



President Lincoln decreed on October 3rd 1863 that there should be a day of thanksgiving to be held on the last Thursday of November. In that declaration he wrote: "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. 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 was a very noble gesture, but not the first thanksgiving, for God had decreed in the days of Moses that three times a year all the males would approach him and: "they shall not appear before the Lord empty" (Deut. 16:16). They were to bring the first fruits: "All the best of the oil, and all the best of the wine, and of the wheat, the firstfruits of them which they shall offer unto the Lord" (Num. 18:12).

While thanksgiving and praise are often closely connected (1 Chron. 16:35; Psa. 79:13; Heb. 13:15), there is a difference between them. Thanksgiving emphasizes the bountiful kindness of God toward us. Praise emphasizes His ability and gracious generosity in showing such kindness.

We in the richest countries are so accustomed to the abundance of food, money in our pockets, health and strength, and indeed work to do, that we lose sight of how well off we are. In the work of Bible teaching I have been privileged to be with saints in some of the most poverty stricken situations of the world. A byproduct of this has been an appreciation and thankfulness to God for the many blessings, temporal and spiritual, we so richly enjoy.

As a child in Ireland I could never understand why some saints fail to have a service of thanksgiving. I know all the arguments: "We always give thanks", "God knows we are grateful", but I still do not understand why there is not a "Gathering for thanksgiving". What a lot could be done for needy saints across the world who do not have the luxury of everyday things that we can take for granted. For a time, the school I went to used the church hall for our classes. I still remember going to school and seeing the fresh fruit and vegetables all laid out. It was not that these were plentiful, for things were very scarce in the early and mid 50's in Ireland. At school all the classes would be brought together and several hundred children would sing:

We plough the fields, and scatter the good seed on the land,
But it is fed and watered, by God's almighty hand;
He sends the snow in winter, the warmth to swell the grain,
The breezes, and the sunshine, and soft refreshing rain.

Refrain:

*All good gifts around us are sent from heaven above,
Then thank the Lord, O thank the Lord, for all his love!*

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He only is the Maker of all things, near and far;
He paints the wayside flower, He lights the evening star;
The winds and waves obey him, by him the birds are fed;
Much more to us, his children, He gives our daily bread.

We thank thee then, O Father, for all things bright and good,
The seed-time and the harvest, our life, our health, our food;
Accept the gifts we offer for all thy love imparts,
And, what thou most desirest, our humble thankful hearts.

The sweet Psalmist of Israel said: "The eyes of all wait upon thee; and thou givest them their meat in due season" (Psa. 145:15); "Thank God in the morning and evening" (1 Chron. 23:30).

We ought to be thankful, if for no other reason than we the redeemed are told to: "follow His steps" (1 Pet. 2:21); "to walk even as He walked" (1 Jn. 2:6); and His was a life of thankfulness.

Consider the following situations:

- a) When the Lord was about to feed the 4000 men, also "beside women and children" (Matt. 15:38). He took the seven loaves and two fishes and "gave thanks" (Matt. 15:36).
- b) When He was instituting the Lord's Supper we read: "He took the cup, and gave thanks" (Matt. 26:27).
- c) When He took the cup it is recorded: "He took the cup, and when He had given thanks" (Mk. 14:23).
- d) When He was about to feed the 5000 we read: "And when He had given thanks" (Jn. 6:11). Particular note is taken that: "the Lord had given thanks" (Jn. 6:23).

There are another two remarkable times when the Lord gave thanks (Matt. 11:12 and Jn. 11:41-42). Interestingly, neither was when one would normally give thanks.

- a) With the coming of John preaching: "The kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt. 3:2), there was great anticipation. The Kingdom of David's greater Son was at hand. To the people this meant Israel as the head, and freedom from the Romans (Deut. 28:13). However, time had passed, and the Kingdom of God as man perceived it not come, but there was growing opposition to the One who was claiming to be Messiah. John was not only put in prison, but was questioning things (Matt. 11:3), and the very cities where Christ did most of "his mighty deeds" had rejected His claims. They rejected Christ as the Messiah (Matt. 11:20-21). This was a crisis, and naturally speaking, not the time to thank God. When the disciples of John come, the Lord says and does things which would solidify John in his beliefs (Matt. 11:4-6). When John's disciples had left, the Lord:
 - i) Gives God's evaluation of the greatness of John. (Matt. 11:7-10)
 - ii) Declares the contrast between the greatness of John and the least in the kingdom of Heaven. (Matt. 11:11)
 - iii) Gives a parable of the children. (Matt. 11:12-19)
 - iv) Then a parable after which the Lord pronounces a solemn declaration of their judgment. (Matt. 11:20-24)

Then we read Jesus speaking this wonderful prayer. The question then is, "What was there about this that caused Him to give thanks, and to speak to God as: "Lord of heaven and earth"?" (Matt. 11:12)

- b) The Lord responding to the holiness of God prays: "I thank Thee, O Father, Lord of Heaven and earth because Thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent and hast revealed them unto babes. Even so, Father: for so it seemed good in thy sight" (Matt. 11:25-26). It is a profound prayer giving us insight into the reverence, relationship, and understanding of the Saviour. Note carefully:
 - i) Twice over He speaks of the relationship addressing God as "Father". This is not so much a prayer as a communion of thanksgiving. It is a sacred moment and holy ground as we are privileged to listen in on this sacred communing.

