

Deuteronomy 26:1-19

Thanksgiving

The first Thanksgiving Day did not take place in the United States or Canada, but in the Promised Land. It was Israel's national Thanksgiving Day, and its purpose is stated for us in Deuteronomy 26:1-19.

When the people entered the Promised Land, they were to bring the first fruits of the land to God and give thanks to Him for all His blessings (Deu. 26:1-11). In the second half of the chapter, the people are to use their triennial tithe to minister to the Levites, foreigners, orphans, widows and people less fortunate than they have been (vv. 12-19). The people who have been blessed of God are to be a blessing to others. From this first thanksgiving we learn great lessons for our Thanksgiving Day celebration.

From Deuteronomy we learn that true worship must be directed to the one true LORD God—Jehovah. The repetition of the name Yahweh, the LORD, and the reminder that He and no one else had redeemed Israel were a reminder that He was the one true God.

THE SACRIFICE OF PRAISE

The Lord brought Israel out of Egypt to the Promised Land. He provided everything for them. Therefore, God's redeemed people offered the sacrifice of praise. Worship is offered to God from people who have been purchased by the blood of the Lamb. Worship is the privilege of the people who are complete in Christ.

Only redeemed people can enter into God's holy presence.

In Deuteronomy 26:1 Moses commanded the people: "Then it shall be, when you enter the land which the Lord your God gives you as an inheritance, and you possess it and live in it" (Deuteronomy 26:1, NASB 1995). All Scriptures are from *New American Standard Bible* unless otherwise noted).

The first ceremony was to take place in the Promised Land, after the conquest, and when the Israelites had begun to live in the land and be supported by its produce. The offering of the first fruits would be a new religious institution in Israel. Before taking possession of the land, they were not an agricultural people and therefore had no harvest festival. This first offering of the first fruits, once the Israelites had taken possession of the land, would mark the beginning of the new life that had been anticipated on the basis of the covenant promise of God.

Israel was God's redeemed people; redeemed by the blood and power of God dwelling in the inheritance God had given them. Israel owed God everything. They purchased nothing. It was an act of God's sovereign grace.

Offering of First Fruits

The first fruits were not observed until the nation entered into the Promised Land and took possession of it (v. 1). It was the celebration of God's provision in the Land. For forty years they had eaten manna, the food of the wilderness journey. The Jewish people at the time of sowing of seed would mark off certain barley in the field. When the time of the harvest season arrived, men would carry a sickle and basket and on command reap the specially designated grain. The men would march to the Tabernacle bringing a sheaf of the first fruits of the harvest to the priest. The priest would wave the sheaf accompanied by burnt and meal offerings (cf. Lev. 23:9-12). Barley would be the first grain to ripen in Israel. After the barley came the fruit, olives, grapes and finally wheat.

Now it was time to celebrate the promise of God's abundant harvest in the land of provision. These first fruits of the harvest were brought to the Tabernacle. Moses continues, "you shall take some of the first of all the produce of the ground which you bring in from your land that the Lord your God gives you, and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place where the Lord your God chooses to establish His name. You shall go to the priest who is in office at that time and say to him, 'I declare this day to the Lord my God that I have entered the land which the Lord swore to our fathers to give us'" (Deuteronomy 26:2-3).

The first fruits in the basket symbolized the whole which they had brought with them, and represented the whole harvest yet in the field. Men gave thanks for the harvest while it still stood in the field. God still claims first fruits of everything. It belongs to Him, even before it is harvested.

God is faithful.

The declaration by the worshiper was a testimony that he had entered into the Promised Land, and the basket he carried symbolized that already he was beginning to experience the blessing of the new land and the new life God had given him. It was a testimony to the faithfulness of the LORD God and the faithfulness of His provision in the land. In the verses that follow Moses emphasized God's gift of the land to His covenant people. Let us state it clearly: the land belongs to Israel. It has always belonged to the people of Israel. The Exodus was the delivering of God's chosen people to the land God promised them. No modern day rewriting of history can change the facts. God redeemed them and with His mighty power delivered them into the land. He is a faithful God. Now it was time to celebrate His faithfulness to His people. It was a time of rejoicing.

The response of the people is given in vv. 4-11.

