

THANKS FOR WHAT? **Dr. George O. Wood**

Our scripture today is a perhaps a rather unusual one for Thanksgiving. I so value and appreciate how Sunday after Sunday you are patient with the length of the sermons which I preach. I have not felt particularly of the Lord to preach a long sermon. So we won't worry about the clock at this point. I read from the first five verses of Job 1. Job is right before the Psalms. "There was a man in the land of Uz, whose name was Job. That man was blameless and upright. One who feared God and turned away from evil. There were born to him seven sons and three daughters. He had 7000 sheep, 3000 camels, 500 yoke of oxen and 500 she-asses and very many servants. So this man was the greatest of all the people of the east. His sons used to go and hold a feast in the house of each on his day and they would send and invite their three sisters to eat and drink with them. When the days of the feasts had run their course Job would send and sanctify them. He would rise early in the morning and offering burnt offerings according to the number of them all for Job said, 'It may be that my sons have sinned and cursed God in their hearts.' Thus Job did continually."

It's fitting at a time when we begin reaching for our historical root as an America people. It was in September of 1620 that a group of 102 persons and men, women and children, left Plymouth, England for what they hoped to be Virginia. They were Puritan Separatists, those who were breaking from the Church of England. As they left in 1620 behind them already was the tradition of being Pilgrims for indeed many of these same 102 people had left England 12 years earlier in 1608 to go to the Netherlands hoping that in the Netherlands they would find a greater freedom of worship. They returned however by way of England as they were on their way to America in order to pick up more persons who would be going to the New World. Their boat Speedwell, which they had sailed away from the Netherlands in, then left with a larger ship, which they picked up in England named the Mayflower. Twice they set out from England on the Speedwell and the Mayflower. And twice they turned back because the Speedwell proved to be unseaworthy.

Finally all of them being in the Mayflower journeyed for a distance of some 65 days of rough passage over the Atlantic until they came to Massachusetts. To Cape Cod. Rough winds and errors in navigation had resulted in them landing up in the New England coast instead of the gentler territory of Virginia. They landed at Provincetown, November 21, 1620. And for a number of weeks after that tried to find what would prove to be a suitable place in which to establish a settlement. Finally by the end of December in 1620 they located at Plymouth where they found a piece of ground with a clear pure stream with some cleared land as well as a hill that could be fortified for defense purposes.

During that winter poor and inadequate food, strenuous work and changeable weather made them very susceptible to sickness so that by the end of their first winter in the new world this colony had lost nearly one half of the 102 persons who had made the trip. In the spring the Indians Samoset and Squanto came into the colony and introduced to the colonists the idea of using fish as fertilizer in order to yield a good crop. Late in the summer of 1621 the Pilgrims harvested their first crop, a bounteous crop for which in the autumn of that year of 1621 they held a three day feast with their new found Indian friends and gave thanksgiving to God.

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Nearly 150 years after this in 1789 George Washington, the first American President, proclaimed November 26th as a day of Thanksgiving. And for a while Thanksgiving was kept in certain years but it was not yet established as a national day until 1863 in the heart of the Civil War some 242 years after the Pilgrims had landed Lincoln proclaimed the last Thursday in November as a day of Thanksgiving and praise to our beneficent father.

To me it is striking to note that in the historical instances which led to the giving of thanks on a special day that two of those times mainly the Pilgrims and the time of Abraham Lincoln came at moments in human history when persons who were at the crossroads between cursing or giving thanks. The Pilgrims on that first autumn of Thanksgiving in 1621 could have chosen to have blamed and cursed the ground, the land, the whole sense of freedom which had driven them from the old world. They could have looked at their loses, turned to the past and they could have despaired. But in that moment they chose to look forward in faith to the future. They chose to hope in God. And by that act of thanksgiving they were symbolizing the desire of life to bless rather than to curse.

It's striking also when the national ceremony, which we celebrate now, began in 1863 again the nation was at a time when an America President and an American people could have despaired of ever giving thanks.

Then I think what a parallel there is for our own lives. That indeed it is often in the times that are the most dark and severe that for the people of God, the greatest thanksgiving arises.

I use for a biblical text a man who certainly lived many years before the pilgrims, Job, who understood the value of giving thanksgiving. For years I sat around at Thanksgiving dinner table and thanked God for material blessings. Thanked God for family, and thanked God for health. But over that same period of time increasingly pangs of conscious would grip me as I realized that there are other people who I know, other brothers and sisters in Christ, some of whom I do not know persons who do not have the very things for which I am giving thanks for. Is God prejudiced and bias toward them? Giving me blessings he has not given to others? Or is there an ability to go on in a deeper level of thanksgiving and find a unity in thanksgiving which brothers and sisters in Christ all over the world can unite in.

