

Jonesboro Community Thanksgiving Service

**Jonesboro Presbyterian Church
Sanford, North Carolina**

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7:00 P.M.**

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**Rejoicing in God's Goodness
Deuteronomy 26:1-11**

Thanksgiving—what a wonderful season of the year!

I often get frustrated with how people seem just to pass right over Thanksgiving Day on their way from Halloween to Christmas!

Even so, tomorrow around noon and on into the afternoon, families and friends will gather round the table, enjoying the food and the fellowship, catching up on things, eating too much turkey and dressing and ham and potato salad and beans and chocolate cake and sweet potato pie—and hopefully, in the midst of it all, giving thanks to God for all His bountiful blessings.

But this year, just as it happens every year, some people will find it hard to give thanks.

I've often thought about that through my nearly three decades as a pastor. It really hit home in the fall of 2001.

Thanksgiving fell just ten weeks after the events of September 11. As we moved toward that day, it dawned on me—nearly 3,000 seats would be empty at that year's Thanksgiving table. For many of these families, there would be more than one empty chair.

In the aftermath of 9/11 and the midst of the ensuing war on terrorism, personal tragedies seemed to pale in comparison to horrors of that magnitude. But in the congregation I was serving as pastor, I thought about the chairs that would be empty at Thanksgiving tables that year.

One of those chairs would have been filled by a 49-year-old man who had been in frail health for many years. He had died in May that year.

Another would have been filled by 56-year-old man who had been left a paraplegic by an auto accident 36 years earlier. He had died in July.

I knew that one mother in my congregation would look at an empty chair that should have been occupied by her 19-year-old son, who had been murdered in August.

A dedicated retired minister and his wife would stare at the chair that should have held their 43-year-old son, the youngest of four, who, overcome by pain and despair, had ended his own life in October.

And yet on Thanksgiving Day, we would gather to give thanks. But how?

That's how life in this world really is, isn't it?

Some days, all is well and our hearts overflow with joy and thanksgiving. But on other days, we face circumstances that make being thankful seem difficult at best, virtually impossible at worst.

Sometimes illness is prolonged, pain relentless, suffering unrelieved. Death comes to family or friends, sometimes in the most tragic ways. Financial burdens weigh us down. Economic shifts lead to plant closings and corporate restructuring and downsizing, which mean the loss of jobs, producing incredible stress for those seeking to provide for their families. In some families, relationships are strained, sometimes to the breaking point, and heartache abounds.

Yet on Thursday, Thanksgiving Day, we will gather to give thanks. For many, thanks will come easily. But for some—how? How can we give thanks when circumstances around us scream that there's little or nothing to be thankful for?

Our text for this evening offers us some help here.

The book of Deuteronomy portrays a series of farewell sermons that Moses preached to the children of Israel shortly before his death, prior to their entering the Promised Land. The text tells us about the instructions Moses gave to the Israelites about offering the firstfruits of their harvest to God once they had entered the land of Canaan.

Picture in your mind for a moment an ancient Hebrew farmer, especially after that very first crop in the Promised Land. Can you imagine what it must have been like to have gathered that

first harvest? There had been dark days—days of bondage in Egypt in his childhood, days of wandering in the wilderness, days of difficulty and struggle, when he, along with the people of whom he was a part, had wondered if they were going to make it, if God was really with them, if He was really going to honor His promises. And now He had! There had to be *some* way of expressing thanks, of giving gratitude to God. Before they even entered the land, Moses had laid out how it was to be done.

The farmer was to come before God with some of the firstfruits of his harvest in a basket, and present it to the priest, saying, “I declare today to the LORD your God that I have come into the land that the LORD your God swore to our fathers to give us.” The priest would take the basket and set it down before the altar.

Then the farmer would make a response to the LORD. He would recite the story of how God had taken the nation from its humble beginnings, delivered the people from slavery in Egypt, and brought them into the Promised Land, a land flowing with milk and honey, and would declare that he was bringing the first of the fruit of the ground the LORD had given him—

“A wandering Aramean was my father. And he went down into Egypt and sojourned there, few in number, and there he became a nation, great, mighty, and populous. And the Egyptians treated us harshly and humiliated us and laid on us hard labor. Then we cried to the LORD, the God of our fathers, and the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. And the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm . . . And he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. And behold, now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground which you, O LORD, have given me . . .” (ESV)

Then the farmer would worship the LORD God, and rejoice in all the goodness that God had given to him and his family and those in the community for whom he shared an obligation. This was truly a *thanksgiving* offering!

It was a little more than what we offer in the way of thanksgiving, wasn't it? It wasn't just a matter of being courteous to God.

You see, there was *a real theological basis* for this act: *God owns everything!* So when the farmer harvested his crop, the very first part of the harvest was to be offered to God in recognition that *He was the source of their harvest, and the one who provided all that was needed to produce it.* This would be associated with the Feast of Weeks, Pentecost, which celebrated God's blessing in the harvest of grain. Seven weeks earlier, during the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the first sheaf of grain that was harvested would be waved before the LORD at the place of worship. Then the farmers could harvest their grain. This offering of the firstfruits was a thanksgiving to God for *all* His goodness, not just the harvest.

