

Thanksgiving, More than a Tally of Goodies

Psalms 100

¹Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth.

²Worship the LORD with gladness;
come before him with joyful songs.

³Know that the LORD is God.

It is he who made us, and we are his;
we are his people, the sheep of his pasture.

⁴Enter his gates with thanksgiving

and his courts with praise;
give thanks to him and praise his name.

⁵For the LORD is good and his love endures forever;

his faithfulness continues through all generations.

Before a national day of Thanksgiving as we observe it was ever signed into law, several precedents had been established on the continent. French Huguenots near modern-day Jacksonville, Florida celebrated a festival on June 30, 1564, specifically acknowledging God's goodness. In 1610, a hard winter decimated the population of Jamestown from 409 to 60. When needed provisions arrived, they set aside a day of thanksgiving. Other settlers elsewhere in Virginia declared December 4, 1619, the day of their safe arrival by ship, as a day of thanksgiving, which they observed annually. The most famous such event, complete with images of pilgrims and Indians, followed the harvest of 1621 at the Plymouth colony in Massachusetts.

Each of these early thanksgiving observances had a singular focus. They were unashamedly about God's provision and all that He had done for them. None of these days had anything to do with a national proclamation from Washington, D.C. There was no Washington D.C. Each of these groups was strongly religious. Their festivals commemorated God's goodness, period.

When Washington did get into the act, God remained very much the focus. Elias Boudinot, a New Jersey congressman, proposed a day of thanksgiving based on the "many signal (or outstanding) favors of God." A Connecticut congressman, Roger Sherman, spoke in favor of the proposal, stating that it was warranted by a number of precedents in "holy writ" (that is, the Bible). November 26, 1789 was proclaimed as a national day of Thanksgiving. A tradition began of naming such a day every year. The first fixed annual commemoration of Thanksgiving began after the Civil War. Intended to be joined with a national day of repentance, Abraham Lincoln set aside the fourth Sunday of every November. The holiday was still deeply religious.

In 1939, Franklin D. Roosevelt moved Thanksgiving to the third Thursday in November to allow more time for shopping between Thanksgiving and Christmas. Congress changed it to the fourth Thursday in 1941, but the uniquely religious overtones that had governed the day began to erode into commercialism. Thanksgiving remains a huge event, but as the nation becomes more and more secular, it becomes more difficult to focus Thanksgiving in any particular direction.

The turkey is the undisputable star of the modern holiday. One turkey breeder was always experimenting to perfect a better turkey. His family was fond of drumsticks, but there were never enough legs for everyone. After many frustrating attempts, the farmer was relating his great success to his friends at the general store. "I finally did it! I bred a turkey with 6 legs!" They asked the farmer how it tasted. "I don't know" he said, "I never could catch the darn thing!"

Apparently, Butterball has a “Turkey Hotline” where people call in to get advice on how to cook turkey from the experts. In an allegedly true story, one lady called and asked how long she should cook her turkey. To answer the question, the Talk-Line home economist asked how much the bird weighed. The woman responded, “I don’t know, it’s still running around outside.”

And, though it’s not very spiritual, I had to share this cartoon of a blind farmer at Thanksgiving:

{picture}

I have shared before that I’ve noticed a strange Thanksgiving trend in the culture, particularly as it is reflected on television. Talking heads speak of their own Thanksgiving memories. TV families sit down around a big thanksgiving spread and share with one another what they’re thankful for. But seldom are we given a clue as to *WHOM* these folks are thankful. They are thankful, but not *TO* anyone in particular. Are they thankful to cosmic chance? Heaven forbid that they should acknowledge God as the source of their blessings. To me, thankfulness directed nowhere is just strange. It’s like dropping Thank-you cards into the mail without addresses.

As Christians, we try to keep the holiday about God. In doing so, we come up with lists of things that we are grateful to God for, but in truth, “counting our blessings” and “naming them one by one” would not be unlike listing our sins and naming them one by one – or naming the stars in the sky one by one, or counting the sands on the seashore. We simply are not up to the task.

Counting one’s blessings is a fine thing to do, especially when trying to lift yourself out a pity party, but it may not be the best way to express your thanksgiving to God. Today’s text is a thanksgiving text, but it is nothing like the toast we might hear as we prepare to dig into a turkey dinner. This psalm takes a different approach to Thanksgiving. There is no record of benefits. There is no tally of goodies and gifts. There is no register of great deliverances. In fact, there is no list at all. The only hint we have that this even is a psalm of thanksgiving is the title:

Psalm 100

A psalm. For giving thanks.

