

### ***Give Thanks to the LORD***

In the name of him who has given us this great land, dear friends in Christ: The setting of the Old Testament lesson is the Plains of Moab, a desert region just east of Palestine. The children of Israel, who have been wandering about homeless for the past 40 years are poised on the edge of the Promised Land, ready to receive what they have long been hoping for. All that remains is for them to cross the Jordan River and receive what God wants them to have. They've been here before though. Forty years earlier the Lord had led them to the edge of the land and told them, "Go ahead, go in and take the rich inheritance I'm giving you." But the people were afraid. They thought there were too many enemies, too many obstacles to overcome, and though they had repeatedly seen for themselves the mighty acts with which he delivered them from Egypt, they didn't trust the Lord to give them what he'd promised. And so the Lord sent them back into the desert to learn the lesson that he alone took care of them every day of their lives, and that he alone would give them everything he'd promised. So now, after forty years of wandering in the barren wilderness learning that lesson, they were back.

And the words we heard in the reading are part of an exhortation that Moses had for the people in which he reminded them of everything that had happened and why. He told them, *"Remember how the LORD your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years, to humble you and to test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands. He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna ... to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD."* He then contrasted the austere existence they'd known so long with what they were about to receive, *"a good land – a land with streams and pools of water, with springs flowing in the valleys and hills; a land with wheat and barley, vines and fig trees, pomegranates, olive oil and honey; a land where bread will not be scarce and you will lack nothing."* And he concluded with these words, *"When you have eaten and are satisfied, praise the LORD your God for the good land he has given you. Be careful that you do not forget the LORD your God ... Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, and [you become wealthy] then your heart will become proud and you will forget the LORD your God ... You may say to yourself, "My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me." But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant."*

It is easy to see why our Pilgrim Fathers thought of this passage of Scripture as they came together to celebrate the first Thanksgiving. They saw a close parallel between themselves and the Children of Israel. After all, like them they were the recipients of a new homeland. They had been the victims of religious persecution and had fled across the vast ocean in search of a place where they could worship God according to their consciences, and they found a land full of the promise of prosperity. It's doubtful that any of them knew just how blessed and prosperous the land would become. So, it's fitting that we who are the inheritors of their vision and the good land they sought should also gather to give thanks to God for the superabundant blessings he has poured out us.

But as fitting as it is for us to give thanks to God, it really isn't *natural*. Anyone with exposure to children will often hear the phrase, "Remember to say thank you." Children need to be reminded again and again to say thanks because it *doesn't* come naturally. Nor does it for adults; and with Christmas just around the corner we'll all soon be going through the often

agonizing process of writing thank you cards for gifts and invitations to holiday gatherings. *What* is it that makes it so difficult to say, “thanks”, and especially to say “thanks” to God? And since it isn’t natural, why do we bother to say “thanks” at all?

When a child asks that question, the reply usually comes back, “Well, how would you feel if you worked real hard to try to please someone, and they just accepted all you’d done without even a word of thanks? You’d feel pretty bad, wouldn’t you?” The answer seems to imply that the reason we say “thanks” is to satisfy some need the giver has to be assured that his effort has not been wasted. We’re obliged to say “thanks” to sort of pay back the giver. And since God gives us everything all the time, we’ve always got this pressing obligation to say “thanks” to him. So, it’s a duty, another command to obey. And that might be true if God were like us and needed reassurance that the things he does for us are worthwhile. But the truth is that God does not pout about his hurt feelings due to our failure to make him feel properly appreciated. He *knows* that what he does is for our good; what he wants is for us to know it too, and to be thankful.

But still we have trouble giving thanks to him; and though there may be many reasons for that, I’d like to look at the two biggest. The first is that very often we are not *grateful* for what he does for us to begin with. Rather than count blessings, we tend to count disappointments and those things in our lives that we wish were different than they are. We’re underpaid, unappreciated, and unloved. We should be smarter, prettier, more talented, and more prosperous. And it’s God’s fault that we’re not that way. “Thank him? For what?” And when we find ourselves critiquing the way God has blessed us, what we’re really saying is, “Lord, I *deserve* more. Though you say what you do is for my good, you really don’t know what you’re doing. I know better than you what’s good for me.” And I think we can all see that this is not just ingratitude, it’s putting ourselves above God and casting judgment on him. It’s self-idolatry of the worst kind, and we do it every time we complain about the way he takes care of us.

But there is another more common reason we fail to give thanks, and that is that we tend to be more preoccupied with the gift than the giver. It works like this: here’s God out here, and here’s all the blessings he gives me – really, I’m surrounded by them. And when I have everything I need right here, who needs God out there? My view of him is obscured by all the blessings he’s poured out on me. It’s like the young people in my confirmation classes: every year when we get around to memorizing the fourth petition of the Lord’s Prayer, *give us this day our daily bread* (you know, that’s the one with the long explanation that goes, “*What is meant by daily bread?*” And what follows is a long list of all that God gives? ... food, drink, clothing, shoes, house, home, land, animals, money, goods, on and on) ... Well it always happens each year that one efficiency minded student will ask, “Why do we have to memorize that long list? Why can’t I just say ‘everything’?” Now, I am a great believer in saving effort when possible, but such students are usually disappointed by my response. We all fall into this trap of wanting to lump together God’s blessings in one big, easy heap that satisfies us – and blocks God from our view. There is real value in enumerating and counting our blessings individually, “God gives me this, and God gave me this, because then my focus stays on the giver. My view of him is clear: I can see him through the gifts he gives.

