

Text: Leviticus 23:39–43

Title: A Mirror that Reflects Light / translated by Eunji Choi

1. Festivals: The Rhythm of Changing Times

In Han Kang's book *Light and Thread*, there is a section containing a garden journal she kept while tending a small garden. She writes that a few years ago she moved into a house with a tiny yard. The backyard faced north, and because it faced north, sunlight rarely reached it. Wanting to plant a small garden with lilac trees, maple trees, and beautiful flowers, she received help from a gardener. Even though they planted trees that grow well in the shade, the gardener must have still been concerned, because he warned her with a smile: "These kids do grow well in the shade, but if you want them to grow healthy and strong, it's good to use mirrors." "Mirrors?" she asked in surprise. The landscaper replied, "You can give them sunlight from the south. Reflect it. Since there's no sunlight here throughout the day."

So she bought three small adjustable desk mirrors and began reflecting light onto the trees. Within a few days, she ordered three more, using a total of six mirrors to shine sunlight onto the plants. She confesses that until she began adjusting the mirrors according to the rising and setting of the sun and the changes of the seasons, she didn't really understand what sunlight truly was. On sunny days, as she adjusted the mirrors, she was astonished at the sun's unwavering speed. Through experiencing the changing angles of sunlight as the seasons shifted, she became aware of how fast the sun's movement truly is.

Humanity has long divided time according to the movement and flow of the sun. Festivals mark time and seasonal changes at regular intervals. People created festivals to divide time according to nature's cycle and breath, so they could live in step with the seasons. In Korea, we have the 24 solar terms, a rhythm of time that grew out of an agricultural culture. November 7 was *Ipdong*, the beginning of winter. When I think back to my childhood, I remember how preparations for winter always began around *Ipdong*. Torn window paper had to be replaced. Firewood had to be gathered from the mountains and stacked. I remember collecting fallen, dried pine needles into sacks, and carrying bundles of dry branches down the mountain with an A-frame carrier. My mother harvested cabbage and radish to prepare for *gimjang*—the making of kimchi for winter—while my father sometimes dug into the ground to bury the large clay jars used for storing it. It may sound like a story from long ago, but that was the late autumn scenery of my childhood. A poet once wrote, "The leaves fall with such sorrow, and yet I feel no longing for anything. Ah, this must be what it means to be worn out." I resonated deeply with that line. Although I now live a city life, far across the world from Korea, I try to remember the seasons because doing so keeps my longing alive.

2. A Pilgrimage into the Festivals

The people of Israel also had their own festivals. Living in the land of Palestine and practicing agriculture, they observed three major festivals: Passover (*Pascha*), the Feast of Weeks (*Shavuot*), and the Feast of Booths (*Sukkot*). All three were tied to agriculture. More importantly, each festival was connected to the historical experiences of their ancestors. Passover, observed in early spring, coincided with the barley and flax harvest and commemorated the ancestors' exodus from Egypt. The Feast of Weeks was celebrated during the early fig, grape, and wheat harvests and commemorated the covenant God made with Israel on Mount Sinai. The Feast of Booths, during the harvest of dates and summer figs, reminded them of their ancestors' life in the wilderness. Through the rituals and rhythms of these festivals, they expressed gratitude to the God who governed their harvests. And by connecting these festivals with the historical experiences of their nation's salvation, they formed a shared identity. Festivals became a rhythm of life tied both to gratitude toward God and to their national identity. There is a saying: "Habit is stronger than reason." In this sense, the rhythm and habit of keeping festivals helps the meaning of the festivals sink deeply into one's body and life. Habits are crucial in our daily lives as well. Attending Sunday worship each week is an important habit. A person who begins each day with Scripture has a truly blessed life. I myself spend 40 to 50 minutes each day handwriting Scripture. Through the habits of festivals and repeated liturgy, we reconnect with the source of our lives.

Here in the United States, there are also several national observances, the greatest being Thanksgiving at the end of November. It is a time when people remember their ancestors' journey to the New World in search of religious freedom and give thanks to God. Families gather, share fellowship, and reaffirm their sense of belonging. As we observe this season of thanksgiving, we too seek to reconnect with God, the source of our lives.

3. Gratitude: The Key that Opens Our Constricted Lives

The most reliable shortcut that reconnects us to God—the source of our life—is gratitude. A life overflowing with gratitude cannot help but shine. But a person filled instead with complaints, despair, and anger shows darkness on their face. Look at one another's faces for a moment—do you see light there, or shadow? Gratitude becomes the key that opens a blocked and suffocating path. Life is not always filled with good things. Misfortune strikes suddenly—like a deer darting out in front of a car on a dark night. But not everyone responds to misfortune the same way. Some choose gratitude; others choose resentment and anger. Choosing gratitude when life is hard is not an easy thing. The lyrics of Hymn 429 give us a hint for how to escape when frustration and anger flood our hearts: *"When upon life's billows you are tempest-tossed, When you are discouraged, thinking all is lost, Count your many blessings, name them one by one, And it will surprise you what the Lord has done."*

When life feels stuck—when sorrow and heaviness rush in—we need the wisdom described in this hymn: sit quietly and count the blessings we have received. As we do, the darkness that has been gripping our hearts slowly begins to recede. Gratitude is like a mirror that reflects God’s light into the dim, shadowed places of our hearts. The darkness itself doesn’t change, but gratitude draws in God’s light and drives the darkness away.

