GREAT ARE THE WORKS OF THE LORD

Psalm 111:1–10

Key Verse: 111:2

“Great are the works of the LORD, studied by all who delight in them.”

This year, to prepare for Thanksgiving Day, we’re studying Psalms 34, 100 and 111. These three Psalms were chosen for a reason. In Psalm 34 David tells us that to really thank God, we need to “taste and see that the Lord is good,” meaning we need to experience God’s goodness personally. Psalm 100 urges us to thank God not just because of what he does for us, but simply because of who he is. He is God. He’s our Maker. We didn’t create ourselves—we belong to him. He’s our Shepherd, and we’re his sheep. This is the main reason we should thank God. Today we’re looking at Psalm 111, which tells us to thank God for his works. In these ten verses the words “work” or “works” are repeated five times.

Psalms 111 and 112 are closely connected. Psalm 111 is about God; Psalm 112 is about the man of God. They are both acrostic poems based on the Hebrew alphabet meant to instruct young people spiritually. Today we’re going to focus on Psalm 111. Verse 1 begins with the famous exclamation, “Praise the LORD!” In Hebrew it’s just one word: “Hallelujah!” which means “Praise Yahweh!” It’s something to get excited about!

The psalmist continues, “I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart.” Often we say “Thank you” only with our lips, like a reflex. But thanking God truly needs to be done with our whole heart. And it’s not just a personal emotion. The psalmist plans to do it “…in the company of the upright, in the congregation.” The word “company” in Hebrew is literally “council,” and it means a circle of confidants having a close conversation with each other. Some people gather in such circles to plot or scheme, or to complain. But these people are “upright,” meaning they’re not crooked in any way; they’re sincere, hardworking and honest. The phrase “in the congregation” refers to a larger group of people who gather to worship God. We may think such people already know God and don’t really need to hear what the psalmist has to say. But he wants to share his wholehearted thanks to God with them. Why? Because they’re the people who can understand and appreciate what he’s talking about. When we share with one another our thanks to the Lord, we mutually encourage each other’s faith.

What is inspiring the psalmist to give thanks to the Lord? Read verse 2. Here, “works” can mean the things God has made. In Psalm 8:3 the moon, stars and heavens are called “the work of [God’s] fingers.” Psalm 19:1 tells us that “the skies proclaim the work of his hands.” Psalm 104:24 tells us that this world contains so many of God’s works, referring to all the different creatures he has made, and that each one reveals God’s wisdom. As we reflect more and more on all God’s works in creation, we can see his amazing wisdom. It’s why people love binge watching tv shows like “Planet Earth” or “Life” or The Blue Planet.” It’s so fascinating. The world-famous Cavendish Laboratory of Physics at the University of Cambridge, which has produced 30 Nobel Prize winners, actually has Psalm 111:2 at its entrance. It’s the place where researchers have discovered, among many other things, the electron, the neutron and the structure of DNA. God wants all scientists and artists to study his great works in creation.

In verse 2 the word “studied” in Hebrew literally means “seek with care,” to really be curious about and interested in, and so, to ponder God’s works frequently, again and again. This meaning is further emphasized by the phrase “all who delight in them.” Psalm 1 tells us to “delight in” God’s word, but here we’re encouraged to “delight in” God’s great works, so much so that we really study them carefully. These are not just God’s glorious works in creation, but God’s even more glorious work of salvation done in history, starting with the Israelites and culminating in Jesus and in the early church. These great works of God are carefully documented for us in the Bible. They also include God’s work in Christian history the past 2,000 years, and God’s work in the world today and in our own lives. What has God been doing? What is he doing now?

Often we study only when we have to, to pass a test, or because somebody is pressuring us. We don’t enjoy it much. But this kind of study is quite different. It’s not forced—it comes from a willing heart. Study always includes some difficulty. Why? Because we’re thinking about things we don’t yet fully understand. We’re not regurgitating things we already know—we’re studying to know better. But this kind of painstaking study gives us real pleasure or delight because we’re actually interested. Read verse 2 again. The psalmist urges us to study the great works of the Lord because we have a genuine interest in them, and because they truly delight us.

