

# **Give Thanks**

MJCF

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Nehemiah 8:13-18, Colossians 3:12-17

Happy Thanksgiving! Each year, we set aside a special time to give thanks to God. But, this year, I wondered how to talk about giving thanks because there are many people who struggle with huge challenges. These days, with the pandemic dragging on, extra stress is easily added to the stress of health problems, a lack of money, conflicts with people who have strong opposing feelings, problems getting along with co-workers, or conflicts within our families.

I came across this prayer in the devotional book, "Our Daily Bread." It focuses on the positive side of a lot of things. It's called, "Everyday Thanksgiving.":

Even though I clutch my blanket and growl  
when the alarm rings, thank you, Lord, that I can  
hear. There are many who are deaf.

Even though I keep my eyes closed against  
the morning light as long as possible, thank you,  
Lord, that I can see. Many are blind.

Even though I huddle in my bed and put off  
rising, thank you Lord, that I have the strength to  
rise. There are many who are bedridden.

Even though the first hour of my day is  
hectic, when socks are lost, toast is burned,  
tempers are short, and my children are so loud  
thank you, Lord, for my family.  
There are many who are lonely.

Even though our breakfast table never looks  
like the pictures in magazines and the menu is at  
times unbalanced, thank you, Lord, for the food  
we have. There are many who are hungry.

Even though the routine of my job is often  
monotonous, thank you, Lord, for the opportunity  
to work. There are many who have no job.

Even though I grumble and bemoan my fate  
from day to day and wish my circumstances were  
[better], thank you, Lord, for life.

In 1<sup>st</sup> Thessalonians 5, Paul says, "...give thanks in all circumstances." (v.18) It's true that we can always find something for which to be thankful. But, in today's message, I didn't want to just tell people, "Cheer up! Thank God that things aren't any worse!" I didn't want to just encouraging people to look on the bright side! The problem is that the focus then easily becomes ourselves rather than God.

When our focus is on what God has been doing, we find the energy to express thanksgiving, even during challenging times. Our deep joy and thanksgiving does not depend on whether or not we're having a good day. We can find reason to "rejoice in the Lord" as the apostle Paul encourages us to do even in times of suffering.

In the Old Testament part of the Bible, God actually commanded the Israelites to formally remember what God has done for them and to give thanks. Giving thanks to God gives us a true perspective of the world around us. God is always ultimately in control, and we can trust God to lead us through whatever challenges we face. God knows how easy it is for us to forget to give thanks when we are struggling with life's problems, so it is important to have regular times set aside for us to remember what God has done.

Every year, the Jews celebrate "Succoth" also known as the "Festival of Booths," or "Festival of Tabernacles." For this 7-day festival, the people would make tabernacles or booths, as described in the book of Nehemiah. (ch. 8) The shelters, often constructed on the roofs of their homes, represented the life of the Israelites before they settled in the promised land. After God rescued them from slavery in Egypt, they wandered in the desert sleeping in temporary shelters. Once they settled in the new land, they no longer needed the shelters, but they needed ways to remember how God takes care of them. So, during the Succoth festival, the people constructed shelters, usually on the roofs of their houses, and lived in them for the week (or at least for one day during the festival), in order to remember how God took care of them in the desert. The people were to rest from their work, and present to God various offerings and sacrifices. Prayers and words of blessing were exchanged, and food was shared with everyone. Along with thanksgiving for what God had given them, it was important to share with others.

This idea was reflected in another important ritual where the Israelites would offer back to God the "first fruits" of their harvest each year. A portion would be put in a basket and brought to the priest. According to Deuteronomy chapter 26, verse 3, the person bringing this offering would say, "Today I declare to the LORD your God that I have come into the land that the LORD swore to our ancestors to give us." Later, the declaration would continue with the story of Abraham: "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down to Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation..." The declaration would then move into the history of how the Israelites were persecuted, becoming slaves to the Egyptians, and how they were rescued by God and led through the desert until they were finally able to enter the land God had promised, a prosperous land flowing with milk and honey. As the people offered back to God the first and best of their harvest, and as they repeated the story of how God had led and blessed them, it helped them remember. It helped them keep in mind the reality of God's presence. The passage later continues with instructions on how their offerings should be shared with the poor, those who didn't have any land. These were the Levites (who were temple helpers), the strangers, orphans, and widows. The Israelites were commanded to share because they, themselves, had also once been poor, as slaves in Egypt before God rescued them.

