He Sent His Word and Healed Them

On the Power of Thanksgiving to Open a Door Out

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There Is a Word From the Outside

A morning of testimonies and music has a particular weight to it. The songs we have been singing have all been pointing the same direction: *there is power in the name of Jesus*, *the word of the Lord is what we need to hear*. There is a verse in Psalm 107 I want to lean on for this whole message:

"He sent His word and healed them, and delivered them from their destructions" (Psalm 107:20).

He sent His word. The word came from the outside. It was not generated by the suffering itself, it was not improvised by the trapped or the lost. *Something came in.* And what came in healed and delivered. Hold that picture; I want to walk us toward it carefully.

There is power in lots of names. There is power in the name of Jesus, but there is also power in the name of Satan. There is power in all kinds of forces in this world. The thoughts we give power to are, in a real sense, the ones that come to dominate us. The transformation, or the deformation, of a life occurs by what it gives power to. Which thoughts do we feed? Which voices do we let in?

More Than Material

Some people will say all our thinking is just the byproduct of chemical processes. The materialist position, that there is nothing beyond the human being other than mechanical processes, gives itself over to the idea that thoughts are no more than a chemistry experiment running inside the skull. And in one direction, that is not entirely wrong. Go without eating for a while and see what happens to your mood. We have a word for it now: *hangry*. If you do not eat right, your mood shifts, your patience shortens, your thoughts go strange places. People stranded in the desert begin to see mirages. The mind plays tricks based on physiological conditions. There is a material aspect to thought we should not deny.

But what is often missed is that there is also a *loop back*. The thoughts we have can actually affect *who we are*. We can remap our minds *through our thoughts*. The mental shapes our material as much as the material shapes our mental.

I have watched it happen in real time. A brother in our assembly had once been broken by years of addiction. There was an old audio recording of one of his earliest testimonies that someone played back in the congregation a while ago, and we wept with him as we listened to his earlier self speak. He could barely string a coherent sentence together. The years of addiction had done something to the architecture of his mind, and you could hear it.

But then he began to put his mind into the Scriptures. He began to believe the stories of deliverance. He began to believe what Psalm 34:7 says, *the angel of the Lord encamps all around those who fear Him*, and that there was, therefore, no reason to fear. And as he kept feeding his mind on those words, *something began to transform in the physical structures of his brain*. The man who once could not finish a sentence became a vibrant agent for good in this congregation, speaking words that have, in turn, transformed other lives.

That is not a small thing. We are not just material creatures destined for material finality: ashes to ashes, dust to dust, and that is the whole story. We can *create* something through ideas and through the words we share, and what we create becomes transformative not only for our own lives but for the lives of those around us. *He sent His word, and healed them.*

Psalm 107: Three Conditions, One Answer

Look more carefully at how Psalm 107 frames the work of God's word. The psalm opens with a command:

"Oh, give thanks to the Lord, for He is good! For His mercy endures forever" (Psalm 107:1).

Sometimes transformation begins when we do not *feel* it but we do it anyway. When we do not feel praise, we praise. There is something in the structure of praise itself, *out of the mouths of babes and nursing infants You have ordained strength* (Psalm 8:2), that begins to generate what we did not have when we started. *Strength and praise are synonyms* in this register. The words we speak become actual material in our lives. What starts as something ephemeral, a wispy idea, becomes effective. There is nothing more powerful in this world, someone once said, than an idea whose time has come, and when that idea begins to infect the minds of the people around us, something at a social level shifts. One person with an idea is good. A group of people with the same idea is powerful. *A nation* of people with the same idea changes history.

Then the psalm walks through three different conditions in which people find themselves. Each one is a different kind of trouble; each one receives the same divine intervention; each one closes with the same congregational refrain.

First, the lost:

> They wandered in the wilderness in a desolate way; they found no city to dwell in. Hungry and thirsty, their soul fainted in them. Then they cried out to the Lord in their trouble, and He delivered them out of their distresses. (Psalm 107:4–6)

Some people are *lost*. Have you ever just been lost in your life? Wandering, hungry, thirsty, looking for somewhere to land?

Second, the imprisoned:

"Those who sat in darkness and in the shadow of death, bound in affliction and irons . . . Then they cried out to the Lord in their trouble, and He saved them out of their distresses" (Psalm 107:10, 13).

Some people are *bound*. Have you ever been imprisoned, by a habit, by an addiction, by a circumstance you could not break out of?

