

GIVE THANKS TO THE LORD!
Sermon for Harvest Thanksgiving, 2018
Psalm 136:1

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen. The text for our sermon today is Psalm 136:1 **Give thanks to the LORD! For He is good. For His mercy endures for ever.**

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

There is so much for us to be thankful for. Yes, we are in a drought, and we grow even more anxious as the sun beats down and cooks everything, but there is no famine. We still have plenty to eat and drink. Fishermen are thankful for an abundant catch. Businessmen and women are thankful for year end profits. Wives and husbands are thankful for a secure home. Children are thankful for caring parents who love them. Surely this thankfulness must cause us to burst forth with the words of the Psalmist, **Give thanks to the LORD! For He is good. For His mercy endures for ever.**

This great psalm of thanksgiving praises God for His acts of creation and redemption, both in history and in the lives of His people. Every detail, at every stage, is a sign of God's steadfast love, which, throughout human history, endures forever. The psalm is all about God's action, not ours.

God certainly does much to provide for us every day. As Luther says in his explanation to the first article, God *"richly and daily provides me with all that I need to support this body and life."* We should never belittle the many things God does for us every day that we are living in this world.

However, in order to put things in their proper perspective, it is necessary that we also remember what He had already done for us before we ever came into this world, and what He will do for us after we leave this world. First, let us consider what He had already done for us.

The greatest event in the history of the world took place long before any one of us was ever born. Yet it took place for our benefit. As we are now almost into the season of Advent, we are reminded of the coming of Jesus into this world, where we beckon the Lord to rend the heavens and come down, permeating humanity with His almighty incarnation, laying waste our sin and unrighteousness. Jesus' life would culminate with His crucifixion, death, and burial. Thorns would pierce His scalp, nails inflict gaping wounds in His hands and feet. He would die a criminal's death, but rise three days later as victor over death, sin, and the devil. All this so that the price would be paid for our sins. The greatest of all the events in the world was the world's own redemption.

The Apostle John bursts forth in praise when he writes, *"For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him might not perish but have eternal life,"* (John 3:16). That love, and that sacrifice which He gave for us is priceless and has brought results. God offered the ultimate sacrifice for the world He loved. He gave His only Son. This giving, however, meant more than having Him born of a virgin mother and hailed as Saviour. God gave His Son as the necessary sacrifice for the world's sins. God gave His one and only Son for the cross.

God was not obligated to provide a way of salvation for mankind. No one forced Him to send His Son into the world. He simply did it because He loved us. From the beginning of the world, He knew that on this day every single one of us would meet here at this church to have a harvest thanksgiving service. He also knew that unless He sent a Saviour into the world every single one of us would be doomed to eternal condemnation. So, His Word tells us He simply felt sorry for us before we were even born. He took pity on us. Then in His grace, at the right time, He sent a Saviour for us. And of course, we remember how a few shepherds were the first to receive the good news, when an angel appeared to them and said, *"Fear not for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy,"* (Luke 2:10). **Give thanks to the LORD! For He is good. For His mercy endures for ever.**

Thus, the redemption of the world had begun. However, it was to be some 33 years before this work was completed. Our Lord grew up on this earth much like children today grow up. He thirsted as we thirst. He hungered as we hunger. He was tempted by Satan in every way that we are tempted. But He never once fell to sin as we so often do.¹ When He

¹ Hebrews 4:15

was cursed He did not curse back. When others made Him suffer, He did not threaten them. Even when He was dying on the cross He asked forgiveness for His enemies.²

God's plan did not end with the death of Christ, because three days later we remember what happened when some women went to the tomb with ointments and spices for the body. On their way to the tomb, their major worry was, "*Who is going to roll away the stone?*" (Mark 16:3). However, they soon found out that their worries were needless, just as so many of our worries are needless today, because Christ had risen.

It had been 33 years since the angels gave that first message to the shepherds in the field. Redemption was now no longer only a plan in the mind of God. It was an accomplished historical fact. Redemption had now been won for all humankind, so that all could be free from the power of sin, Satan, and the fear of death. This freedom which our gracious God gained for us through the redemptive work of His Holy Son was achieved for us all long before we were ever born.

However, God did not stop doing things for us after our redemption was gained. (What good is freedom, if no one tells the slaves about it?) God also preserved a means whereby men, women, and children like you and me, who live many years after Christ's earthly ministry, might still know of Christ and His work.

