

Thanksgiving Expectation

Thanksgiving Expectation: A Way of Praising and Hoping

November 23/24, 2019

Digging Deeper

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Background Notes

Key Scripture Texts: Several throughout.

Introduction

The American traditions of national thanksgiving have long and deep rootage in shared experiences of early settlers and more recent citizens. Gratitude for the gifts of freedom required dedicated seasons of remembrance in our common history. Stories convey the truth and meaning of thanksgiving, and for Americans such stories abound. Not every story actually happened in the ways citizens remember them, but are often the result of combining episodes whose chief actors were lumped together in order to inspire gratitude. The church in America became the accepted environment for Christians to sort through the sometimes uneven telling of those stories with a firm grip on the higher and more compelling story of God. The *gospel*, as understood by the church, is the good news arising first in the Jewish history of promise and covenant, slavery and exodus, wilderness survival and Canaan land. Early American preachers found ways of conflating these stories with the more recent developments of settlers from Europe on new soil whose faith in the Gospel invited forms of thanksgiving in a new land.

However, not *all stories* told *everything* about American Christians when they remembered the past. Many episodes were sufficiently troubling that they were simply omitted when the episodes flowed from the lips of the preachers and the witnesses. Occupying new real estate alongside a native indigenous population meant airbrushing the harsher realities. Covenants made in exchange for land and resources were ultimately not kept. Fellowship of English pilgrims and their native hosts masked the unresolved tensions which later burst into bloody conflicts that shaped the future of colonialism. Christians also faced contradictions of faith and culture that only obedience to the Gospel could remedy, and yet the fledgling churches trembled with the implications of such obedience. Much like the church in the first century of the Christian era, Christ followers lived with the differences between themselves and the “other” even as Jewish Christians joined with Gentile Christians. It is one thing for English believers to share a thanksgiving table with Native Americans, but quite another to commit themselves to forming a genuine body of Christ with them after doing so.

And so, in this year of thanksgiving celebrations, God’s people in America once more will either engage in sentimentalism about their remembered pasts, or they will face with honesty the unfinished work of uniting a people that still admits of the unkept promises, broken covenants, and unfulfilled expectations. Thanksgiving for the church holds opportunities to carry on the hard work of reconciliation which embraces the nation and the diverse communities within its borders. What expectations can this thanksgiving season offer us? Part of the answer lies in the unusual calendar presented by Thanksgiving which is followed by Advent and Christmas.

On this weekend, as with all previous Thanksgivings, we engage in transitional themes that lead us from a season of gratitude for remembered gifts to a new season of the expected Advent of the Christ child. The church’s calendar invites us to reimagine and reenact the dramatic events that announce *the arrival* of a new birth. In reimagining and reenacting we bring together the act of *thanksgiving* with the voice of *praise*. When the church has historically followed the script of Advent followed by Christmas, it acknowledges the need for slow and intentional practices before the birth of Jesus finally appears in the story of God. That is why the church’s wisdom chooses these two terms, “Advent” and “Christmas,” to describe the gradual hopeful expectation of good news.

We must not be in a hurry, and so our voices must begin with *whispers* about the future before the *shouts* of angels split the Judean skies with words of joyful praise. Pausing, as we do in this weekend before Advent begins, the church lays hold with one hand on *the words of thanksgiving* and with the other on *the whispers of Advent*. Contained in the celebration of thanksgiving is already the expectation of praise, and so that subtlety we introduce our study this week and our expectation of Advent which lies beyond.

In his book *Praise and Lament in the Psalms*, Old Testament scholar Claus Westermann makes the following startling observation:

The fact that there is no word for “to thank” in Hebrew has never been properly evaluated. The ignoring of this fact can be explained only in that we live so unquestioningly in the rhythm between the poles of thanks and request, of “please!” and “thank you!”, and the thought does not occur to anyone that these concepts are *not* common to all mankind, have *not* always been present as a matter of course, and do *not* belong to the presuppositions of human intercourse nor to those of the contrast of God and man. We are compelled to imagine a world in which petition plays a thoroughly essential and noteworthy role, but where the opposite role of petition is not primarily thanks but praise. And this praise is a stronger, more lively, broader concept which includes our “thanks” in it. Thanking is here included entirely within praise...

