

THANKSGIVING

Sermon by Terry Lortz

Opening Prayer

Good morning! I would like to begin with a quick prayer asking for God's blessing and inspiration on the subject I wish to share with you today.

(Short Prayer)

Introduction

Here we are on the Sunday before Thanksgiving. The historic proclamation of a national Thanksgiving Day was issued by George Washington during his first year as President. It set aside a Thursday in November as "A Day of Public Thanksgiving and Prayer."

I wonder if you really feel very thankful. Some may reply, "Some of us are more thankful than others. It depends on one's circumstances." You know, it's easy to celebrate Thanksgiving when your family is healthy, your income is ample, your savings are growing, your favorite team is headed to a bowl game, and your physical aches and pains are minimal.

But that kind of thanksgiving can be awfully superficial. God is almost neglected in such a celebration. In this world it's often just a matter of congratulating ourselves on how well we have done.

Real thanksgiving, biblical thanksgiving, is much greater and deeper than that. It is based not on our circumstances, but on **God's sufficiency**; not on our production, but on **God's provision**; not on our performance, but on **God's providence**. Paul described real thanksgiving with this admonition: "Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus" (1 Thessalonians 5:18).

Specific Purpose Statement

In Paul writings he gives two reasons for his confidence and thanksgiving towards God no matter the circumstances throughout his thirty years of selfless Christ led ministry. This morning we will quickly review these two important reasons and how they personally relate to our own reflections and true understanding of the upcoming Thanksgiving Day.

Body

In the movie, Facing the Giants, Coach Grant Taylor tries to deliver this message to his football team. He said, "We're going to praise God when we win and we're going to praise Him when we lose." Now I know that is tough! It's hard to feel very thankful if your favorite football team is suffering through a losing season; if your political party is suffering in the polls or if your first major car or appliance problem came less than thirty days after the warranty expired.

More seriously, it's hard to be thankful if there has been a death or divorce in your family in the past year; if your job or income is at risk; if your marriage is struggling; if someone in your family is facing a very serious health problem. It's hard if you have so many smaller problems that you just can't seem to get around to fixing them all. Sometimes we are like the man who said, "I could get this mattress up the stairs if I could just figure out how to get hold of it!" What we each have to be thankful for is related to our personal perceptions and observations. Just living in this wonderful free country is a major blessing we should all be thankful to God for!

Let's think about that first Thanksgiving celebration in America. On September 6, 1620, 102 Pilgrims had left Plymouth, England bound for the New World. For two months they braved the harsh elements of a vast storm-tossed sea in their creaky little cargo ship. They arrived in Massachusetts in late November. After a prayer service, they began building hasty shelters. However, there was no way they could have anticipated that harsh New England winter. Nearly half of them died before spring. Nevertheless, on December 13 of the following year, the Pilgrims declared a three-day feast to thank God and to celebrate with their Indian friends. That is real Thanksgiving, when people praise God regardless of personal circumstances.

In, **2 Tim. 1: 11-12**, Paul shows us what true thanksgiving looks like. Paul is in a dungeon, chained to a Roman guard. It is dark down in that hole. He can barely see well enough to write. He thinks back over his past thirty years as an apostle, teacher and preacher. Most of us in such a situation would have felt sorry for ourselves. Can't you hear us now, crying out, "Lord, you certainly have a strange way of showing your love for your servants. I have sacrificed and suffered for you all over two continents. What do I get for it? I'm locked up in this terrible hole, and I'll probably be executed within a month. Thanks a lot!"

But that's not what Paul said. Instead, he declared, "I am not ashamed of the Gospel." Then he gives two reasons for his confidence and thankfulness, even in a dungeon, even face to face with death. If we can claim and develop these same two reasons in our daily lives, we too can celebrate real thanksgiving this week.

First, Paul said, **'I can be confident and thankful because I Know God Personally.'**

There is a great difference between knowing about God and knowing God. Even the devil knows about God, and trembles because of what he knows. To know God personally is to love and serve Him as Savior, leader, counselor and friend.

In past conversations with relatives; they have said they "believe in God but don't go to church. They try to live by the Ten Commandments and good morals." This is all fine

and good to a point but that is almost a description of how we were thinking and living in the Worldwide Church of God in the past. That was before God graciously opened our eyes, minds and hearts to the true Gospel or Good News of His Ever-Forgiving Grace! We now know being a true Christian is basically a matter of whether or not one accepts that only Jesus death and resurrection paid for our sins and we have the awesome opportunity to enjoy a daily personal relationship with Jesus, the Heavenly Father and the Holy Spirit!

How can we have that personal knowledge of God and feel that inner assurance? Actually, God alone gives us this relationship of Grace through the Holy Spirit . However, God's word clearly gives us several examples of personal habits we can live to enhance and strengthen our personal relationship with our loving God.