Job I think leads us to an appreciation of that idea. As we see him in the scriptural record as he has sat down at a thanksgiving table and as we find him in Job 1, the early verses, he could have thanked God for his material blessings. Indeed he had much material blessings. In a day before silver or paper currency was used he was a wealthy man. He had his investment in stock – all kinds of sheep, camels, oxen, she-asses and many servants.

In a moment of time however all that he had in terms of possessions is taken from him. We kind of need to recognize that we live in a time in which two things are going on. We live in a world in which people are starving to death. That one hundred thousand people today in the world will die of starvation. Most of them children. Most of them young. When we thank God for the food, which we have at the Thanksgiving table, we are made conscious of the fact that we indeed are in a special and privileged place. And simply because we have food and others do not does not mean that God loves us and does not love others. But rather he is seeking to move our hearts with a new level of generosity and compassion for the world.

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Sometimes we are the most thankful when we have the least. I think of my little boy who at his birthday or Christmas time received numerous gifts and because he does not have one he can single out upon but so many he tends to be careless in how he keeps them up and how he plays with them. But when he has fewer things he is better to work with, better to play with and far more joyful.

As I think back to my experiences as a child to times of poverty that were in our family it was the one gift that I would get for Christmas and nothing else which stood out in special significance.

God's people have a unique way that in a time of adversity finding the greatest thanks to give. On the one hand there is hunger and famine. On the other hand a severe recession threatens our country, some are fearing depression. Here is a time when we can really show our values as the people of God. Whether or not our life has really consisted in the abundance of things or whether our life has been made up of something far more deep and fundamental. It is a striking contrast to compare the story of the rich man in the gospel of Luke, the story which Jesus tells in Luke 12 with the story of Job. Here is a man in trying to continue to base his life on material possessions it is stripped away from him in one night and his life then folds up.

In 1929, persons because of the loss of the stock market I understand were jumping out of windows and were in despair because they had lost all that they had. If a person indeed despairs of life because he loses simply what is external to him his material possessions, he perhaps had not much to begin with.

But life, as Jesus says, lies deeper than the abundance of possessions. Job had a stock failure. And he had it all in one day. Will he blame or curse the Lord? Not at all.

You may be in a time of economic pinch. You may be without a job today. You may wonder where your next meal is coming from. Still there's room for us all to give thanks. Why? Let's look at some more possibilities for giving thanks.

Job not only could have thanked God for his material possessions at the beginning of the story of Job but he could have thanked the Lord for his family. And a beautiful family it appears to be. Seven sons and three daughters which would be the ideal combination in ancient times. This appears to be not only a rather large family but a close knit family. They're giving birthday parties for one another, verse 4. His sons used to hold a feast in his house on his day. Perhaps his birthday. The feast would last for a week. All the brothers and sisters would be there. A close association.

In turn Job seems to have a real concern for the spiritual welfare of his children. So much so he sacrifices for them *less* they have committed any sin against God. A wonderful family. But in a moment of time, verses 18-19, his sons and his daughters are taken from him. And the family which he could have given thanks for is now no longer in existence.

I think of that in reference to holiday seasons like Thanksgiving and Christmas there is not only much joy but there also can be much sorrow. You may be at a Thanksgiving dinner today sitting down at a dinner and for the first time in your experience as a family there will be a chair missing. Someone will not be there who is absent by death or separation or rebellion or distance geographically. Will you in that setting still give thanks to the Lord?

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The hardest thing I can conceive us is the loss of my children in death. Could a person still serve God through loss through death? Job here is a real help to us. The temptation in the loss is to curse God. But Job does a very incredible thing, verses 20-21. Job arose when he learns of his children's death, he rent his robe and shaved his head and fell down. Acts of grief. But then comes the phrase, "and worshipped."

I don't know how a person finds the strength to give thanks to God when the worse adversities in regard to separation of family have come in. Yet I do believe in the ministering power of the Holy Spirit who in that hour causes an unceasing flow of thanksgiving and praise to be given to the Father.

Yes, we thank God for our family. But we recognize around our family as we have our family that there are other brothers and sisters in Christ who do not have their family. It is not as though we were God's favorite people and the other persons were being punished and therefore do not have their family. Rather, there must be even something more fundamental and in common for which we can give thanks for. Even beyond our families and dear and precious to us as they may be.

