

Why Give Thanks? Israel's Three Thanksgivings

Turn to Ps 30 please. Would you describe yourself as regularly thankful to God? Would the people around you, who know you well, describe you as someone who often thanks God? Would we describe our church as a thankful church? I don't know, not particularly I don't think.

That is not my natural response to God. But the Bible says much about thanks. God has been calling me this way for a long time, and that certainly happened again this week.

Why would we thank God for what he's done for us? There are two reasons floating around in Scripture that we'll talk about today.

Two Reasons to Thank God: Reciprocate his Faithfulness, and Educate Ourselves

One, we give thanks to reciprocate, to give God his due. He's been good to us, so we thank him. We owe it to him. By providing for us, our bodies and our souls, our present and our eternal future, he has earned our thanks.

What I have come to see is that when we thank God, he considers himself repaid. He keeps providing for us, and we keep thanking and praising him for what he gives. The relationship carries on like that, eternally. By not thanking him, we ignore our side of the relationship.

That's how we reciprocate, we thank him because he's earned it and we owe it. We also thank God to educate ourselves by facing reality. God provides so faithfully that we lose touch. We forget how much we receive from him, and we get foolish. We get a lopsided view of how we relate to God, and what makes life work.

Let's go over these two reasons again, this time from Scripture. We thank God to reciprocate, which is what we learn from Psalm 30.

Ps 30:8-10 To you, Lord, I called; to the Lord I cried for mercy: "What is gained if I am silenced, if I go down to the pit? Will the dust praise you? Will it proclaim your faithfulness? Hear, Lord, and be merciful to me; Lord, be my help."

This prayer bargains with God. *What will you gain, Lord, if I am silenced? I will praise you if I live, but I can't if you let me die. Will the dust praise you, and proclaim your faithfulness? No, it won't. But if you help me, and keep me alive, I will proclaim your faithfulness and praise you.*

The psalmist knows that he has something God wants. He can praise God and proclaim his faithfulness. This matters to God, and the psalmist knows it. This is a fair exchange. If God rescues the psalmist, the psalmist will praise God and proclaim his faithfulness. Reciprocate.

In the next two verses we read how this ends. *You turned my wailing into dancing; you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, that my heart may sing your praises and not be silent. Lord my God, I will praise you forever.*

If you want to make a deal with God, don't promise great acts of sacrifice, promise to thank him openly and not be silent. This happens quite a few other Psalms, too.

We don't necessarily have to feel thankful to thank God. Don't lie to God, or fake it. On a dark day, you can still say this: "God, to this very day, you have given me a body and the clothes my body needs, to this very day you have given me life and the food my life needs."

"God, you have promised my body and soul the best future, for all eternity. Here and now, you are with me every day. You have a right to my honour, you are worthy of all service. I worship and praise you. You have been unbelievably kind to us, and you do this every single day. Thank you; and again: thank you."

You have not said one word to God about how you feel, you just told God the truth. Start with that. That's reciprocating, thanking God because he has earned it, and we owe it.

Romans 1:21 is a Scripture about using thanks to educate ourselves. *Although people knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.*

Their thinking became futile, and their foolish hearts were darkened. What happens if we are rarely thankful to God? We know God, in a sense. But IF we are not thanking and praising God for what he has done and is doing and will do, THEN our thinking becomes empty and our foolish hearts get dark.

We don't feel like that, of course. It feels like we're as smart as ever, maybe more so. We feel like we are being honest about hard realities. We feel like the thankful people are naïve. But it is not true. We ourselves become foolish and dark. So, let's give God glory, and thank him, to enlighten ourselves, to shine the truth on our minds and into each other's minds.

At those times of honouring and thanking God, giving God his due credit for how kind and generous he's been with us, at those times we are experiencing true relationship with God. It may or may not feel "special," but in fact it is pure and true relationship with God.

God is immensely faithful, every single day, even through our hard times. The only way to absorb that, get our heads around it, is to thank him. The alternative is to become foolish and dark. We thank and honour God to educate ourselves about how life actually works. Thanking him is the only way to keep our minds alive to God's faithfulness.

Jesus said, *Love your enemies, and do good to them, because the Most High is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked.* Will God stop providing if we are ungrateful and wicked? No. God is kind to all, no matter, even those who are offensive.

The thing is, I would have thought that “wicked” was much worse than “ungrateful.” Jesus viewed “ungrateful” and “wicked” as a pair that belonged together. Being ungrateful is a more serious problem than I thought, and thankfulness is more important than I thought.

Why Do We Have Food? Genesis 1

In Genesis 1, God made a deal with the human race, male and female humans. He blessed them, and then he told them what to do. “I bless you,” he said. “Now have a lot of children, and fill the earth, and I’ll provide the food.” Is that complicated? Not really.

In Genesis 9, after all kinds of sin and the flood, God spoke to Noah and Noah’s family. He blessed them, and he told them what to do. “I bless you,” God said. “Now have a lot of children and fill the earth, and I’ll provide the food.” So, people, why do you think we have enough food?