And this gets us to the real purpose of being thankful: God wants us to remember him, the giver, not because he needs to be remembered, but because *we need* to remember *him*; because only by remembering him and what he’s done for us can we *trust* him. This is why the Israelites spent forty years in the wilderness, so they would get it through their heads that everything they had, and everything they needed, and everything they had been promised comes from God, and they could trust him to give it. Every day they picked up their daily bread

from off the ground where God had served it up for them so that they would learn that what was really important was not bread, but rather their relationship with God who gave it to them. By their gratitude they remembered that they had a loving Father whom they could always trust.

And that's important because God knows how we are. We have the tendency to forget him as soon as we're satisfied. When we forget to *thank* God, we forget *him*, and we start slipping down the slope to despair, misery, and death; as St. Paul writes: *For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools...* and soon they were worshipping the things God made instead of the God who made all things. And so, once again, we see that the purpose of thankfulness is to keep us from losing our God through the sin of idolatry.

Now, because God knows that we're especially susceptible to falling into this trap, in his mercy he sometimes takes things away from us. It's his way of prying a few blocks loose from the wall of blessings we're surrounded with so we can look out and see him: "Remember me? I'm still here, and you still need me." That's why he led the Israelites in the barren wilderness for forty years where there was no water, no way to grow food, no way to get the materials to make clothes or tools. He didn't just knock a few blocks out of their walls, he totally obliterated the wall "to humble them and test them" and to "discipline them as sons", to get them to place their trust in him alone. And so we see God shows his love to us not only in what he gives, but also in what he takes away – or that he never gives us to begin with. All is intended by God to be for our good. And that's why we give thanks to God: so that we remember him and his great love for us in order that we learn to *trust* him.

But now having examined *why* we give thanks, it is appropriate on this Thanksgiving Day that we spend a few moments reflecting on all that we have to be thankful for. And that should be easy for us as citizens of this great nation. Like the Israelites, like our pilgrim fathers, we have inherited a good land, a land which overflows with every material blessing imaginable; where chronic hunger is virtually unknown, and where even the poorest citizens are better off than the vast majority of the rest of the world's population. It's a nation that leads the world in medicine, science, technology, and education; a nation that has been blessed with success in its brief times of war and prosperity in its long episodes of peace. Above all it is a nation that values the right of its citizens to choose how they will worship God, and allows them to decide how and by whom they will be governed. Yes, for all this, and for all the individual blessings we receive on personal level, our "daily bread", it is right that we give thanks to God.

At the same time, we recognize that this nation is not perfect, nor do we have everything we could hope for. And for this we should also thank God. Because if a nation could satisfy all the desires of our hearts, or if we could amass to ourselves all the goods it would take for us to say, "That's it, I've got all I need", then we would no longer have any use for God. We might gain the whole world at the expense of our own souls. And so we thank God for our losses, our frustrations and disappointments, our health problems, and everything else that reminds us that we need him to sustain us even in this great and blessed nation.

And if we ought to thank God for having made us the citizens of this blessed land, how much more should we who are Christians thank him for making us citizens of his Kingdom and members of his royal family? This Kingdom is his Church in which the sweet water of the Gospel flows freely, where we can feast daily on God's Word, the Bread of Life, and receive also the Body and Blood of our Savior to assure us that for his sake our sins are forgiven. It's a Kingdom where the burdens are light, and the robes of righteousness we have been given to

cover our sin and shame will never wear out. It's where we know the peace of God which makes it possible to live with each other in peace: always loving, always forgiving one another as fellow members of God's family. It's a Fortress Kingdom in which God himself protects and defends us from the assaults of Satan and the world. And it's a Kingdom in which we can work God's good will, not by our own power, but by the power God gives us to accomplish his will. For all this, we should be thankful ... *should be*, but all too often we are not.

And that is why our Thanksgiving should begin with repentance. We should examine our hearts to see when we have grumbled about the Lord's gracious provision and thereby claimed that somehow, we deserved more than he gives us. We should acknowledge that we have sat in judgment of his wise decisions, thus making ourselves gods above him. And we should reflect upon how we have in times of need asked for blessings, and then just as soon as we have received them, turned from him because we were satisfied for the moment, thus making the *things* we have more important than our Father who gave them.

Beginning to give thanks with such a heart of repentance will prepare us to receive the greatest blessing of all: the forgiveness that God gives us for the sake of his Son who lived and died for us. And in this way too our hearts will be cleansed and healed so that the thanks we give to God will be genuine and truly heartfelt. I said earlier that thankfulness doesn't come naturally. The truth is that it comes supernaturally: A truly thankful heart is the gift of God, which is implanted by the Holy Spirit through his Word which gives us new life. Today and in all our days to come, may God in his grace grant to each of us such a new heart, so that with it we may give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; and his mercy endures forever.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***