The significance of the harvest was not only the blessing of prosperity, but even more, the sign that *God had fulfilled His promise* to bring them into the land, which was a part of His larger purpose of deliverance and salvation for His people Israel! This act of thanksgiving was the recognition that it was all *God's* doing—the call of the patriarchs, the deliverance from bondage in Egypt, the guidance through the wilderness, the gift of the Promised Land, and now, the harvest in this land of promise. Nine times in these eleven verses, there is reference to “the LORD your God.” Four times the passage refers to “the LORD,” and once to “the LORD God of our fathers.” *Fourteen* references to God in eleven verses! It's all about *Him* and what *He* has done for His people!

When I look at this, I have to ask myself about my own thanksgiving.

After all, isn't real thankfulness more than simply tipping our hat to God once a year on the last Thursday of November, to acknowledge that we've received some good things from Him? That's only simple courtesy, and really falls short of even that!

Doesn't real thankfulness remember and recite what God has done, how He has fulfilled His promises in Christ, how He has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in Christ (Ephesians 1:3)? Doesn't real thanksgiving *rejoice in God's goodness to us*, in His mercy and grace? Isn't it being grateful for the forgiveness of sins and for salvation? Isn't it about remembering that God didn't owe us anything, yet He has made us heirs of all things with Christ, having redeemed us, continually working in us to make us like Christ, and even raising us at the last day as He was

raised? These are the real blessings! The temporal blessings He lavishes on us are merely icing on the cake!

It really isn't just finding a silver lining in every cloud. I remember hearing one time about an old preacher who always began every service by thanking God for something. One cold, wet, dreary Sunday, his congregation wondered what in the world he would thank God for that day. When he stood to pray, he began, "O Lord, we thank Thee that not every Lord's Day is like this day . . ."

He was a rising star among the Pharisees. He had studied at the feet of one of the most prominent rabbis of the day. He held the coats of those who stoned Stephen, the first Christian martyr, and was relentless in his persecution of those who followed "the Way" of Jesus. He even went so far in his zeal as to obtain authority to go to Damascus to arrest and bring back Christians to deal with them appropriately.

But on his way to Damascus, the Lord Jesus arrested him, and commissioned him to carry the gospel to the Gentiles. While his ministry saw much success, it also saw much failure by human standards. Time and again he was rejected, imprisoned, beaten, harassed, shipwrecked, hungry, thirsty, and cold.

Yet he wrote to the young church he had established in Thessalonica that was facing persecution, "Always rejoice, constantly pray, in all circumstances give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you."¹

Likewise he wrote to the young church in Philippi that was both poor and persecuted, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice . . . Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and petition with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God."²

How could he call on them to rejoice? How could he urge them to be thankful? After all, he was writing from prison! His situation was even worse than theirs!

What was the difference for the Apostle Paul? It was because he focused on God's goodness, displayed in His grace in Jesus Christ! Paul knew that no matter what circumstances he was facing, God had already been far better to him than he deserved, for the Lord had saved him and was present with him through the Holy Spirit.

You see, when you boil it all down, isn't it really very simple? Real thankfulness, genuine thankfulness, doesn't focus on the circumstances of our lives. *Real thankfulness rejoices in God's goodness!*

So this year, as you and your family give thanks, don't just think about the nice things God has blessed you with this past year. Give thanks for those, yes, because they are blessings from Him. But go deeper, and find what real thankfulness is all about. Like the Hebrew farmer of old, *be truly thankful, and rejoice in God's goodness*, in all that He has done for us, is doing for us, and will do for us in Christ.

It's a story I heard or read many years ago—where, I don't remember.

Once upon a time, an eloquent preacher mounted his pulpit to preach at the Thanksgiving worship service. He looked into the faces of his congregation of one hundred and said, "We come today to give thanks to our great God who so generously provides for us."

The people mumbled, "Amen."

Then he proceeded to try to show them why they should be thankful.

He said, "Let us be thankful for the beauty of all that surrounds us." And ten blind people left.

"Let us be thankful for good health." Ten sick people left.

"Let us be thankful for the wealth we enjoy." Ten poor people left.

"Let us be thankful for the food that sustains us." Ten hungry people left.

"Let us be thankful for justice." And ten oppressed people left.

This went on until finally, all one hundred people had left. The preacher cried out, "O Lord, why has my congregation left?"

And a still small voice answered, "Because you have deceived them! When did I ever promise all the things you told them about—health or wealth or all these other things?"

"But Lord," he said, "what *have* You promised?"

And the answer came, "*Myself!*"

¹ 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18, my translation.

² Philippians 4:4, 6, my translation.

The preacher ran out and found his people and said, “I have deceived you! I called on you to give thanks for things, many of which you do not possess! Come, let us give thanks as we should!”

So they gladly returned, and the preacher began again: “Let us give thanks to our glorious God who has done great things for us. For He has said, ‘Behold, I am with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you!’” And with full hearts and full voices, all the people said, “*Amen!*”

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