

Sermon Thanksgiving 2020 A Time to Give Thanks

Genesis 32:9-10

Then Jacob prayed, "O God of my father Abraham, God of my father Isaac, O Lord, who said to me, 'Go back to your country and your relatives, and I will make you prosper,' I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness you have shown your servant. I had only my staff when I crossed this Jordan, but now I have become two large groups."

This week our nation celebrates the holiday of Thanksgiving. Yes, it's true that a lot of people in America today associate Thanksgiving more with a day off work, a turkey dinner and a football game...than the actual giving of thanks. The act of showing appreciation for something received isn't very popular in our culture.

In other cultures it is, though! A missionary from the African country of Zimbabwe Rhodesia tells of an interesting custom the people have there: in Zimbabwe, whenever you receive a gift from an acquaintance or friend, the recipient has to extend two hands to receive it. Even if it's just a match to light a fire, two hands are socially necessary to grasp it. If you don't hold out two hands, it means you're not thankful for the gift.

Our text today is an example of a man who held out two hands, in prayer, to thank God for all the blessings God gave him. The man was the Old Testament patriarch Jacob. Jacob was standing at a crossroads in his life, facing a crisis, uncertain what his future would be. But even at this critical point, he found a moment to lift up his hands in a prayer of thanks to God. I hope that we Christians can do the same this Thanksgiving.

Jacob found himself at a crossroad that day as he stood facing the Jordan River, about to return to the land of Canaan, the land of his birth. He was returning from 20 years of exile. During those 20 years he had

worked hard on the estate of his great-uncle Laban and had gone from a poverty to riches. He had gained huge herds of livestock. He had gained servants. He had married and had children. And now he was returning to his homeland.

Why, you ask, did he leave his homeland in the first place? Because, years ago, he had cheated his brother Esau out of his birthright. Esau had sought to kill him, and he fled. Now, twenty years later, Jacob knew that he would be meeting Esau and his army of servants the next day. Would Esau still seek revenge? Would he kill Jacob and his family and take his wealth for his own? Jacob was at a crossroads, facing a terrible crisis. This just might be his last day alive! And at that moment he did what a lot of us would never think of doing - he said a prayer of thanksgiving!

It's interesting to see the words he uses to preface his prayer, "O God of my father Abraham, God of my father Isaac, O Lord, who said to me, 'Go back to your country and your relatives, and I will make you prosper...'" It's almost as though he's reminding God of His promises! "Remember, God - you promised! You said that you'd prosper me! You said that my descendants would be like the sands on the seashore!" But Jacob knew God's faithfulness. He knew the Lord never forgets a promise.

Perhaps what Jacob was really doing was reminding himself of God's promises! Standing there, facing what looked like certain death at the hands of his brother, he was trying to remember, in his fear, that God could not possibly abandon him. He couldn't, because He had promised to prosper him.

The next step in Jacob's prayer of thanks is surprising - he admits to his own unworthiness. He says, "I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness you have shown your servant." The word Jacob uses to describe himself means, "Lord, I am small. I'm way too small for you to have expended all this mercy and grace on me; there's nothing inherent in me that deserves all these blessings!"

That's the attitude that frees us up to be truly thankful. We may have worked hard for what we have, but it is still all a blessing from the hand of God. When we compare what we have put into what he has put in, well, God is pretty much all in all.

That was Jacob. In his prayer he humbly admitted his unworthiness. And then he went on to the next step of his thanksgiving prayer - by realizing God's blessings. He says, "O Lord...I had only my staff when I crossed this Jordan, but now I have become two large groups!"

We've got an expression we use about thankfulness. Whenever someone is complaining about something, we tell them, "Count your blessings." Well, at the moment Jacob couldn't count his blessings - it would have taken him all night! When he left Canaan, his worldly possessions amounted to the clothes on his back and the walking stick in his hand. Now God had given him a large family, scores of servants, and herds of livestock that stretched to the horizon. So many, that he had to separate the mass into two groups to face the coming danger. From one stick...to two groups so huge he could hardly count them!

It is impossible for us to fully count our blessings. The material things are the easiest for God to provide; Jesus calls them "things". He simply says, "...All these things shall be added unto you." The job that God has given you, the monthly check He puts in your hands, the roof He puts over your head and the food He puts on your table. We even mouth a prayer of thanks for these from time to time. But what about the bigger things, infinitely more valuable?

And while we're on the subject of realizing God's blessings, let's not forget the big one. The Advent Season begins in three days. It's a time, especially, when we remember God's greatest gift to us - the gift of His Son. "God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son, that

whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life." --
Jn 3:16.

To a wretched, ungrateful world of humans, lost in sin, He sent His Son. The everlasting King became a pauper and made his sinless life into a gift of righteousness for us. He shed his innocent blood for us and died the shameful death of a criminal to bring us the peace of forgiveness. Praise God! We're God's redeemed people now and forever. All because of Jesus.

This Thanksgiving it might be good for us to say thank you to God the African way: with both hands! Let's extend our hands to heaven in a prayer of heartfelt thanks for all His gifts, and especially the gift of his Son. God bless us and cause us to remember to return to him in thanks for all we have in him. Amen.

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