4. Gratitude Brings Light into the Darkness

The poet Oh Kyu-won writes in his poem *Even When You Look Closely, Darkness Is Still Dark*: “It isn’t that darkness is dark; it’s that the dark is darkness.” It’s not easy to understand at first. His point is that darkness has no substance of its own. Depending on how we relate to it, what seems dark may appear dark—or may not. The poem continues:

“Because the dark is darkness, everything seen on a dark day is darkness.

Because the dark is darkness, the flowers, the love, the youth seen on a dark day are all darkness.

Because the dark is darkness, even the sun seen on a dark day is darkness.

Thus, darkness bound together by darkness remains darkness even when seen on a day that is not dark.”

The poet seems to be saying that if we wear sunglasses tinted by darkness, the whole world becomes dark. We travel between heaven and hell many times a day. When something good happens, we rejoice; but when something disappointing or painful comes, we collapse into despair. Many people lose their sense of happiness and struggle to endure life. They no longer have the resilience to enjoy and savor their own existence. They have forgotten that life itself is a gift. They have lost sight of the fact that our life is a festival overflowing with mystery. Do you remember the practical challenge shared last month after worship during our small group gatherings? We were asked to recognize the wonder filling our lives and to practice living with that awareness. When we fail to see life as a gift and to enjoy it, it can actually become an insult against God, who has given us life. Life is full of mystery. We are beings sent into this world of mystery. As we studied the Gospel of John for a long time, what did we learn was the core of Jesus’ self-understanding? It was his identity as “the One who is sent.” “God has sent me into this world. I will accomplish the will of the One who sent me and then return to Him.” This is the mindset we need. God invites us to enjoy this life—His gift to those whom He has sent. Everything we are enjoying right now is a gift from God. Even the things we complain about are God’s gifts. This church, our small groups, our coworkers, our brothers and sisters—all of them are God’s gifts. The simplest way to drive out darkness is gratitude. The way to live joyfully—knowing life is a gift and savoring that gift—is gratitude.

5. We Are Not Grateful Because We Have Much

We easily think we can be grateful because we have a lot. But gratitude does not come from having much. Today's text contains God's command to observe the Feast of Booths. For seven days the people were to leave their homes and live in booths. But how can a festival take place in a booth? A booth is a place of lack. There is no bathroom, no bed. It is cramped and smells of the outdoors. Yet there, through a small taste of the wilderness, they remembered God's provision. The Israelites who escaped Egypt lacked everything in the wilderness. But they were no longer slaves—they reaffirmed their identity as free people. In the wilderness they learned they were a covenant people, connected to God. The wilderness was a place where miracles occurred daily, where God's provision was experienced up close. They were not materially abundant, yet they learned a life of being led and supplied by God. The experience of the booth during the Feast of Booths reminded them that happiness does not come from possessions or circumstances, but from living life with God. We give thanks not because we possess much, but because our hearts are joined to God. Though we may be in pain, though we may still be lacking, we do not lose heart because we trust in the Lord's love and righteousness. The Feast of Booths reminded Israel that God—their guide and provider—was responsible for their lives. The moment they forgot their days in the booth, they forgot God.

Leo Tolstoy wrote a short story titled *The Little Devil and the Loaf of Bread*. In a Russian village lived a poor farmer named Fyodor. Each morning he went out to plow his field, and when hungry he would eat the loaf of bread he had set on a tree. But one day, when he went to eat, the bread had vanished. He quenched his hunger with plain water and said, "I won't die from skipping a meal. Someone must have been hungry and taken the bread. I hope it satisfies him well." But the one who stole the bread was a devil. The devil had hoped to provoke the farmer into cursing and sinning. Yet when the farmer responded with blessing instead of anger, the devil failed and was scolded harshly by the chief demon. So the devil tried another tactic—not stealing bread, but increasing it. He disguised himself as the farmer's servant and helped him with his crops. Knowing drought was coming, he told the farmer to sow seed in the marsh; knowing a flood was coming, he told him to sow on the mountaintop. Because of the devil's schemes, the farmer's barns overflowed. With surplus grain, the devil tempted him to make alcohol. The daily bread that once satisfied his hunger now became a tool for pleasure. Once he had liquor, he invited wealthy neighbors to drink with him. Drunk, the farmer and his guests lost all human dignity and behaved like animals—growling, fighting, and unable to listen to one another. The devil later reported to the chief demon that he had done nothing except give the farmer more than he needed. Once there was surplus, the farmer began using God's gifts for his own pleasure, and all the fox, wolf, and pig blood tied up in the human heart burst out. The point is clear: having no lack is not the cause for gratitude. Rather, a life that shares—a life that recognizes God's gifts and passes them on—should be the foundation of our thanksgiving.

6. Let Us Live by Sharing

Thanksgiving should be a season of sharing. The moment a church begins to accumulate excessive wealth, it inevitably steps onto the path of corruption. Aside from what is truly necessary, we must continually practice sharing. We were not able to do it this year, but next Thanksgiving I hope we can collect a special offering to support vulnerable members of our local community or our mission fields. It would also be wonderful to form habits and liturgical practices in meaningful seasons such as Christmas—gathering portions of what we have and offering them for good works. We are a faith community that has shared the same experience of salvation. We are people who walk toward the same direction and the same hope. Each time a festival season returns, we must reconnect ourselves to the source of our lives. God has brought my life to this place, and the reason He has called us here is that we might celebrate life with many others. I am grateful to those who brought food for today's potluck. Sharing food may seem like a small act, but this table is a foretaste of the heavenly banquet. I hope our church will have more of these table-sharing liturgies. In this season of thanksgiving, may our hearts be deeply reconnected to God—the source of our lives—so that our lives may once again become rich and abundant.