How much attention do we give to thanking God in our lives for all that God has done for us? What sorts of rituals do we have to help us remember how God takes care of us? I can think of things like our prayers of thanks before every meal. Or, as a church, I thought of our monthly celebration of the "Lord's Supper," when we remember Jesus' death and resurrection. I think also of the times when we share with others by making donations. As we share, it helps us remember how God continues to bless us with gifts that enable us to share with others.

So, as the Israelites learned, it's important to remember to give God thanks, and it's important to remember to share God's blessings with others. But, in these stressful times today,

what if we are struggling to find things for which to be thankful? Here are four reasons for which we can all give thanks. They do not depend on our circumstances, and they point to something much deeper.

First, we can give thanks because of who God is. Psalm 107:1 says, “Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever.” God is good, and God’s love never ends. In some churches people regularly say, “God is good, all the time!” If we allow this truth to sink deeply into our hearts, it can change our lives.

Second, we can also give thanks because of what God has done. In the book of James, it says that “every good and perfect gift comes from God.” All the good things we experience in life, are gifts of God. And, the greatest gift is Jesus Christ. God came to us, in Jesus. When we look at Jesus, we learn much about God. Jesus showed us God’s ways of love and faithfulness. He modeled obedience in that he followed God’s way of love, even to the point of allowing himself to be crucified on a cross. In his resurrection, God’s power was then shown to be stronger than death.

A third reason we can give thanks is that, through God, we have hope for the future. I’m reading from 1<sup>st</sup> Peter, chapter 1, verse 3 to 6:

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials...”

Because Jesus was raised from the dead, we have hope for the future. No matter what happens, Death is not the end. We may have many difficulties, but we can be thankful that God has prepared an “inheritance” for us. Through Jesus, we have been made part of God’s family. In his letter to the Romans, the apostle Paul says, “...all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.” (8:14) And, “...if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ – if, in fact we suffer with him so that we may be glorified with him.” (8:17). We are all children of God. We belong to a future heavenly kingdom.

This brings us to the 4<sup>th</sup> reason for giving thanks. We can give thanks because God is able to use even difficulties to bless us. Romans 8, verse 28, says, “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.” God can transform our problems into something good. Through challenging experiences, we become stronger.

One of my favorite passages is the one we read from Paul’s letter to the Colossians. It lists several key characteristics for followers of Jesus. But, I’d like you to take note of especially the final three verses. They are full of thanksgiving. In three verses thanksgiving or gratitude is mentioned three times. Verse 15 starts, “...Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful...” In the next verse, we read, “...and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.” And finally, in the last verse, it says, “...do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” This attitude of gratitude is not based on our circumstances. The Colossian believers faced challenges to their faith in Christ. Many experienced persecution, yet they were to continue to give thanks to God. By focusing on God, they received strength, and a clearer perspective of reality. It’s easy to get caught up focusing only on the problems around us. We forget that God is ultimately in control. When we focus back on God, we see things as

they truly are, and we realize that nothing can separate us from God's love. Let's pray.

O Lord, you have led us through many experiences. We've celebrated your goodness, and we've struggled through challenging times. Thank-you that you are still present during the tough times, even when we struggle to see you. Loving God, you understand us better than we understand ourselves. Today, there are many who suffer. Some are tired for various reasons. O Lord, we need you. Draw us nearer. Help us to see that you are ultimately in control. May we trust in you. We praise you for who you are. May we not forget to share your blessings, through Jesus Christ, our Lord, Amen.