Perhaps it will be easier to understand this if we remind ourselves that even today none of our children learns on his own to express thanks. He has to be told a hundred times, “Say thank you!”, and he still does not say it without being reminded. In addition, where the polish of good upbringing disappears, the expression of thanks soon falls by the wayside. In male society, the harder the life is, the less expression of thanks there is. I have established this point again and again in the war and as a prisoner. Even under the worst circumstances someone will always beg ... but he very quickly forgets to say thank you...

...In the Old Testament...there is as yet no verb that means only “to thank.” *Hodah*, which is usually translated as “to thank,” is not used in the Old Testament a single time for an expression of thanks between men. Thus it is clear from the start that this *hodah* cannot be equated with our “to thank,” which can be directed equally to God or to man. In those places in the O.T. where our “thank” as something taking place between men is most clearly found, the verb used is *berek*, which does not have the primary meaning of “praise” but means “bless.”

In view of these facts, it is clear that the O.T. does not have our independent concept of thanks. The expression of thanks to God is included in praise, *it is a way of praising*...

...Thanking presupposes that the community is no longer primary and no longer self-evident. It presupposes that the community is no longer prior to the individual. The differentiation of thanks from praise presupposes a certain development of individualism... What makes this word so valuable to modern man is just that element in which it differs from praise or goes beyond it. We speak of “thankfulness,” and this is the main thing. Spoken thanks is only an externality, the expression of the feeling of thankfulness. The important thing is the thankful attitude. All this cannot be expressed by the vocabulary for praise. Surely the main difference lies here. The thankful attitude has its origin in a gift or in a helping or saving deed which someone does for me. It can then be expressed in a great variety of ways, by a word, or by a deed, but the decisive factor is the permanence of the thankful attitude.

In primitive thought it is otherwise. For us thankfulness stands in a line; for the primitive man only the first and last points of this line are of interest. Both of these appear more sharply in primitive thought. That is, the beginning and end of what we call thankfulness are contained in the vow and the performance of the vow. (This is the reason why the vow at the end of a petition is an essential, inseparable part of the prayer)

This occurs from time to time in a relationship; thankfulness, the line between these two points, is something that I have, or that I have in me; it is something that I possess as a feeling or as an attitude. For primitive man an attitude does not exist except in its expression, for man does not exist “in himself,” but only in community with other men (the Hebrew *'ādām* means “mankind”). The same holds true for the relationship of man and God. Modern individualistic thought has interpreted the rejection by the prophets and many of the Psalms of specific cultic acts as meaning that it is not a matter of outward works, but of the “attitude of the heart.” This interpretation does not have any basis in either the prophets or the Psalms. *In the place of sacrifice the Psalms placed praise and obedience, not an attitude, but activity directed toward God.*

In relation to God, the concept of thankfulness and that of giving thanks are liable to be misunderstood when they are divorced from the concept of praise. The vocabulary of praise never expresses anything like an attitude or a feeling of gratitude. Where a worshiper in the Psalms says, "I will praise the Lord..." he does not mean, "I will be thankful to God," but, "I will respond to Him for what He has done for me."¹

Personally, this discovery gave me reason for pause. We usually associate thanksgiving with words or heart-felt attitudes. But the Old Testament raises the standard higher: it requires response in some *concrete* fashion, especially in the form of *obedience*. And, it places the onus not only on the individual, but on the whole community. This is why *sacrifice* appears frequently as the concrete expression of praise, and in this regard comes closest to the idea of thanksgiving as *thank-offering*. All of which seems appropriate to consider on a weekend when we renew our faith promise pledges to missions. In the praise of God who gave Himself for the salvation of His creation, we devote a portion of His loving gifts to us by way of pledge and offering.

In this week's study we will explore some of the words used in the Bible to express the notion of thanksgiving as *a way of praising* God. As such we become immediately aware that thanksgiving-as-offering is an essential part of worship. Through its concreteness, in the act of giving, thanksgiving properly takes its place at the center of our hearts. Then, with our eyes attentive to the four weeks in Advent, we look ahead to newness and newborn hope.