First Habit, Christ was a wonderful example of relating to His father through regular prayer. Likewise, we too, are encouraged to **talk directly with God in prayer every day!**

Second Habit, as the daily study of God's scriptures of the Berean church members (**Acts 17:11**) served as a fine example and as Jesus demonstrated through his many references to God's words; we too are encouraged to **read and study God's inspired book every day!**

Third Habit, the fine example of David, a man after God's own heart (Act13:22), encourages us to **meditate on the important personal meaning found in God's Words** everyday! "I remember the days of long ago; I meditate on all your works and consider what your hands have done." (Psalm 143:5) NIV. Also, from personal experience, I know the value of reading daily devotional books such as the one recommended by Curtis May last Sunday, Jesus Calling written by Sarah Young. They help us meditate on the full meaning of the scriptures.

Fourth Habit, we are encouraged to **gather regularly with other believers to worship God**. We could worship alone at times, but Jesus said, "Where two or three come together in my name, there I am with them." (Matt. 18:20). Also, "Not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near." (Hebrews 10:25) Mary Koehler, Peggy and Gunnar quickly come to mind as a few wonderful examples of ever-faithful church attendance!

The **Final Habit** in getting more personal with God is to **take some risks with Him**. Dare to do something that is not likely to succeed without God's help. Seek out and reach out to some alienated person or someone you know has a need & you could assist, with the help of God. Volunteer to help at church or a needy organization in your community. Tithe on your income.

When I think back to taking my job for the City of Long Beach for 13 years, I know I depended daily on God to help me fulfill my vast daily responsibilities and keeping our marriage and family strong through the long physical separation. When we approved

our 15 year old son Josh going to school for 3 months in Costa Rica and Audrey going to school and doing missionary outreach in the jungles of Peru and Ecuador for 1 ½ years we entrusted our children to God for His divine protection. They relied on God's promise in His Word - "For I can do everything through Christ, who gives me strength." NLT ([Philippians 4:13](#))

When we take God-approved risks, we come to know God better and trust Him more. We are encouraged to ask ourselves Where in our life are we taking God-approved risks that are not likely to succeed without God's help? If we want to know God personally, the habit of risk-taking is essential. Remember, "Our personal habits will either make us or break us!"

"The name of our Lord Jesus will be honored because of the way you live, and you will be honored along with him. This is all made possible because of the grace of our God and Lord, Jesus Christ." (2 Thessalonians 1:12) NLT It is not enough to know about God. It is not enough to be an excellent student of the Scriptures. In order to celebrate real Thanksgiving, we must truly know God personally.

Second, Paul said, '**We can be confident and thankful because God is Able to Guard All That we Entrust to Him.**'

Without God we are in deep trouble, because our power and wisdom are so limited. But when we entrust to God the care of family, friends and possessions that are important to us, then we have enlisted the all-wise, omnipotent God. This does not mean that God puts an invisible protective shield around us and our families so that nothing bad can happen to us. This is a free, sin-prone world in which bad things even happen to people of faith. God does not love me or you more or less than any other person on earth. What then can we be sure of in this insecure world? God's Word assures us that nothing can separate us eternally from God. Nothing can happen tomorrow that God and we cannot handle together. No challenge or tragedy can erase God's sufficiency!

In the final analysis, our true security is only with God. We can entrust our loved ones, our church and our nation to the only One who is able to safeguard us. And I believe that He will. Our only assets that are absolutely secure are those that have been entrusted to Christ. When Wall Street is tumbles and trashes the hopes and dreams of investors, our investments in Christ will still be shining like pure gold.

So here we are on the eve of Thanksgiving. We don't know what a day may bring, much less a year. Yet we dare to give thanks to God because we can say with Paul, "I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day" ([1 Tim 1:12](#)). God's power is unlimited. "Surely the arm of the LORD is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear." ([Isaiah 59:1](#))

Awhile back I read a childhood memory story of a woman who recalled "My Dad owned a boat that we would take out to a sandbar up a local river. We had many fun times picnicking and swimming. My brother and I were quite young at the time. Dad would not

allow us to go into the water until he had first tied a rope around our waists. He held the other end of those ropes. A few times when I got into deep water, he had to gently pull me to safety. Somehow that rope always made me feel safe because I knew that my Dad was dependable." As I read that story, I thought about our heavenly Father. Though He does not control us like puppets, there is a kind of invisible rope between Him and us. He loves us so much. He has wonderful and mysterious ways of pulling us out of trouble and keeping us secure in Him. For that we can be so thankful!

In Ralph Waldo Emerson's journal, there is a heartfelt section where Emerson reflects painfully on the tragic death of his little son, Waldo. In his grief, Emerson wrote these words of faith: "All that I have seen teaches me to trust God for all that I have not seen."

Conclusion

If we too believe and trust God with all our hearts, then we know the secret of our Christian confidence in a truly personal relationship with our Ever-Loving God, and we are truly ready to celebrate Thanksgiving!

[More Thanksgiving Scriptures for Personal Study & Meditation](#)

"Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name."
(Psalm 100:4)

"For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving," (1
Tim. 4:4)

"Let us come to him with thanksgiving. Let us sing psalms of praise to him." (Psalm 95:2)

"All this is for your benefit, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God." (2 Cor. 4:15)