

## THANKSGIVING—A WAY OF LIFE

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This is Thanksgiving Sunday. What a wonderful in holiday Thanksgiving can be if we learn the art of being thankful, even difficult times.

Thanksgiving Day has an interesting history. Most of our childhood memories of the event go back to our remembrances of the first Thanksgiving as the pilgrims shared together their meager supplies with the entire community to produce a thanksgiving meal—but part of the problem with Thanksgiving is that for many it has boiled down to being just a meal. We often forget to take the time to reflect upon what we have to be thankful for.

Some of you, rightfully so, I suppose, might counter that by saying, *“What do I have to be thankful for? Life has been pretty bad to me.”*

I can understand that. I know for many people this thanksgiving time will be an anxious one. And I am mindful of the fact that it is often difficult to find reason for thanksgiving when things are difficult.

Yet throughout history, it has been in such difficult times that thanksgiving has traditionally been offered by people. Although there is some debate about the first Thanksgiving, in each of those early celebrations thanksgiving was offered not because there had not been difficulties, even death, among the people, but because they experienced in their lives the steadfast presence of God amid the difficult times. They depended upon the benevolent care of God.

You have heard me speak of a friend Shelly Hoover, who is suffering from ALS. This is just one of many journal entries she has shared since she started on her journey with this terrible disease that slowly can destroy every muscle in her body. She wrote:

*There is humorous folklore in the Hoover house about sticking to the plan, "You've got to stick to the plan!" Well my plan wasn't working so I had to develop a new plan in which to stick. I've accepted the fact that I need assistance to move. I've got the lift in the bedroom and the custom ankle-foot orthotics ready to roll. Forget cute shoes, my new plan includes "not hideous" shoes. I've got some work to do there. The roll-in shower construction is nearly complete and I have a top notch shower chair on order. Part of the new plan is learning how to grieve well. I'm familiar with the grief stages: denial, bargaining, depression, anger, and acceptance. I hop amongst them on a pogo stick. Have I gotten over the fact that I can't walk anymore? No. Not really. Yesterday, we were driving through San Francisco and I was watching pedestrians scurry in the rain. My thought bubble read: "I hope these people know how lucky they are -- walking up and down the sidewalk. They probably don't even give a second thought to jumping in and out of a car or stepping up a curb." It's like I was watching them walk in slow motion. I was missing the feeling and freedom. So no. I'm not over it. But I have accepted it and I don't dwell there.*

*So how do you grieve well? WebMD has a few suggestions:*

*Allowing time to experience thoughts and feelings openly to self*

*Expressing feelings openly or writing journal entries about them*

*Remembering that crying can provide a release*

*Confiding in a trusted person about the loss*

*Acknowledging and accepting both positive and negative feelings*

*Finding support groups in which there are other people who have had similar losses*

*Seeking professional help if feelings become overwhelming*

*I'm familiar with most on the list. Who knew that this journal was part of my grieving well?*

*Allow time. Express feelings. Cry. Acknowledge. Seek support. I can stick to that plan.*

*I'm forgiven and free and sticking' to the plan.*

Since Shelley wrote that post things have gotten worse. She can no longer speak and now has to use a computer program that enables her to type using her eyes. She gets her nourishment through a feeding tube and depends on others for just about everything. Yet, she continues to share with family and friends a very positive and thankful outlook on life. She even wrote a book using her eyes to patiently type it letter by letter.

In difficult times Selley has learned to find reason for thanksgiving—or to put it another way to “*remember and be thankful.*”

I would also remind us of the letters of Paul in the New Testament. You will notice that repeatedly he began his letters to the various churches with prayers of thanksgiving—even though he might be planning in that letter to correct the congregation about some issue of faith.

You might also remember the prayer for the Philippians. It was a prayer of thanksgiving. But, do you remember where Paul was when he wrote that prayer of thanksgiving? He was in prison.

*“I want you to know, beloved that what has happened to me has actually helped to spread the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to everyone else that my imprisonment is for Christ; and most of the brothers and sisters, having been made confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, dare to speak the word with greater boldness and without fear.”*

Paul was convinced that he was in the hands of God and because of that “*whether he lived or died—he was the Lord’s.*”

How do these stories relate to Thanksgiving? In my mind they relate because in each of these cases the invitation to be involved with prayers of thanksgiving were in the community. It was a communal act, where Paul was thankful for the faithfulness of church communities and invited them to join him in thanksgiving, it was a community event at the time the Pilgrims and the nation was called to thanksgiving in 1883. In the Old Testament the invitation was to remember the faithfulness of God—and because of that remembering—offer prayers of thanksgiving. The central event of the Old Testament for the Jewish people was their deliverance from Egypt. And they were reminded that as a community of faith they *should remember and be thankful.*

Our annual observance of Thanksgiving gives us a wonderful excuse for altering our attitude, for turning away from our complaining ways.

I call us this morning to a time of thanksgiving. Not because your world or my world has all the ingredients for our comfort or needs for justice and fairness; but because God is God and God’s steadfast love endures forever and we too are the heirs of the promise of his Kingdom. We are the ones who live by faith.

As with most holidays we have our idea of the “*perfect Thanksgiving*” that is based upon Thanksgivings past. And, if our current “*Thanksgiving*” does not match the “*perfect*” one we often grumble and complain.

My mind has its ideas of the “*perfect Thanksgiving*” as well. There was then, as today, Thanksgiving at church the Sunday before Thanksgiving Day. It was at the small country church just a short walk up from the house I lived in. And, like Christmas, there were always the same songs we sing at Thanksgiving.