"Thanksgiving" in the Old Testament

The word *thanksgiving* is in quotes above as a reminder that technically there is no separate word for this concept in the Old Testament, for the reasons suggested in Westermann's book. However, the emphasis still falls on the "giving" portion of the term. If our English word derives from the German *denken*, which means "to think," then in the acts we call "thanksgiving," we are *giving* some concrete *thought* about God through what we do. That is, we want to make it known that God is like this or that. Our actions in this respect are revelatory both of God Himself and of what we truly think about Him. Which brings us to the first important Hebrew verb form we'd like to consider.

Yādah (see Genesis 29:35; Leviticus 26:40; Psalm 32:5; 1 Chronicles 16:4; 2 Chronicles 5:13; 2 Samuel 22:50; 1 Chronicles 16:34)

In this Hebrew verb appears the notions of "acknowledge" or "confess." Certain variations of this verb mean "throw, cast." When the Jewish scribes translated their Bible into Greek (the *Septuagint* or *LXX*), they commonly chose the Greek word *exomologeō* to handle this Hebrew form: "to speak out commonly," or "to confess externally." There is nothing at all private about either word group. God's people hold deep beliefs about their God, Yahweh, and they are determined *to get those beliefs out there for others to see and know also*. We use the expression "put it out there" or "get it out there" when we want to expose ideas to the consideration of other people. The word *yādah* carries those meanings.

Interestingly, the word can apply to confessing sin to God as well as confessing God to others. Confession of sin was a very public affair in Israel, and it reached a concentrated level on the Day of Atonement (see Leviticus 16:21) with the national confession of sins. This is also evident from other passages (Daniel 9:4, 20; Ezra 10:1; Nehemiah 1:6; 9:2-3). The New Testament takes up this notion in 1 John 1:9. Confession is an outward action of contrition which seeks restored relationship with God. The Greek form, *homologeō*, could be taken to mean "to say the same thing": in this case, to say the same thing about *sin* that God says about it. In so doing, we have no secrets with God, since our lives are laid open and bare before Him.

Confession, in the sense of thanksgiving, moves toward expressing publicly *who God is* and *what He has done*. By concrete actions, we declare the character of God — a frequent theme in the *Psalms*: (89:5; 105; 106; 145; see also 1 Chronicles 29:13). This emphasis blurs the common distinction we make between praise and

¹ Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms*, Westminster John Knox Press, 1981, pp. 25-29.

thanksgiving; a distinction absent from the original Hebrew idea. While we might find it convenient to speak about *praise* in terms of who God is, and *thanksgiving* in terms of what He has done, that is wholly artificial in Hebrew terms. For the Hebrew mind, there is no isolating the character of God from his actions. When God identified Himself to Moses as "I am" (*'eyeh*) "who I am" (*'asher 'eyeh*), he was literally combining concepts of *being* with those of *doing*. Or, perhaps more accurately, He was not separating *being* from *act* by calling Himself by this designation. The word *Yahweh* derives from this complex of verb forms and is the covenant name for God in the Old Testament. God seems to be telling Moses "I am myself in my act, and in my act I am myself." So it is with the praise/thanksgiving of God.

The name of God (Yahweh) is regularly the object of praise/thanksgiving (Psalm 97:12; 99:3; 136:1-3, 26). Those who acknowledge God in this way are the living and not the dead (Isaiah 38:18-19; Psalm 6:5; 30:9; 88:10). When we ask the question, "Who praises/thanks God?" we receive the following answers:

1. The righteous ones (Psalm 140:13).
2. Israel (Psalm 106:47)
3. The nations (Psalm 45:17)
4. The kings of the earth (Psalm 138:4)
5. The heavens (Psalm 89:5)

Acts of praise are commonly public, whether before the nations or within the community of Israel (2 Samuel 22:50; Psalm 35:18). Normally, these expressions of thanksgiving assume a verbal form (Psalm 109:30; 34:1; 40:3; 71:8), and musical instruments accompany them (2 Chronicles 5:13; Psalm 33:2; 43:4). Designated leaders directed these displays within the setting of the house of God at regular intervals (Psalm 100:4; 122:4; 1 Chronicles 16:4; 1 Chronicles 23:30). Though outwardly declared, the roots of praise/thanksgiving were found in the heart which must be right with God (Psalm 7:17; 86:12; 111:1; 119:7). And it must be continuous and forever (Psalm 30:12).