God blesses us, male and female keep having children and filling the earth, and God keeps providing the food. So why do we have food? Because God provides. You might say, “because I work hard for it.” True, but that is not the whole story.

Listen to Moses: *“You may say to yourself, ‘My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.’ But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth.”* (Deut 8)

If we work hard, it is because God gave us energy and strength and ability to work hard and produce. We must not say to ourselves, “see what I have done.”, “see what God has given.” Other people, through no choice of their own, do not have energy or strength or ability, and those who do have these things are not better people.

Jesus was real clear in Matthew 6 that food and clothes come from God. Bodies and the clothes they need come from God, life and the food that life needs come from God, to everyone on earth.

Whatever problems we have that stop us from being thankful, if all of a sudden we did not have food or clothes or shelter, we would forget about those other problems, and we would pray fervently for food and clothes and shelter. And we would be thankful when we got them. God is faithful. Let’s give him his due, and let’s shine the truth into our minds and hearts.

The Three Thanksgiving Festivals.

We have thanksgiving once a year, second weekend in October, and we time it so that most of the fields and gardens have been harvested. We thank God for the food he provided in our fields and gardens.

The Israelites did that three times a year. According to Leviticus 23, they had seven festivals a year, and for three of them they had to go to the tabernacle, or to the temple once it was built, and they would meet God at the temple three times a year. Everyone shows up before God three times a year.

And those three central festivals were all timed around their agricultural year, they were three different thanksgiving festivals, each one a full week long. In Palestine, at least in those years, they had two growing seasons. The winter was cooler and wetter, and during the winter months they grew grain, mostly barley and wheat. This they harvested from April to June.

In the summer it was hot and dry, and at the end of the summer, October like we're in now, they harvested olives and grapes and figs and other things that needed a long hot summer.

First Thanksgiving – Festival of Firstfruits – Leviticus 23:9-14.

Firstfruits happened at the very beginning of the barley harvest, the first grain to ripen. That happened at the same time as Passover, our Easter. They took the first part of the barley harvest, the firstfruits, and brought it to God at the temple, and they offered it to God as a gift.

They were not to eat any of that new barley harvest until after they had offered God the firstfruits, the first part of the harvest, to thank him for his faithfulness in providing again. That was their first thanksgiving festival. At the same time, they observed the Passover and Unleavened Bread.

Second Thanksgiving – Festival of Harvest – Exodus 23:16a; Lev 23:15-22

This was also called Pentecost. After the festival of Firstfruits, the beginning of the barley harvest, they went home and counted seven weeks, and came back for Pentecost, which Exodus 23 calls the Festival of Harvest. Here they celebrated the wheat harvest. This would happen in the first part of June.

It is not clear to me if the Festival of Harvest, the Festival of Weeks, was the *beginning* of the wheat harvest or the *end* of the wheat harvest. The commentators usually say the end of the wheat harvest, but both Exodus 23:16a and 34:22a say to celebrate the firstfruits of the wheat harvest, and Lev 23 speaks of "firstfruits" in vv17,20. So I think the Festival of Harvest, the Festival of Weeks, celebrated the beginning of the wheat harvest (as Firstfruits celebrated the beginning of the barley harvest), not the end. Either way, it was a second thanksgiving.

Third Thanksgiving – Festival of Ingathering (Tabernacles) – Ex 23:16b; 34:22b; Lev 23:33-43

Then then went home for the summer, and came back in the fall to thank God for the grape and olive and fig harvest. This was their third pilgrimage to Jerusalem, which they called the Festival of Tabernacles, but Exodus twice calls this the Festival of Ingathering. This was the end of the crop year, and the climax of the three thanksgivings. The emphasis was joy, and they thanked God for all that they had harvested that year.

At the same time, the Festival of Tabernacles reminded them again of God leading them out of Egypt, and they celebrated their deliverance again.

What this boils down to is that their worship year was built around thanksgiving for food. They honoured God for rescuing them from Egypt, for giving them a land. They honoured God twice for the winter crop, one before it was harvested and again after, and they honoured God in the seventh month for the summer crop.

Their worship year went like this to reciprocate, to give God praise and thanks. God had rescued them from Egypt, given them land, and every year God gave them their spring harvest and fall harvest. So they came to God to honour and thank him. That's how a good relationship between God and people works.

And their worship year also educated them, as we worship to educate us, so no one would become foolish and say, "My skill and my energy have produced this wealth for me." Rather, we would remember the Lord our God, because he gives us skill and energy and the ability to produce what we have done. We have food and clothing and shelter because God has been incredibly faithful to us. So let's thank and praise him. Amen.

PRAYER: Thank you, God Most High, that we do not know about hunger. There is food in our refrigerators, our cupboards, and our stores. You have been so faithful in this, and we give you honour and praise. We have clothing and shelter which we receive from your hand. We could not possibly have a more faithful Provider than you have been to us. Amen.

BENEDICTION: The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace. Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.