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 Reuben · 31 minutes ago · 14 min read

A Heart of Thanksgiving, and Where the Feast Interestingly Originated



Ps 95:3,

“Let us come before his presence with thanksgiving.”

Col 2:6-7,

"As ye have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk ye in him: Rooted and built up in him, and stablished in the faith, as ye have been taught, abounding therein with thanksgiving.”

The world at large may celebrate thanksgiving once per year, though not in gratitude to their Creator and Giver of all things good, but the life of the truly saved is one of thanksgiving. For what do we have that we haven't received? (1 Cor 4:7). Thus His redeemed can say with the host of saints,

“Rejoice evermore. . . . In every thing give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you.” (1 Th 5:16, 18)

Sandwiched between these verses in Thessalonians is “Pray without ceasing.” Our daily routine should be one of rejoicing and thanksgiving, without ceasing, offered up as acceptable sacrifices unto God.

The word “thanksgiving” is first found in the English language c.1530 A.D., and derived etymologically from the exclamation "thanks" plus the present participle of give. It is kin to thankfulness which means thoughtfulness; a mindful acknowledgment of what God has done for us, its primary usage. Interestingly, the word "thank" and "think" has the same etymological roots. The Bible says, "For as he thinketh in his heart, so is he:" (Pr 23:7a). A thankful heart has certain fruit, as does an unthankful heart. To what does the heart return "thanks"? To self, or to God? The only heart that is truly thankful is one that is obedient to the Word of God; and that is only a regenerated, born again heart. You can't fool God, when your thanks is only lip deep.

The Hebrew word “Juda” or “Judah” (יהודה), found 827x in Scripture, is defined as thanksgiving and praise. Judah was the fourth patriarch son of Jacob (Gen 29:35), after whom the Tribe and Land is named. His children became one of the twelve tribes of Israel.

He repented and was saved by God through the Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of Joseph for his evil part in what they did to him (Gen 44) and because of that, the lineage of Jesus Christ came through him (Gen 49:8-10; Nu 24:17; 26:19; Ru 4:12; Neh 11:24; Matt 1:2-3; Lk 3:33; Rev 5:5). When you read the chronological list of the 12 sons of Jacob in Rev 7:5-8, it doesn't start with Reuben even though he is the oldest son and even though the rest of the list is in chronological order, but the list parts from this traditional listing and starts with Juda because of his prominence among the patriarchs and the lineage of Christ.

Consider the holiday of thanksgiving and its roots.

The Thanksgiving As We Know it Today

The world celebrates this holiday but mostly not in thanksgiving towards God. Once this day was dedicated particularly to worshipping God and enjoying family, but today more likely to be consumed by pleasure, entertainment and gluttony. Food is certainly a blessing and is to be enjoyed with thanksgiving, but not without recognition from whence it derives. "The LORD satisfieth thy mouth with good things; so that thy youth is renewed like the eagle's" (Ps 103:5). In his present mortal body, man needs food for strength. When Saul forbade his army to eat for only one day he caused them to be limited in what they could do (1 Sam 14:24-30).

A proper and reasonable diet can go a long way toward maintaining good health and renewing one's youth. The Bible does not set forth any certain diet that is required of believers, but common sense teaches us to eat a balanced healthy diet and to avoid overeating or junk eating, lest you be guilty of the sin of gluttony. Food is something God has given to satisfy the mouth or the taste, and it is not unscriptural to enjoy one's food as a gift from God's hand. We can be thankful for food, and we should, but we must avoid gluttony, and the holiday is not just about food; it's about the Lord.

The History of Thanksgiving Day among the Gentiles

Most are well aware that thanksgiving in America was started by the Pilgrims in the Colony of New Plymouth. But it didn't actually start in 1621. Though they held a meal in appreciation for the assistance from the members of the Massasoit tribe and celebration of the first harvest in 1621, this was not the first actual day of Thanksgiving. There was also no turkey, squash, and pumpkin. The feast of thanksgiving came about as a result of going from a communist government to a capitalist government as chronicled by Governor William Bradford. He writes about the transition from a communal form on governing to a capitalist:



“At last after much debate of things, the governor gave way that they should set corn everyman for his own particular. . . . That had very good success for it made all hands very industrious, so much [more] corn was planted than otherwise would have been.”

The governor "assigned to every family a parcel of land, according to the proportion of their number for that end."