Read verse 3. In verse 2 the psalmist said God’s works are “great”; here they’re “full of splendor and majesty.” Why? Because his work reflects God himself, just like the quality of any work reflects on the person who did it. Psalm 145:5 says the same thing: “On the glorious splendor of your majesty, and on your wondrous works I will meditate.” In verse 3 the word “splendor” in Hebrew is literally “high” or “weighty,” like the snow-covered peaks of high mountains. When the clouds move away and we see it, it takes our breath away. That’s what it’s like to really see God’s work. The word “majesty” is literally the word “ornament,” like those on a Christmas tree. God’s work is captivatingly beautiful and varied like stunning ornaments.

Look at verse 3b again. “…and his righteousness endures forever.” The word “righteousness” stands out. Usually we think of righteousness as doing all the right things. It may sound like something very abstract or even unrelated to us. But in this context it especially refers to God’s loyalty to his people. God’s loyalty to us endures forever. This is a very important aspect of his work.

Read verses 4–6. These words are a poetic summary of how God delivered the Israelites from slavery in Egypt through his wondrous works, how he provided for them in the wilderness and finally gave them the promised land, showing them his own great power. These things also reveal the main character of God’s work. God’s work reveals that he is gracious and merciful. God’s work reveals that he never forgets his promises. God’s work reveals his almighty power. God’s works among the Israelites was just a shadow of what he has done for us in Jesus. Just like the helpless Israelite slaves, God delivers us from our hopeless bondage to sin through his great salvation in Jesus. Through the sinless, shed blood of Jesus and his resurrection we can escape our sin, and through the power of the Holy Spirit we experience real freedom. As we live our lives in this world like a spiritual wilderness God satisfies our souls with the spiritual food of Jesus the Bread of life. Though we fail so many times, God never forgets his covenant with us in Jesus. God even uses us in his work to bring his salvation to all the nations, and he leads us all the way to our true inheritance, the kingdom of God. Read verse 4 again. As we remember God’s wondrous works, we experience that God is indeed gracious and merciful.

Read verses 7–9. These words summarize how God gave the Israelites his words, and it is yet another aspect of God’s great work. God still works in our world and in our lives today, like working with his own hands, through his words. We tend to treat the Bible casually, habitually or even recklessly. But the words in the Bible are like God’s own hands working in peoples’ lives. They especially reveal that God is faithful and just. The word “precepts” in Hebrew is literally “instructions” or “procedures.” Sometimes we get instructions with something we buy, and we think they’re way too complicated or useless. But we shouldn’t be thinking about the Bible like that. It says here that all God’s instructions are trustworthy. So we should be reading them carefully. In verse 8a the word “established” is literally the word “sustained.” It means that God’s words apply in every generation, and that they sustain us, too. In verse 8b the word “performed” is literally the word “done” or “put into practice.” We can’t outsmart God and do things half-way or half-heartedly or only for a while. We need to practice God’s instructions to us “with faithfulness and uprightness.” What’s the main point of God’s instructions? Read verse 9 again. This isn’t just an old story. God wants us to accept his gift of redemption to us in Jesus. God wants us to hold onto this new covenant he made with us in Jesus forever. When he gave the first covenant at Mt. Sinai, there was fire and smoke coming from the mountain to confirm it, and the people were terrified. When he gave us the new covenant in Jesus, he confirmed it through raising Jesus from the dead, sending us the Holy Spirit, and promising to send our Lord Jesus back to this world someday as the Judge of the living and the dead. Just as the Israelites experienced how holy and awesome God is, we too need to experience through God’s work that he is still the same holy and awesome God.

Read verse 10. This is a famous saying repeated in the Book of Proverbs (Pr1:7; 9:10). As we meditate on God’s works, studying carefully, inquiring, seeking to better understand, we’re not only thankful, but also we grow in a healthy fear of the Lord. This healthy fear of God gives us true wisdom. It says here we are to “practice” the fear of the Lord, meaning let it guide us in daily life. The fear of the Lord prods us to avoid sinning in real life situations—it gives us a reason to follow God’s moral and ethical instructions, even when we don’t feel like it. The fear of the Lord also shapes our worldview, and it gives us “a good understanding,” meaning keen spiritual insight. This too, is one of God’s great works in our lives. The psalmist concludes, “His praise endures forever!”

When we think about the world we live in, we can get stressed out or depressed. When we think about what people do, we can get annoyed or angry. When we think about our own situation and our problems, we can get exhausted. But when we think about God’s great works, it changes our hearts and spirits and fills us with praise. This Thanksgiving may God help us to study his great works with genuine interest, with new enthusiasm, and even with delight, and may he fill us with wholehearted thanks and praise to him, no matter what our situation.