

Thanksgiving in Biblical Perspective
“A Reason to Give Thanks”
Psalm 100
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Why is this Thanksgiving thing so significant? I really believe it's a line of demarcation. I want to set this to you in the Bible. For instance, why is it in a nation that is driven by the cultural elite toward secular humanism which by definition means you might want to give thanks to someone else for something but there is no ultimate thanksgiving? There is a lot of approximate thanksgiving where I may want to thank my parents or my friends but where do they come from? Are they accidents or did they somehow get into my life on purpose and with a purpose? Or I want to give thanks for the way things are working out in my life? If that's just mere chance then who am I giving thanks to? Why is that impulse to give thanks so deep within us? Undeniably, it's just there.

We want to give thanks unlike anything else created. We can give thanks for a tree but a tree is not wondering if it will have a day of thanksgiving. An animal doesn't look at a sunset and think 'I need to give thanks for that.' Why is the impulse within us to give thanks? And if you don't know the Lord why is there a need to give thanks where you can give an approximate thanksgiving but not an ultimate thanksgiving. You can give thanks to other things and people but where did they come from, how did they get there and why are they there?

This whole matter of thanksgiving has been built into our culture and for that I give thanks and praise to God because I see its roots in Christians, in Christian theology, and in the Gospel which gives me the ultimate impulse to give thanks for my salvation and all that God is doing in my life.

We can kind of trace this season of Thanksgiving back to a president named Franklin D. Roosevelt when he had this instituted as a holiday originally on the fourth Thursday of the month, but it was later moved up to the third Thursday because after Thanksgiving people started getting ready for Christmas and businesses wanted that extra week of people getting ready for Christmas. Interesting, how man's consumerism (greed) finds a way into everything. It is interesting to read how Roosevelt originated this holiday because it falls during WW II and Roosevelt is giving thanks, that God would give us stout hearts and strong arms as a nation, that soon we could put down weapons and be a nation at peace. It was an amazing statement of Thanksgiving but

This had been something that had been percolating among presidents because of the insistence from Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln almost became renown in that after his conversion under the ministry of a Presbyterian pastor by the name of Dr. Phineas Gurley, the influence of a Quaker Christian woman, the influence of an African American servant and under the duress of a war and the loss of his son, in those few month he wrote Meditations of the Divine Will. In this you can see a man coming through the process of conversion in which he owns Christ and one of the things he was able to do is turn out these wonderful requests of Congress to declare each year a holiday of Thanksgiving with its proto type under George Washington. If you go back and read these statements of thanksgiving in the midst of a war, it's really astounding and many times during the Thanksgiving season you will see these repeated.

One of the things that enamored Lincoln after his conversion was the life of George Washington and he loved Washington's desire that the country would have motto. His desire

was that the motto would be ‘In God We Trust’ and that we would be a nation that would acknowledge the founding documents that we are under God. We don’t establish a national religion but we acknowledge that we are a theistic nation under God. Lincoln drew upon what Washington had said so whenever you think of Thanksgiving I always love to think of the very first official American document that was passed in 1777 by the Continental Congress.

The Continental Congress on November 1, 1777, issued a recommendation of a National Thanksgiving Day saying:

It is therefore recommended to the legislative or executive powers of these United States, to set apart Thursday, the 18th day of December next, for solemn thanksgiving and praise; that with one heart and one voice the good people may express the grateful feelings of their hearts, and consecrate themselves to the service of their divine benefactor; and that together with their sincere acknowledgments and offerings, they may join the penitent confession of their manifold sins, whereby they had forfeited every favor, and their humble and earnest supplication that it may please God, through the merits of Jesus Christ, mercifully to forgive and blot them out of remembrance; that it may please him graciously to afford his blessings on the governments of these states respectively, and prosper the public council of the whole; to inspire our commanders both by land and sea, and all under them, with that wisdom and fortitude which may render them fit instruments, under the providence of Almighty God, to secure for these United States the greatest of all blessings, independence and peace; that it may please him to prosper the trade and manufactures of the people and the labor of the husbandman, that our land may yield its increase; to take schools and seminaries of education, so necessary for cultivating the principles of true liberty, virtue and piety, under his nurturing hand, and to prosper the means of religion for the promotion and enlargement of that kingdom which consists in righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Ghost.