Their new incentive-based economic system was great success. An abundant harvest was forecast. But then, during the summer, the rains stopped, threatening the crops. The Pilgrims held a "Day of Humiliation" and prayer. The rains came and the harvest was saved. Logically the Pilgrims saw this as sign that God blessed their new economic system, and Bradford proclaimed Nov 29, 1623, as a Day of Thanksgiving. Bradford wrote that their experience taught them that for society as a whole, communism, or sharing all the production between the people, was vain and unscriptural:

“The experience that has had in this common course and condition, tried sundrie years, and that amongst Godly and sober men, may well evince the Vanities of the conceit of Plato's and other ancients, applauded by some of later times; that the taking away of propertie, and bringing into commone wealth, would make them happy and flourishing, as if they were wiser than God.”

But there is evidence that a Thanksgiving Harvest Festival was held prior to this on American shores, in the Popham Colony in Maine, 1607, together with the Abenaki Indians who had been a tremendous help to these early settlers. In 1607 an Englishman named George Popham set up camp and eventually a Fort, “Fort Popham,” a five-sided, star-shaped fort, America's first pentagon, on a well-known beach in Maine called Popham. They set up a supply house and built the first major, ocean-going boat in what would become the United States of America, *The Virginia*. During that 1607 fall, the Abenaki Indians befriending Popham was a Godsend. While the Indians liked to indulge Popham's imagination, confirming a big sea to the West, Northwest Passage a real possibility, and China out there to be found, not sure what China was, they were also kind. A tradition among the Abenaki was the harvest festival. In that spirit, the Popham settlers invited the Abenaki Indians, whom they soon knew by their first name, to celebrate festivities at their fort. Truth be told, this Thanksgiving between Popham's men and the Abenaki near Popham Beach in Maine, *was* the first Thanksgiving. The journals that followed the day called it ... Thanksgiving.

Thanksgiving didn't become an annual American ritual for another 200+ years. In 1789 President George Washington announced that on Nov 26 would be a day of thanksgiving and prayer to mark the adoption of the U.S. Constitutions and the establishment of a new government but this was just a one-time event. Much of the credit for this annual holiday may be given to Sarah Josepha Hale. Editor of *Ladies Magazine* and *Godey's Lady's Book*, she began to agitate for such a day in 1827 by printing articles in those magazines of stories and recipes, and wrote scores of letters to governors, senators, and presidents. After 36 years of crusading, she won her battle. On Oct 3, 1863, buoyed by the Union victory at Gettysburg, President Abraham Lincoln proclaimed a national holiday to be observed the last Thursday of November as a "day of thanksgiving and praise to our beneficent Father."

While the USA certainly made it popular and the first to establish it as a national holiday, they actually weren't the first to hold such a feast. A day of thanksgiving was celebrated by the arctic explorer Martin Frobisher on May 27, 1578, more than forty years before the Pilgrims arrived. They ate a meal of salt beef, biscuits and mushy peas to give thanks to the Lord for their safe arrival in

Newfoundland, which is now a province of Canada. They celebrated communion and formally expressed gratitude through the ship's Chaplain, Robert Wollfall, who, according to explorer Richard Collinson,

“made unto them a godly sermon, exhorting them especially to be thankfull to God for theyr strange and miraculous deliverance in those so dangerous places.”

Thanksgiving was proclaimed a national holiday in Canada in 1879, sixteen years after America. This is what Parliament called it:

“A day of General Thanksgiving to Almighty God for the bountiful harvest with which Canada has been blessed.”

In Canada the holiday draws from three traditions: harvest celebrations in European peasant societies which had gone on for hundreds of years, formal observances like Frobisher's where the crew gave thanks for their safe return from their search for the Northwest Passage, and the Pilgrims' harvest celebration.

While all these were inspired by thanksgiving towards the Lord God for His abundant goodness and lovingkindness, they were also inspired in particular by a feast of thanksgiving found in the Word of God.

The Feast of Thanksgiving in the Word of God — Where it Began, with the Israelites



The notion of offering thanks to God with food didn't originate with the pilgrims and puritans or the Europeans and Frobisher; it actually goes way back as far as the book of Leviticus in the OT. It actually started in Lev 7:11-21.

Leviticus is full of commands and laws from God for the Israelites to offer up sacrifices on certain days, at certain times, for certain reasons. Majority of these sacrifices were commanded. There was however one sacrifice in Leviticus that wasn't a requirement. This sacrifice was to be a pure expression of thanks to God, purely from the will of man's heart, and it's called the "Todah" offering ("todah" = "thank you!").

