

Remembering to be Thankful

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

Thanksgiving

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Deuteronomy 8:7-18 (NRSV)

⁷For the LORD your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with flowing streams, with springs and underground waters welling up in valleys and hills, ⁸a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, ⁹a land where you may eat bread without scarcity, where you will lack nothing, a land whose stones are iron and from whose hills you may mine copper. ¹⁰You shall eat your fill and bless the LORD your God for the good land that he has given you.

¹¹Take care that you do not forget the LORD your God, by failing to keep his commandments, his ordinances, and his statutes, which I am commanding you today. ¹²When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them, ¹³and when your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, ¹⁴then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, ¹⁵who led you through the great and terrible wilderness, an arid wasteland with poisonous snakes and scorpions. He made water flow for you from flint rock, ¹⁶and fed you in the wilderness with manna that your ancestors did not know, to humble you and to test you, and in the end to do you good. ¹⁷Do not say to yourself, “My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth.” ¹⁸But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, so that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your ancestors, as he is doing today.

Luke 17:11-19 (NRSV)

¹¹On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. ¹²As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, ¹³they called out, saying, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” ¹⁴When he saw them, he said to them, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” And as they went, they were made clean. ¹⁵Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. ¹⁶He prostrated himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. ¹⁷Then Jesus asked, “Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? ¹⁸Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?” ¹⁹Then he said to him, “Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.”

We have so much. Do we remember to give thanks? Do we remember whom to thank?

One out of Ten!!

What’s up with the lepers?¹ Ten are hanging out together one day, as Jesus makes his way through northern Samaria. Evidently, they recognize Jesus as he approaches and they know of his reputation as a healer. Quickly, they begin to plead for mercy, for healing. And why shouldn’t they? What other hope do they have? And, not surprisingly, Jesus responds to their pleas with the mercy they seek. He treats them as if they had already been healed, telling them to go show themselves to a priest, as required by the Law. So they head off directly, realizing that they had been healed. But

¹Though the skin disease is usually translated as leprosy, the Greek word here was used for a variety of skin diseases. Still, these ten people were outcasts not only because people feared their disease, but because people believed that their affliction was punishment for sins they or someone in their family had committed. Lepers kept to themselves, lived in colonies of their own, and lived near major thoroughfares so they could more easily beg for charity.

one of them hangs back, praises God at the top of his lungs and throws himself on the ground in front of Jesus, thanking him over and over.

Why does only one turn back and thank Jesus? The other nine seem so ungrateful. Yet, Jesus told them to go to the priest and that is what they did. Why condemn them for it?

Fred Craddock suggests that this story has two parts. The first (v. 11-14) is a “typical” healing story. The second part (v. 15-19) is then the story of a foreigner’s salvation.

Deuteronomy

Deuteronomy is one of the most important books in the Bible. It is the most-quoted book in the New Testament. Here are a few things to keep in mind when you come to Deuteronomy.

Though the book contains many laws, it is much more a book of the heart. Look for the spirit of the law, the instruction given by God to Israel. Notice that the book reads much more like a sermon than some sort of legal code.

There are several ways to outline or organize the book. The authors of the Open Bible see the book as a series of three sermons. What God has done for Israel (1:1 – 4:43), What God expects of Israel (4:44-26:19), and What God will do for Israel (27:1 – 34:12). Many scholars see the book as a covenant that elaborates on the Ten Commandments. (Compare Deuteronomy 5:6-21 with Exodus 20:1-17 and remember that Exodus is set nearly 40 years before Deuteronomy!)

In its structure and much of its language, Deuteronomy is a treaty/covenant between a king and his people. It can be compared to a standard ancient near-eastern treaty. They both have preambles, a reminder of all the things the king has done for his people, laws/regulations, blessings that come from keeping the law, and curses that will flow from breaking the laws. But, of course, Israel’s covenant was not with some earthly king, but with God himself, the one true god.

The Law given by Moses was seen as a delight by the Israelites, not a burden. The Law is God’s instruction to Israel on how they are to live in relationship with him. There is one God, one people, one land, one place to worship, and one law.

