

A Thankful Heart (Thanksgiving 2009)

Once again, the holiday season has rolled around and people are saying, "Where did the year go?" Already the stores are filled with Christmas decorations. Even before Halloween arrived this year they were running Christmas commercials on TV. Little and not-so-little children are wondering what they will find under the tree on Christmas morning, and moms and dads are wondering how they will pay for it. These days Thanksgiving is basically a pre-season holiday, something you do to get in shape for Christmas. We eat, we sleep, we watch football, and we do not stop until January. All of this hustle and bustle really is a shame because the art of giving thanks is one thing that separates man from the animals, and yet it is overlooked increasingly. To receive a gift and say, "Thank you," is one of the noblest things a man can do. There is nothing small or trivial about it. To say "Thank you" is to acknowledge that we have been given something we did not earn and do not deserve. Happy is the man who understands that all of life is a great gift of God and that life itself is the ultimate gift.

Although it is almost a throwaway holiday, this is the time of the year that we focus especially on the matter of giving thanks. Here, in a nutshell, is the history behind Thanksgiving in the United States.

The Pilgrims set ground at Plymouth Rock on December 11, 1620. Their first winter was extremely devastating. At the beginning of the following fall, they had lost 46 of the original 102 people who had sailed from the Netherlands aboard the *Mayflower*. Before departing from Holland, the pilgrims had fled from England in order to escape religious persecution. But the harvest of 1621 that followed that disastrous first winter in the New World was a bountiful one, and the remaining colonists decided to celebrate by holding a feast to give thanks to the Lord Who had provided for them. Among the people gathered for the feast were 91 Indians who had helped the Pilgrims survive their first year. It is believed that the Pilgrims would not have made it through the year without the help of the natives. The feast that ensued was more of a traditional English harvest festival than a true "thanksgiving" observance. It lasted for three days.

Governor William Bradford sent "four men fowling" after wild ducks and geese. It is not certain that actual wild turkeys were part of their feast. However, it is certain that they had venison, or deer meat, and some kind of fowl. The term "turkey" was used by the Pilgrims at that time to mean any sort of wild gaming bird.

This "thanksgiving" feast was not repeated the following year. Many years passed before the event was repeated. It was not until June of 1676 that another Day of Thanksgiving was proclaimed. On June 20 of that year, the governing council of Charlestown, Massachusetts, held a meeting to determine how best to express thanks to God for the good fortune that had seen their community

securely established. By unanimous vote they instructed Edward Rawson, the clerk, to proclaim June 29 as a Day of Thanksgiving.

A hundred and one years later, in October of 1777, all 13 colonies joined in a thanksgiving celebration. It also commemorated the patriotic victory over the British at Saratoga, but this, too, was a one-time affair. President George Washington proclaimed a National Day of Thanksgiving and prayer to be observed on November 26, 1789, although some people were opposed to it. It was through the efforts of a woman named Sarah Josepha Hale, a magazine editor, which eventually led to what we recognize as Thanksgiving. Hale wrote many editorials championing her cause in her *Boston Ladies' Magazine*, and later, in *Godey's Lady's Book*. Finally, after a 40-year campaign of writing editorials and letters to governors and presidents, Hale's obsession became a reality when, in 1863, President Lincoln proclaimed the *last* Thursday in November as a national day of Thanksgiving and prayer.

Thanksgiving was proclaimed by every president following Lincoln, too. The date was changed a couple of times, most recently by Franklin Roosevelt, who moved it up one week earlier to the next-to-last Thursday of November in order to create a longer Christmas shopping season. However, public uproar against this decision caused the president to set Thanksgiving back to its original date two years later. And in 1941, Thanksgiving was finally sanctioned by Congress as a legal holiday, to be observed on the *fourth* Thursday in November. The customary turkey dinner is a reminder of the four wild "turkeys" brought down by those four men sent out by Governor Bradford to go fowling in 1621 for the Pilgrim's first thanksgiving feast.

Although Thanksgiving Day comes, by statute, once a year here in America, but to the honest man or woman of God it comes as frequently as the heart of gratitude will allow. In other words, Thanksgiving should be a way of life for the child of God. It should not be a once a year matter, but a daily sending up of thanks to God out of a heart grateful for the blessings of God. For some, sadly, the only things they are thankful for on Thanksgiving Day are the NFL and elastic waistbands!

