

THANKFUL LIVING

"Give thanks every day for everything
to our God and Father."

-Ephesians 5:20

Some time ago I wrote a Reflections column in which I reflected on the goodness of God and expressed my gratitude and thanksgiving to Him for every blessing of my life. After enumerating some of these blessings, I concluded by writing these words:

"There is no apparent reason why I should have any of these blessings. They come to me all undeserved. They are the gifts of God. They are testimony to God. If I neglect to be thankful for them, my soul shrivels and I die."

In response to that column I received a letter, a part of which I would like to share with you this morning:

"In reading your Reflections....I was amazed at your beneficent desire to be thankful to Him 'from whom all blessings flow'....with the normal Christian attitude, you follow the path through 'the narrow gate'. If you are so madly wanton to praise the Almighty for his merciful bounties, why not praise all of which he has caused? You are too narrow in your praise. Why didn't you praise the 'acts of God'; the hurricanes, the earthquakes, the wars, the plagues, and the immoralities....why didn't you exalt the joy of senility; why didn't you praise the taste-buds on the tongues of puff-bellied orientals who would strangle your God for the mastication of singular (sic) tid-bits? Why be so narrow? Raise your hands to the sky, shout out to all the nations the good news, 'God is bountiful, his blessing prevaieth.' Had you taken time to reason the omnipotence and 'love' of God, I think that most undoubtedly you would have taken your own Christian soul and damned the Christian God and his insipid immortality."

Well, those are harsh words, but we can discount the harshness a bit when we know that their author was a college freshman. Like all college freshmen he is idealistic and militantly opposed to injustice. He wants the perfect, idyllic world and he wants it now. His emotions have victimized his reason.

Nevertheless, his arguments deserve consideration, and they are posed not alone by college freshmen. With somewhat less harshness and belligerence they are in the minds of many, many Christians. It is particularly apropos that the arguments should be faced and, if possible, answered at this time of the year when we celebrate a national Thanksgiving Day as has been the custom in our country since George Washington proclaimed the first day of public thanksgiving in 1789. Since that time 34 presidents have called upon all Americans to express their thanks to Almighty God for the blessings of the year. It is, therefore, not only clergymen who admonish men to credit God for his goodness, but statesmen as well.

II

My young correspondent has indiscriminately mixed his evils and immoralities. I would like to disentangle them and discuss them separately. There are indeed

mysterious, natural forces at work in our world which every year become less and less mysterious. There are indeed earthquakes, hurricanes, floods and plagues. Little by little, however, man is beginning to probe their secrets. He can now give several hours of warning to residents on the Atlantic coast concerning any approaching hurricane. He has done much in the field of conservation to limit flood damage. He knows where the potential earthquake danger zones are. He has developed medical treatments and often preventatives which have wiped out many diseases and promised to wipe out even more. Where they cannot be wiped out their effects can often be mitigated.

Now, we refer to these great natural disasters as "acts of God." They got that name in an earlier day when little or nothing was known of the cause or control of such disasters. Today, we know that they are "acts of God" only insofar as they are produced by certain existent physical conditions in a world which God created. Anything men cannot understand or control -- anything they do not like -- they are quick to blame on God. We blame God for creating what in man's eyes is an imperfect world, but if it is imperfect it is because God wanted it that way. And if God wanted it that way, it is perfect from God's point of view. It is the kind of world in which can be produced the kind of men he wants us to become.

These natural disasters, therefore, are not indicative of a world of chance in which God is absent. An earthquake out in the middle of the wilderness where no one lives is not considered an evil or a disaster by anyone. It is only when men are adversely affected that we lament such cataclysms. But much of the time men are adversely affected only because they are willing to take a chance. The choice is theirs. The people in San Francisco and the people in my own home town in Salt Lake City have been told that one day there may be a sharp and serious earthquake in their areas. Yet they remain. They are willing to risk it. If the earthquake comes, is God to be condemned as a heartless deity who does not care, or is he to be praised because he gave men the intelligence which has enabled them to forecast possible sites of earthquakes?

