

**IN CHRIST WE HAVE BEEN SET FREE TO LIVE AS HIS CHOSEN PEOPLE AND HIS TREASURED
POSSESSION**

Sermon for Harvest Thanksgiving 2019

Deuteronomy 26:1–11

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 our First Reading from before, 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!**

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

Dear friends in Christ,

Our First Reading for this Sunday is from the end of a very long sermon preached by Moses as the children of Israel end their wilderness journey and are on the verge of entering the land promised to them for generations. In this sermon, stretched over thirteen chapters, Moses has reminded the people of how they are to live in this new land. He has reminded them of the covenant the LORD made with them and how they live in *obedience* to the covenant. Now, as he comes to the end of this long sermon, he reminds them in the simplest terms possible what the LORD wanted for them. He reminds the people that the LORD is giving them this land as a gift. They haven’t earned the land, they haven’t deserved the land, and neither shall they own the land. It’s a gift, the LORD’s gift, to them. It’s a fulfilment of the promise spoken to Abraham, and they will soon cross the Jordan River to a new, secure, prosperous, and abundant land, given them as a gift from the LORD.

To mark this gift, the Israelites are given a new “liturgy” and a new “creed.” Speaking through Moses, the LORD says, 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!”** This is the liturgy of thanksgiving - returning to the LORD some of what He has given us.

The word translated in verse 2 as **“the first from all the produce of the ground”** comes from the Hebrew word for “head,” the “*beginning*” or the “*chief*” fruits. These could mean the first that comes up or the best that comes up; either way, the LORD wanted His people to give back to Him the best of what He’d given them. Although Moses described them as **“some of the first from all the produce of the ground,”** it was to be a widely distributed sample

- not just of fruits and vegetables but also of sheep and cattle. The Israelites would not have acquired this land by accident, nor by their own genius or military muscle. Their covenant-LORD spoke an oath to their fathers that He would give them the land, and He did what He promised.

The “creed” likewise remembers what God has done: 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.’**

The men and women of each new generation could adopt this “creed” as their own. Even though they hadn’t yet been born when the LORD had rescued His people from Egypt, they could identify with their fathers and grandfathers who’d seen the LORD’s mighty miracles and received the gift of the land. “**My forefather was a wandering Aramean**” referred to Jacob; he almost became a “perishing Aramean” because he had to flee for his life from his brother Esau¹, elude his uncle Laban², and finally relocate to Egypt to escape the famine.³ Jacob’s extended family numbered only 70 sons and grandsons when they left Canaan⁴, but the LORD multiplied them into a people so large and powerful that the Egyptian pharaoh enslaved them because he feared they might join Egypt’s enemies.⁵

The **miraculous signs and wonders** included all the plagues the LORD had inflicted on Egypt. Throughout the plagues He made a distinction between His people and the Egyptians⁶, sparing the Israelites from the plagues of flies⁷, death of livestock⁸, hail⁹, and darkness¹⁰. In the tenth and final plague, the LORD dealt differently with Israel in the most dramatic way. While He struck down all the firstborn in Egypt¹¹, the LORD rescued all the firstborn of Israel through the blood of the Passover lamb.

This last plague caused such great terror among the Egyptians that they urged the people to hurry and leave the country, for otherwise, they said, “*We shall all die!*” (Exodus 12:33). The LORD carried out these miraculous signs and wonders to bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt, so the Egyptians would know that He was the LORD, and so His name would be proclaimed in all the earth.¹²

Such a great blessing from their Saviour-God would lead each new generation of Israelites to bring their LORD the first and the best their soil produced, to bow down to Him in worship, and to rejoice for all He had given them.

We are here today to follow the same liturgy and confess the same creed. Today, we take a small part of what God has given to us, and we return it to Him. We bring our money to place in the collection plate; we bring some of our goods and place it at the front of the church. We share the bounty we have received, returning our firstfruits to Him and sharing them with those around us. In so doing, we confess that we are wandering people, people who have come from all corners of the earth to make this land our home. Yet, like the children of Israel, we don’t own this home; it isn’t ours. We may for a time “possess” the land even as the children of Israel took possession of Canaan, but it’s not ours. It’s always the property of its Creator, always the property of the God who in various ways and at various times has made it possible for His children to live here.

As Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Moses were wanderers, as the people of Israel were wanderers, so we too, are

¹ Genesis 27:41-45

² Genesis 31:17-30

³ Genesis 46:1-7

⁴ Genesis 46:27

⁵ Exodus 1:6-14

⁶ Exodus 8:23

⁷ Exodus 8:22

⁸ Exodus 9:4

⁹ Exodus 9:26

¹⁰ Exodus 10:23

¹¹ Exodus 12:29

¹² Exodus 9:16

wanderers, tenants, people just passing through, people who, in their distress, call out to the LORD, and the LORD has heard our cry. He knows we are all in bondage to something far more sinister than the pharaohs of Egypt. He knows we carry *the weight of sin*, and sin is a weight that makes the stones of the pyramids seem like pebbles. The weight of sin is death - not the death of someone whose grave the people of Israel assembled, but our own death. As a result, He has come with a mighty hand and with arms outstretched on the cross to save us. *In Christ, He has set us free, and in freedom, we are to live as His chosen people and His treasured possession.*

Tragically, the people of Israel would not be long in their new land before they would forget whose land it was and to whom they belonged. Before too long, a deeper slavery would begin to be revealed. They would begin to fall in love with the things of Canaan and disobey the LORD who had given them the land. Even while the walls of Jericho were falling, before the dust had even settled, one of the Israelite soldiers was grabbing some of the “devoted things” from the city and hoarding them away among his possessions.¹³ As a result, the Israelite army was roundly defeated when they attacked the next city. They loved created things more than the Creator, and the battle has been raging ever since.

Sin holds us in its grip every bit as tightly as it held the people of Israel. Like them, we hold on too tightly to the things of this world and nurse within ourselves a sense that our things are our things. We possess them, we own them, we need them. The evil one fans the flame by causing doubts to arise in our minds about whether the LORD will really care for us as well as He has promised to care for us. Maybe we feel that even more so today as we look around at our bare paddocks and parched land. Even though we have experienced even up to now God’s abundant care and the overwhelming bounty of His love for this world and its people, we wonder if we will really have enough. We worry when it seems others have more than we do. Before long, the things we are to manage for His glory become things that take possession of us. Sin always curves us in on ourselves, and we see this most clearly in the way we often handle those things that are to be a trust from the LORD. We hold onto them in the same way the rich fool mentioned in Luke 12 held onto his things. For him, life consisted in his possessions. When life consists of our possessions, then even the smallest sacrifice seems impossibly large. Setting aside even the smallest fraction to return to the LORD or to share with our neighbour is beyond us entirely.

The LORD’s dream for His people three thousand years ago as they entered the Promised Land was never fully realised. They never really experienced the full peace, prosperity, and abundance He intended. Their lives were consumed with worry, stress, and burdens He did not want them to carry. Our lives are likewise not really living the dream the LORD has for us. But the great wonder of God is that He does not abandon His people. If our reading had stretched right to the very end of Moses’ sermon, we would have been reminded that when it comes to falling in love with our possessions, we have nothing on the LORD. As much as we love our possessions, His love for His possessions dwarfs ours. The big difference is that His possessions are not things, but people. At the very end of this long sermon, Moses says this: *“The LORD has also declared today that you are His own people, His treasured possession, as He has promised you”* (v 18).

The people of Israel were His treasured possession. We are His treasured possession. And for this reason, every time we come to Him confessing our sin, every time we meet Him in repentance, He is there to forgive us over and over again.

The story of God’s people in their Promised Land is the story of God continuing to rescue His people from their slavery. Sometimes their slavery would be to other nations; sometimes, it was slavery to their possessions, but at all times, it was slavery to sin.

God’s rescuing work continues to you and to me this day. God has set us free with Christ’s mighty hand and arms outstretched on the cross for us, and He keeps coming to us, by His Holy Spirit, to free us again and again. Every time we come to Him in repentance, He is there to forgive, strengthen, and renew us in His love. He takes us back to our Baptism and washes us clean; He takes us to His Holy Supper and sets us free! He renews in us the sure and certain promise that our place in this world is not our final destination, but a jumping-off point for a new heaven and a new earth, the home where righteousness dwells and where we shall dwell forever.

¹³ Joshua 7

Set free, we loosen our grip on the stuff of this world. We live not as stressed-out owners, but as wise and faithful stewards. We live not as misers but share freely what has been shared with us. We live not clutching and grabbing, but setting aside the firstfruits, giving to Him what He has given to us and sharing with those around us. We live not fearing scarcity but rejoicing in the abundance God lavishes on His treasured possessions.

May we continue to give thanks to the LORD for all His goodness to us, especially for giving to us the greatest gift of all - His only Son for the forgiveness of all our sins, which means we already possess the wonderful gift yet to be realised –eternal life with Him forever! 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."