

Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

Deuteronomy 8:7-18

Psalm 65

2 Corinthians 9:6-15

Luke 17:11-19

Text: 2 Corinthians 9:15

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Introduction

Does it seem to you that it is easier to find something to grouse/complain about than it is to see something for which to give thanks? Some of you will remember as children how quick you were to note that your sibling got a bigger piece of cake for dessert and how slow you were to say ‘thank you’ that there was even a cake to be had for dessert. We seem so ever ready to tell a story of how we were mistreated and yet must set a plan to go around the table asking each person to name something for which they are grateful. Why isn’t thanksgiving contagious? Why is it that we must be taught to be thankful? Why do we have to set aside a day for thanksgiving?

The gospel asserts that thanksgiving arises out of our apprehension of what God has done and is doing for us in Jesus Christ. “Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!” exclaims the Apostle at the conclusion of his discussion on giving. What gift is Paul talking about? “For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.” (2 Corinthians 8:9) Paul is thinking about the theme of his preaching to the Corinthians; “For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified.” (1 Corinthians 2:2)

1. The Heidelberg Catechism, written in 1563, is the crown jewel of the shorter Reformation writings. It is a gem. The first section of the Catechism is titled “The Misery of Man.” Ten questions and answers realistically probe and portray the human predicament in the era of the Fall. The second section is titled “The Redemption of Man.” Seventy-Five questions and answers tell us of God’s glorious mercy and patience and persistence, all motivated by his oceanic love of sinners. The third section is titled “Thankfulness;” simply that: “Thankfulness.” This third section begins by posing the question, “Why should we obey God?” It doesn’t answer that we should obey him lest we provoke his anger. It doesn’t even say that we should obey him out of enlightened self-interest (things will go better for us if we obey him.) It says that we should obey him out of gratitude to him for all that his goodness has done for us.

All Christians, together with our Hebrew ancestors in faith; all Christians have stood at the edge of the Red Sea; all Christians have stood at the foot of Sinai; and all Christians have stood, above all, at the foot of the cross. We are the beneficiaries of God’s goodness so many times over that minimal spiritual sanity means maximal gratitude. Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

This theme of thankfulness runs through all our scripture readings today. In our Hebrew scripture reading (older testament), we were brought to that moment when the wilderness

journey of the children of Israel is coming to an end and they are soon to take possession of the promised land. This generation of Israelites grew up seeing mana on the ground every morning as God provided food for them in the wilderness; God's presence was seen in a cloud by day (shade) and a pillar of fire at night (warmth). Time and again God provided water when they couldn't see any source. You would think they would be the last people to ever forget God and yet a warning is given to them not to let their future prosperity be a trap for spiritual laziness; a distraction such that they forget God; a delusion that they are self-sufficient and don't need God.

In our human logic we are prone to think that gratefulness to God should increase as wealth and possessions increase; the more you have the greater the thanksgiving. Such is not the case. The warning of this scripture written so long ago is as relevant today as it was then. Possessions begin to possess us; wealth affords any number of choices besides worship. One only has to reflect on how yesterday's luxuries have become today's necessities. There was a time (and still exists in many parts of our world) when not everyone had a cell phone.

The implication of this warning is that thankfulness to God requires a certain amount of vigilance. Parents know that they have to teach their children to say, 'thank you.' It is not instinctual. And parents find themselves having to remind their children long after they think their child should have learned to offer 'thank you(s).' At some point what we teach our children to say moves from their head to their hearts. I know this when I receive a hug from a grandchild and hear the genuineness in their voice when they say, "thank you, Papa."

This is also so for us followers of Jesus. The scriptures teach us that thanksgiving is to be the root attitude of all our praying. We learn to speak prayers of giving thanks even in times when difficulty abounds. Perhaps there are those moments we can only offer thanks with our heads because our hearts are wounded. The believer finds that as she grows in appreciation of all that God has done for her, particularly standing at the foot of the cross, thanksgiving emerges more from the heart than from the discipline of the mind. And when that thankfulness bubbles up genuinely from your hearts, the words 'thank you' do not seem anywhere near adequate to express what you are sensing. Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

2. Psalm 65—the Psalm appointed for Thanksgiving Day—is a prayer of praise to God for the bounty of the earth. "You visit the earth and water it, you greatly enrich it; the river of God is full of water; you provide the people with grain, for so you have prepared it. You water its furrows abundantly, settling its ridges, softening it with showers, and blessing its growth. You crown the year with your bounty; your wagon tracks overflow with richness." It is a fitting prayer for the time of harvest.

Last summer my seventeen-year old granddaughter successfully passed her driving exam and received her driver's licence. It was a celebratory mood at their household, and she thought it a good time to offer to chauffeur her father (my son) to the places he needed to go—for a fee of course. Her father eagerly agreed to negotiate with her, noting that he would have to stop paying for her cell phone plan so that he could afford his new chauffeur. You recall these kinds of negotiations don't you; when you thought you should receive a decent wage for all the household duties you performed until it was pointed out to you that perhaps your parents may then charge room and board.