It was a confession of God's faithfulness and their presence in the Promised Land was the result of His grace and power to redeem them. There was no reason God should have chosen Israel except of His grace (Deut. 7:6-8). They confessed their humble origins, the harsh treatment by the Egyptians, and God's answer to their prayers. He now has a land he could call his own, "a land flowing with milk and honey."

"Then we cried to the Lord, the God of our fathers, and the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction and our toil and our oppression; and the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm and with great terror and with signs and wonders; and He has brought us to this place and has given us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey" (Deuteronomy 26:7-9).

The worshiper then acknowledges God's abundant provision. "Now behold, I have brought the first of the produce of the ground which You, O Lord have given me.' And you shall set it down before the Lord your God, and worship before the Lord your God; and you and the Levite and the alien who is among you shall rejoice in all the good which the Lord your God has given you and your household" (Deuteronomy 26:10-11).

The people of Israel came with grateful hearts that first Thanksgiving. Then they celebrated the feast of the first fruits yearly. It was a time of great rejoicing. This moment marked a dramatic moment, the culmination of several centuries during which the promise of God had been anticipated.

We have entered into our inheritance

We have entered into the inheritance, which is ours in Christ. Our great High Priest presents to the Father our worship and praises.

We are saved by grace through faith. Jesus is our Passover Lamb who shed His blood to redeem us. We are His unique possession. "Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body" (1 Corinthians 6:19-20).

We are His chosen people who are a royal priesthood. The apostle Peter wrote, "you also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 2:5). Then he adds, "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; for you once were not a people, but now you are the people of God; you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy" (1 Peter 2:9-10).

We who have been blessed of God are to give thanksgiving to Him and in turn be a blessing to others less fortunate. We have been blessed to be a blessing.

Christ our First Fruit

The apostle Paul picks up on this great theme of first fruits and tells us that Jesus Christ is the first fruits of the believers who are dead in Christ.

"But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep. For since by a man came death, by a man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, after that those who are Christ's at His coming, then comes the end, when He hands over the kingdom to the God and Father, when He has abolished all rule and all authority and power. For He must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet" (1 Corinthians 15:20-25).

Jesus described Himself as the grain of wheat that fell into the ground and died, that it might spring to life and bring much fruit (John 12:23-24). Christ rose from the dead as the first fruits of the resurrection on the third day from His death. Our Lord Jesus Christ is in the presence of the Father in heaven as the representative of the whole church that is still in the field waiting the harvest. The feast of the first fruits is a living testimony to God's sovereignty and it says to a watching world, "Because I live, you shall live also."

The tomb is empty! Jesus rose from the dead! He is the first to rise from the dead in expectation of a greater harvest.

Christ was the first to rise from the dead. He is designated the first fruit indicating that a great harvest will soon be gathered in from all over the world. The resurrected Christ has entered into the presence of God as our forerunner, the pledge of the greater ingathering when the redeemed will be transformed and changed at the moment of His second coming (1 Cor. 15:50-58; 1 Thess. 4:13-18).

We come with hearts filled with Christ

As believers we come to the Lord God with hearts filled with Christ, thinking of Him, praising Him, occupied with Him alone in worship.

God delights to receive worship from His redeemed. Can you imagine what it is going to be like in heaven in the presence of the Lord God for all eternity? We have only tasted what it is going to be like when He comes for us. The presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives guarantees the promise.

"Therefore, brethren, since we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, His flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water" (Hebrews 10:19-22).

We enter into the immediate presence of God and present our first fruits of worship and thanksgiving for salvation.

Going back to Deuteronomy 26:12-15 we see a second religious service prescribed for the people of Israel. This service relates to the presentation of the *tithe* every *third year* (v. 12). This offering was not to be taken to the priests, but was given directly to the Levites, the strangers, the orphans and widows, "that they may eat in your towns, and be satisfied."

God's people are walking by faith trusting Him to keep His covenant promises. Their one consuming passion is to please Him. God declares His faithfulness to His people. "This day the Lord your God commands you to do these statutes and ordinances. You shall therefore be careful to do them with all your heart and with all your soul. You have today declared the Lord to be your God, and that you would walk in His ways and keep His statutes, His commandments and His ordinances, and listen to His voice. The Lord has today declared you to be His people, a treasured possession, as He promised you, and that you should keep all His commandments; and that He will set you high above all nations which He has made, for praise, fame, and honor; and that you shall be a consecrated people to the Lord your God, as He has spoken" (Deuteronomy 26:16-19).

