

This Thursday we will celebrate one of our favorite American holidays –Thanksgiving. A time when we gather with family, friends and neighbors to enjoy a meal of turkey, dressing, and pumpkin pie followed by hours and hours of football and indigestion, and for some early shopping; trying to get the jump on the Black Friday sales.

One Thanksgiving, a food editor at the local newspaper received a telephone call from a woman inquiring about how long to cook a 22-pound turkey. “Just a minute,” said the food editor as she turned to consult a chart. “Thank you very much,” replied the novice cook as she hung up the phone. I hope your turkey will be cooked a little longer than that!

When we were in Grants, I had a running argument with one of my members, Marvin Rider, who firmly believed based on southwestern history that the first Thanksgiving was held just south of Amarillo, Texas. And today based on the highway billboards as you approach Amarillo, I guess that the meal consisted of a 72-ounce steak named the “Big Texan.”

However, those of us from back east would argue that the first Thanksgiving in America was held on December 13, 1621. Governor William Bradford of the Massachusetts Plymouth Colony declared a Thanksgiving Day, a day of feasting and prayer. For many years thereafter, while several colonies and states celebrated a day of thanksgiving, no national Thanksgiving Day was observed. However, Mrs. Sarah Hale worked for thirty years to get a national Thanksgiving Day. On October 3, 1863, President Abraham Lincoln issued the first Thanksgiving proclamation, setting aside the last Thursday in November for the observance. It was observed on the fourth Thursday in November for many years until President Franklin Roosevelt changed it to the third Thursday in 1939. As usual Congress reversed this decision in 1941 returning it to the last Thursday.

While Thanksgiving is an American holiday, it is also based on biblical teaching. There are no less than 139 passages in the Bible that deal with the subject of thanksgiving. Many more talk about rejoicing, happiness, and joy such as our Responsive Reading from Psalm 100. Now you can be thankful that I am not going to try and cover all of them this morning. However, in the time we have, I would like to discuss the first nine verses of Psalm 107.

Read Psalm 107:1-9

There is a common tendency to dwell on the problems and concerns of life; to worry and complain most of the time, and not count our blessings. Does that sound like you? Often, we find it hard to be thankful. Unfortunately, it’s human nature to take all the good things; the small blessings of life for granted.

For example, a man accompanied a friend home for dinner and was impressed by the way that his host entered his home, asked his wife how her day went, and told her how pretty she looked. After dinner, the husband complimented his wife on the meal and thanked her for it. When the two men were alone, the visitor asked: "Why do you treat your wife so well?" "Because she deserves it, and it makes our marriage happier," replied the host.

Impressed by what he had observed, the visitor decided to follow the example of his friend. Arriving home, he embraced his wife and said: "You look wonderful!" Then for good measure he added: "Sweetheart, I'm the luckiest guy in the whole world!" His wife burst into tears. Bewildered, he asked her: "What's wrong?" Continuing to cry, she replied: "What a day! Billy got into a fight at school. The refrigerator broke down and spoiled all the groceries. And now to top it all off, you've come home drunk!"

A hog will eat acorns under a tree day after day, and never look up to see where they came from. Are we like that or are we aware of the love and blessings that God bestows on us each and every day? The *Webster Dictionary* defines "thanksgiving" as: "an expression of gratitude, especially to God." Have you discovered the secrets of Thanksgiving? In Psalm 107, the author gives us some insight into the secrets of Thanksgiving.

The first secret is to be able to celebrate the goodness of God. Verse one states: "Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good." Or as the *Message* paraphrases it: "Oh, thank God, He's so good!" God's goodness is illustrated in several different ways through this particular Psalm. God delivered the people from their distress. He satisfied the thirsty and filled the hungry with good things. He brought them out of darkness and gloom, and broke their bonds. He healed the sick and delivered His people from destruction.

The second secret is to focus on the main issues of life; what's really important. In the remaining verses of Psalm 107 that we didn't read, the psalmist paints four pictures of people who are facing some difficulty in life. First, there are travelers who have lost their way in wilderness. They wandered in the desert where there were no familiar landmarks. Alone, hungry, and thirsty, they were ready to give up when they called on the Lord, and He led them by a straight way, till they reached a city to dwell in; till they reached home safely. The second picture is of captives who suffer in terrible prisons, covered by darkness and bound in chains. In the third picture the psalmist describes those who are sick and on the verge of death. The fourth description is one of terror; sailors who are helpless in the perfect storm. In all of these situations, the people cried out to the Lord and He rescued them.

Hopefully, we have never been in these actual situations; lost in the desert, in prison, near death, or facing terror, but we can all relate to similar crises in life. Have we not at times felt lonely, lost, bound by some burden, overwhelmed by the demands of life, sick, and sacred by

the events of the day such as 9-11 or Covid? You know a hungry homeless man at Community of Hope today or the Interfaith Bible Center is more thankful for his hot meal than a person having lunch at O'Hara's. A lonely woman at MorningStar will appreciate a visit more than a socialite having a dinner party thrown in her honor. Another person may complain about their home heating bill until they see someone homeless walking down Southern with a sleeping bag and tent. Thanksgiving wells up in the hearts of men, women, and children who know the difference between the necessities and the luxuries of life; who have learned to be grateful for the basic joys and blessings of life.

