



Living by Faith and Thanks

Deuteronomy 1:19-33; Matthew 6:1-15; Ephesians 2:1-10

This week we celebrate Thanksgiving Day. We set aside time to help us remember to give thanks for the blessings of life and the provision for our needs. We spend the rest of the year focused on what we can do to make a living and get ahead in the race of advancing ahead of the masses. An aside from our selfish approach does us good, but maybe we need more than setting aside a day for thanksgiving. Maybe we need a change that is somewhat more drastic. Can we learn to live by faith and giving thanks day after day?

The people had suffered in the forty years of wandering. They had escaped from Egypt and a life of slavery, but at costs that were not insignificant. They had left their homes, their work routines, and their sense of personal worth. They had experienced a new life in which they were not sure how to survive. The uncertainties of a wandering people, the constant seeking of water for so many mouths and animals, the anxiety of finding food in the semiarid land wore on them. God had provided for their physical needs, but it was still hard to trust the One we don't see to provides for us.

In the midst of their wandering, there were strife and considerable quarrels with other peoples through whose lands they passed or wanted to pass. As a people recently freed from slavery, they felt uncomfortable in waging war against peoples rooted in their own lands. Without the normal tools of war, they sought to protect themselves against enemies used to fighting for land rights.

They reached the Promised Land, which still remained under the control of the Amorites. The will to enter the land and trust to the provision and promise of *Yahweh* failed them. They lacked the courage to recognize the hand of *Yahweh* guiding them along the way, offering shelter, food, water, and everything else they needed. It's one thing to look at the past with its problems, turbulence, and resolutions. It's another thing to look at a problem in the moment—a conflict for which we yet see no solution. It is at this point that the question of faith arrives at a decisive moment. In the moments of crisis in life, where will we place our focus and attention?

The great problems of life all have something in common. They all are in the past except for one. The difficulty is that it is always the question of the moment before us that looms as the biggest problem of all. It seems to be the greatest of all not for genuinely being larger, but for being the current crisis. The others have already reached a conclusion. We have already faced them, made decisions, and faced the results of their time. The question that lies ahead of us is another matter, because we still have options in our dealing with the difficulties of today. Its uniqueness is the fact that we live in the moment to position ourselves before the options in our path, or even our lack of options in our expectation of what will come.

The essence of our response hinges on where we will place our attention. When we place it on ourselves, we look at our lack of potential, resources, and skills to deal with the unknown. They are not problems when they are smaller than us. The difficulties we call problems are the questions where we lack the power to contain the crisis and manipulate the results. When our attention amid our problems focuses on ourselves, the only logical conclusion is to expect a lot of anguish down the road. Raising our eyes in another direction, however, we have a way out in trust and peace.

Moses spoke with people at the end of his ministry among them. He recounted the disasters, the victories, the difficulties, and the lack of faith the people had towards *Yahweh*. Even looking backwards, they failed to see God's hand protecting them during their wandering. They lacked faith and confidence, because they had their fixed on their own situation. They needed to change the focus of their attention. For that, Moses indicated they should remember their history with God. Over and over again they failed to accept God's guidance. Day after day, they forgot about *Yahweh's* faithfulness over the course of their journey from Egypt to the freedom of a new life.

They were the people of God, but being such was not their mode of action. They did not live out of trust in God. They lived focused on their problems, their conflicts, and enmeshed in despair. "Woe is me! Woe is me!" was the mantra of their day to day. They sought God only in their desperation, but not from a life of trusting in His provision, grace, and love. They had not yet learned to trust and rest in *Yahweh*. God was something far removed from their daily life experience. They felt themselves distant from God and God far removed from their desires and concerns. They needed a change of focus, a look to the identity and character of the God they claimed to worship and serve.

That was not simply the condition of those people wandering forty years in the wilderness. It was also standard in the days of Jesus Christ. Throughout the history of the Hebrews, God's people have suffered for the same issue. With the coming of Jesus, very little has changed. Even today we remain enmeshed in the difficulties of life, not looking enough to God for his provision, escape, and leadership in our lives. We act as though God would not like to help us live and enjoy life. We let our anxiety control too much of our attention without the faith and gratitude to look to God in recognition that God has a solution for our lives.

To the Ephesians, Paul spoke that life in Christ did not depend on one's actions. We do not enter into the life of faith through our merits and deeds of worth. Life in Christ is through faith—confidence in God's provision. It is not by works that we inherit the life of eternity, nor is it by works that we retain it. It is all through grace. Of course, this life of eternity is another quality of existence. It has a different quality of focus. It brings us to participate in other type of life and another quality of action. At the same time, such actions are the fruit of this new life, not the means by which we reach it, nor to deserve it.

This life has a different focus. In exchange for focusing on our lives, needs, concerns, and anxieties, we come to find a new focus in life and relationship with God. Faith and thanksgiving revolve around a new existence of confidence. It is no longer necessary to look continually at the context of our concerns and situation, for we exchange a focus from our lives onto the action and character of God. Confident in His provision, we can live in freedom from the worries of before. We can experience a new life of trusting in the presence of the Eternal One.

What will we do with our thanksgiving? There is no reason to set them aside, but there is reason to let them into our lives more deeply. There is reason to move from taking time for faith and thanks to live according to a new pattern of existence. Already in Moses' day it was time for the people to begin to live by faith and gratitude. Do we need us to do the same? Otherwise, we just take a short break from our anxiety to return to a troubled life, while God invites us to live a life of confidence that springs with constant gratitude from within.

—*Christopher B. Harbin*