Tōdāh (see Psalm 42:4; 50:23; Joshua 7:19; Ezra 10:11; Jeremiah 17:26; 33:11)

In its noun form, the emphasis is on "confession" but with the unique aspect of the "thank-offering." Even when the confession had to do with sin, there was an accompanying "sin-offering" or "peace-offering" (Leviticus 7:12-15; 22:29; Jeremiah 17:26). The object of this offering was the glory of God revealed in His forgiveness of sin while simultaneously maintaining His own righteous character (Psalm 50:23).

Joy enters the picture at the offering of the sacrifice (Psalm 95:2; 33:11). So does the *magnifying of God* (Psalm 69:30). The Hebrew word for "magnify" comes from *gādal*, "to grow up, become great." Of course it is primarily true that God *is* great, and the act of "magnifying" God in no way adds to His character. However, the purpose of praise/thanksgiving is to allow that greatness *to be seen*. Even our English word "magnify" has this shade of meaning: a magnifying glass does not make something larger, but it does cause it to be seen as larger. Our acts of thanksgiving reveal and make visible the true nature of God. Those who witness the giver of thanksgiving see God more clearly as a result. They are led to ask, "Who is this God who receives such accolades of praise and sacrifices of thanksgiving?" In so doing, one main goal of thanksgiving is attained.

Music gives voice to the greatness of God (Psalm 147:4).

Making a vow to God often preceded a prayer for deliverance, and these together found expression in sacrifices of thanksgiving at the house of God (Psalm 56:12; 116:17; Jonah 2:10; 2 Chronicles 33:16).

Hālal (see 1 Chronicles 16:4, 10; Nehemiah 12:24; Psalm 34:23; Isaiah 38:18; 45:25)

Our English word "hallelujah" derives from the Hebrew verb form *hālal*. In this case, the focus is on "making clear, showing, boasting, raving, or celebrating." The verb itself has two general meanings: 1) shine; 2) praise. It is not hard to see how the more basic idea of "brightness" underlies the concept of praise. Light makes things visible and clear. "In your light we see light" (Psalm 36:9), writes the psalmist. Jesus knew intimately this

connection when he gave the Sermon on the Mount: "Let your light shine before others, so that they might see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 5:16). Notice how something we are or do throws the spotlight on the character of God. Or, perhaps better said, "Allow the light of God to shine forth in unmistakable ways." A certain irony exists here: Is there any light brighter than that of God Himself? Does not His light shatter all forms of human light and surmount them? Yet, mysteriously, we are called upon to "glorify" God through acts of praise/thanksgiving.

The *Psalms* call for God's people to praise Him. In so doing they draw proper attention to Him. Yahweh alone is God (Psalm 102:21); that is the meaning of "declaring the name of Yahweh; declaring his praise." How is this declaration expressed?

1. Through the community (Psalm 146:1).

2. By choirs, musical instruments, speaking, and dancing (Jeremiah 31:7; Psalm 69:30; 149:3).

The whole creation is invited to share in this thanksgiving of praise (Psalm 148:1ff; 150). In the future, a "new song" will shape the joyful worship by creation (Isaiah 42:10), a theme picked up in the New Testament (Revelation 5:9).

God alone is worthy of this kind of praise (Psalm 65:1; 147:1; Jeremiah 17:14). The very existence of God requires praise (Psalm 109:1; 22:3; Deuteronomy 10:21). Life itself depends on the praise of God (Psalm 119:175), and death, not yet defeated, silences it (115:17). Praise is the celebration of life (Psalm 84:4).

One specific aspect of *hālāl* is its use for "boast." While boasting about *oneself* is criticized, the opposite is true with God. Precisely because only God is worthy of praise, should His people boast only in Him (Psalm 105:3; 64:10). His praise fills creation itself (Habakkuk 3:3), and is depicted as proclaimed (Isaiah 42:10), rehearsed (Psalm 78:4), and growing (Psalm 71:14).