If you simply wanted to say Thank You ("todah") to the Lord for all His blessings or even a special blessing He had bestowed, you would follow the instructions outlined in Lev 7:11–18, which is here for your reading:

"And this is the law of the sacrifice of peace offerings, which he shall offer unto the Lord. If he offer it for a thanksgiving, then he shall offer with the sacrifice of thanksgiving unleavened cakes mingled with oil, and unleavened wafers anointed with oil, and cakes mingled with oil, of fine flour, fried. Besides the cakes, he shall offer for his offering leavened bread with the sacrifice of thanksgiving of his peace offerings. And of it he shall offer one out of the whole oblation for an heave offering unto the Lord, and it shall be the priest's that sprinkleth the blood of the peace offerings. And the flesh of the sacrifice of his peace offerings for thanksgiving shall be eaten the same day that it is offered; he shall not leave any of it until the morning. But if the sacrifice of his offering be a vow, or a voluntary offering, it shall be eaten the same day that he offereth his sacrifice: and on the morrow also the remainder of it shall be eaten: But the remainder of the flesh of the sacrifice on the third day shall be burnt with fire. And if any of the flesh of the sacrifice of his peace offerings be eaten at all on the third day, it shall not be accepted, neither shall it be imputed unto him that offereth it: it shall be an abomination, and the soul that eateth of it shall bear his iniquity."

Wrapped up in this wilful sacrifice we see the first and greatest commandment to "love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might." (De 6:5; 10:12; 11:1; 19:9; 30:6, 16, 20; Matt 22:37-38).

Although no specific numbers are mentioned in Lev 7, according to rabbinical tradition, the thankful Israelite would bake 40 loaves of bread (30 unleavened and 10 leavened). He would then choose his finest lamb or goat and travel to the Temple in Jerusalem. This walk could be an hour or days journey depending on where he lived, just to say, "todah, Lord!" When the thankful Israelite would arrive at the Temple he would give a portion of his bread (usually 5 loaves) to the priests. The priest would take the offered lamb or goat and sacrifice it to the Lord.

After it was cooked the priest would take that barbecued lamb off the altar and give it to the thankful Israelite who was required to eat all of it by the end of the day, and leave nothing by the morning: “And the flesh of the sacrifice of his peace offerings for thanksgiving shall be eaten the same day that it is offered; he shall not leave any of it until the morning.” (Lev. 7:15).

Today at Thanksgiving we deal with turkeys ranging from 12-20 pounds (which feeds 8-15 people), with some leftovers for a casserole or turkey sandwich the next day or so. According to Leviticus, the thankful Israelite was required to eat all of the bread and lamb (100+ pounds) before the morning! That’s 35 loaves of bread and 100+ pounds of mutton to eat. Good thing theres no tryptophan in lamb!

How on earth could it be possible for one man, and many his family, to eat all of that food?

Well, what is the second greatest commandment? The thankful Israelite was compelled to invite people to the feast and in his abundance of meat and bread he would bless his family, his friends, and also strangers with a filling meal. He would love his neighbour as himself.

As they would sit around to eat, people rejoicing for a free meal of abidance, inevitably the question would come up as to why the Israelite was so thankful to the Lord. Well there we go, not only is God glorified in this man’s sacrifice, but now the man has even greater opportunity to glorify God! This would provide an excellent opportunity to bring glory to the Lord and what He had done for him, and witness of the salvation that God had provided for him and for all.

Isn’t that just wonderful! I absolutely love the way the Lord structured this sacrifice.

First of all, it wasn’t required, which means God doesn’t want a manufactured “Thank You” from us. Instead, He wants us to give Him the praise and thanks He deserves from the heart. "And when ye will offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving unto the LORD, offer it at your own will." (Lev 22:29).

Secondly, the Lord didn’t take the sacrifice just for Himself, once again demonstrating His unselfish love; instead, His impossible demand to eat all the food by the next day encouraged the Israelite to glorify God and bless others and be a witness for God, to

“Only fear the LORD, and serve him in truth with all your heart: for consider how great *things* he hath done for you.” (1 Sam 12:24).