But, as we read further, no specific attention is given to any of the things God has provided or to any of the things He has done for His people. Rather, the psalm celebrates the LORD’s deity, His pastoral concern for His people, His love and His goodness. Ancient Israel needed to remember that God is more than the stuff He gives. He is the Creator of the heavens and the earth and He was, by virtue of a covenant, their God, and Israel was uniquely His people. God should always be thought of independently of the things He has made and the gifts that He gives. Consider how Genesis records the creation of the sun and the moon on the fourth day of creation:

“God made two great lights – the greater light to govern the day and the lesser light to govern the night. He also made the stars.” – Genesis 1:16

Anyone can figure out that the text is talking about the sun and the moon, so why didn’t the author simply call these heavenly lights by those designations? The Hebrew words for sun and moon were the same as the names of two pagan gods, because many pagan nations worshipped the sun and the moon. It has been suggested that simply calling them “a greater light” and “a lesser light” effectively invalidated that connection for the Hebrews. God was not to be confused with anything He created. He was to be known by His character as He revealed Himself to them.

Through the ages, men have become distracted by created things, even to the point of revering them in the place of God. The ancients worshiped heavenly bodies, rivers, mountains and animals. For many today, faith revolves around how much God does for them. No one I know worships the sun, but I know a few people who talk as though they know God, but who speak only of the things He has done for them or provided to them. Seldom do they talk of the assurance, joy or peace He brings to their lives. They may not be conscious of it, but temporal things still captivate them far more than eternal things. Even on Thanksgiving, focusing only on physical blessings can hinder us from seeing God, because God is more than the things He gives.

I. Give Thanks because the LORD is God (1-3a)

¹Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth.

²Worship the LORD with gladness;
come before him with joyful songs.

³Know that the LORD is God ...

In the Old Testament, when we see "the LORD" in all upper case letters, it represents the proper name of God, "I AM" or YAHWEH, by which He had made Himself known to the Hebrews. This personal name for God appears four times in the psalm. The psalm is clearly NOT speaking of God in the abstract or in some generic sense. It is speaking of God, Who revealed Himself by name with attributes of recognizable personhood. That God has made Himself known as a Person is essential to a full appreciation of this psalm. God first identified Himself as "I AM" to Moses in a burning bush, but later He more fully revealed the Person behind the Name:

... "The LORD, the LORD (or "I AM", JEHOVAH or YAHWEH), the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. - Exodus 34:6-7

In the psalm, verse 3 states simply that "the LORD, (YAHWEH), is God." The pagan world was filled with false gods, but there is only one God, and "I AM", the God of the Hebrews is He. The psalm is citing as one supreme cause for thanksgiving the simple fact that whoever knows "I AM" knows the only true God. Having "I AM" as God, whose Name is identified with love, compassion and faithfulness, was much better than worshipping idols that represented forces believed to be hostile, vengeful and petty in their inclinations towards men. All the nations surrounding Israel lived in fear of their false gods. What a difference it must have made to know the truth about YAHWEH - that He is the LORD who loves His creation and provides for it.

YAHWEH, the God Who made Himself known to Israel is the only God that there is. Once we connect with this, we begin to connect with the call to worship in this psalm of thanksgiving:

"Shout for joy to YAHWEH, all the earth.

Worship YAHWEH with gladness;
come before him with joyful songs."

The worshipper's thoughts are directed to God's Person and beyond what He does or provides. But, the language becomes even more specific. "Know that the LORD is God." "Know" means to know not casually, but to know very well. Be certain beyond any shadow of a doubt that the only true God is this "I AM", Who revealed Himself to Moses and Who cares for His people Israel.

The false gods that surround God's people today have changed for they were never gods at all. But, new false gods have taken their place. These new gods of science, technology, materialism, humanism and chance are just as "not God" today as the pagan deities of the ancients were "not God" then. But, the same LORD Who covenanted Himself with Israel *IS* God. And now, because of Jesus, our knowledge of His Person is even more thorough. That's why the psalm calls us to shout and to worship. We know that the LORD is God, and that knowledge gives us somewhere meaningful to address our thanksgiving. Ultimately, we will never be able to enumerate our blessings, but one of the greatest blessings of all is that we know Who it is that we thank.

II. Give Thanks because the LORD Is Your God (3b)

... It is he who made us, and we are his;
we are his people, the sheep of his pasture.

The second thought taken up in this psalm of thanksgiving is the LORD's relationship to his people. Again we don't see a list of blessings or of the things that God gives and what He does. Provision is given as *YAHWEH* is depicted as the shepherd of His people. In this psalm, things, blessings, gifts, deliverances – all these take a back seat to focusing on God as Shepherd.

