

Psalm 100 (Opening)

- 1 Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth!*
- 2 Serve the LORD with gladness!*
Come into his presence with singing!
- 3 Know that the LORD, he is God!*
It is he who made us, and we are his;
we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.
- 4 Enter his gates with thanksgiving,*
and his courts with praise!
Give thanks to him; bless his name!
- 5 For the LORD is good;*
his steadfast love endures forever,
and his faithfulness to all generations.

It's getting to be that time of year when there's a lot of two things going on: giving (and hence, receiving), and thanking.

I have never been very good at sending thank-you cards; well, any kind of cards at all, really. If it involves planning ahead, or remembering to do something, I've not been very good at it.

Thinking back, I don't remember sending out thank-you cards for our wedding presents, but that may just be my memory acting up. I do know we got a box of Christmas cards to send out one year, addressed them, and then found them again a few years later, unsent. That's a little embarrassing to bring up.

I was raised to be polite, though, even though my forgetfulness may make it seem like I'm not. My mother raised me right; always say please and thank-you, don't put your elbows on the table, stuff like that.

I'm always impressed with the effect simply saying "Thank-you" to someone has. Depending on what you're thanking them for, the response could go from a minor dismissal like "It was nothing" to a hearty "You're welcome!" followed by a glowing and beaming face and a great attitude.

Some people have a hard time accepting things like gifts, praise, or thanks. I guess it's just in their nature. I know for me it's hard to accept help sometimes. I was raised to be independent, just like most of you were, I'm sure. We Mainers are a hearty bunch, and we stand on our own, right? Well, sometimes we just need to accept help, no matter what our pride does to us.

With Thanksgiving coming up this week, I've been thinking a lot about thanking people, and helping people. The story of the Plymouth colony is all about helping and thanking; at least the first year was. Oh, and dying. There was a lot of that going on too.

After months of delays, trying to leave England for Northern Virginia, the Puritans had to give up one ship of the pair they'd hired and crowd into the Mayflower to get to a place where they could worship God in relative freedom. But all the problems delayed their departure until early September; not the best time to be sailing across the Atlantic Ocean.

Because of bad storms, it took them 66 days to get across the Atlantic, and not only that, but they ended up quite a bit off course, landing on Cape Cod when they were aiming for the Hudson River. They didn't start building their settlement until Christmas of 1620, and by March, almost half of their 100 people had died of scurvy or exposure. Plymouth Plantation was not a happy place.

By March, 1621, the plantation finally negotiated a mutual defense treaty with the local native tribe, and they sent representatives to help them learn to survive in New England. Because of the help from the native people, a part of the Plymouth Plantation survived the first year. In October of 1621, the remainder of the Plymouth Plantation colonists (only 53 survived to that point) and about 90 of the Wampanoag people had a three day harvest festival, sharing their produce, along with water fowl, wild turkeys, and five deer. This is what is the model for our Thanksgiving Day.

So, why did I tell you all that?

Even though they had a hard year, the survivors were very thankful for having made it through, and the fact that God, through the local peoples, provided for them. If it hadn't been for many bad things happening to people, they wouldn't have survived. Like Joseph says to his brothers in Genesis 50:20

Genesis 50:20

²⁰ As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.

But what prompted the Pilgrims to have their Harvest Festival? Why celebrate like they did? Why not just smoke and salt all the meat and dry the produce so they'd have enough for the long winter ahead?

Well, we have two specific examples of it in the Bible, where the Jews were commanded to sacrifice or celebrate. First is what was called a Thank Offering, or Peace Offering, in Leviticus 7:11-15.

Leviticus 7:11-15

¹¹ "And this is the law of the sacrifice of peace offerings that one may offer to the LORD. ¹² If he offers it for a thanksgiving, then he shall offer with the thanksgiving sacrifice unleavened loaves mixed with oil, unleavened wafers smeared with oil, and loaves of fine flour well mixed with oil. ¹³ With the sacrifice of his peace offerings for thanksgiving he shall bring his offering with loaves of leavened bread. ¹⁴ And from it he shall offer one loaf from each offering, as a gift to the LORD. It shall belong to the priest who throws the blood of the peace offerings. ¹⁵ And the flesh of the sacrifice of his peace offerings for thanksgiving shall be eaten on the day of his offering. He shall not leave any of it until the morning.

This is an offering that a family would bring expressing thanks to God for what He had done for them. The offering consisted of an animal sacrifice and bread, with or without leavening. The animal was butchered and cooked, a part of the bread and a part of the meat was given to the priest who performed the sacrifice, and the rest was eaten by the family or group that brought it.

The second example is the Festival of Booths, or the Feast of Ingathering, mentioned in Exodus 23, in the last half of verse 16.

Exodus 23:16b

You shall keep the Feast of Ingathering at the end of the year, when you gather in from the field the fruit of your labor.

This is celebrated in Late September to late October (because the Hebrew calendar is a lunar calendar, it moves around on our calendar). There's a more detailed description of it in Leviticus 23:33-43

Leviticus 23:33-43

³³ And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ³⁴ "Speak to the people of Israel, saying, On the fifteenth day of this seventh month and for seven days is the Feast of Booths to the LORD. ³⁵ On the first day shall be a holy convocation; you shall not do any ordinary work. ³⁶ For seven days you shall present food offerings to the LORD. On the eighth day you shall hold a holy convocation and present a food offering to the LORD. It is a solemn assembly; you shall not do any ordinary work.

