

Sermon for October 8, 2023 - Thanksgiving

Deuteronomy 26:10a NIV84

Theme: **I thank you, O Lord . . .**

- 1) . . . for all you have given me.
- 2) . . .with the firstfruits of your blessings.

*“And now I bring the firstfruits of the soil that you, O LORD, have given me.”*

The LORD was about to settle the Israelites in the promised land of Canaan. Because He foresaw how the devil would use the abundance of His blessings to tempt them to forget Him, He commanded them to partake in a special thanksgiving ceremony to help them remember His mercy.

The Israelites were to bring before him the firstfruits of their harvest (that is, the first and best products of their land). As each Israelite presented his gift, he was to recall the mercy the LORD showed him: how, even before he was born, God guided his forefather Jacob and his family into Egypt, grew them into a great nation, and brought them into the land he promised. This whole ceremony was to remind the Israelites of God’s amazing grace so that, by acknowledging His past love and faithfulness, they would grow in faith that the LORD would continue providing for him and his family into the future. Moreover, He wanted the Israelites to continue trusting that he would send His promised Saviour.

Having reminded himself of all those things in prayer, the Israelite was to say, *“And now I bring the firstfruits of the soil that you, O LORD, have given me.”*

Like the Israelites of old, we are gathered here to remember and thank God for His goodness. Why? Because Satan uses the wealth and worries of our earthly life to tempt us away from Jesus.

Because the devil wants to separate us from the love God has for us in Christ by tempting us to forget God’s grace, the festival of Thanksgiving provides an excellent opportunity to thwart Satan's plan. I wrote this sermon as an “open letter” meant to move us to think about and thank the LORD for his many blessings. As I pray this open letter to God, please think about all the things God has done for each of you individually and pray along in your heart as you listen. Come, let us thank the LORD for all he has given us. Let us thank him with the firstfruits of his gifts.

Part One: **I thank you, O Lord**, for all you have given me.

Gracious LORD, the love you show us is wonderful; eternity is not enough time to praise you. Your blessings are so numerous that I hardly know where to begin.

First, thank you for creating the universe: the stars, sun, moon, mountains, forests, fields, and seas. When I go for an evening walk, I marvel at your breathtaking sunsets. The heavens look like a painter's canvas with colours wonderfully splashed all over it.<sup>i</sup>

I thank you for the marvellous way you preserve both people and animals. You cause the seasons to come and go, the sun to shine, rain to fall, and plants to grow. You provide food for every living thing. Without your care, nothing would exist.<sup>ii</sup>

I thank you for creating humans and I marvel at all the abilities you have given them. Even the greatest minds on earth can't come close to figuring out the mind you put in each of us. You created us to see, touch, taste, smell, and hear all the wonders of creation so we might enjoy them. You created us to will, think, feel, and even create things on our own, such as music, art, and technology - all to be used to your glory.<sup>iii</sup>

Unfortunately, our first parents used the very gift of will you gave them to rebel against you. Because of that, all people are born sinful, including me. I was born with a rebellious heart that wanted to run away from you. Following the devil's temptations, I wanted to become my own god - doing whatever my sinful flesh desired. The only thing my sinful rebellion led me to do is become hopelessly lost without you - doomed to hell for my sins.<sup>iv</sup>

But you didn't want me in hell. No, for reasons that reason cannot comprehend, you foresaw and loved me from before the world's creation, so much so that you sent your Son to forgive my sins! You allowed him to set aside his divine glory and become like me. He took my sinfulness upon himself and suffered the punishment I deserved. And Jesus didn't just do that for me; he did it for the entire world - even though it wanted nothing to do with him.<sup>v</sup>

Having forgiven everyone's sins, you sent your Holy Spirit to create faith in the hearts of your chosen people through the preaching of your Gospel. You called and empowered men and women to be your witnesses on this earth as each fulfilled the distinct role you assigned them. You kept the Church safe from extermination during persecution and delivered it from false teachers who tried to twist your truth to lead your people away from you. You guided history so I could hear your Gospel and become your child through Holy Baptism. Your Spirit created faith in my heart - moving me to repent of all sin, trust in you for forgiveness, and be zealous for the increase of your kingdom.<sup>vi</sup>

Looking back at my life, I can't help but see your hand in all of it. Every person you had me meet was for a purpose. When I consider all the evil I did throughout my life, I marvel at how you forgave all of it and turned it around for my good!<sup>vii</sup>

I even praise you for the problems you allowed in my life - some of which seemed insurmountable. Even though I was at a loss as how to overcome them, you were always there, inviting me to trust in your mercy and power to see me through them. I stand awe-struck at how you delivered me when I struggled with broken friendships, sickness, losing loved ones, mental health struggles, financial problems, and my pet sins. You were always there to correct, forgive, strengthen, and deliver me.<sup>viii</sup>

Gracious Lord, I praise you for giving me everything I need for life. Though there may have been times when I was in danger of not having enough, you were always there to provide. My family always had food to eat, clothes to wear, and water to drink. The fact that I can stand here and praise you proves that you never abandoned me. Truth be told, you have given me more than I need – blessing most of us in Canada with more wealth than much of the world’s population has ever known.<sup>ix</sup>

You have given me a job, a means through which you provide for me and my family. You have given me many physical comforts: a home, car, TV, smartphone, and many other luxuries. You have blessed me with both a physical family in the home and a spiritual family in the Church through whom you show me great love as we care, pray, and provide for each other's needs.