The Hebrews were never the strongest, bravest or noblest of nations. In fact, they were quite small and apparently insignificant, but they were *YAHWEH*'s nation, chosen to bring His plans for the world's salvation to fruition. In His wisdom and mercy, He called Abraham out of ancient Ur and made him into a great nation. The psalmist celebrates the fact that this nation uniquely belonged to God and that no other nation was ever cherished by God in quite the same way.

As Christians, we see ourselves in a similar light as ancient Israel: "It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, the sheep of his pasture." God not only made us physically, He remade us spiritually in Christ. He made us His covenant people when Jesus died for our sins. Sin separated us from God, but "*I AM*" loved the world so much that He sent us Jesus. Of all the temporal blessings for which we are thankful, it is this eternal blessing that we cherish most.

The things for which we are thankful today, all those things that we would never be able to name one by one, are secondary to the fact that we belong to God because of what Jesus did. We are His people, the sheep of His pasture, and that's what we will be throughout the ages. From our relationship with God through Jesus Christ come all the blessings we enjoy. Let our thanksgiving begin with the fact that the LORD chose us to be His own people, the sheep of his pasture.

III. Give Thanks because the LORD Is a Faithful, Loving God (4, 5)

⁴Enter his gates with thanksgiving
and his courts with praise;
give thanks to him and praise his name.

⁵For the LORD is good and his love endures forever;
his faithfulness continues through all generations.

Again the focus is all on God's Person, not on any blessings or created things. This psalm does not mention anything that He has given or any battle that He has fought. It does point to the fact that He is good and that His love endures forever. God's people are now summoned to the temple to worship and to give thanks. Most of these Israelites were farmers. They were utterly dependent on God to act in kindness from year to year, blessing the fields and sending rain. And, God promised that He would do just that, so long as Israel loved Him and remained loyal to Him. Their pagan neighbors lived in superstitious fear of their childish gods. That is why they made all sorts of sacrifices to the idols they fashioned – in hope that their gods would bless their fields. All the Hebrews had to do was avoid such foolishness. God's faithfulness would sustain them.

In this technological age, it is easy to lose sight of our need for God's enduring love and goodness. Farming for most of us is a trip to the grocery store. Science and medicine have produced cures to maladies that were fatal only a few decades ago. Christians are determined to give glory to God in all things, but man has proven himself to be awfully smart, perhaps, too smart. You have seen lists suggesting that we have become too technologically dependent?

1. You have a list of 15 phone numbers to reach your family of three.
2. You call your son's beeper to let him know it's time to eat. He e-mails you back from his bedroom, "What's for dinner?"
3. Your daughter sells Girl Scout Cookies via her web site.

Technologically, man has advanced so far and in such a short period of time that believers often have to consciously remind themselves that none of man's advances inform God of anything about this world. We only make these strides at His good pleasure and only until He chooses to roll up this creation as we know it in anticipation of a new heaven and earth. In the meantime, it is from His grace that these days of plenty continue to amass. He will always be the source of our blessings, whether men are Christians or not and no matter how clever they show themselves to be. We know that He can reverse the trend of prosperity at any moment. Perhaps, that is what will be required to remind us that what we are most indebted to Him for are eternal benefits.

It is customary in our culture to send a person a "Thank you" when someone sends a gift. We are also in the habit of naming the gift. "Thank you Aunt Mary for the toaster." "Thank you Uncle Bob for the cash." Do you think that in the body of your note that Aunt Mary and Uncle Bob really want to read about how much you love the toaster and the cash? Or, might it touch them more deeply if you were to tell them how much you appreciate them for thinking of you and caring about you?

Thanksgiving Day is no different. Counting your blessings one by one doesn't tell God what He yearns most to hear. He knows your blessings. He could point out to you thousands that you have either overlooked or have never even noticed. I suspect that He would prefer to hear from us how grateful we are that He has overlooked nothing in caring for us. Even when we cannot name our needs, He meets them. Even when we cannot recognize all our blessings, He continues to faithfully send them, because we are His own people, the flock under the great Shepherd's care.

Tallying the goodies can actually become a distraction to one's walk with God if that is all a person looks to Him for. A man might name a handful of things that God has done for him – a nice house, a good wife, a reliable job - but if those things were suddenly gone, would a relationship endure? One day, you may long for peace in a storm or joy in a valley. That is why our thanksgiving to God must mature beyond goody lists and into knowing Him for who He is.