Thanksgiving and praise are inseparable. You can’t worship without a grateful heart and a grateful heart will want to worship. Remember this was a Congress making this proclamation. Not many years after that we established a first president, George Washington and he was the first president to call for a National holiday and this was his key segment of the decree that was approved by Congress. As president of the United States, this is part of George Washington’s Thanksgiving proclamation of 1789;

Whereas it is the duty of all Nations to acknowledge the providence of Almighty God, to obey his will, to be grateful for his benefits, and humbly to implore his protection and favor – and whereas both Houses of Congress have by their joint Committee requested me to recommend to the People of the United States a day of public thanksgiving and prayer to be observed by acknowledging with grateful hearts the many signal favors of Almighty God especially by affording them an opportunity peaceably to establish a form of government for their safety and happiness.

Now therefore I do recommend and assign Thursday the 26th day of November next to be devoted by the People of these States to the service of that great and glorious Being, who is the beneficent Author of all the good that was, that is, or that will be – That we may then all unite in rendering unto him our sincere and humble thanks – for his kind care and protection of the People of this Country previous to their becoming a Nation...

Where did he get that idea? It had preceded a century before. There was a group of believers who were being faithful to the Reformation in the 16th Century as it unfolded in the nation of England. England began to undergo reformation yet some did not feel it was a thorough going reformation so this group begin to ask God to help them purify the church. They

soon became known as Puritans due to what they wanted to help do – purify the church. They wanted theological integrity and moral sensibility. Some decided to work within the church and some decided it was time to step away from the church and they were called the Separatists.

The only problem was that the Church of England had its head a King. You don't want to get on the wrong side of a King in ecclesiastical and theological matters. If you do then you're known as a non-conformist and you are now in a dangerous position. Your livelihood at best would be at stake so many of them fled to the Netherlands. While they were in the Netherlands they declared they were pilgrims, sojourners, exiles. They were there for quite some time and while they were grateful for their freedom to worship as they pleased, they noticed that their children were being exposed to a moral liberalism – a libertinism. They were deeply concerned as to what would happen to their children. They found a way to make an appeal that they could become a company.

They then found themselves on a number of ships, sailing across the Atlantic Ocean in unbelievable weather. Then they landed but they didn't land where they were supposed to land. They thought they were going to land further south in what we would call South Carolina and Georgia. They ended up landing in a place today that we call Plymouth Rock, right outside of Boston, Massachusetts. They were glad to get off the ship and they built a place of worship which was the very first thing they did. They gave praise to God and then they were met with much adversity in the weather they faced, their need for food and low provisions.

They found that God provided in many ways and not the least of which was by an Indian chief named Squanto. There became some interpersonal relationships with a friendly tribe and at the end of that first year they declared a time to give worship, praise and thanksgiving. With a meager harvest they were able to obtain that fall they had a day of thanksgiving where they invited the Indians to share with them. Unlike the secularists who rewrote the history books, the Indians were their guests at thanksgiving and not the object of their thanksgiving. They certainly were approximately thankful to the Indians but ultimately they had gathered together with their guests who had benefited them, to now give thanks unto the Lord.

Why did they give thanks unto the Lord? It is the mark of a believer and I'd like to show you this with two passages of Scripture. Many people ask me how they can know God's will for their life and sometimes what they are really wanting to know is if they are to take a certain job or not. The Bible speaks to the matter of God's will and not so much of pinpoint decisions but of channel markers for life. Paul says in I Thessalonians 4:3, *[3] For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality.* Sexuality is a gift from God to be blessed within a monogamous, conjugal, heterosexual, covenantal relationship and he says this is God's will. There is God's will for us to work on.