WE ARE TO BE A BLESSING

In Deuteronomy 26:12-14 Moses says to the same people that they have been blessed in order to be a blessing to others. Verses 12-15 would take place two years later during the third year of full settlement in the Promised Land. The tithe of the third year took place in the Israelite towns or settlements. That which was tithed was distributed among the underprivileged people in the land.

Our joy becomes greater as we share God's blessings with other people.

The people were to offer their gifts to God with a solemn prayer in verses 13-19 and give it to the needy people. The worshiper was to keep in mind that what he offered was part of the blessing of God, and not something he had produced through his own intelligence or agricultural skillfulness. The tithe was a sign that the Israelites were already experiencing the blessings of God.

The worshiper declares that his gift is the full tithe. It was a solemn statement before the Lord. The results of a sinful heart are described for us in Acts 5. The worshiper declared that he had observed the regulations for giving his tithe to the poor (v. 14).

The ceremony reminds us of Matthew 25:31-46. "As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me." We can't divorce the two great commandments to love God and to love our neighbor.

We find the same great truths of Deuteronomy 26 summarized in Hebrews 13:15-16. "Through Him then, let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name. And do not neglect doing good and sharing, for with such sacrifices God is pleased" (Hebrews 13:15-16). Verse 15 speaks of the sacrifice of our praise to God. It is the fruit of lips that confess the name of Jesus. In verse 16, we have the sacrifice of ministering to those in need; doing good and sharing with others what God has given to us.

On Thanksgiving Day we offer to God through Christ the spiritual sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving. We come with hearts overflowing with gratitude for God's rich benefits and blessings upon us. Our sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving are offered through Christ the one great High Priest and Mediator of the new covenant. This sacrifice of praise is offered continually, implying that the one perfect sacrifice by the Lamb of God has already been offered and accepted by God.

The offering of the heart to God in praise and thanksgiving must be followed by the sacrifice of love manifested in good deeds and in free sharing of our possessions.

SOME ABIDING PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

1. God is faithful.

2. There is no worship without concentration on the person and work of Christ. When we worship we enter by faith into the holy presence of the LORD God and there gaze in love and gratitude upon our Lord Jesus Christ. There you are overwhelmed with a sense of divine holiness and God's redeeming love. "A heart filled with Christ, that constitutes a worshiper," says Harry Ironside.

3. God has first claim on our lives. He claims the first fruits of everything.

4. God always answers our prayers. When we pray to God that He fulfill a divine promise, we can rest assured that God is able and willing to answer our prayers.

5. "To praise God continually requires us to be in *daily communion* with Him," said A. W. Pink. The psalmist wrote, "I will bless the Lord at *all* times; His praise shall continually be in my mouth" (Psalm 34:1). "I will sing unto the Lord as long as I live; I will sing praise to my God while I have my being" (Psalm 104:33).

6. We are "created in Christ Jesus unto good works" (Eph. 2:10). Jesus modeled this continually during His earthly ministry. "It is not enough to *be* good; we must *do* good," says Pink.

7. No one has ever out given God in ministry. Jesus gave a great word of encouragement to the giver when He said: "Give, and it will be given to you. They will pour into your lap a good measure—pressed down, shaken together, and running over. For by your standard of measure it will be measured to you in return" (Luke 6:38). He still does it that way.

8. "Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 5:16).

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Wil is a graduate of William Carey University, B. A.; New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, Th. M.; and Azusa Pacific University, M. A. He has pastored in Panama, Ecuador and the U. S, and served for over 20 years as missionary in Ecuador and Honduras. He had a daily expository Bible teaching ministry head in over 100 countries from 1972 until 2005. He continues to seek opportunities to be personally involved in world missions. Wil and his wife Ann have three grown daughters. He currently serves as a Baptist missionary and teaches seminary extension courses and Evangelism in Depth conferences in Honduras, Nicaragua, Peru and Ecuador.