When God saves us from our sins and from Himself—from His wrath which is upon us when we are lost (Jn 3:36) and the children of disobedience (Eph 2:1-3)—at that moment of conversion, “the LORD thy God will circumcise thine heart, and the heart of thy seed, to love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, that thou mayest live.” (De 30:6). This great “love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us.” (Rom 5:5b). And it is God that teaches us “to love one another.” (1 Th 4:9). Hence why the keeping of the first and second greatest commandments are required for eternal life (read Lk 10:25-28). Saved people can and do keep these two of greatest commandments, for “On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” (Matt 22:40).

So Many Reasons to Give Thanks unto God!

“By him therefore let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to his name.” (Heb. 13:15)

There are innumerable things and blessings for which we could—and should—give thanks to God. But there are three notable gifts mentioned by Paul the Apostle in his letters to the Corinthians in which he was led to use this particular exclamation: “Thanks be to God.” We shall do well to look at these great blessings, and then—like Paul—pour out our own thanks to God for them!

1. Thanksgiving to God for Victory over Death.

“Death is swallowed up in victory” (1 Cor 15:54)

Death has lost its terrible sting for the believer, for Christ conquered death forever when He died for our sins and rose again.

“Jesus said unto her, I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die. Believest thou this?” (Jn 11:25-26).

“But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” (1 Cor 15:57).

2. Thanksgiving to God for Victory over this Life.

“Now thanks be unto God, which always causeth us to triumph in Christ, and maketh manifest the savour of his knowledge by us in every place” (2 Cor 2:14).

Not only victory over death but victory in life! By the indwelling presence of the Spirit of Christ, we are enabled to triumph over all circumstances and “shew forth the praises of him who hath called [us] out of darkness into his marvellous light” (1 Pet 2:9).

3. Thanksgiving to God for the Greatest Gift of All: Christ Himself and Eternal Life!

“For 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).

The value of this gift is beyond comprehension, truly “unspeakable and full of glory” (1 Pet 1:8). It saves from an eternity in hell and rather gives eternal life in heavenly bliss,

“For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.” (Rom 6:23).

Jesus Christ, our Lord, King and Saviour, gives us triumphant peace and joy in this life, and eternal victory over death. Therefore, we join with Paul as he exclaims, “Thanks be unto God for his unspeakable gift” (2 Cor 9:15).

How Do We Show Thankfulness to the LORD as His Children?

1. *By Obeying His every word, and not hearing only.*

“Jesus answered and said unto him, If a man love me, he will keep my words: and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him. He that loveth me not keepeth not my sayings: and the word which ye hear is not mine, but the Father's which sent me.” (Jn 14:23-24).

2. *By Meditating and Studying His Word.*

“Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.” (2 Tim 2:15).

“The heart of the righteous studieth to answer:” (Pr 15:28a).

“The wise in heart shall be called prudent: and the sweetness of the lips increaseth learning.” (Pr 16:21).

3. *By Prayer.*

“Rejoice evermore. *Pray without ceasing.* In every thing give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you.” (1 Th 5:16-18).

4. *By Singing praises to Him with godly hymns and godly melody, not fleshly or worldly.*

“Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord; Giving thanks always for all things unto God and the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ;” (Eph 5:19-20).

5. *By making known His deeds, judgments and righteousness, in preaching all His counsel and testifying before the brethren in the local Church, and soul-winning, preaching forth His Word.*

"Knowing therefore the terror of the Lord, we persuade men; . . . For the love of Christ constraineth us; because we thus judge, that if one died for all, then were all dead: And ~~that~~ he died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him which died for them, and rose again." (2 Cor 5:11, 14-15).

Notice—among many examples that could be provided—how these commands or instructions are typically associated with the giving of thanks?

The spiral of apostasy, where an unsaved person goes from a position of knowing the things of God (Rom 1:18-20) and “holding the truth in righteousness” (Rom 1:19) to eventually becoming a full blown reprobate (Rom 1:24-31) begins with not being thankful:

“Because that, when they knew God, they glorified *him* not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened.” (Rom 1:21).

So let all the people sing praises to our Father Lord God and His Son the Lord Jesus Christ, and give Him the glorious and great honour He so deserves.

Psalms 100:1-5,

“Make a joyful noise unto the Lord, all ye lands. Serve the Lord with gladness: come before his presence with singing. Know ye that the Lord he is God: it is he that hath made us, and not we ourselves; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture. Enter into his gates with thanksgiving, and into his courts with praise: be thankful unto him, and bless his name. For the Lord is good; his mercy is everlasting; and his truth endureth to all generations.”