³⁷ "These are the appointed feasts of the LORD, which you shall proclaim as times of holy convocation, for presenting to the LORD food offerings, burnt offerings and grain offerings, sacrifices and drink offerings, each on its proper day, ³⁸ besides the LORD's Sabbaths and besides your gifts and besides all your vow offerings and besides all your freewill offerings, which you give to the LORD.

³⁹ "On the fifteenth day of the seventh month, when you have gathered in the produce of the land, you shall celebrate the feast of the LORD seven days. On the first day shall be a solemn rest, and on the eighth day shall be a solemn rest. ⁴⁰ And you shall take on the first day the fruit of splendid trees, branches of palm trees and boughs of leafy trees and willows of the brook, and you shall rejoice before the LORD your God seven days. ⁴¹ You shall celebrate it as a feast to the LORD for seven days in the year. It is a statute forever throughout your generations; you shall celebrate it in the seventh month. ⁴² You shall dwell in booths for seven days. All native Israelites shall dwell in booths, ⁴³ that your

generations may know that I made the people of Israel dwell in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God."

To put it in modern language, it was a seven-day long party, and everyone would bring their best to share with everyone else; at least, that's what God told them to do, anyway. Of course, we know they didn't always do what God told them to do. But this was supposed to be one big national party, a huge family reunion, if you will, at the Temple, every year.

These are the examples that the Pilgrims followed that October, celebrating their "Harvest Home" celebration.

Why else would you provide a Thanksgiving offering to God? Well, let's look at other examples, specifically in the Psalms.

In Psalm 50:22, and 23, the Psalmist points to deliverance as a reason for a Thank Offering.

Psalm 50:22, 23

*22 "Mark this, then, you who forget God,
 lest I tear you apart, and there be none to deliver!
23 The one who offers thanksgiving as his sacrifice glorifies me;
 to one who orders his way rightly
 I will show the salvation of God!"*

In Psalm 107, the Psalmist talks of Thank Offerings to God because of all He's done for them.

Psalm 107:21, 22

*21 Let them thank the LORD for his steadfast love,
 for his wondrous works to the children of man!
22 And let them offer sacrifices of thanksgiving,
 and tell of his deeds in songs of joy!*

Jonah expressed verbal thanksgiving to God while he was still in the fish, and God had him delivered onto dry land so he could continue his journey.

Jonah 2:9

⁹ *But I with the voice of thanksgiving
will sacrifice to you;
what I have vowed I will pay.
Salvation belongs to the LORD!"*

I know what you're thinking. Those are great examples, but they're all Old Testament, and we're not under the old law anymore. So, that doesn't apply to us, right?

Well, sort of. We aren't **required** to celebrate the Festival of Booths, but God expects us to be thankful. The Festival of Booths was at a specific time of year, but God wants us to be thankful **all the time!**

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

¹⁶ *Rejoice always, ¹⁷ pray without ceasing, ¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.*

How do we do that? How can we constantly do what the Israelites did, bringing our best produce to sacrifice to God? Well, there's a few ways you can do that. The first example I can give you is from Hebrews. We know that book was written to the Jewish Christians, who understood the Law and the sacrifices and festivals.

Hebrews 13:15, 16

¹⁵ *Through him [Jesus] then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name. ¹⁶ Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.*

The fruit of our lips is the sacrifice that God wants now. What's that? Well, we've been doing it this morning; praising God by singing, reading His word, and praying to Him. But again, going back to the verse in 1st Thessalonians, it's not an occasional thing, or a "only on Sunday" thing, it's all the time.

God is a good father. He takes care of us. He gives us good things, and wants the best for us. He hopes we were "raised right" and that we're thankful for what He gives us, and that we express those thanks.

So, what are a few ways we can express those thanks to God? Well, one big way is sharing what we have. We're going to do that today here at our pot-luck. We bring food to share, and invite people to stay and eat with us. That's like the Thank Offering from the Old Testament. It's us sharing God's blessing with others.

Another way we can express our thanks to God is by sharing Him with people around us. When we praise God through our lives, by doing what's right, we are a sweet smelling sacrifice, a living sacrifice, to Him. That's what Paul says in Romans 12:1, 2

Romans 12:1, 2

¹ I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. ² Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

By sacrificing what we want for what He wants, we are doing His will. By not being conformed to this world, we please God. This is our living sacrifice, constantly praising God and showing His love to the people around us.

I know a lot of you will be spending time sometime this week focusing on family and food. So many people are calling it “Turkey day” rather than what it really should be; a day of thanksgiving to God for helping us through another year; a day of sharing His blessings with those around us. We know we don’t need the government to tell us when to do something like that, because we’ve decided to do it every month with our pot-luck. But we need to take the time to remember those who may not be able to celebrate, or not want to celebrate for whatever reason. At the very least, we should be praying for those folks, but even better, we should be working to help them in whatever way we can, trying to share Christ with them by doing.

2 Corinthians 9:10-13 (Closing)

¹⁰ He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. ¹¹ You will be enriched in every way to be generous in every way, which through us will produce thanksgiving to God. ¹² For the ministry of this service is not only supplying the needs of the saints but is also overflowing in many thanksgivings to God.