I'm talking about the preservation of the Holy Scriptures. God has preserved His Holy Word through every natural, and unnatural catastrophe you can think of. God has seen to it that the Bible has survived through earthquakes, fires, floods, hurricanes, tornadoes, and volcanoes for one reason, because He loves you and me and He wants us to read this message. A message so simple that even a child can understand it. We are all familiar with that wonderful hymn: "*Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.*" That message is not complicated, yet it is profound. Because, unless we knew of God's love from the Bible, we would know nothing of salvation. See all that He has done for us before we were even born! He has provided redemption for us and has preserved the Bible through hundreds of years so that we might know of that redemption. **Give thanks to the LORD! For He is good. For His mercy endures for ever.**

But His grace did not stop there. He also promised to send us His Holy Spirit so that through the Spirit's work each of us would realise the importance of the message of the Bible and accept it as being a message that is relevant and meaningful to us, here today. Without the work of the Holy Spirit you and I would have little care for the contents of Scripture - Why? Because we are sinners and left by ourselves, we would want nothing to do with God because we would prefer to lead a life of sin than to know about God and His righteousness. Just as darkness has nothing to do with light neither would we have anything to do with God if it were not for the work of the Holy Spirit. Do you see how much God loves us, and how much He has done for us even before we were born? How do we begin to adequately thank Him for these great blessings? Here's a good start: Let's begin by proclaiming, **Give thanks to the LORD! For He is good. For His mercy endures for ever.**

God did not stop with preparing great blessings for us before we came into the world. Right now at this very moment He has prepared even greater things for us when we leave this world. Our life with Him in heaven will be like nothing we've ever known before. On that great day, at the end of the world, Satan, and all his evil angels will be cast into hell forever. No more will you and I ever be tempted to think, say, or do anything contrary to the will of our loving heavenly Father.

Many people have spent much time trying to figure out exactly what heaven will be like. Will it be a place up in the sky? Will it be right here on earth? Will it be like a palace with golden streets and pearly gates? You could spend much time dwelling on all those questions. But this we know for sure. Listen to these words of John from Revelation 21:3-4, "³ *I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying: "Look! The tabernacle of God is among human beings. He will dwell with them, they will be His people, and God Himself will be with them as their God. ⁴ He will wipe every tear from their eyes; and there will be no more death. There will not be any more grief, crying, or pain, because the former things have passed away."* As long as I know that, heaven is certainly a place where I want to be.

That same Jesus we mentioned earlier, who lived, and died, and rose again so that we might have eternal life, that's the same Lord we will see then in the flesh face to face. We join with Job in confessing, "*For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth.*"²⁶ *And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my*

² Luke 23:34

*flesh I shall see God,*²⁷ *whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another,*" (Job 19:25-27). That is the same Lord who will wipe away all our tears. That is the same Lord who with the Father and the Holy Spirit will take care of us and reign for ever and ever.

Many of us appreciate what God does for us every day of our lives, because He has surely supplied us with many temporal blessings; food, drink, house, clothing, money, government, good weather, peace, health, friends, and family, and I am sure we could add to the list and make it longer and longer.

It is certainly good and right that we remember all these are God's gifts, and it is good to thank Him for them. Yet we must never let these temporal blessings, however great they may be, predominate over the spiritual blessings which God the Father has given us through Jesus Christ. Because it is only through Jesus Christ that we receive eternal life, and there can be no greater gift than eternity in heaven.

That is why on this harvest thanksgiving day, it is important that we not only remember our blessings, but that we also keep them in the proper perspective by putting Christ first. Because Christ is the one who has won our salvation for us even before we came into this world, and Christ is the one who has heaven waiting for us when we leave this world. **Give thanks to the LORD! For He is good. For His mercy endures for ever.** Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

PRAYER FOR HARVEST THANKSGIVING

God our Father, You have created the universe in great wisdom, and sustain it by Your powerful word. You are good to everyone, and have compassion on all that You have made. We enter Your house of prayer with thanksgiving, and come before You with songs of joy. We thank You for the many blessings and joys You lavish on our lives. We thank You for soil and seed, sunlight and rain, health and strength, machinery and technology, and every other blessing by which You give us our daily bread. You have given us a plentiful land, rich in resources for agriculture, mining, and industry. You have blessed us with education and skills to use these resources for the good of our country and its people. Although You do not always spare us from trouble and dark days, we still must confess that our cup of blessing is overflowing, and so we praise Your name. Make us continually aware of Your goodness, O Lord. Increase our trust that in all things You are working for our good.

But, Lord, You not only care for our bodies; Your richest love is reserved for the salvation of our souls. Because You have revealed Yourself to us in Your Word, we know You in Your limitless grace, and live in the light of Your truth and love. We thank You especially for Your greatest of gifts: Jesus Christ our Saviour, and for all the blessings of the Gospel and the Church. Help us to appreciate fully these choicest gifts, and to produce in our lives a rich harvest of faith, goodness, and love.