And, although we could not consider ourselves to be middle class in terms of economics—there were too many of us to meet those guidelines, we lower class folks did not know better because we

always had reasons to count our blessings. The meal itself was one of them. The turkey at Thanksgiving and the ham at Christmas were given by the owner of the lime stone quarry at White Hill. That turkey, along with vegetables that were canned or frozen from the garden we tended made the meal an event to look forward to. It was a good time.

You can begin to get the picture because I have the feeling many of you can relate to the same thing. Even when life was not so good—we did not seem to be overly aware or concerned about it and counted our blessings and had a good time.

It is when we refuse to see light and choose darkness instead—when we complain instead of giving thanks that we have problems. We have things but no inner peace. We are anxious and come to Thanksgiving wondering if it is worth it. Even the parades and the football games will not quiet our inner spirits. We will allow the spirit of what “*we do not have*” to overwhelm us instead of looking to the life we do have and offer thanksgiving to God. We will see the losses in our life rather than the people and community we have. We will know we have no reason for “*thanksgiving*” because our neighbors drive a Lexus and we drive a Chevy and they have the huge home on the edge of town and we have the small home on one of the busy streets in town. We will worry about the imagined future rather than enjoy the reality of the present.

Our worries about today and tomorrow are rooted in our very nature itself—we tend to forget so easily. When I think of where to find the cure I think of the passage from the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy.

It comes after the people of Israel are liberated from slavery in Egypt. They are in route to the “*Promised Land*” and begin to grumble because they do not have enough to eat. God provides manna for them. They complain because they do not have meat. God provides meat and they get tired of eating meat. They could not remember that they had been slaves and are now free. No wonder the writer of in Deuteronomy wrote a warning to the people of what he suspected might happen once they arrived in the “*Promised Land*” and settled in.

The writer says: “*Take care that you do not forget the LORD your God, by failing to keep his commandments, his ordinances, and his statutes, which I am commanding you today. When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, who led you through the great and terrible wilderness, an arid waste-land with poisonous\* snakes and scorpions. He made water flow for you from flint rock, and fed you in the wilderness with manna that your ancestors did not know, to humble you and to test you, and in the end to do you good. Do not say to yourself, ‘My power and the might of my own hand have gained me this wealth. But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, so that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your ancestors, as he is doing today. If you do forget the LORD your God and follow other gods to serve and worship them, I solemnly warn you today that you shall surely perish. Like the nations that the LORD is destroying before you, so shall you perish, because you would not obey the voice of the LORD your God.*”

The writer seems to be saying that without a “*Thanksgiving spirit*” we will surely perish; and I suspect he is right.

I have seen it happen too often in the lives of too many people. There are those who are so wrapped up in the feeling that they have somehow been cheated in life to realize just how much they have been blessed. I have seen it lead to bad feelings among family members, bad feelings among fellow

employees, and is often a trigger for depression.

If you are struggling with reasons for thanksgiving today may I suggest three things?

We must learn to be thankful or we will become BITTER.

Dr. Jim Moore, a Christian author and pastor of a church in Houston, Texas wrote a little book several years ago that perhaps some of you have seen entitled *"You Can Get Bitter or You Can Get Better."* He told the story of a twenty-six-year-old woman in his congregation, whose husband died in a bazaar accident. The man's tractor brushed up against a hot electric wire and killed him instantly. Now here she was, with three children, insufficient money, and hopes dashed. *"I don't know what I am going to do without him,"* she sobbed. *"But I do know what my choices are. I can get bitter or I can get better. I am turning to the church so that I can get better."* She underscored a universal truth. When trouble slams us, we do have choices.

Secondly, we must learn to be thankful or we will become DISCOURAGED.

It is an inescapable tenant of Christianity that hardship will come. No one is immune, from the greatest to the least of us. But there is another inescapable tenant of our faith; we are not to become discouraged. The Bible is an encouraging book.

Jesus said; *"Let not your hearts be troubled."* At another time he said, *"Fear not, for lo, I am with you always."*

Paul encouraged the Philippians: *"Rejoice in the Lord always."*

As you reflect upon some of the events of your life this Thanksgiving, I challenge you to ask yourself this question *"if it had not been for God?"* That's the question I would like you to focus on for the next four days leading up to Thanksgiving. Where would you be right now, if it were not for God? God has not let you down. So, be of good cheer!

Then thirdly, we must learn to become thankful or we shall surely grow ARROGANT AND SELF-SATISFIED. Mankind is certain that whatever he has achieved is of his own doing. But the truth teaches us that none are independent. When we give thanks, we reach beyond ourselves. I was always taken with the scene in the Jimmy Stewart movie *"Shenandoah."* The time frame is the Civil War and Stewart is the father of a very large family. Each meal time they gather around the table and he gives the exact same blessing: *"O Lord, we planted the seed, then harvested the crop. If we had not put the food on the table, it wouldn't be sitting there. But Lord, we give you thanks anyway."* This is the problem with the thankless heart. We end up giving credit where credit is not due.

My friends, there are many things that confound me in life, but the one anchor of my soul has always been that God is good.

It takes a magnificent spirit to come through such hardship and express gratitude. Here is a great lesson. Surrounded by tremendous adversity, thanksgiving will deliver you.

Yes, I still think it is true. The heart that can find room for thanksgiving is the heart that can be comforted. So, remember my childhood Thanksgiving service at church and our annual singing of the song we sang just before this sermon, *"Count your many blessings."*