God's word teaches those of us who are in Christ, "***We know that in everything God works for good with those who love Him, who are called according to His purpose***" (Romans 8:28 [RSV]). Knowing that God is working on our behalf for our own good in all He does, and knowing that the Lord gave His only begotten Son for us to die in our place, should be enough to make anyone grateful, and to have reason to give thanks. This is also why the Apostle Paul tells us in 1 Thessalonians 5:18 [RSV], "***give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.***" When we cannot do anything else, we can always be grateful. As someone once said, "If you can't be thankful for what you have received, be thankful for what you have escaped!" And for Christians, we know what it is exactly we most definitely have escaped: Eternal

separation from God! Of those who remain in a state of rebellion by not submitting to the Lord Paul warns in 2 Thessalonians 1:9-10 [RSV], **9. They shall suffer the punishment of eternal destruction and exclusion from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His might, 10. when He comes on that day to be glorified in His saints, and to be marveled at in all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed.**

With that in mind, I would like to bring a special Thanksgiving message this morning from Psalm 131. As you know, David was a poet and a musician, and he at times is referred to as "The Sweet Singer of Israel." If you read through the Psalms sometime, you will notice that nearly half of them were penned by David.

Psalm 131 is one of the Pilgrim Psalms. The heading in most translations calls it "A Song of Ascents." That means it was part of a group of Psalms which were sung as the Hebrew pilgrims made their way up the mountains toward the city of Jerusalem for one of the annual Jewish festivals. Fifteen of these Psalms are grouped together – numbers 120-134. All except one are fairly short, exactly the kind of songs you would expect a group of travelers to sing as they marched along. The Pilgrim Psalms are like the choruses we sing every week. Their purpose is the same: To prepare the heart for worship.

It is possible that you have never noticed Psalm 131 before. It only has three verses, so you might tend to overlook it as being not very important. But that would be a mistake, because this little hymn by David is really a little jewel. Charles Spurgeon said that this Psalm is "one of the shortest to read, but one of the longest to learn." As I said, there are only three verses in Psalm 131, but each one reveals an important quality for us to consider as we approach the Thanksgiving season. Let us now take a few brief moments to read this beautiful little Psalm.

1. O Lord, my heart is not lifted up, my eyes are not raised too high; I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me. 2. But I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a child quieted at its mother's breast; like a child that is quieted is my soul. 3. O Israel, hope in the Lord from this time forth and forevermore. A Song of Ascents. (Psalm 131:1-3 [RSV])

The Psalm begins with these words, "**O Lord, my heart is not lifted up, my eyes are not raised too high.**" I daresay that not too many of us would begin a prayer this way. It sounds a bit odd to our ears, as if perhaps David was bragging about his humility.

It is always tricky to talk about the humility of oneself. How do you know when you are truly humble? Come to think of it, if you are truly humble, will you even know it? I mean, is it not just a tad bit ironic that Moses would write of himself in Numbers 12:3 [RSV], "**Now the man Moses was very meek, more than all**

men that were on the face of the Earth”? It has been well said that humility is the virtue which, when you think you have it, you have lost it.

It is helpful to know that the word translated “high” in this verse in the Hebrew actually was used to indicate pride, as well as height. In the Hebrew of the Old Testament, it was used for high trees and high mountains. It was used to describe King Saul who was said to stand head and shoulders higher than anyone else in Israel. It was also used of God Who was said to be **“on high”** and Whose thoughts are higher than the thoughts of man. We use the word in the same way when we say to some arrogant snob, “Get off your high horse, buster!”

Let us be very honest with ourselves on this point. We live in a time and culture that puts a very low value on humility. They do not give out merit badges for humility. From the moment we enter the world we are urged to get ahead, to climb the ladder, to look out for number one, to win through intimidation, and to prove our success by the car we drive, by the home we buy, by the career we have, by the clothes we wear, and by the friends we keep. Being status-conscious still plagues America. I am sure you have seen those T-shirts that say, “The One Who Dies With the Most Toys Wins.” (When I see that, I always want to say, “So what? Dead people don’t play with toys!”)

While it may be true that the meek shall inherit the Earth, it does not seem to be happening around here. We all feel the pinch. Not too long ago, a friend confided to me that he hates Christmas because giving gifts has become a game where your love is measured by how much money you spend. (I guess this means Congress must **REALLY** love us all! I, for one, wish they would love us a **LOT** less!) This is a very sad commentary on the way we live.

David went on in Psalm 131 to describe humility in terms of how he looked at his own limitations. **“But I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a child quieted at its mother’s breast; like a child that is quieted is my soul.”** *The Living Bible* simply says, **“I don’t pretend to be a ‘know it all’.”** David is saying, “There are many things in the universe that are far beyond my meager ability to understand. I don’t worry about those things and I don’t try to figure them out.”

Humility, in this context, simply means that you realize that you do not run the world, you do not have all of the answers, and you know your own limits. That last one is a really hard one for some people, facing up to the idea that they really do have limits. It is sort of a trendy, New Age-type idea to talk about unlimited potential and the untapped resources within. The truth is, our potential is very limited and the only untapped resources are the ones we discover when we come to the end and admit that we are limited, but our Lord and Savior God is not.