For His people who have been redeemed and saved by His mighty acts of deliverance, praise becomes the natural outlet to let this be known (Exodus 15:11; Psalm 78:4; 106:47). In this regard, God receives praise for honoring His covenant with His people. But this is not limited to the elect, the chosen. Looking toward the future, the prophets celebrate in advance when the whole world will praise, give thanks and rejoice over God's promised salvation (Isaiah 61:11; 43:21; 62:7; Joel 2:26).

These latter texts direct our attention to the coming Messiah.

By way of summary: the idea of thanksgiving as only an inward feeling of gratitude is absent from the Old Testament. In its place are variations on the theme of praise, especially outward expressions or actions which draw attention to God who is worthy of praise. Approximating thanksgiving, however, is the "thank-offering," a concrete sacrifice to God of material things, calculated to attract attention to the goodness and greatness of God who is "the giver of all things." At harvest time, for example, Israel brought firstfruits as signs of Yahweh's faithfulness to His people.

"Thanksgiving" in the New Testament

"Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift" (2 Corinthians 9:15). Paul wrote those words to a church which boasted of having everything gift imaginable. However, the gift Paul references is none other than Christ himself. When the New Testament talks about "thanks," it does so largely with Greek words derived from the basic root *charis*.² This word commonly translates as "grace" in the English translations, but in this passage it usually is taken to mean "thanks." *Charis* is what "delights, charms." In turn, *charis* has roots in the verb *chairō* which means "to rejoice, be joyful." As a collective, these various terms suggest expressions of joy growing out of a rich experience of God's favor. When Paul calls on the Corinthians to be thankful, he does so

² From Hans Conzelmann, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Editors: Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich; English translation by Geoffrey W. Bromiley, Eerdmans, 1974, pp.359-415. We draw from the studies of *chairō*, *charis*, and *eucharisteō*.

on the basis of God's own gift in Jesus Christ. That thanksgiving should take the form of actual gifts to meet the needs of others (see the context of 1 Corinthians 9). God graces us, and, in response, we should grace others. Such concrete actions draw attention to the favor of God.

One particular Greek word commonly used for "thanksgiving" or "to thank" is *eucharisteō*. Secular Greek often translated it simply as "pleasant," but it comes to mean "grateful" in the sense that a person shows favor to another. Thanks is something "given," and so has a tangible and usually material form. The ancients also employed this expression when conferring "honor" by decree. Among writings in praise of Alexander the Great, this word is associated with *megalopsuchon* which means "greatness of soul." Later, the church fathers picked up this term, and, in the case of Chrysostom, encouraged persons who were materially poor to still be great in their souls.³ A certain reciprocal action is involved: A does x for B, and so, in turn, B gives back to A. No doubt this is why our English word *thanksgiving* contains "giving" at its core. When the pagans wrote letters, they invariably included sections in which they gave thanks to the deity.

Although the Hebrew Bible does not use a unique word for thanksgiving (see above), the Hellenized Jewish culture adapts the "prayer of thanksgiving" model. This appears in the New Testament (John 11:41; Acts 28:15; Revelation 11:17), and applies to thanks at meals (Mark 8:6; Matthew 15:36; John 6:11, 23; Acts 27:35). We find cases in Second Temple Judaism where a blessing is pronounced over each food.

Perhaps the most prominent use of *eucharisteō* is in the account of the Lord's Supper (Mark 14:22-23 and Matthew 26:26-27). Here we find both the word for *thanksgiving* and the word for *blessing* (*eulogeō*). This latter word means "to speak well" but also "to invoke a benediction upon." Comparing Luke's account with Mark's, we find the interchangeable use of these terms. The invocation of a blessing and the act of thanksgiving seem to be closely related. When I bless God, I also have reason to bless His good gifts of food and the like, thereby blessing them as signs of His goodness.

When we arrive at Paul's letters, we are confronted repeatedly with "I give thanks to God for..." As rhetorical analyses of the letters reveal, thanksgiving language commonly introduces the main themes of the letter. Sometimes the thanksgiving and the main body of the letter merge together (see *1 & 2 Thessalonians*). Paul would often follow his use of "I thank" with participles indicating *how* he did so (see 1 Thessalonians 1:2ff; Philippians 1:3ff; Philemon 1:4ff; Ephesians 1:15ff). Alternately, he would follow "I thank" with the word "that" (Greek: *hoti*), indicating *what* provoked his gratitude (see 1 Corinthians 1:4-5; Romans 1:8; 2 Thessalonians 1:3).