You promise to keep guiding me through my earthly life, protecting me with your angels and keeping me safe until you deliver my soul to heaven. You promise to resurrect my body on the last day and allow me to live with you forever in the beautiful paradise you are preparing for believers.<sup>x</sup>

Thank you for all these mercies and the many more you show me every moment of every day.

Part Two: I thank you, O Lord, with the firstfruits of your blessings.

O Lord, I wouldn’t even exist without your providence, guidance, and love. All that I have in life (my homes, gadgets, car, career, and clothing) and all that I am (my personality, talents, salvation, **and entire being**) are gifts from your hand. They all prove your extraordinary, undeserved grace. Your love makes me want to love you back. How can I do that? By unselfishly using the time, talents, and treasures you have given me to serve your kingdom. You ask me to be willing to give up everything to follow you if called to do so - trusting that you will continue to provide all I need.<sup>xi</sup>

But I am afraid to do that. Why? Because of what I might suffer. When it comes to witnessing your name before others, I often fear how people will react when I tell them the truth of your Word. When it comes to offerings, my selfishness does not want to let go of my finances because I’m afraid I won’t be able to get the things I want to enjoy. The same holds true when it comes to acts of charity. Such thoughts make me feel ashamed. Why? Because I see in me a wickedness that loves created things more than you (my Creator) and doubt instead of faith in your promise to provide.

Merciful Lord, these are the exact reasons you want me to offer you the firstfruits of my life: the first and best things you have given me. You want me to remember your grace as I recall the innumerable blessings you have granted me. You want me to fearlessly use those blessings in service of your Gospel – trusting that you will continue to provide me with more than I need.

You tell me not to worry about my life but always think first about Christ's Kingdom and the righteousness he won for me. Why? Because, just as you provide for the lilies and sparrows, you will continue to provide for me.<sup>xiii</sup>

You also promise to graciously reward those who remember and thank you with their firstfruits. You, the almighty God, praised the widow for giving her last mite to you. You gave unlimited oil and flour to the widow who helped your prophet. You challenged Israel and all who put their faith in you to test you: to see whether you won't open the treasure house of heaven and shower down blessings on those who offer their firstfruits to you in faith.<sup>xiii</sup>

You love a cheerful giver! I am but a servant sower in your kingdom, and your blessings are the seed I sow in service of your Gospel. If I hoard your blessings and sow them sparingly, I will only retain the few blessings I saved. But if I use your blessings as intended – sharing them with others as freely as a sower sows seed on his field - you promise me a harvest of blessings worth far more than what I gave away.<sup>xiv</sup>

Gracious Lord, you do what you promise. I wonder how many blessings I forfeited because of my lack of faith! You have never lied or failed to help your people in the past. History records your perfect faithfulness. O, how little faith I have! Why do I hurt myself by not doing what you invite me to do with your blessings?

Forgive my lack of faith. Remind me again of your great, undeserved love for me: a love that moved you to send your only Son to die for my sins on His cross. Reassure me that, because of His sacrifice, I am forgiven. Let the peace of your forgiveness move me to willingly offer all the gifts you give me (my time, talent, and treasures) in service of your kingdom.

So now, brothers and sisters in Christ, having recalled God's past faithfulness in prayer, confessed our sins to him, and asked for his grace to exercise our faith in the peace of his forgiveness, let us present our first fruit offerings to the LORD – trusting that he will bless their use in his kingdom and continue to provide for our every need. Let us offer him all we have and are: looking for opportunities to share his Gospel with others and help those in want. Yes, let us thank our Saviour by offering ourselves to Him as He offered himself up for us. Let us deny our sinful natures and take every opportunity he gives us to study His Word and partake of His Sacraments. Through these means, he sends the Holy Spirit to strengthen our faith so we can live our lives in continual thanksgiving to God for the great love he has shown us in Christ.

Therefore, let us each pray from the heart:

*"And now I bring the firstfruits (of your blessings of time, talents, and treasures) that you, O LORD, have given me." Amen*

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<sup>i</sup> Cf. Revelation 4:11, Genesis 1

<sup>ii</sup> Cf. Psalm 104:24-27

<sup>iii</sup> Cf. Psalm 139:14

<sup>iv</sup> Cf. Genesis 3:1-19

<sup>v</sup> Cf. Ephesians 1:3-14, Philippians 2:5-11, John 3:14-20, Romans 5:8

<sup>vi</sup> Cf. Acts 1:8, Matthew 16:18, Luke 21:12-15; Jeremiah 23:25-29, Acts 2:28, Galatians 3:26-27

<sup>vii</sup> Cf. Romans 8:28, Genesis 50:20

<sup>viii</sup> Cf. Romans 5:1-5

<sup>ix</sup> Cf. Psalm 37:25, Philippians 4:19

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<sup>x</sup> Cf. Psalm 91:11, 2 Timothy 4:18, 1 Corinthians 15:42-54; 2 Peter 3:13

<sup>xi</sup> Cf. Matthew 25:14ff, Mark 10:21, Luke 9:23-25, 1 John 2:15

<sup>xii</sup> Cf. Matthew 6:25-34

<sup>xiii</sup> Cf. Mark 10:29-30, Mark 12:41ff; 1 Kings 17:9ff, Malachi 3:10

<sup>xiv</sup> 2 Corinthians 9:6ff