

Thankful, for “That”?

Valley Center Seventh-day Adventist Church

November 21, 2009

This Thursday, we in America will be celebrating Thanksgiving Day. For some, it will mean nothing more than a day off from work featuring football, family and food and an expectation of an early morning shopping spree the next day to look for bargains.

For some others, it will be a time of reflection on the providential beginnings of our country, remembering how nearly five centuries ago God led a pilgrim band of about 100 from across the sea, in search of a place in which they might practice their religion without fear of interference or persecution. They will recall how God had His hand in their preservation, being sustained those early winters by the kindness of native Americans who generously shared their food with them.

The pilgrims arrived in 1620 and landed in Massachusetts, but their first winter was difficult because they had come too late to grow many crops. Since their food stores were inadequate, more than half of the settlers died from disease.

The next spring the local Indians taught them how grow corn, a new food for them. That fall, a wonderful crop of corn, barley, beans and pumpkins was harvested and a feast planned, to which 90 of the Indians, including their chief were invited. The Indians brought deer to roast with turkeys and popcorn.

In the following years the colonists celebrated the fall harvest with a feast of thanksgiving. When the United States was formed, Congress recommended that one day of Thanksgiving be set aside each year and George Washington suggested the date of November 26 to be the date. On October 3, 1863 President Abraham Lincoln made a general proclamation, which had been written by Secretary of War William Seward:

By the President of the United States of America.

A Proclamation.

“The year that is drawing towards its close, has been filled with the blessings of fruitful fields and healthful skies. To these bounties, which are so constantly enjoyed that we are prone to forget the source from which they come, others have

been added, which are of so extraordinary a nature, that they cannot fail to penetrate and soften even the heart which is habitually insensible to the ever watchful providence of Almighty God.

“In the midst of a civil war of unequalled magnitude and severity, which has sometimes seemed to foreign States to invite and to provoke their aggression, peace has been preserved with all nations, order has been maintained, the laws have been respected and obeyed, and harmony has prevailed everywhere except in the theatre of military conflict; while that theatre has been greatly contracted by the advancing armies and navies of the Union.

“Needful diversions of wealth and of strength from the fields of peaceful industry to the national defense, have not arrested the plough, the shuttle or the ship; the axe has enlarged the borders of our settlements, and the mines, as well of iron and coal as of the precious metals, have yielded even more abundantly than heretofore. Population has steadily increased, notwithstanding the waste that has been made in the camp, the siege and the battle-field; and the country, rejoicing in the consciousness of augmented strength and vigor, is permitted to expect continuance of years with large increase of freedom.

“No human counsel hath devised nor hath any mortal hand worked out these great things. They are the gracious gifts of the Most High God, who, while dealing with us in anger for our sins, hath nevertheless remembered mercy. It has seemed to me fit and proper that they should be solemnly, reverently and gratefully acknowledged as with one heart and one voice by the whole American People.

“I do therefore invite my fellow citizens in every part of the United States, and also those who are at sea and those who are sojourning in foreign lands, to set apart and observe the last Thursday of November next, as a day of Thanksgiving and Praise to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the Heavens. And I recommend to them that while offering up the ascriptions justly due to Him for such singular deliverances and blessings, they do also, with humble penitence for our national perverseness and disobedience, commend to His tender care all those who have become widows, orphans, mourners or sufferers in the lamentable civil strife in which we are unavoidably engaged, and fervently implore the interposition of the Almighty Hand to heal the wounds of the nation and to restore it as soon as may be consistent with the Divine purposes to the full enjoyment of peace, harmony, tranquility and Union.”

Most of us have lost the concept of “harvest.” Last Sunday evening our church came together for a “Harvest Festival,” and we reviewed some statistics and data of farming in America. Only a little more than a century or so ago, with farming being done in a similar manner as it was done since the time of Abraham thousands of years ago, one farmer was needed to grow the food for about every nine people. It took between 250 and 300 labor hours to produce 100 bushels of wheat from five acres. Now, with machines that plow, plant and harvest nearly everything mechanically, in America one farmer can feed more than 75 people. Now it takes only about 3 hours of labor to grow 100 bushels of wheat from 3 acres. Few of us have to rely on what used to be a yearly necessity for most families, in growing and harvesting their food. With almost every variety of food being readily available for us in the stores throughout the year, we’ve lost the sense of what the fall harvest meant, when the food was now “safely gathered in” and rest from the work of farming could be laid aside for a time.

Nevertheless, it is a time when it is appropriate to reflect, and to thank and praise God for His blessings. Truly they are great! Did you wake up this morning? Praise God. Was there food in your refrigerator? Praise God! Did your car start when you turned the key? Praise God! His blessings are without number and we should thank him daily. Someone pointed out that we have this whole “Thanksgiving Day” thing wrong: we should have one day a year set aside for grumbling, leaving the rest to be days of praise and thanksgiving. Every day should be a day of thanksgiving for His wonderful gifts and blessings.