Here is another statement of God's will where He is throwing these beautiful statements of life to you one after another. I Thessalonians 5:16–18 says *[16] Rejoice always, [17] pray without ceasing, [18] give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.* God's will for you is to give thanks in all circumstances. Paul is the man who is stoned, thrown over a wall, left for dead, thrown into prison and who is constantly suffering and yet he is the one who through the Spirit says to give thanks in everything. This is not a man who is speaking in theory but a man who is speaking in life. This is a man who is not finding his satisfaction in the circumstances of life but he has a confidence in the God who is over those circumstances.

We have a phrase we tend to use when someone asks how we're doing we will respond at times and say 'I'm doing pretty well *under the circumstances.*' If I responded to Paul this way

when he asked me how I was doing I think he would say to me, ‘What are you doing there? Why are you under them? In Christ you are more than a conqueror.’ I’m not saying to smile and pretend like something isn’t painful. No, for people grieve and they understand the difficulties but we’re not defined by the moment. Circumstances do not define the people of God. Their Savior is who defines them and their confidence in them. It is fine for us to have this season of Thanksgiving but this does not replace what Paul is telling us here that is God’s will for our life. Thanksgiving is the mark of a changed heart – the heart that has been redeemed because it is overflowing with gratefulness to the Lord.

I want to flip this and show it to you from the negative. In Romans 1 there is this profile of a culture apart from the grace of God descending into death. I won’t read all of it but a part. Romans 1:18–23 says *[18] For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. [19] For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. [20] For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. [21] For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or **give thanks to him**, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. [22] Claiming to be wise, they became fools, [23] and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.*

There are two insights I want to draw from this and then I’ll close in prayer. Calvin refers to this as the foundation of sin. All sin at its root is idolatry. The reason we are willing to disobey God is because we have determined there is something or someone in life more important than God. It is something that is in front of Him or beside Him or above Him in our life. The expression of sin is ungratefulness. What is the expression of grace? It is gratefulness. What is the expression of sin? It is rebellion against God in everything and ultimately it’s expressed in ungratefulness. What is the expression of God’s grace? It is the surrender to God, our trust in God, who loves us, will not let us go and has been the foundation of our life. He is the Capstone of our life. He is our life. So in everything we give thanks.

Gratefulness becomes the hallmark of the redeemed. Let the redeemed of the Lord say so. Some of you may be reading this and by God’s grace there is still within you the work of God’s grace and thanksgiving is drawing your heart. You don’t want to live an entitlement life, a life that is all about you, for there is something calling you to something better that you were made for. You were made to give thanks to Him and worship Him. He is calling you today. The answer isn’t to start giving thanks but the answer is to come to Christ.

Christ gives you a new heart and then gratefulness flows from that heart. It is heart that will say ‘no’ to idolatry and ‘yes’ to the glory of God and the praise of God who loves His people. And His people love to worship and intrinsic in worship, give thanks with a grateful heart. If you have never made that commitment to Christ come to Him today. Conversion is an event but the calling of the Lord is a process and God uses different people in our lives.

Maybe today is that invitation through this thanksgiving study for you to say ‘Lord, I want that new heart that not only is drawn to approximate thanksgiving but is able to give ultimate thanksgiving to the God who made me and saves me through the blood of Jesus at the cross, and to the God who sustains me.’ Then you go to a new heavens and a new earth in which thanksgiving will mark eternity. Let’s pray.

Prayer:

Father, thank You for the time we could be together in Your Word. Would You bless my brothers and sisters as they give thanks and we give praise to You? We have so many and much that we are thankful for. Thank You that we can encourage one another with gratefulness but we also are more than grateful that we can not only do that approximate thanksgiving to those who You have used in our life but we give that ultimate thanksgiving – praise God from whom all blessings flow, in Jesus' Name, Amen.