

Thanks Be To God

Valley Center Seventh-day Adventist Church

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A few days from now and almost everyone in America will enjoy a day dedicated to Thanksgiving. It is supposed to be a day of remembrance for the providential manner in which the early English settlers in America were sustained during the harsh winters of their experience here. Today, I'm afraid, too many look on this day merely as a day for food and sport, for traveling or just enjoying a day off from work or school. Not that fellowship with family or good food is wrong. Not in the least! But it would be well to contemplate the many blessings which the Lord has bestowed on us; not just one day in the year, but all the time.

Thanksgiving is a vital part of the Christian walk. It should be cherished and nurtured every day. If you stop to think about it, nearly everyone in America is far better off than most in the world. Our garbage cans eat better than 25% of the globe's population. One of our members brought to our attention the project "Sandals for the Soul," a drive to collect "flip-flops" and thongs as inexpensive footwear for the victims of Haiti's earthquake. Think of the hundreds of thousands, the millions who are living in squalor almost within shouting distance of America! A donation to purchase some flip-flops so that the health hazard is reduced in their turmoil-torn country: what a small price to pay to lift someone else! I read this week a story from the "Junior Guide" magazine, made even more charming because it was written by someone I knew, Miriam Hardinge. She was the wife of one of my college teachers, Dr. Leslie Hardinge, at PUC. One year I was privileged to rent a small cottage on their property and live there. This story was printed around Thanksgiving of 1956.

Mrs. Hardinge recounts that she was in a store making a purchase when she heard a voice say, "Hi." At first she wasn't sure that the young girl was speaking to her, since she didn't recognize her at all, but the young woman was indeed speaking to her. Triumphantly she said, "This is my first day without crutches." She evidently had overcome a broken bone or other disability, and was sharing her good news with anyone and everyone, whoever would listen. Miriam conversed with her briefly, and then the young lady was off to tell someone else her happiness, this time the cashier.

It got Miriam to thinking. There were people she knew that wouldn't be able to share such news. They will forever be leaning on a crutch or riding in a wheelchair, or as many find helpful today, pushing a walker. Wouldn't they like to go up and tell someone, "This is my first day without crutches." Then Miriam's mind went fast-forward to some glad day when

even those who in this life had been forever afflicted with some ailment will say, "This is my first day without crutches." When Jesus comes, all will raise their voices in a thanksgiving chorus to our great and wonderful God Who will make all things new on that day.

Today should be a "Thanksgiving Day." It is the ungodly who are unthankful. Paul says, "although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful." Romans 1:21. He identifies this characteristic of ingratitude as one of the tokens of the last age. "But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come: for men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy." II Timothy 3:1.

In the Bible, the giving of praise and the offering of thanks were hallmarks of God's faithful, whether the circumstances were totally favorable or not. Notice these words of counsel. There's a small variation between the thoughts of the two passages we'll read. Paul wrote to the believers in Thessalonica, "In everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." I Thessalonians 5:18. "In" everything give thanks. But he went a bold step further than that, when writing to the church at Ephesus. He wrote, "Giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." Ephesians 5:20.

There's a slight difference between the two concepts. Did you see that? In the first, when we give thanks "in" all things, we are giving thanks that in every circumstance God will be with us and bring good from it. In the first passage, we are thankful not for the trial, but for what the experience will accomplish, through His grace, in our lives. In the second, however, Paul ventured further and said that we are even thankful for the trial itself. We are not only thankful "in" it, but we are thankful "for" it. That requires great faith! Someday we will give even more thanks when we see things as He sees them. We will know that nothing in our lives has been by mere happenstance.

Daniel was targeted for execution by his colleagues, simply because he had been so faithful that King Darius considered promoting him to be the head of the other presidents of his kingdom; essentially, Daniel would be prime minister of Medo-Persia. His co-workers became jealous and concocted a plot to get rid of Daniel, hood-winking the monarch into signing a law that prohibited anyone from praying to anyone but the king for a period of 30 days. They did this, not because they were really desirous of establishing Darius' throne, but because they knew that Daniel prayed to his God everyday, so they schemed to place him in a trap that would result in his death.