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- ii) Only here does He speak of God as “Lord of heaven and earth”. The only other time this title is used is when Paul was at Mar’s Hill and said to the Athenians: “God that made the world and all things therein, seeing that He is Lord of Heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands” (Acts 17:24). It points to His creative power and has uncurtailed sway in heaven and earth. Therefore, if He in grace gives man opportunity to accept His evidencing of who Jesus is, and it is deliberately rejected, God is fully justified in accepting their response and sending judicial blindness. However, if there are others who perceive He is more than a prophet, He is perfectly within His rights to give further enlightenment.
- iii) In His recognition of the sovereignty and grace of God, He thanks God for the perfections of His sovereignty and grace.

Luke tells us how the Lord felt at this time: “Jesus rejoiced in spirit”. (Lk. 10:21)

- c) Again we read how that Lazarus had died and in due time the Lord came to the place where the dead was laid. In that situation He said: “Father, I thank Thee that Thou hast heard me. And I knew that Thou hearest me always: but because of the people which stand by I said it, that they may believe that Thou hast sent me” (Jn. 11:41-42). What was it He said (v. 42) that would cause the people to believe that He had been sent by God? Was it:
 - i) “Take ye away the stone” (v. 39), thus putting the people in anticipation of what he would do next?
 - ii) “I thank Thee that Thou hast heard me” and spoke this audibly that the people would know he was always in fellowship with God despite how things looked, for God: “heareth not sinners” (Jn. 9:31).
 - iii) Was it that which He was about to say: “Lazarus, come forth”? (v. 43)

It is my thought that, while primarily it is that God had heard Him give Mary the knowledge that He was the “Resurrection and the Life” (v. 25), which had been followed by the intimation that He would raise Lazarus by telling them to roll away the stone, He would give further evidence that God had sent Him. With these things in mind he thanks God.

Continuing with the Lord giving thanks, several matters are to be observed which demonstrate Him as wholly dependent on God His Father.

- a) When the Lord said: “Father, I thank Thee that Thou hast heard me”, why was this said outwardly and not just a quiet prayer within, after all that is what Nehemiah did (Neh. 2:4)? It is a glorious demonstration of: "Trust in the Lord with all thine heart . . . In all thy ways acknowledge him" (Prov. 3:5-6). In so doing, all attention was directed toward the Father for the fulfilling of the miracle.
- b) By lifting up His eyes (Jn. 11:41) He was showing the source from where His help came from. It was not by Beelzebub He performed the miracles, as He had been accused (Matt. 12:27), but in fellowship with the Father for the miracles “God did by Him” (Acts 2:22), “God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Ghost” (Acts 10:38), and “God was with Him” (Acts 10:38).

One must be in awe of the unreserved confidence the Man from Nazareth had in God. This was because: “He that sent me is with me: the Father hath not left me alone; for I do always those things that please him” (Jn. 8:29). This was a man who never regarded iniquity in His heart (Psa. 66:18), and who kept all His commandments (1 Jn. 3:22).

When this petition was spoken audibly, the fulfilling of it was a further endorsement of who Jesus was. Reading it again: "But because of the people which stand by I said it, that they may believe that thou hast sent me" (Jn. 11:42). It is almost impossible to read this and not think of Elijah on Mount Carmel. "Elijah the prophet came near, and said, Lord God of Abraham, Isaac, and of Israel, let it be known this day that thou art God in Israel, and that I am thy servant, and that I have done all these things at thy word. Hear me, O Lord, hear me, that this people

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may know that thou art the Lord God" (1 Kings 18:36, 37). That miracle at Carmel was for the authenticating that Elijah was a prophet from God. The raising of Lazarus was an authentication that Jesus was the Messiah.

"Lazarus, come forth. And he that was dead came forth" (Jn. 11:43-44). At the sound of that voice which is "powerful . . . full of majesty . . . that breaketh the cedars . . . that divideth the flames of fire . . . that shaketh the wilderness . . . that maketh the hinds to calve (Psa. 29:4-9); spoke in all its glory and Lazarus came forth. That which was the king of terrors and the terror of kings gave up its prey, the tomb was emptied, and Christ was seen to be the mighty conqueror over death and the grave.

All I can say is that in that prayer there are depths of power and fellowship that no mortal tongue can convey, but ours is the privilege to bow in worship and genuine adoration and say with the disciples: "What manner of man is this" (Matt. 8:27).

. . . Rowan Jennings