1. Acknowledging God as Creator gives thanksgiving its true background for Paul (see Romans 1:21 in the negative sense of this; also 1 Corinthians 10:30-31; Romans 14:6). The idea here is that God has given His creatures all things to enjoy. Notice how the original root idea of *chairō* — joy — comes through this form of thanksgiving.
2. Worship themes are frequent settings for thanksgiving in the New Testament, and Paul writes about them in various places (see 1 Corinthians 14:16-17).
3. In passages like 2 Corinthians 1:10-11, we discover the reciprocal relationship between "the gracious favor granted us" (*charisma*) and the fact that "many give thanks" (*eucharisteō*). Theologians sometimes write about *oratio infusa*: grace given by God flows back to Him through thanksgiving (see 1 Thessalonians 3:9; 2 Corinthians 4:15; 9:11-12).
4. The goal of thanksgiving is the glory of God (*doxa*) (2 Corinthians 4:15).
5. Thanksgiving, joy and confession appear together in Colossians 1:12.
6. Christ himself is the basis for thanksgiving in Colossians 2:7 and 1 Thessalonians 5:18.
7. The expression of worship through music results in "giving thanks to God the Father for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Ephesians 5:20).

³ See his *Homily 21 on Romans*. He wrote this in conjunction with giving alms.

8. Thankful prayer is also *watchful* with respect to the future (Colossians 4:2; Philippians 4:6).

By the time the church fathers start to write, the word *eucharisteō* acquires its connection to the Lord's Supper or the *Eucharist* — the "great thanksgiving." The elements (bread and wine) are called "the gifts of God for the people of God." Through the Supper, God gives His Son to His church under the signs blessed by the priest at the communion altar. The liturgy invites the receiving of the elements along with the admonition, "...and be ye *thankful*..."

The close connection between *charis* (grace) and *eucharistia* (thanksgiving) is not accidental. From this relationship comes the idea of "gratitude," the returning of *thanks* for *grace*. In giving thanks to God, we are acknowledging His grace and our debt to God for His good gifts to us. Failure to "give thanks" lies at the heart of sinful unbelief and unbelieving sin:

²¹ For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened (Romans 1:21).

To honor God *as God* means to give Him supreme credit for everything good and right in our lives. Our successes, achievements, possessions, enjoyments, health, and well-being are not of our own making, but come from the hand of God. When we claim the credit for what God has done, we are guilty of the sin of *ingratitude*. The sin of the rich man lies not in his riches but in his failure to attribute their origin and his possession of them to God.

Thomas Aquinas reflected on this when he wrote:

It would seem that the ingratitude, whereby a subsequent sin causes the return of sins previously forgiven, is a special sin. For, the giving of thanks belongs to counter passion, which is a necessary condition of justice. But justice is a special virtue. Therefore this ingratitude is a special sin. Thanksgiving is a special virtue. But ingratitude is opposed to thanksgiving. Therefore ingratitude is a special sin.⁴

Here we are indebted to God's words to Israel just prior to their entrance into Canaan. Instructing Moses, Yahweh said:

¹⁷ Beware lest you say in your heart, 'My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth.' ¹⁸ You shall remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your fathers, as it is this day (Deuteronomy 8:17-18).

Proper covenant faith begins with this principle: "It is he [Yahweh your God] who gives you power to get..."

God's Indescribable Gift: Expectation Whispered in Advent

¹⁵ Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift! (2 Corinthians 9:15).

