

Thanksgiving: A Testimony To Survival

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Text: Psalm 100:1-5

Introduction:

A. Almost 390 years ago in 1620 in September a small group of religious refugees from England by way of Holland arrived at Plymouth Rock on the northern and eastern coast of what is now the United States. They originally were headed for Virginia but were blown off course. During that first winter in the new world New England weather was extremely cold, there was a shortage of food, and disease greatly affected these pilgrims. Fourteen of the 26 men and 15 of the 18 women died!

1. For those who did survive, spring finally came. Crops were planted and the work that was necessary for the future was accomplished.

2. By the Fall of 1621, these Pilgrims and their neighboring Indians shared in New England's first thanksgiving.

I. This week we will celebrate throughout our nation the custom of giving thanks for the many blessings that have come our way.

A. Families and friends will sit down together to tables overflowing with turkey, ham, dressing, an abundance of vegetables and salads, a variety of pies and assorted desserts. But before we begin eating, most of us will give thanks to God for all of the blessings that the table symbolizes. For some this will be the only time of the year that they pause and give thanks.

B. For many people who give thanks to God, they will look at their blessings primarily in terms of material blessings. And I must admit for someone who was raised in an environment that was not too far removed from poverty, such blessings are appreciated and not taken for granted.

C. But for many we look at our home, our vehicles, our tvs and entertainment systems, our jobs, etc. We consider our families and our opportunities for an education and we say, and usually quite genuinely, "My how God has blessed us with so many of the good things of life."

D. But let's return to the Pilgrims, the first thanksgiving was not a song to great prosperity. Rather it was a hymn to survival.

1. Their lives were so much better than just a few months earlier.

2. Compared to that harsh and destructive first winter the present was good and the future was promising.

3. But the awareness of struggle was the foundation for gratitude. This first thanksgiving was a testimony to survival much more than simply appreciation for the bounty that they were now experiencing.

E. It is easy to say "Thank you God" for all of the good things of life. And, we usually genuinely mean it when we say "Thank you." Especially, since we have so many good things to be thankful for.

F. But the Pilgrims were able to say, "Thank you, God" even when they reflected upon the hardships and the tragedies of the past winter.

1. Over half of the family heads and 5/6s of the married women had died in the cold, harsh winter. Such loss was enormous but it also made the lives of those who had survived more meaningful.

2. To find joyfulness and thankfulness in such circumstances took great faith on the part of the Pilgrims. It took humility. It took honesty. It took a recognition of human frailty.

3. There was no bitterness expressed by these Pilgrims, rather it seems that they focuses upon remembrance, appreciation, and humility.

G. True thankfulness transcends gratitude for the good things of life. It flows forth from a constant faith, which engulfs the wholeness of life, involving both the good and the bad that comes our way.

a. A person of deep faith is able to see the hand of God, to feel His love and presence in times of both happiness and sorrow, of wealth and poverty.

H. As Christians, we must recognize that God is God regardless of what happens in our lives.

1. We must be aware that God cares about us, regardless of the circumstances that can engulf us. I am reminded of the journey of my longtime friend and college roommate, Gene Cotton, who several years ago developed a brain tumor. He told me that although he knew anxiety from his circumstances, he reached the point of where he was not afraid to ask God hard questions. In the end he lost his struggle but interestingly became even a greater witness for God during the final months of his illness.

2. On a personal level in 1999 I lost five relatives and three close friends (Gene and two friends at OBU)- my sister passed away from breast cancer; Janis's mother died in her 90s; and aunt on my father's side and an uncle on my mother's side passed away; and a 14 year old first cousin, once removed committed suicide. Add to this the death of my roommate and two other friends and 1999 was not a good year. I experienced sorrow, loss, and a void in relation to all of these.

3. On the other hand, I developed a deep sense of gratitude for the lives of those who had departed; or at least a certainty and awareness of their influence, the joy that they brought, their presence in my life. I certainly would rather remember that than dwell on their absence.

II. The Psalmist, as he wrote the hymn, which was read this morning to be used in the worship of the people, tells them to worship with joy (vs. 1 & 2). He tells them to know that Jehovah is God (v. 3). He reminds them that He is God, and that they are his people. He tells them to remember that God is the God of creation and that the Hebrews were apart of that creation and His people.

A. The history of the Israelites was anything but smooth sailing. Patriarchs struggled to settle in the land of promise and to establish their families there. The exodus from Egypt reminded them of the constant struggles in taking the land, as indicated in the book of Judges. Even after the monarchy was established, holding on became more and more difficult as major powers, such as Egypt, Assyria, Babylonia, and others contested for control of this strategic place along the Mediterranean coast. Even as the land was divided and then both the North and the South fell under the control of outsiders, the Psalmist reminded them to be thankful to God (v. 4).

B. Why should they be thankful - the answer is found in verse 5.

1. For the Lord is good.
2. His love is steadfast.
3. And his faithfulness is constant.

III. Today, in the twenty-first century, we Christians need to be renewed with the joy that the Psalmist encourages. These are really challenging days for so many of us. The economy is bad, stress is all around, pain and struggle are realities everywhere we turn. Still, as God's people we should express our thankfulness in the good times and the bad times.

A. If our faith is strong and constant, we will know and be able to sense the presence and the love of God, not just when He "blesses" us, but when He wishes to comfort us, to love us, to encourage us, even to chastise us, and to strengthen us to move forward when the past has been so difficult.

Conclusion:

A. As you gather together this Thanksgiving to give thanks to God, look around and observe the good things of life and be grateful to God for all that has been given to you. Rejoice! Give thanks! We always are reminded of our home, our family, and our work. We do have it really good when compared to so many.

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B. But I remind you to also examine the difficulties, the losses, the pain, the suffering. And I encourage you to evaluate your faith and the role it plays or does not play as you seek to respond to these challenges. Have you been able to say "Fear not, God is with us?"

C. The bottom line is that God loves us at all times. So let us love him also. May bitterness never replace the joy that comes from being a child of God.

D. Let us in all things be thankful in the words of the Psalmist (100:4b-5) - Be thankful!

"Give thanks to Him: Bless His name.

For the lord is Good.

His loving kindness is everlasting,

And His faithfulness to all generations."