



THANKSGIVING

Developing from the English harvest festival, and celebrated since 1619 (annually since 1863), American Thanksgiving remains a wonderful custom. In many ways, it stands as a critically important reminder of the Judeo-Christian roots of America. For the thanksgiving we offer is, above all, thanksgiving to God. In this, the early settlers established a wonderful example.

We need their example, for the fact that God's gifts of nature now come to us with minimal hassle, means that we are most prone to take them for granted. But how much do we invest in God the extra time that present day forms of technology have bought us? While thankfulness to God can and ought to pervade all of life, does not the lure of leisure and the demands of our daily "to do" lists make the carving out of quality time with God a spiritual and practical challenge? How hard it has become for God's people to switch off the 24/7 news coverage, to logout of e-mailing and the web, and to ignore the demands of the phone, in order to sit still in God's presence grateful for all he daily sends our way. And yet, how we find that time when the consciousness of our needs press in upon us! The problem with prayer under such circumstances is that we are prone to skip thanksgiving to get to petition—the part of prayer that seems to flow so naturally! I know that I have to fight against this.

A number of things may be said about thanksgiving.

I. THANKSGIVING IS THE OFFSPRING OF OBEDIENCE

"Offer to God," writes Asaph, "a sacrifice of thanksgiving, and perform your vows to the Most High" (Ps. 50:14). Thanksgiving, then, is not first and foremost a matter of feeling, it is a principle of obedience. Meaning that we are to learn self-consciously a habit of thankfulness to God, whether for things big or small.

II. THANKSGIVING IS THE YOUNGER SISTER OF PRAISE

Praise comes first. When we praise God, we call to mind what we know of His character from what He has revealed of Himself in creation (Rom. 1:18–20) and in His Word. The very contemplation of how great God is in every facet of His being stirs us to thankfulness that he should ever have stretched out toward us in love and in kindness. For his attributes teach us that he is self-sufficient. He does not need our worship nor is he enhanced by it. Nevertheless, it is appropriate for us, as lovers of God, to recognize his many excellencies.

III. THANKSGIVING IS THE TWINNED SIBLING OF CONFESSION

While thanksgiving and confession are distinct, they are ultimately inseparable. When we consider not only how small we are before God, but also how much we daily wrong Him, we cannot but be thankful for all He gives us despite how we grieve Him. Not only has He done us "good by giving [us] rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying [our] hearts with food and gladness" (Acts 14:17), he has given us Christ, his inexpressible gift (1 Cor. 9:15), and the only Mediator we need (1 Tim. 2:5). By dying on the cross, Christ has dealt with our sins once and for all. If this is not reason for gratitude, then nothing is! Our condemnation has been taken away. In Christ we have been reconciled to our Maker. We have no righteousness God can accept; nonetheless He accepts in Christ our thankfulness (Lev. 22:29).

IV. THANKSGIVING IS THE SURROGATE SIBLING OF INAPPROPRIATENESS

Thanksgiving pushes out those traits not fitting in a Christian. Writes Paul: "Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving" (Eph. 5:4; cf. 1 Tim. 4:1-4). This thanksgiving is joyful; something in which we are to abound (Col. 2:7). It is a vital sign of spiritual life.



Thanksgiving
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V. THANKSGIVING IS THE MOTHER OF HOPE

By thanking God for His help in both past and present, we articulate hope for the future. This is possible not only because God is unchanging, but because He looks kindly on thankful souls. In the words of a sermon title of the Scottish preacher Robert Murray McCheyne (1813–43), “Thanksgiving obtains the Spirit.” “My dear flock,” he urged, “I am deeply persuaded that there will be no full, soul-filling, heart-ravishing, heart-satisfying, outpouring of the Spirit of God, till there be more praise and thanking the Lord.” In other words, it is to the thankful spirit that God is mostly likely to respond with his reviving. Noting the need for it, McCheyne asks:

Are there not some who read the Bible, but get little from it? You feel that it does not sink into your heart—it does not remain with you through the week. It is like the seed cast in the way-side, easily plucked away. Oh! It is just such an outpoured Spirit you require, to hide the Word in your heart. When you write with a dry pen, without any ink in it, no impression is made upon the paper. Now, ministers are the pens, and the Spirit of God is the ink. Pray that the pen may be filled with that living ink—that the Word may remain in your heart, known and read of all men—that you may be sanctified through the truth.

There is no time too soon to learn the expression of gratitude. Soon enough, we who love the Lord, will join the angels in chorus to God: “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen” (Rev. 7:12). Let us seek to improve now, then, what shall shortly preoccupy us without nausea hereafter.