These words from St. Paul come at the end of a lengthy teaching about the importance of sacrificial giving in the life of the church. What Paul does in this single sentence is remind his audience that pure thanksgiving and praise to God must ultimately converge on the real source of every act of gratitude by the Christian church: the gift of Jesus. Whereas during seasons of thanksgiving, grateful hearts celebrate the gifts of God's providence and the provisions of His gracious mercy, Advent whispers with expectancy the coming of the greatest Gift: not a possession but a person. God the Father gives to us His Son, the supreme embodiment of His true self and the exact identity of His own being. It is about this *person* that Paul bursts into grateful praise in his Corinthian text. He tells us that the gift is "indescribable," the translation of a Greek word *anekdiēgētos* which has rich roots in classical Greek where the meaning is "ineffable": beyond utterance, too great or extreme to be expressed or described in words. Paul's Jewish audience would have understood his choice of this word since they viewed the sacred name "Yahweh" as without words to speak it, and so they would substitute another word, "Adonai" ("Lord") in its place. We might suggest that all that *God is* and all that *God has done* in His

⁴ QUESTION CVII.: OF INGRATITUDE. - St. Thomas Aquinas, *Aquinas Ethicus*: or, the Moral Teaching of St. Thomas, vol. 2 (*Summa Theologica - Secunda Secundae* Pt.2) [1274].

long history with the human race is the whisper of this one “good and perfect gift,” His Son the Lord Jesus Christ.

John’s gospel announces the good news of God’s gift in the familiar text:

¹⁶ "For God so loved the world that *he gave his one and only Son*, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16).

The gift in this case appears as the verb of God’s own action when he gives his one and only Son. Then, in the next chapter of *John*, Jesus himself identifies the “gift of God” with his offer of eternal life:

"If you knew *the gift of God and who it is* that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water." ... Whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life" (John 4:10, 14).

With equal assurance, St. Paul tells his Roman audience:

²³ For the wages of sin is death, but *the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord*. (Romans 6:23).

Closely associating “the gift of God” with the person of Jesus, these texts also show the *lively nature of this person* who is the bringer of eternal life precisely because Jesus is “the risen one” and therefore the embodiment of God’s very life.

It is no wonder that Jesus in his famous high priestly prayer in John 17 identifies eternal life with persons of the Father and the Son:

For you granted him authority over all people that he might *give eternal life to all those you have given him*. Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent. (John 17:2-3).

Elsewhere in John’s gospel, the gift of life appears several times:

For just as the Father raises the dead and *gives them life*, even so *the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it*. (John 5:21).

Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to *eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you*. On him God the Father has placed his seal of approval." (John 6:27).

This bread is my flesh, which *I will give for the life of the world*." (John 6:51).

²⁸ *I give them eternal life*, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. (John 10:28).

The gift of the Son, like the Father who gives him to the world, overflows with many acts of giving for the benefit of the Christian disciples. In his prayer Jesus describes those gifts:

⁸ For *I gave them the words you gave me* and they accepted them. They knew with certainty that I came from you, and they believed that you sent me. (John 17:8).

¹⁴ *I have given them your word* (John 17:14).

²² *I have given them the glory that you gave me*, that they may be one as we are one (John 17:22).

²⁴ "Father, *I want those you have given me to be with me where I am*, and to see my glory (John 17:24).

Jesus creates even greater expectation in the hearts of his disciples when he promises to give himself to them in the future through the gift of the Holy Spirit:

¹⁶ And I will ask the Father, and *he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever--* ¹⁷ the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. ¹⁸ I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. (John 14:16-18).

²⁷ Peace I leave with you; *my peace I give you*. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid. (John 14:27).

Luke confirms the gift of the Spirit in the parting words of Jesus before he ascended to heaven:

⁴ On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but *wait for the gift my Father promised*, which you have heard me speak about. ⁵ For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with *the Holy Spirit*." (Acts 1:4-5).

Jesus is the gift which keeps on giving for he continues to be present with his followers in the new future promised through the coming of the Spirit.

It is that new future which Christians reenact during Advent by way of expectation, whispered by the Holy Spirit to expectant persons who like Mary look forward to Christ being formed in them. In the words of St. Paul:

¹⁹ My dear children ... I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you, (Galatians 4:19).

Advent, which we begin to celebrate next weekend, *anticipates during four weeks* the arrival of God's indescribable gift of Jesus. He is the Gift who makes possible every good gift. In the words of *James*:

¹⁷ Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. ¹⁸ He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created. (James 1:17-18).

Let Advent anticipation lead to expectation which brings us hope for God's new future and His new creation through the person of His Son. Such hope is not wishful thinking but the result of God's promises with roots in His past faithfulness. Allow the season of praise-filled thanksgiving be the solid ground beneath our feet for the joy-filled expectation of the Advent season. We have every reason to be hopeful because we've had every reason to be thankful.