When I used to work at TWA several years ago now, there came one of those many times in which the members of the sales department were required to attend one of those mandatory meetings conducted by some motivational speaker. I cannot remember the name of who this particular person was in this endless parade of self-help gurus invited to speak to us, but I certainly remember one exchange that took place between this particular speaker and one of the company's kiss ups. Never letting an opportunity pass him by that would show the higher ups just how smart they were by hiring him, a young man came up and asked the speaker his advice on what he should do with his life. The young man explained that he felt he had so many possibilities open to him and that he had so much to give to the company that he just couldn't decide which way was the best to go. I will never forget the speaker's answer, though, and I confess I chuckled when I heard it, because all the "higher ups" heard it, too. This speaker told Mr. Kiss Up, "That's the curse of having too many options. The man who thinks there are 15 things he could do with his life will probably do none of them very well. But the man who has only one option throws himself into it because that's the only choice he has." The speaker then added that for most of his life his options had been limited and that was why he was a happy man. I think King David would agree entirely with this philosophy. Happy, indeed, is the man who knows his limits and within those limits does the very best he can.

Verse 2 of Psalm 131 brings before us a second quality that is very useful as we approach Thanksgiving. It is the quality of simplicity. ***"But I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a child quieted at its mother's breast; like a child that is quieted is my soul."*** The picture envisioned here is one only a mother can fully understand. A child is born and for a long time he looks to his mother's breast as the source of his nourishment. Breakfast, lunch and supper all come from the same place. When he is hungry, he cries and Mom knows exactly what to do. Her milk satisfies him and back to sleep he goes.

But the day eventually comes when he has to learn how to take a bottle. That is not a happy day. He cries, big tears roll down his face, his arms reach out, but his mother pushes them away. He fights, he pouts, he screams, but all to no avail. What has happened to Mom? She who used to be his friend has now become his enemy! he thinks. And if Mom has a heart at all, she cries, too, because from now on things will be different. They will never be the same. She still will feed him but never again in the same way.

When the bottle is over, when the tears have stopped flowing, when he learns to eat with his brothers and sisters, then the child comes, he lays his head on his mother's breast, not in order to be fed anymore, but just because he loves her. He comes because he wants to be near her. Here is the truth: Unless a mother weans her child, he will never grow up. He will be a baby all the days of his life, regardless of how old he is. Though it may seem hard, and though the child misunderstands, if a mother truly loves her child, she will not stop until the job is fully done. When the job finally is completed, the child no longer begs for that

which it once found indispensable. Once he could not live without his mother's milk; now he no longer needs it.

It was Jesus Who said in Matthew 18:3 [RSV], ***“Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven.”*** What was He talking about? Was it not a faith that is childlike in its simplicity?

I will never forget the time when Daniel was just five years old and he was reading from his Bible. I told him to turn to Mark 16, and read out loud verses 15 and 16 [RSV], which say, ***15. And He said to them, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation. 16. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned.”*** After reading these verses, I asked him, “Daniel, when does Jesus say a person becomes saved?” He looked back down at his Bible for a second or two and then he looked up and said, “When they are baptized.”

That, dear friends, is what Jesus was talking about when he said, ***“Unless you turn and become like children.”*** It is having a faith which is childlike in its simplicity. There are grown men who have spent years studying the Bible, attending the finest universities and seminaries the world has to offer, and still they will read Mark 16:16 and argue that Jesus really did not mean what He said. “Baptism has nothing to do with one's salvation!” they loudly proclaim. And yet, a simple child can see what their eyes are blinded to see, and their ears dull of hearing. There is something our children can teach us at Thanksgiving. They can teach us what it means to have a simple and uncomplicated trust in God.

Little children may have their occasional squabbles with one another, but rarely will they be found holding onto grudges. That is something they have to learn with age. We can also learn a valuable lesson from our children this Thanksgiving by doing as they do, and free ourselves of animosity towards others. The Hebrews writer tells us in Hebrews 12:14-17 [RSV], ***14. Strive for peace with all men, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. 15. See to it that no one fail to obtain the grace of God; that no “root of bitterness” spring up and cause trouble, and by it the many become defiled; 16. that no one be immoral or irreligious like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal. 17. For you know that afterward, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears.***

Let us conclude with the following passage, also found in the *Book of Hebrews*, to help us prepare our minds to celebrate Thanksgiving in a proper spirit that gives the glory to God: ***15. Through Him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge His name. 16. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.*** (Hebrews 13:15-16 [RSV])