Do we not do a similar sort of thing with God? According to the gospel, in Jesus Christ all things consist. The One who gave his life for us to rescue us from the destruction of our self-centeredness, holds all things in his hands. He is the One in whom all things are unceasingly sustained in their being and rational order. He is the one who causes plants to grow and trees to produce fruit for he is the One who gives life to all things. The sun follows its course and the earth rotates at his behest. None of us got life for ourselves—we simply found ourselves alive in the world. All of life is sheer gift of God, according to the scriptures. And so often we humans take the fruit of harvest as a given as we do the turn from one day to the next. For many these rhythms of nature are so constant some humans think them self-generating. And then we try to negotiate a better deal with God; assuming what is given we, think more ought to be ours.

Gratitude isn't merely politeness to God—the thing we say to make sure the candy keeps coming. Gratitude is the acknowledgement of the truth of our existence; it is to correctly assess the nature of reality; it is the sane response to the gift of our life. Ingratitude is insanity; it is a denial of reality. Ingratitude shrivels hearts and distorts perception and perverts understanding. Gratefulness expands life and enhances perception and undergirds true understanding. Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

3 In our reading from the Apostle Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, a connection is made between thanksgiving to God and giving. Thanks for God's giving and giving and giving becomes the motivation for our giving. The occasion of Paul's discussion on giving is the collection that was being taken up among the churches Paul established to help the Jerusalem churches in the devastation of a severe famine that had come upon them. The Corinthians had committed themselves to help and Paul is sending Titus to them to receive their contribution for this project.

As Paul makes this connection between thanks to God for his indescribable gift and our response of giving, he likens giving to sowing seed. "The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance."

Often giving is perceived as losing something we had; the money was in my bank account but having given it now it's gone. The gospel teaches us that giving is like sowing seed. In the springtime when a farmer cultivates a field and then plants acres of wheat or corn seed it looks like nothing; a lot has been invested in that field and it looks empty. The hope is that a harvest is coming. God says our giving is like that. The harvest we may see or not, but God guarantees the harvest of our giving. Just as Jesus giving himself on the cross looked like all is lost and yet became the salvation of a countless host, so is all our giving. We trust the Lord of the harvest just as any wise farmer does.

Gratitude to God spills over and becomes gift to others; gratitude to God is the ground for gratitude towards one another. I wonder sometimes if our passion for human rights fosters a sense of entitlement that stifles gratitude. Gratefulness encourages blessing one another while ingratitude often bites the hand that feeds.

Mother Theresa, founder of the Missionaries of Charity, told this story at the U.S. National Prayer Breakfast in 1994. Relating to her work on the streets of Calcutta, she said, one evening we went out, and we picked up four people from the street. And one of them was in a most terrible condition. I told the sisters, "You take care of the other three; I will take care of the one who looks worst."

So I did for her all that my love could do. I put her in bed, and there was such a beautiful smile on her face. She took hold of my hand as she said two words only: "Thank you." Then she died. I could not help but examine my conscience before her. And I asked: What would I say if I were in her place? And my answer was very simple. I would have tried to draw a little attention to myself. I would have said, "I am hungry, I am dying, I am in pain," or something. But she gave me much more; she gave me her grateful love. And she died with a smile on her face. Gratitude brings a smile and becomes a gift.

4. In the story Luke recounts of the healing of the ten lepers our attention is drawn to the one leper who thanked Jesus. I invite you to listen again to that section of the story. "Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him." When you listen to this story in the context of Luke's entire account of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, Luke is clearly making the point that the man returned and worshipped and thanked Jesus. Notice how Luke joins the man's praising God in a loud voice and prostrating himself at Jesus' feet.

Further Jesus said to the man, "your faith has made you well." The word translated 'made you well' literally means 'saved you.' Your faith, Jesus said, has saved you. It is the same word Jesus said to the woman who was healed from chronic hemorrhages. (Luke 8:48) Whenever we see this word in the gospel it alerts us to the fact that it is often a loaded term that speaks of something much greater than relief from a physical ailment, as wonderful as that is. Indeed, the gospel asserts that Jesus heals us of all our diseases, but this healing is included in being saved from our sin, redeemed from that heart corruption where we have turned away from God. Jesus is the centre of this story and the salvation he brings is the reason healing occurs.

On this Thanksgiving Sunday, when we think of the many blessings we have received in life and understand that all good things come from God, gratefulness to God is the right response to God. As Chesterton said, "all good look better as gifts." A point I invite to reflect on is that the salvation offered us in Christ is much more than these myriads of gifts from God. The healing this man received points forward to that promise when all will be healed, just as the plethora of gifts in our lives points forward to the great future Jesus gave his life to secure for us. The believer know herself rescued from the dreadful consequence of sin and as the apprehension of the wonder of Jesus self-forgetful self-giving increases in the heart, it becomes the fuel for all thanksgiving in life. Many people are grateful for a sunny day, but not all bless God for his love that gives such to us. As we bask in the love of Jesus, we learn how to appropriately give thanks for the sunny day.

When Paul exudes, "Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!" he means Jesus.