After all, what is a Samaritan doing in the bunch, for if they are not Jews, then why would Jesus send them to a priest? And the statement, “Your faith has made you well,” could just as easily be translated, “Your faith has saved you.” That would be even a more typical translation of the Greek root word, *sozo*. Thus, we see that here again, it is an outsider that sees and understands Jesus and the Kingdom of God better than do the insiders, the Jews. In this way, the second half of the story carries much the same punch as the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), for there it is the Samaritan outsider, not the priest and Levite, who knows the right answer to Jesus’ question, “Who is my neighbor?” The healing of this Samaritan leper also has strong echoes of Elisha’s healing of Naaman the foreign commander who had leprosy (2 Kings 5:1-17). Naaman too is not only healed of his affliction, but comes to know that Yahweh, the god of the Israelites, is the only god, the LORD God. Just as the Samaritan sees the truth about Jesus’ kingdom announcement, so Naaman comes to see the truth of Elisha’s ministry of life.

All that said, we still have nine lepers who can’t make the time to turn and offer heart-felt thanks to Jesus for their healing. We have trouble imagining how they could be so ungrateful, or at least so neglectful of showing their thanks. Yet, how often do we turn forgetful ourselves. In today’s Scripture passage from Deuteronomy, Moses reminds the people that they will have to guard against their own forgetfulness or they will quickly turn ungrateful.

“Take care that you do not forget . . .”

Much of the industrialized world is post-Christian, even post-religion. Less than 5% of the French go to a church, synagogue,

or mosque weekly. In England, though more than 25 million people identify themselves as members of the Church of England, only 1.2 million of them go to services weekly. Even in Italy, less than 25% attend Mass weekly. Though sizeable majorities profess belief in God and even the importance of services at key moments in life, in truth, they have forgotten nearly all that there is to remember about God and the Christian faith. All this stands in sharp contrast to the developing world, the world of disease and deprivation, where the growth of Christianity is exploding. In 1900, just 9% of Africans were Christian. Today, it is 46%! By 2025, 50% of the world's Christians will be in Africa, Latin America, and South America.

Why has so much been forgotten in the West? A young lawyer in Lagos, Nigeria, sees it this way: "In countries where everything is very o.k., where they take care of their citizenry, people are very lethargic when it comes to religion. They are not encouraged to ask for any help. They seem to have it all." Moses said basically the same thing more than 3,000 years ago.

Today's passage from Deuteronomy is taken from Moses' final speech to the Israelites as they prepared to enter the Promised Land without him. He warns them that in this land of milk and honey it would be very easy to forget God. They would build fine homes. They would grow rich and comfortable. Being human, they would be tempted to stand on the mountaintops shouting for all to hear – "Look what I have done! Behold my accomplishments!" Moses knew how easy it would be for the Israelites to become "full of themselves," thinking "I did all this. And all by myself. I'm rich. It's all mine!"² How were the Israelites to avoid the temptation to forget God in their affluence and achievement? By keeping God's commandments, his instructions to them. Every day and in all ways, they were to love God and to love neighbor.

A life of thanksgiving

The holiday of Thanksgiving is a great time to embrace anew the thankful hearts that ought to characterize us all year. In his book, *Prayer: finding the heart's true home*, Richard Foster writes, "Jesus was the ultimate grateful person. The signature written across his heart was the prayer 'I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth'" (Matthew 11:25). Jesus was of one heart and mind with the psalmist who wrote "I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart" (Psalm 9:1) and with Paul who wrote "I thank God for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed throughout the world" (Romans 1:8) and with the writer of Hebrews, "let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name" (13:15).

As in all things, we are called to be Christ-like. We must allow ourselves to be drawn more often into the praise of God and the joyful giving of thanks to him. Foster reminds us of Augustine's phrase, "God thirsts to be thirsted after" and writes "Our God is not made of stone . . . Like the proud mother who is thrilled to receive a wilted bouquet of dandelions from her child, so God celebrates our feeble expressions of gratitude."

Let's not pretend that even feeble expressions of thanks are easy. Living every day in a spirit of thanksgiving does not come naturally to us; there is much in life that wants to crowd out any sense of gratitude. Nonetheless, as we come again to the glories of Advent and Christmas, we can remind ourselves to be a grateful community, seeking ever to grow in our ability to see and to experience God in all his goodness.

²These phrases are from Peterson's paraphrase of the Bible, *The Message*.