Third, the fools:

> Fools, because of their transgression, and because of their iniquities, were afflicted. Their soul abhorred all manner of food, and they drew near to the gates of death. Then they cried out to the Lord in their trouble, and He saved them out of their distresses. (Psalm 107:17–19)

And some people just get themselves into trouble by their own foolishness. Some accountability. Some choices. Sometimes we are the lost sheep that just wandered. Sometimes we are the lost coin that did nothing, it just got lost the way coins get lost (cf. Luke 15). Sometimes we are the lost son who rebelled against his father (Luke 15:11–32). The Bible knows all three categories: the wandering, the inert, and the rebellious. And it has the same answer for all three.

Look at the verse that comes immediately after the *fools*:

> He sent His word and healed them, and delivered them from their destructions. Oh, that men would give thanks to the Lord for His goodness, and for His wonderful works to the children of men! Let them sacrifice the sacrifices of thanksgiving, and declare His works with rejoicing. (Psalm 107:20–22)

He sent His word and healed them. That is the answer for the lost, for the bound, for the foolish, the same answer in every case. Something *from the outside* comes in. Something we could not generate by our own efforts. And after each section of the psalm, the same congregational response repeats: *Oh, that men would give thanks to the Lord for His goodness, and for His wonderful works to the children of men.* (Psalm 107:8, 15, 21, 31). Four times. Like Psalm 136's *for His mercy endures forever,* the refrain runs underneath every panel of the psalm.

Why does the response keep being *give thanks*? Because thanksgiving is the *opened door* through which the word that heals can enter. When we begin to believe the stories of deliverance we have been hearing, when we begin to believe the word that has come to us, the Spirit of truth comes in to confirm it. There is a voice that says *you are condemned, you are lost, you will never change your history*. And there is *another* voice, *a voice of truth*, that comes from the outside and speaks a different word. There is nothing we can do to save ourselves. There is no material reformation of our own brain we can manage by ourselves. But something from the outside comes in. A word in season is planted, and it takes root, and it produces fruit. *Give yourselves over to that word.*

Romans 1: The Unthankful Mind

Now let me show you what *unthankfulness* does. The whole catalog of the debased mind in Romans 1 begins with one small refusal. Paul says:

> . . . because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man, and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things. (Romans 1:21–23)

Notice where Paul locates the moment things began to fall apart. It was not in some great rebellion or some dramatic blasphemy. It was in this: *they were not thankful.* That is reflecting all the way back to Adam and Eve. They had received all the goodness of God's creation. They had been placed in a garden. They had been given dominion. They had been given each other. And in dialogue with the serpent, *they began to look at God with a jaundiced eye*. They began to listen to a different word. They were not thankful for what they had been given. They began to envy God's position and his power. And in the moment they stopped being thankful, their thoughts became *futile*, empty, and their foolish hearts were darkened. *That* is where the long catalog of Romans 1 begins. The unthankfulness opens the door.

And Paul says the same pattern repeats wherever it shows up:

> "Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonor their bodies among themselves . . " (Romans 1:24).

> And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a debased mind, to do those things which are not fitting; being filled with all unrighteousness, sexual immorality, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, evil-mindedness . . . (Romans 1:28–29)

It is not that God *made* them debased. He simply allowed them to go the direction they wanted to go. *He has allowed us to go where we want to go.* That is one of the most sobering

truths in Romans 1. Free will is real. We can give ourselves over to another controlling narrative (the music we feed our minds, the entertainments we let in, the loops we let run in our heads) and that narrative will eventually have *power over us*. Instead of the story God has spoken over you (*son*, *daughter*, *king*, *priest*) another story will begin to write itself in your head, and over time it will be the story you act out.

An older preacher I sat under used to say: *those are low-altitude rats. Climb higher and they'll fall off. If you try to kill the rat directly, you'll crash the plane.* The image is that some temptations cannot be defeated by direct combat at their own level; they have to be left behind by climbing higher. *Look at Jesus*; that is the higher altitude. The low-altitude rats fall off on their own when the plane climbs into the air where they cannot breathe.

Romans 12: The Renewed Mind Begins With One Seed

And then Paul, having walked us through the whole anatomy of the unthankful mind, turns the corner:

> I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God. (Romans 12:1–2)

"*Which is your reasonable service.*" The King James phrase is a little closer to the Greek than some of the modern translations that render it *spiritual worship*. *Reasonable*, the only *reasonable* response to all the mercies of God catalogued in the first eleven chapters of Romans is to present yourself. *That* is the worship that follows naturally from a clear-eyed accounting of what God has done.