Butch Summers was buried under tons of rubble when a Joplin, Missouri, hotel collapsed while he was working there as a welder. He said: "There was no warning; all of a sudden it just collapsed. Everything was dark. Did I panic? Oh, there was a time when I thought that I might not make it out alive. But I kept pounding on the pipe and praying a lot and hoping. I mainly laid there and prayed. I did an awful lot of praying. I prayed to Jesus, because He was the only one that I knew who could get me out of there. I'm not much of a religious person, but if anyone could get me out alive, it had to be Jesus."

When the world caves in on us, as it did on Butch, or as it did on the people described in Psalm 107, we cry out to the Lord in our distress, and He hears us. The secret of Thanksgiving is partly understood when we face trouble and realize how important the basic things of life are that we normally take for granted.

Although Butch Summers said that he was not much of a religious person, he did know where the source of his help came from. He knew that if anyone could get him out alive it had to be Jesus. The people of Israel understood, as this psalm clearly illustrates, that God was the true and only source of their strength and deliverance. He brought them out of bondage in Egypt; He led them through the wilderness and brought them safely home to the Promised Land. The third secret is if we are to be truly thankful, we must remember from whom our blessings flow.

A man who had been an atheist for most of his life confessed that he finally came to a point in his life when he started believing in God. This came as a result of not knowing who to thank for the basic joys of life: the beauty of a sunset, the glory of the birth of a child, and the love in the eyes of his wife. On reflection, he had to admit to himself that the astonishing joys of life were so magnificent that only God could have made it possible. It was his desire to say thank you, and only God is worthy of this gratitude.

The fourth secret of Thanksgiving is to take time for gratitude. After God's deliverance of the people, the psalmist noted that they took time to be grateful. In the seventeenth chapter of the Gospel of Luke, Jesus healed ten lepers, but only one came back to thank Him. These desperate men came to Jesus seeking healing; Jesus cured all ten; however, nine never came

back to give thanks. I have often wondered why only one out of ten showed gratitude. Are we often guilty of the same carelessness? When we do not give thanks, it is sometimes because we simply are not willing to do so.

On an autumn night in 1860, a steamboat broke up and sank into Lake Michigan near a village in Illinois. Of the 393 passengers aboard the Lady Elgin, 279 drowned. Of the 114 survivors, 17 were saved by Edward Spencer, a theology student at Northwestern University. Spencer was a strong swimmer, but after having made seventeen trips, he became delirious from the strain. It was reported that he kept asking over and over again: "Did I do my best?" As a result of that night, Spencer became sick and was confined to a wheelchair for the remainder of his life.

Some years later, on Spencer's birthday, a reporter asked him what was his most vivid memory from that night. His answer? "I remember that not one of the seventeen returned to thank me." Many of us are like those seventeen survivors and the nine lepers who at times neglect to give thanks when something good happens to us. We all need to acquire the habit of giving thanks at all times, in all situations and for all things as the Apostle Paul tells us in Philippians 4:6 when he wrote: "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your request to God." The words "thank" and "think" hail from the same root word, reminding us that **thanksgiving** comes from **thinking** about our blessings. In the old Anglo-Saxon tradition, thankfulness means "thinkfulness." Thinking of all God's goodness draws forth gratitude.

It is so easy to take things for granted. We live in a wonderful free country. We have all the basic necessities of life. Now we might not be as well off as some people, but compared to the rest of the world we are truly blessed. We are not only blessed materially; we are also blessed with good friends, family and a future. In spite of all this, we are sometimes slow to acknowledge our blessings. Because we have grown so accustomed to them, we take them for granted. Occasionally, we need to be reminded of just what we have been taking for granted and what we have to be thankful for. At special times like Thanksgiving, we should focus our attention on the things that really count. Count your blessings and name them one by one.

An evergreen is always green despite the changes in the weather around it. It is green in the heat of the summer as well as the cold of the winter. So also our lives should be characterized by an enduring thankfulness that is unaffected by the changes around us. When the heat of a stressful week or the deadly cold of pain strikes us, we should stand "ever green," always thankful, regardless of whatever situation we find ourselves in.

Offering praise and thanksgiving is not only the right thing to do, it is the one of those things that pleases God and brings Him glory. 1 Thessalonians 5:18 states: "Give thanks in all

circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." In other word, give thanks no matter what happens. Or as one of our hymns say: "Give thanks with a grateful heart."

The secrets of thanksgiving are simple: 1) you must be open to the goodness of God; 2) you must be willing to focus on what really matters in life; 3) you must remember where your help comes from; and 4) you must be willing to take time to say thank you. Now that you know the secrets, you can turn every day into Thanksgiving Day, because Thanksgiving should not come just one day a year.

I would like to close with a poem by Helen Steiner Rice: "Give thanks for the blessings that daily are yours – the warmth of the sunshine, the beauty of flowers. For the joy of enjoying and the fullness of living are found in the heart that is filled with thanksgiving." My friends, thanksgiving comes through living life with a grateful heart for the Lord. Happy Thanksgiving!