An Easily Forgotten Lesson

After fleeing Egypt, Moses and the people must make their way through the vast, Sinai wilderness. Here are some reflections by Patrick Miller on what they were supposed to have learned. (from his commentary on Deuteronomy)

So Israel is meant to learn from the wilderness experience that its sustenance comes from God, who is to this people as a teaching parent. But the sermon of Moses indicates that the experiment in the wilderness was a test by which God also would learn something—whether Israel would keep the commandments (v. 2). The results of the experiment at that point are ambiguous. We are never told whether God received an answer or what that answer might be. That ambiguity or unanswered question is not unimportant for comprehending the purpose of Deuteronomy or the purpose of the narrative of Jesus' temptation. For it is precisely the case in Deuteronomy that the issue of the whole book is to answer: Has Israel learned the lessons of the past and will it now, in a (later) situation of prosperity and abundance, remember who is the provider and live by that one's word? The matter is still open-ended and even more acute, for the richness of life on the land with beautiful houses, lush gardens giving both the necessities and delicacies of life, and large mineral resources (v. 7–10) creates an even larger possibility that prosperous people will forget the gift-giver and think, I did it all by myself (v. 17).

The movement from verse 10 to verse 12 provides the central axis of thought and thus the point of 8:7–17. Will the people, when they shall have eaten and are full, bless the Lord your God “for the good land he has given you”; that is, give thanks to the one who has provided it all (v. 10)? Or will they eat and be satisfied and prosperous with all the comforts of life and “forget the Lord your God by not keeping his commandments” (vv. 11–12), “forget the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage” (v. 14), and think, “My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth” (v. 17)? Take heed lest the Lord find arrogance and the hubris of forgetfulness (vv. 14 and 17) rather than obedience (v. 2) “in your heart” (see vv. 2, 14, and 17). That is the clear and difficult word to a later generation of prosperity that has long experienced the blessing of God. Have you forgotten that the Lord is the one who gives you power to get wealth? If so, it is necessary to go back to the wilderness and the boundary to learn the lesson afresh.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. The story of Jesus and the ten lepers links together faith and gratitude. Alan Culpepper asks us, “In what sense is gratitude an expression of faith? Does not gratitude follow from faith? Or is gratitude itself an expression of faith? . . . Is there any better measure of faith?” What do you think?
2. Remembering God . . . it seems so straight-forward, so easy. It is not. Sure, we might be able to say grace before meals and come to church each Sunday. But remembering God, as Moses spoke of it, meant centering one's life upon God, in all moments and in all places. I think that is what Paul means when he speaks of praying without ceasing. Paul knew that we can't spend our entire day on our knees, but he knew that for most of us, it can be hard to give God more than a passing thought during our busy days. You might begin your discussion or reflection by considering what it really means to be immersed in God, to center your life upon him. For example, it might mean seeing each person we meet as bearing the image of God – try that in the mall sometime! It might mean going into each business meeting asking ourselves . . . what would God really want me to do in this meeting? You might also make a list of the major obstacles we face as we try to remember God in the “real world.”
3. ¹⁷*Do not say to yourself, “My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth.”* Wow, that verse is a conversation stopper. I'm convinced that this is the sort of Bible verse to which we often pay lip service, but rarely let seep into our souls. I was trained in the gospel of self-reliance and achievement, as if to scream out “I am the master of my ship; darn right it is by my hand . . . who else do you think it was!?” Somehow, we have to figure out how to hang on to the goodness of hard work and accomplishment but still acknowledge that all we have is a gift from God. I bet that most of us would like to trust God more and cling less tightly to our bank accounts. We'd like to believe Jesus when he says “do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear.” (Matthew 5:25). But we lack the spiritual resources to actually do so. How can we begin to wear our wealth lightly, to be more generous, and to place our security in God's hands rather than our own?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Deuteronomy 6:1-9; 7:7-11 Remember God, always knowing that what we have is his gift to us.</p>	<p>Tuesday, Psalm 111 One of the great psalms of thanksgiving</p>
<p>Wednesday, Psalm 105 Another psalm of thanksgiving</p>	<p>Thursday, Romans 1:8-15 Paul give thanks for the believers in Rome.</p>
<p>Friday, 1 Thessalonians 1:1-11 Paul is thankful for the faith and the witness of the believers in Thessalonica.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Weekly Joys and Concerns</p>