And it begins with a seed. *A seed of thankfulness. I'm going to be thankful.* That can be the crack that opens up infinite possibilities for the changing of our destinies. Just opening ourselves up through praise and thanksgiving can shift everything that follows.

Do you need light in your darkness? Do you need to be *found*? Think about the very first question God asks in the entire Bible. Adam has hidden among the trees, naked and ashamed, and God walks through the garden and calls:

"Where are you?" (Genesis 3:9).

If God is *looking for you*, you are definitely lost. Come out of the bushes. Come out of the darkness. Come and present yourself to the Lord. *Present your bodies a living sacrifice.* That is what God is calling us into. Stop hiding. Step into the open. The renewing of the mind begins when we stop hiding from the One who is already looking for us.

The Remembering That Renews

Paul says we are transformed *by the renewing of our minds*. That renewing is not a one-time event. It is ongoing, day after day, year after year. And sometimes the renewal involves *remembering where we have been*.

An older brother in our tradition used to sing: *If you could see where I once was, if you could go with me back to where I started from, I know that you would see a miracle.* That captures something precise. *We are a miracle of God.* The only reason my mind goes back to where I once was is so that I can exalt God with thanksgiving, so that I can remember that the One who delivered me before will continue to deliver me until the end of my days. That kind of remembering is not nostalgia. It is *eucharistic*. It feeds the present with the substance of past mercies.

And the renewed mind that emerges through that remembering does more than something just for me. It enables us to *prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God* (Romans 12:2). And then Paul gives a catalog, just as Romans 1 catalogued the disintegration of the unthankful mind, Romans 12 catalogues the integration of the thankful one:

> Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil. Cling to what is good. Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another; not lagging in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation, continuing steadfastly in prayer; distributing to the needs of the saints, given to hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. Be of the same mind toward one another. Do not set your mind on high things, but associate with the humble. Do not be wise in your own opinion. Repay no one evil for evil. (Romans 12:9–17)

Look at what becomes possible with a renewed mind. *Bless those who persecute you. Weep with those who weep. Associate with the humble. Live peaceably with all men, if possible, so far as it depends on you* (Romans 12:18). Every one of these is the inverse of something from the Romans 1 catalog. The unthankful mind that began with one small refusal generated a long catalog of corruption. The thankful mind that begins with one small *yes* generates the long catalog of restoration.

Go Back to the Seed

Sometimes the darkness we find ourselves in (the depression we can't shake, the loop that keeps running in our heads) has a *seed thought* underneath it. A seed that was planted in some moment we may not even remember clearly. Sometimes we are dwelling on a thing that is not wrapped up in the truth of God. It is not wrapped up in the victories of God for our life. It is

wrapped up in our own weakness, our own inability to be who God has called us to be. And we lie awake at night running that loop, and it tightens around us.

When that happens, *go back to the seed*. Trace it back. What is the thought you are believing about yourself, or about God, that is generating everything downstream? And when you find it, fall on the Spirit:

> There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death. (Romans 8:1–2)

The *Spirit of life* sets us free from the *law of sin and death*. And that same Spirit that brought Jesus out of the grave is the one Paul promises will quicken our mortal bodies:

"But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you" (Romans 8:11).

That same Spirit. *Quickening*, making alive, even the mortal body. The physical body. The physical mind. Reshaped, remodeled, renewed. And you will look back twenty years from now and realize, *I don't know when it happened, but that thought has not hit my mind in twenty years. I have been delivered.* And you didn't even know it was happening. It was just a constant renewal toward the kingdom of God, day after day, year after year.

Why Testimonies Are Powerful

And this is why testimonies are so powerful. When we give ourselves over to the testimony of the saints, something happens *vicariously*. I begin to live my own victories out of *your* victories. I hear the story of a brother delivered, and something is unlocked in me that could

not have been unlocked by my own striving. The word that came to *you* and healed you becomes, in the telling, the word that comes to *me*.

That is why Psalm 107 keeps repeating the same refrain after each panel of trouble: *Oh, that men would give thanks to the Lord for His goodness, and for His wonderful works to the children of men*. The thanksgiving is corporate. The deliverance of one becomes the encouragement of many. The story does not stay private. It enters the body of saints and feeds everyone.

So as we walk toward the table of Thanksgiving this week, let me leave it here. The word that heals is being sent. Praise opens the door. Thankfulness lets it in. The voice of truth speaks something we cannot speak over ourselves. And the Spirit that raised Christ from the dead is at work in mortal bodies, yours and mine, to remake us into the image of the Son. Trace back to the seed. Open the door. Receive the word. He sent His word and healed them, and delivered them from their destructions.