

## בְּרַכָּה (Berekah): A Life of Praise

One of the central concepts when I teach on addiction is summarized by writer Elizabeth Wurtzel, “addiction is, in its essence, an inability to live in the moment.”<sup>1</sup> A person in the grip of an addiction does not, and indeed cannot, experience moments of real joy because they are always anxious about when and where the next ‘fix’ will come. When *that* fix comes they cannot really enjoy it as they are already looking ahead to the next and so on. This mindset becomes a way of *being*. “For an addict like me”, Wurtzel concludes, “the thrill is always gone, in fact it is leaving before it even arrives”. I realize that many people reading this do not struggle with addictions *as we commonly think of them* but, as a counselor, I am convinced that the dis-ease of the soul caused by living with one foot in the future, one foot in the past – thereby abusing the gifts of the present – is pandemic. We have trouble being still. We don’t know how to be alone. In a very real sense addicted to what Mark Buchanan calls “the cult of the next thing”, we so often fail to notice what is going on around us, we fail to see a good God at work in the midst of the ordinary mess of daily life.

In contrast, the Judeo/Christian teaching has consistently been that we are to cultivate gratitude, because we live in a world formed and fashioned by a loving Creator in whose image we are made, and, therefore, life is a rich gift. Paul reflects this mindset with his command to be in an attitude of prayer and thanksgiving with joy and with gratitude, in *the present time* (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18). We are to live one day at a time, forcefully present in our own lives, carrying out every activity in a spirit of prayer which flows from an awareness of God’s presence. Essentially, Scripture suggests that our ethics reflects our gratitude. This New Testament teaching is rooted in two foundational texts on בְּרַכָּה (*berekah* = ‘praise’, blessing’) from the Hebrew Bible.

### Psalm 24

This is theological bedrock. The bottom line for a Jewish person ‘giving thanks’ was a profound sense of awe at the majesty of God. The Earth/the Land is the Lord’s and so when you benefit in any way from anything that has been created, you are to receive it as the rich gift that it is. You are to give thanks (*berekah*) to the One who made it and the One who gave it. The Jewish Talmud says ***“to enjoy anything of this world without a blessing of thanks is to steal from heaven for your own gain because ‘the Earth is the Lord’s and everything in it.’”*** In Ephesians 1 and 1 Corinthians 10:23ff, Paul seems to be echoing this basic worldview.

Don’t miss the deeper significance of all this. When we thank Him we are not engaging in a ritual, much less a duty. We are actually making a choice about who is going to be our Lord. When we thank Him we are simply and profoundly making a statement to ourselves, to our community and (so Job and Ephesians tell us) to the universe about who is going to be our Lord. The simple theology of a text like Psalm 24 keeps us grounded in a world which confuses us and pulls at us.

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<sup>1</sup> Wurtzel, Elizabeth. *More, Now, Again*. Simon and Schuster 2002:185ff

We have a good God who has given us good gifts from an originally good creation. Giving thanks is not an activity so much as a way of life which acknowledges His Kingship. Conversely, failing to give thanks is not neglect so much as an act of rebellion as it denies His goodness and His authority over the creation. Take this one step further. Failing to bless God for the gifts of the present day is, by default, to proclaim another king and set that on the throne of our lives and thus the essence of Genesis 3 and 4 is repeated.

## Deuteronomy 8

Remembering redemption is the second pillar on which the life of thanksgiving stood. Remembering (רָכַז, see Deut 8:18) is, Biblically, more than cognitive. It implies recall but with a focus on *responding appropriately*<sup>2</sup>. Such a response led to the covenant being confirmed and to eventual *shalom* (peace, wholeness, the abundant life). Forgetting what had been done for their redemption led to pride, false kingdoms, and eventual chaos (e.g. Jer 4:23-26).

The hinge of Deuteronomy 8 is verse 10, a verse quoted and commented on by many 1<sup>st</sup> C Rabbis. The Talmud, for instance, comments that “each person must give an account before God for every legitimate pleasure which he saw but did not take the time to enjoy”. When the NIV says ‘*praise*’ in Deut 8:10, we shouldn’t be fooled into thinking about ‘*praise*’ in the sense we usually think of it. This isn’t to be limited to prayer over a meal, to songs, hymns, spiritual songs, or choruses on PowerPoint - the usual elements of what we call ‘*praise*’.

Biblically, בְּרָכָה ‘*praise/thanksgiving*’ is not so much about the way we *feel*; it is about the way we *live*. It is our theological orientation with shoes on (e.g. Deut 8:6, 8:20). To give God ‘*praise*’ or to ‘*bless God*’ is to live your life as if His Lordship actually made a difference. It is to make a choice to acknowledge the Kingdom of God and His claim over our lives.

When they did so, and when we do so, it is nothing less than a reversing of that rebellious choice first made in Genesis 3 and so often repeated in our world and in our lives.

## So What?

So what does all this have to do with us? We must understand that living a life of praise, blessing and gratitude (*berekah*) does not mean that we have to turn a blind eye to the obvious fact that much of what’s going on around us is not pretty. The truth is that there are broken people all around us, relational wreckage all around us, people who have been violated and shredded by the words or actions of someone they trusted, people who are poor, who are sick. As a counselor I see this every day, and I am far from immune to it in my own life.

That is all true. What is also true is that this will not be the final reality. The testimony of Scripture is that the broken and shattered world will be made whole again and there will be *shalom*. Giving thanks for the

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<sup>2</sup> Swanson, James. *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains*, 2349.

blessing of this day, for redemption and for re-creation, all three, is an act of faith precisely *because* we see so much chaos all around us. When we live a life of praise, we quietly and peacefully scream to the world that the wreckage and brokenness we see is not going to be the final word. The last words will be those familiar Gospel nouns and participles; truth, love, peace, grace.

Something as basic as the way we speak to each other can be an act of pushing back the chaos and bringing a taste of new life (Proverbs 15:1). A life of *berekah* implies a decision and a basic worldview which says that we are not self-sufficient and not, ultimately, in control. We live our lives of *berekah* in the present as a witness to a deeper reality and a glorious future.

As they say in “the program” (rehab), “Today is day one”. Choose.

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