Concluding Thoughts

We began this brief study with the reminder from Westermann that thanksgiving is but *a way of praising God*. In each act of giving thanks, the spotlight falls on God, and He receives proper acknowledgement. Herein lies an antidote to spiritual pride, and a refusal to take credit for something God has accomplished. As the Psalmist admitted:

Not to us, O LORD, not to us, but to your name give glory, for the sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness! (Psalm 115:1).

The reputation of God was constantly on the line for ancient Israel. How the people of God conducted themselves was a radical reflection on the nature of their God, Yahweh. Witnessing the overt forms of grateful sacrifice, the nations around Israel became keenly aware of who this God was to whom a whole nation devoted itself.

For us, each act of thanksgiving should simultaneously become an anthem of praise:

We offer God our tithes: God be praised!

We offer God our thoughts: God be praised!

We offer God our lives God be praised!

As a reminder of this, George Herbert (1593-1633), Welsh poet and priest, penned these lines:

Thou that has given so much to me,
Give one thing more -- a grateful heart;
Not thankful when it pleases me,
As if Thy blessings had spare days;
But such a heart, whose pulse may be
Thy praise.

To this we add the wisdom of Henri J. M. Nouwen:

Gratitude goes beyond the 'mine' and 'thine' and claims the truth that all of life is a pure gift. In the past I always thought of gratitude as a spontaneous response to the awareness of gifts received, but now I realize that gratitude can also be lived as a discipline. The discipline of gratitude is the explicit effort to acknowledge that all I am and have is given to me as a gift of love, a gift to be celebrated with joy.

When the world sees the thankful community of God, it bears witness to something which, in turn, has great *influence*. We close this study with an extended selection from a sermon delivered by Charles G. Finney.⁵ In it, Finney reflected on the *influence* which the praising and thankful church might have on those around it.

...the withholding of due praise from God tends to injure his government. For, it should be considered, his government is a moral one, and must be sustained by moral *influence*. To withhold our praise, is to withhold testimony to his goodness, and this is often equivalent to leaving his character under suspicion. For his established order is to employ his people in revealing himself to the wicked. He says to them, "Ye are my witnesses." First revealing himself to them, he depends on them to communicate what they learn of him to their ungodly neighbors.

⁵ "On Offering Praise to God," *The Oberlin Evangelist*, December 17, 1856.

Suppose they refuse to do so. It amounts, practically, to bearing witness against God. This very neglect virtually proclaims--I have known God, but I have nothing good to say of him. You must make your own inference; this is all I have to say. You do not hear me commend God. You must judge for yourself whether I should do so, if I thought he deserved it!

Now, who does not see that, if this took place between a son and his father, this very silence would be a terrible stab? Who could bear it? When Christians take this course towards God, must it not tend naturally to injure his interests among men? If you, young men, were never to speak well of your father, would you not greatly detract from his *influence*? If you wished to sustain and establish his *influence*, could you hope to do it by withholding all due commendation? Suppose you should never speak well of him; could you hope, in this way, to honor him?

In fact, to commend God, is the way to extend his *influence* greatly. This is its natural *influence*. Consequently, to withhold praise, must be an awful sin against God and against his kingdom. Persisting in this sin, do you not deserve to be denied all further gifts? If you will not praise God, why should he continue to load you with his benefits?

...the praises of heaven are not only useful to those who offer them, but are grateful to Him to whom they are offered. They aid him in carrying out his purposes of love, because they lead his creatures to a better appreciation of his character and works. If it be useful to an earthly monarch to have his subjects speak well of him, how much more so to God!

...God's *influence* in the universe depends greatly on the praise offered to him by his people, and by all who know him. This praise is the more effective for good because where sin goes, there goes unbelief, and a want of confidence in God. The praises of his people bear a direct testimony against this wicked withdrawal of confidence from God. Then, let us never overlook the fact that God's *influence* is augmented by our testimony to his goodness.

And with the coming of Advent next weekend, the goodness of God invites us to welcome the future of his newborn Son whose testimony we bear with gratitude (thanksgiving) and with joy (praise).

Glory to God. Amen.