But that’s not the direction to which I want to turn your mind this morning. As strange as it may seem, I want to invite you to be thankful, not just for your blessings, but for your trials. “Be thankful for what?” you ask. Yes, be thankful for your trials and afflictions.

I remind you that God made a perfect world in which a man and women were placed who were created to bear the image and likeness of their Creator. But because of sin, that likeness was marred and through the years has nearly disappeared. How ungodly mankind has become! How the mighty are fallen!

But through the Gospel, God’s great plan of salvation, He purposes to redeem and restore man back into the image and likeness of Himself. With our cooperation (because He won’t do this without our consent), He proposes to create a new heart within us and change our very thought processes so that we have the “mind of Christ.” By the implantation of His Spirit He plans to change us from within so that we reflect the divine character. Selfishness, pride, covetousness, envy and all

the other “natural” traits of fallen man may be replaced by Him with love, joy, kindness, unselfish service and all the other godly traits, the “fruits of the Spirit.”

One of the ways in which God accomplishes this process is by the ministry of trials. God didn’t “cause” them, but He uses them. He allows certain things to come into our lives which have the result of us looking to Him more, depending on Him more, praying to Him more, trusting Him more and looking to that grand fulfillment of His plan more. If our lives here on earth were “perfect” and without any adversity, would we long for the heavenly courts above? If our bodies never knew pain, would we look for that day when Jesus will give us bodies touched by immortality? If there were no tribulations in our lives, if everything ran smoothly, would we be as conscious of the fact that we live in a world afflicted with sin and its deadly results? In mercy, to point us to Him and to a better future, to draw us closer to Him, to shape our characters through suffering, God allows trials and difficulties to come into our lives. Are you thankful for your trials?

In a time of great tragedy, the attack against Jerusalem by King Nebuchadnezzar which God allowed for the discipline of His people, the prophet wrote, “And they will comfort you, when you see their ways and their doings; and you shall know that I have done nothing without cause that I have done in it,” says the Lord GOD.” Ezekiel 14:23. Someday we will see that He has been there all along. There will come a day (perhaps not now) that we will consciously realize that God has directed our paths in this life.

On our recent mission trip to India, Brother Bruce Fjarli encouraged us with this thought. “If you run into trouble, what’s the worst that could possibly happen? That you would fall asleep in Jesus and take a short rest till you see Him in the clouds.” If that’s the worst that could possibly happen, shouldn’t we have a positive outlook on life?

I know that many in our church family have been afflicted with trials of various sort. From the things you’ve shared with me and what I’ve personally observed, there have been difficulties and disappointments in abundance. Hardly any family is exempt from some affliction or trouble. In these, do we recognize God’s tender care and mercy? Do we find comfort in suffering for Christ? Do we realize that there is no crown without a cross? Do we see the privilege in walking the thorny path of Golgotha with our Savior and sharing in His sufferings?

Early in the church’s history the apostles encountered persecution. As a result of the healing of a man at the temple gate, a commotion began which landed the

apostles before the Jewish Council. Gamaliel offered some wise advice and the Council “agreed with him, and when they had called for the apostles and beaten them, they commanded them that should not speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. So they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name.” Acts 5:40, 41.

Paul, who endured countless trials and tribulations including shipwrecks, beatings, stonings and scourging, wrote to the Philippians with these words. “Yes, and if I am being poured out as a drink offering on the sacrifice and service of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all. For the same reason you also be glad and rejoice with me.” Philippians 2:17, 18.

It was in that very city of Philippi that Paul and his companion Silas were beaten and jailed. Was theirs a response of grumbling and complaining over the injustice that had been done to them? Paul, a Roman citizen was beaten without a trial in the Roman colony (a “model city”) of Philippi. Did he seek revenge? Did he whine and murmur? No! He and Silas sang. They sang so loudly the other prisoners heard their songs of praise at midnight.

Paul wrote to the people of Rome, “We know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.” Romans 8:28. Even my trials can work for good? Yes; the Bible says “all things.” I should then be thankful for my trials? Yes. God has promised that He will allow nothing to come into our lives for which He has not made provision. “No such temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it.” I Corinthians 10:13.

Trials are the grit of God’s sandpaper. His purpose is to polish and prepare us for heaven. We are the stones which are being quarried from the earth, to be pillars in His temple above. Regarding the mighty stones which found their way into the temple which King Solomon built, we read, “And the temple, when it was being built, was built with stone finished at the quarry, so that no hammer or chisel or any iron tool was heard in the temple while it was being built.” I Kings 6:7.