What did Daniel do? "Now when Daniel knew that the writing was signed, he went home. And in his upper room, with his windows open toward Jerusalem, he knelt down on his knees three times that day, and prayed and gave thanks before his God, as was his custom since early days." Daniel 6:10. There might have been a lot of things that Daniel might have prayed about that day, not the least of which might have been, "Dear Lord, Save me." But the content of his prayer, this man of giant faith, was thanksgiving.

King David scheduled a celebration at the returning of the ark of the covenant. The ark had not been in Jerusalem for a long time, since its capture by the Philistines in the days of Eli. David had attempted to bring it back on a previous occasion, but their method of transporting the ark was not in keeping with the explicit instruction that had been given by God. They were carrying the ark on a cart drawn by oxen, rather than the ark being carried by the poles made for it, which were supposed to be placed on the shoulders of the Levites. You'll remember that when the cart was in motion, it appeared to rock and tip when the oxen stumbled and Uzzah reached out his hand to steady the ark and was struck dead on the spot.

This confused and angered David. He became very upset about it. Weren't they doing a good thing? They were in the process of bringing the ark back to Jerusalem. Wasn't that a noble deed? Why had God allowed this to happen. But later when his anger cooled, he realized that they had been the ones at fault. They had disregarded the direct command of the Lord, and His blessing had been removed. In repentance and contrition, David went back and re-scheduled the return of the ark, this time in obedience to the commands of the Lord. David explained it this way, speaking to the priests and Levites. "For because you did not do it (carry the ark by its poles) the first time, the LORD broke out against us, because we did not consult Him about the proper order.' So the priests and the Levites sanctified themselves to bring up the ark of the LORD God of Israel. And the children of the Levites bore the ark of God on their shoulders, by its poles, as Moses had commanded according to the word of the LORD." I Chronicles 15:13-15.

It was on this occasion that David composed the beautiful psalm of thanksgiving that is recorded in I Chronicles 16. What's important for us to see is that David could have remained in his attitude of anger, sulking over the tragedy of Uzzah's death, and never ascended from the pit of discouragement and despair. What he did, though, was to review his life and what had happened, and became open to the possibility that maybe there was reason that he had not yet seen, a failing in his own policy that had played a part in the calamity. When it was brought to his attention that they had not obeyed the Lord's command regarding the carrying of the ark, David, to his credit, acknowledged his error and went about to correct it and bring the ark back to Jerusalem.

Rather than wallow in self-pity and resentment, the occasion was turned into a celebration of thanksgiving! David could give thanks that the Lord had given them another opportunity to bring the ark to Jerusalem, and this time as they obeyed His instruction and received His blessing, jubilation and celebration resulted.

A number of centuries later, the children of Judah had strayed far from the precepts of the Lord, and He had allowed them to go into captivity at the hands of Babylon. On the third attack of King Nebuchadnezzar in 586 BC, the beautiful temple that had been constructed by King Solomon, the most glorious building this world ever saw, went up in flames. Now, many decades after its destruction and following the release from Babylon, the foundations for a new temple were laid.

There were some there, as the stones were put in place, who were old enough to remember what the previous building had looked like, and wept in sorrow at the comparison. But others rejoiced that at long last God's house was being rebuilt. "When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, the priests stood in their apparel with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, to praise the LORD, according to the ordinance of David king of Israel. And they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the LORD: 'For He is good, for His mercy endures forever toward Israel.' Then all the people shouted with a great shout, when they praised the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid." Ezra 3:10, 11.

At that time, they could have pined away in sorrow over their past mistakes, over the tragedy of their captivity, over the loss of their beautiful temple. But it was God's will that, having repented of their sins, they now rejoice and share together in thanksgiving. It was a time to recount His bountiful blessings. They were to be thankful "in" all things and "for" all things.