Free us from every temptation to trust in uncertain things like material wealth. Free us from covetousness, envy, and jealousy. Increase our joy in what You provide, and make us content. Make us more sensitive to what others need. Give us compassion to help those who have too little, and the opportunities to share Your blessings. Let our service to others pave the way for witness to the Gospel of salvation through Jesus Christ Your Son. Teach us to use wisely the things You place at our disposal.

Bless and strengthen the poor and the hungry, those who cannot work, the lonely, the depressed, and especially those who are suffering because of their Christian faith. Give them all the generous help of friends, but, above all, strong trust in Your presence and care.

Guide the nations on earth, and particularly those countries whose people are desperately poor. Grant that all who look up to You for material blessings may find Your kingdom, and Your righteousness. Bless our country Australia with a united spirit and godly goals. Teach its leaders and its people to know, believe, and do Your will. Remove from us things that are unwise and harmful.

Continue to supply the spiritual needs of our families, so that truth, love, and high morals may bless our homes.

We offer You our prayers and our songs of praise, heavenly Father, in the name of Your dear Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ, to whom be glory and honour for ever. Amen.

Harvest Thanksgiving

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

¹ “When you enter the land that the LORD, your God, is giving you as an inheritance and you take possession of it and live in it, ² you shall take some of the first from all the produce of the ground, which you will harvest from your land, which the LORD, your God, is giving you! You shall put it in a basket and go to the place where the LORD, your God, will choose to make His name dwell! ³ You shall go to the priest who is in office at that time and tell him, ‘I declare today to the LORD, your God, that I have come into the land that the LORD swore to our forefathers to give us!’ ⁴ Then the priest shall take the basket from your hand and set it down in front of the altar of the LORD, your God! ⁵ You shall make this response before the LORD, your God: ‘My forefather was a wandering Aramean. He went down to Egypt with few people and lived as a foreigner there. There he became a great, powerful and numerous nation. ⁶ However, the Egyptians treated us harshly, oppressed us and imposed severe forced labour on us. ⁷ Then we cried to the LORD, the God of our forefathers, and the LORD heard our cry. He saw our misery, distress and oppression. ⁸ The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror and with miraculous signs and wonders. ⁹ He has brought us to this place and has given us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. ¹⁰ So now, look! I have brought the first produce of the land, which You, O LORD, have given me.’ Then you shall set it down before the LORD, your God, and worship before the LORD, your God! ¹¹ Then you shall be glad about all the good things that the LORD, your God, has given to you and your family, together with the Levite and the foreigner who is living among you!

2 Corinthians 9:6-15

⁶ In addition, I say this: The person who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the person who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. ⁷ Each person should give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion! For God loves a cheerful giver.

⁸ God can make all grace abound toward you, that you may always have all that you need in every way and may abound in every good work, ⁹ as Scripture has said: “He has distributed. He has given to the poor. His righteousness remains for ever.” ¹⁰ He who provides seed for the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed and will increase what your righteousness produces. ¹¹ You are being made rich in every way that you may be totally generous. This is producing thanksgiving to God through us. ¹² This work, which you are doing in serving others, not only supplies the needs of the believers but is also overflowing through many expressions of thanks to God. ¹³ By this service, by which you prove yourselves, you are glorifying God for your subordinate confession of the Good News of Christ and for your generous contribution to them and to all people, ¹⁴ while they also long for you deeply and pray for you, because of the extreme kindness that God has shown you. ¹⁵ Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift!

Luke 12:13-21

¹³ Someone in the crowd asked Him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me!”

¹⁴ Jesus asked him, “Man, who appointed Me to be a judge or an arbitrator over you?”

¹⁵ Then He told them, “Beware and be on your guard against all greed! For a person’s life does not consist in how plentiful his possessions are.”

¹⁶ Then Jesus told them a parable: “The ground of a certain rich man yielded plentifully. ¹⁷ He thought to himself, ‘What am I to do? For I have no place to store my produce.’

¹⁸ “Then he said, ‘This is what I shall do: I shall pull down my barns and build bigger ones and shall store my grain and all my other goods in them. ¹⁹ Then I shall say to myself, “Soul, you have many good things stored up for many years. Take life easy, eat, drink and enjoy yourself!”’

²⁰ “However, God said to him, ‘You fool, this very night your life will be demanded of you. Then who will get the things that you have prepared?’”

²¹ Jesus said, “So is he who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God.”