Do you see the wonderful lesson in that text? The rocks were cut and chiseled, a very rough and “painful” but needful process, to prepare them for their place of honor in the temple. But all of the work to make them fit took place at the “quarry,” not in the temple. When they arrived at the place of God’s presence, all

the work had already been done and it was left just to assemble them into their proper position. The hewing, smoothing, sanding and polishing was completed before they arrived. That's what God is doing for us in this "quarry," called "earth." The cutting, smoothing process of preparing us to live with Him in heaven's perfection is what is taking place, if we let Him, in our characters right now. Are you thankful that He allows certain things to come into your life to increase your love and your patience? Are you thankful for your trials?

Peter wrote, "Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy." I Peter 4:12.

Try to imagine being in heaven, being in the presence of Jesus, the Creator King Who left all and came to this earth to suffer shame and death. Every step of His journey was marked by privation and poverty, thorns and thistles. There are the scars in His hands as a reminder of His great sacrifice. What if you were in His presence, but there was nothing in your personal experience here on earth in which you participated in the "fellowship of His sufferings," there was never any self denial, never any real sacrifice, never the burden of the cross. You never felt what it was like for Abraham to climb Mount Moriah with your "Isaac." You never suffered with Him and for Him. How uncomfortable you would feel! I must confess that I feel there has been too little self denial, too little self-sacrifice for Jesus in my life. What have I given up for Him?

Are you thankful for "that"? I may not know what "that" might be in your life, whether it is physical and health problems, of which there many; financial or business troubles, which abound in our present economic distress, family issues which produce pain and stress, or if it's something else that makes the road of life rough. But whatever "that" is, are you truly thankful for it? Do you see it from the perspective of God's great plan of restoration?

Of our great Forerunner, Jesus, it is written, "For it was fitting for Him, for whom are all things and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to make the Author of their salvation perfect through sufferings. For both He who sanctifies and those who are being sanctified are all of one (experience), for which reason He is not ashamed to call them brethren." Hebrews 2:10. It is because the redeemed and their Savior share together the experience of suffering that they realize a special bond; they belong to a special fraternity who know, like no others, what it means to walk this path below.

Late morning last Tuesday, while on my way to make a hospital visit, I came approached the intersection of 2nd and Quince in Escondido and found myself behind a shiny new black corvette with the license plate that said, “HOF 52” which was surrounded by a license plate holder which read, “Los Angeles Rams.” Hmm. Could it be that a former player in the NFL was stopped at the red light in the car just ahead of me? Was it someone I would know from the days when I watched football on television? There was also an insignia that read “NFL alumni.” My curiosity was peaked. A player from the Rams whose last name started with “F:” Or, maybe “HOF” stood for a nickname. I couldn’t come up with any name. When I returned home I did a little research.

At first I had thought that “HOF” were this person’s initials, but I couldn’t find any player with those letters as his initials, even when I searched on the internet. Then it dawned on me that the letters, “HOF” weren’t this person’s initials or a nickname, but meant something else. Those initials stood for “Hall of Fame.” Sure enough, defensive end Jack Youngblood wore the number “52” for the L.A. Rams from between 1974 and 1981 and was inducted into football’s Hall of Fame in 2001. He no doubt feels pleased with his accomplishments and enjoys being part of a small, select group that share a common experience. Many there are who would like to be a part of that special group and sport a license plate like that.

Let me tell you about another Hall of Fame. It will cause the NFL Hall of Fame to fade into insignificance quickly. It’s composed of a special group who have *shared Jesus’ experience in suffering*. You can be a part of this group, whose honor will last a lot longer than anything comparable on this earth. Shiny black corvette? You’ll be flying to the far stretches of the universe! Paul aspired to be a part of this Hall of Fame. He wrote, “That I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the *fellowship of His sufferings*, being conformed to His death, if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.” Philippians 3:10, 11. Paul greatly desired to be a member of the “alumni” who had suffered for Christ.

What should we as Christians do with our trials? Should we complain and murmur about them? No. Should we merely tolerate and begrudgingly “get through” them? That’s not the way Paul looked at them. He embraced them! When you pause to reflect and express thanksgiving (I hope it’s not just once a year on Thanksgiving Day!), be sure to include in your prayer an expression of thankfulness for “that.” Whatever “that” trial or tribulation is, tell Him “thanks,” because you know that He will allow nothing to come into your life for which He has not provision; you know that it is a part of His great plan to shape you and prepare you for the life to come.

Your trials may seem insurmountable. They may seem incomprehensible. They may seem beyond endurance, but God is there with you through every one of them. He didn't "cause" them, but He is working through them for your good. He Himself walked this path before and He knows, like no other human being, what you experience. You are a part of a very special "alumni," those who have shared in the fellowship of His sufferings. In His great love He is looking over you and guiding you. He is leading you home. Part of this process is the ministry of trials. Are you thankful for them?