Job had a last thing that he could give thanks for. Even though his possessions were taken away and his family was taken away he still had his health. But in 2:7-8 we find that also removed. "Satan went forth from the presence of God and afflicted Job with loathsome soars from the soul of his foot to the crown of his head. And he took a potsherd [that is, a dried up piece of pottery] with which to scrape himself and sat among the ashes."

At this Thanksgiving time I recognize that I, at least outwardly, am in good health. But I recognize also that there are some within this body of Christ and others within the body of Christ worldwide who suffer with sickness, who are crippled with this disease or that disease or who face extremely serious times in respect to health and to age. Surely our thanks therefore must find a rootage in God deeper than even our health. For there comes a moment when even that may be in peril.

When Job's possessions and family and health are taken a way he has only one thing left that he can be thankful for. His wife turns to him in verse 9 and says, "Do you still hold fast to your integrity? Curse God and die." When everything is stripped away only God remains. I suppose if in your life if only God is left that you have the most part remaining. To only have God left is to have an awful lot left. Curse God and die? That one thing which cannot be taken away? That one relationship which nothing can sever? Which the lack of material possessions will not have anything to do with? The lack of family cannot destroy? The lack of health can no way alter. Take away God? Never! Blessed be the name of the Lord.

I'm struck in the room of Christ's thanksgiving in the last hours in which he sat with his disciples, as he sat down with them to have his last meal of thanksgiving. The text of the gospel clearly states, when he had given thanks he took the cup. When he had given thanks, he took the cup.

How much after Job is the Lord's experience patterned? In those forthcoming hours from that Last Supper he will lose all of his material possessions, the few that he had, even his coat, girdle and sandals will be stripped and taken from him. He will have lost his family, who do not

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believe in him. His mother will not understand him. She will stand weeping at the cross. His disciples who in one way or another have served as his family, all forsake him and flee. He will lose his health by the cruel and brutal beating of the cross. And crucifixion.

Yet in that moment he lifts his voice to give thanks to God. For what is he thankful? He is thankful because he is God's Son. Because he has that relationship to the Father. He is thankful because he knows that following that time of death and following the separation from things material, from family and from health, there is victory and resurrection.

You say, that's especially to the Lord. How would that apply to me? In every way. Because in one way or another, while in a different sense, we are also the sons of God. If we have come to the new birth in Christ Jesus, if we have believed in him and trusted in him for our salvation, he has brought us into relationship. We are his sons and daughters. Nothing can sever that. If we have that we also know that passing through every valley, just as there is resurrection for Christ so there is restoral for us. With Job the restoration occurred before he died. With others of God's children the restoration occurred in the life to come. But hope beats high within the human heart whose trust reposes upon Christ Jesus, the Lord.

At Thanksgiving time I want to find a deeper confidence and trust than in simply the things that I have. In the family as cherished and beautiful as it is. That in health as long as I might have it. Because I know with my brother somewhere else who is deprived of all these other things yet he and I share this in common. A relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ and a trust and abiding faith. Indeed there is triumph in Christ, now and forever.

There are some Christians, who in the midst of these difficult times have had the temptation to run very scared. To be fearful of the course of the age. We need to renew our confidence with the words of the great hymns. I have Christ in my heart.

I hope you can say that. Thanks be to God.

There will be so many moods of Thanksgiving around this season of the year. There will be within our body whole families together. All of whom will be in health and prosperity and who will set down at this Thanksgiving time and count it all joy for all the wonderful things which have been given to them. There will be others, Lord, within our body who perhaps may be alone. Or at least not be with a major segment of their family. Lord, there will be others who will have. Some who will have less. But somehow as we trust in you, all of us will have you. All of us will have you, whom to have is indeed everything. Lord, if indeed you are the friend who sticks closer than a brother, then through your presence this Thanksgiving season fill in the lonely places and empty chairs with the light of your love, with the wonderful counsel and healing peace of the Spirit of God. We do give thanks. We give thanks for our Christian faith. We give thanks for your love for us, for the cross, for your resurrection. We give thanks for all of those things which are real but which we cannot see. We recognize that the outer world is passing away but the things, which are real we cannot see – love and joy, acceptance, peace, mercy. Only do we see expressions of these. We do not see the things themselves. But there will come a day, Lord, when we see your face and we will see the face of God – love itself, joy itself, peace itself. Now only do we behold the deed. But then we shall know, even as we are known of thee. Cause our hearts to be grateful, be kept cleaving unto thyself. Through Christ, our Lord. Amen.