The same thing can be said about hurricanes and floods. With his brain which God gave him, man can forecast the probable sites of these occurrences. Those who live there could move. If they choose not to, is God to be damned because he does not protect them against their own decisions, and often against their own foolishness and perversity?

What I am saying is this: God loves man. Because he loves him and respects him he has given him two priceless gifts which he has given no other creatures -- a reasoning brain, and freedom to use it. He has given man the opportunity to learn, to profit by his mistakes. If man refuses to learn, we can condemn God for only one thing -- for having trusted man with these two magnificent gifts.

III

However, my correspondent also laments the fact that there is disease in the world. He blames this on God as well. Well, I am sure God is willing to accept the responsibility, but he might in doing so point out that he has also given man the ability to overcome disease, and in point of fact, man has already overcome a

great deal of it. It has been a long time since we have heard of any mass deaths because of polio, smallpox, the flu, or the black death. The answers to these evils are in our hands, so to speak, and it is God who has provided the answers. The answers are not always obvious, but they are there.

How often do we hear men and women talk about the sick and dying, and then exclaim, "It is the will of God." If this be so, then we are quite inconsistent in calling in the doctor in hopes that he will somehow prevent God's will from being done. This is, no doubt, why you will often hear men say, "It's too good to be true." But seldom do you hear them exclaim, "It's too bad to be true." The bad we accept, and blame on God when it gets too bad. The good we take for granted or assume we deserve.

There is one other evil my correspondent bewails which we cannot ignore. It is immorality; man's inhumanity to man. When he speaks of men starving to death, this is basically what he is talking about. It is a terrible thing, a horrible thing, but one cannot blame it on God. To be sure, he lets men be immoral. He makes it possible for men to starve by letting them procreate more human life than a given area can support. He makes it possible by letting them freely choose what they themselves can and will do in the midst of the suffering of their fellow men. Every family in this church, I dare say, could without too much difficulty send a \$100 worth of food to India today if we wanted to. But we don't want to. Our motives are mixed. Perhaps we think it wouldn't really do any good. Perhaps we are afraid it would fall into the wrong hands. Perhaps we are just insensitive, uncaring, selfish. Is that the fault of God? America has millions of tons of food in storage. Is it God's fault that it sits there and rots while people starve?

IV

Now, to be sure, God could have created an entirely different kind of world. He could have created a perfect utopia which, apparently, is what my critic desires, a perfect world full of perfect people. But what would have been the point of it all? Our world is far from perfect, but at least it has some point to it. There is something to fight for, a goal to be achieved, a victory to be won.

So, I am thankful. I can never adequately express to you, or to God, how thankful I really am. I love this world into which God has put me. I love my life in it and I am fully conscious of all its imperfections, especially those within myself. I am thankful more than anything else just for the privilege of having lived, even though I realize that there are many whose lives are cramped and warped and terribly crippled. I do not close my eyes to all that is painful and ugly in the world, but neither can I close my eyes to all that is so beautiful, so lovely, and so good in the world.

Paul gave the Ephesians good advice: "Give thanks every day for everything to our God and Father." It has been my own experience that the people who are the most thankful are the people who know how best to use and enjoy the world. Their lives are the fullest. Those who are not thankful, who cannot find that for which they ought to be thankful, who have no one to be thankful to, are most of the time people whose lives are unhappy, cramped, bitter.

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There are times in every man's life when he must express his gratitude to someone. The young man who wrote me the letter I have quoted feels that all his gratitude and thanks should be expressed toward his fellow men. Certainly, I too am grateful for what all those whom I have known, who have known and loved me, have done and contributed towards my welfare. I could not begin to name them all, but as I reflect upon it I begin to realize that the people who have done the most for me have been men and women who have been motivated by their faith in God, who have loved God, and through whom the love of God is reflected toward me. And so once more I must give thanks to God for those men and women who have contributed so much to my life.

And so I would end this sermon the way I ended my Reflections column:

"There is no apparent reason why I should have any of these blessings. They come to me all undeserved. They are the gifts of God. They are a testimony to God. If I neglect to be thankful for them my soul shrivels and I die."

Lord, Thou hast given us so much. Give us one thing more -- thankful hearts.
Amen.