When the rebuilt wall was dedicated, again there was cause for celebration and thanksgiving. "Now at the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem they sought out the Levites in all their places, to bring them to Jerusalem to celebrate the dedication with gladness, both with thanksgivings and singing, with cymbals and stringed instruments and harps. So I brought the leaders of Judah up on the wall, and appointed two large thanksgiving choirs, one of which went to the right hand on the wall toward the Refuse Gate; the other thanksgiving choir went the opposite way. So the two thanksgiving choirs stood in the house of God, likewise I and the half of the rulers with me. The singers sang loudly with Jezrahiah as their director. Also that day they offered great sacrifices, and rejoiced, for God had made them rejoice with great joy; the women and the children also rejoiced, so that the joy of Jerusalem was heard afar off." Nehemiah 12:27, 31, 38, 40-43.

Again, rather than walk the path of sorrow forever, they raised their voices in thanksgiving to their great God Who had delivered them from the hand of their enemies and allowed them to return to their homeland and reconstruct the temple and the city.

Paul and Silas were out doing missionary work. They were in the city of Philippi, a Roman "colony," which meant that it was intended to exemplify the Roman way of life. While there, Paul healed a young lady who had been possessed by the devil. She had been following the missionaries and her presence had become a distraction. Her masters, who received money from the divinations accomplished by this demon-possessed girl, were now deprived of their income source and sought occasion against Paul and Silas. Trumping up false charges, they threw the two missionaries into prison, beating them and constraining their limbs in the cramp-inducing stocks.

What did Paul and Silas do? Did they complain and murmur? Did they shout imprecations and insults against their tormentors? No! They sang hymns of praise. At midnight, no less! Did they sing in soft, subdued tones, hoping no one else would hear their songs of thanksgiving? No! All the other prisoners heard Paul and Silas singing! "But at midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening

to them.” Acts 16:25. There may be a time in which you find yourself in a similar situation as did Paul and Silas. When it looks like the enemy has the upper hand, sing praise to God! When it looks like life is unfair and you’ve been mistreated, sing praise to God! Let your voice of praise be heard by others, whether it’s actual singing or by what you say in your personal testimony. Others will be listening, and listening they will be blessed. God will use this occasion to reach others, just as He did in that Philippian prison.

What happened back then? There was a great earthquake, and the jailor, supposing that all the prisoners would flee, and knowing that it would be his life that would be held accountable, was about to kill himself. Paul assured him, “Do nothing to harm yourself. We’re all here.” At this demonstration of godliness, the warden had to find out what Paul and Silas had that was missing in his life. Because Paul and Silas sang and gave thanks, God turned a cruel experience into a salvation crusade! The jailor and his family were converted and baptized as a result of Paul and Silas’ thanksgiving crusade. When trials come to you; when you’re afflicted and tormented, give thanks. “In” all things and “for” all things, give thanks. Sing, as did Paul and Silas! It will lift your spirits and will bring blessing to others.

A few days from now nearly all in our nation will celebrate Thanksgiving Day. Let it be a time of genuine thanksgiving to God for all His blessings. Be thankful “in” all things and “for” all things. Let your mind recount the ways in which God has been merciful and caring in your life. Let it be the beginning of a life of thanksgiving, in which you allow the Spirit to teach you ways in which to praise God in every circumstance. “Therefore by Him let us continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name.” Hebrews 13:15.

Paul, in writing his second letter to the believers in Corinth, was overwhelmed with the spirit of gratitude and necessity of expressing praise to God. He wrote three times in this letter of his thankfulness to God. “Now thanks be to God Who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and through us diffuses the fragrance of His knowledge in every place.” II Corinthians 2:14. “ Later, he expressed his gratitude for the way in which his co-worker Titus had responded to the need to minister to the saints. “Thanks be to God who puts the same earnest care for you into the heart of Titus.” II Corinthians 8:16. Finally, in one of the most memorable of all passages in the New Testament he said, and we echo his thoughts today, “Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift!” II Corinthians 9:15.