches me. After remembering all this, it says, "*But Your [God's] footprints left no trace.*" Really?<sup>9</sup> Rescuing slaves by pushing back the sea? That's not subtle. Creating the cosmos? Kind of hard to miss.

But again, the Bible knows our human nature. We easily see the mighty act, but are usually dense to God who is generously giving it.

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<sup>7</sup> When we think of creation accounts in the Bible, the two in Genesis 1:1-2:3 and Genesis 2:4-3:24 usually come to mind. There are others too, and in particular I'm thinking of resonances between Psalm 77 and Psalm 104.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Alter writes that "the imagery [in Psalm 77:16-19] has such a strong cosmic character that the mythological image of God triumphing over the primordial powers of the sea is superimposed on the image of the Exodus story." Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: Volume 3, Writings (Ketuvim): A Translation with Commentary*. (New York, London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2019), 187.

<sup>9</sup> The Common English Bible's rendering of verse 19b.

VII

This Thanksgiving feels different.

Honestly, we still have so much abundance, too much really, more than our share. But it feels like less these days.

I'm not feeling it's much like the wilderness either, where God's generous giving is so obvious.

I'm feeling more like Psalm 77, where God seems to have forgotten to do what God is supposed to do.

What's the remedy?

Remember. I need to remember, and you might remember with me, what God has always done.

God, giving generously.

God, creating wonderfully, as at the beginning, and even raising Jesus from death, the start of the new creation. God's done that, and God hasn't changed.

God, saving surprisingly, as through the sea, and even on Jesus' cross, defeating the powers of chaos and destruction. God's done that, and God hasn't changed.

And now. This Thanksgiving. Day in day out, hour by hour, breath after breath. Even when our breath ends, God's giving will not stop.

Most of the time we don't notice. God's footprints leave no trace.

But remember again, and see them now, and be grateful.

The Psalm ends kind of abruptly. Maybe there is no more to say. Or, maybe this troubled insomniac, having remembered well, finally drifts off and gets some rest.<sup>10</sup>

Thanks be to God.

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<sup>10</sup> Thank you, Walter Brueggemann, for this delightful, imaginative conclusion. He writes, "The psalm ends rather abruptly, as though the review is complete. Or perhaps we can imagine that this troubled insomniac has fallen asleep, consoled by the memory of his community." Brueggemann and Belling, 334.