

Thanksgiving Eve. (November 21, 2018)

1763

Text: Acts 27:33-38

Theme: Thanksgiving On A Sinking Ship

- I. Past mercies.
- II. Present blessings.
- III. Future joys.

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

Acts 27:33-38

Just before dawn Paul urged them all to eat. "For the last fourteen days," he said, "you have been in constant suspense and have gone without food -- you haven't eaten anything. Now I urge you to take some food. You need it to survive. Not one of you will lose a single hair from his head." After he said this, he took some bread and gave thanks to God in front of them all. Then he broke it and began to eat. They were all encouraged and ate some food themselves. Altogether there were 276 of us on board. When they had eaten as much as they wanted, they lightened the ship by throwing the grain into the sea.

O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise.

Dear brothers and sisters, thankful, even in the midst of life's tempestuous sea;

Just think! On a sinking ship with 276 terrified passengers, Paul, the great apostle of our Lord, gave thanks. "He gave thanks to God in front of them all." What a sermon in the pre-dawn hour of what would turn out to be a glorious Thanksgiving Day.

The ship was making its way across the Mediterranean Sea toward the city of Rome, where the Apostle Paul was being transported as a prisoner. Soon the boat was engulfed in a furious storm with hurricane-force winds that lasted not one day, but two weeks. Try to envision the desperation of the crew as they gave up on holding to their course and let the storm take them where it may, as they passed ropes under the ship to hold it together, as they lightened the ship by throwing its cargo overboard, and the next day the ship's tackle. Imagine the panic of the passengers, huddled beneath the deck, despairing of their lives as day after day they could see no letup in the tempest -- no sunlight, no starlight, only the fearful howling of the winds and pounding of the waves.

This is the setting of one of the most remarkable thanksgivings of all times. For on that ill-fated vessel was Paul, of whom the Scripture says, "He gave thanks to God in the presence of them all."

Thanks? In the midst of such horrible circumstances? Thanks for what? What possible reasons could he have had? But the Apostle, whose eyes were enlightened by faith, saw even there some compelling reasons that may teach us a type of thanksgiving that is a true glorification of God.

You may be wondering: What reason do I have to give thanks this year? There are wars going on in our world. Terrorist's attacks continue around the world and in our own country. Our economy is not the best. Should President Trump announce that there will be no Thanksgiving this year? I don't think so!

Or in our personal lives, perhaps we've experienced some great loss, some serious illness or accident, the death of a family member, or some other difficulty that causes us to visualize our life like the picture that hangs on the wall of an intensive care unit for pre-mature babies in Rochester Minnesota -- a picture of a little boat on big blue waves with the caption: "The sea is so big, and my boat is so small."

In his small boat the Apostle Paul trusted in the Lord and was thankful to the Lord for his past mercies. For the Lord had brought Paul to himself and his salvation, and had granted him his grace to be his apostle, putting him on that ship, a prisoner heading toward Rome, where he would have the privilege of proclaiming the precious gospel. Is it not amazing, Paul thought, that after 14 days of violent tempest our ship and all its passengers are still intact! Who is keeping us? It can be none other than the Lord God our Creator, our Preserver, our Savior! So certain was the Apostle of this that, although the seas were still raging and hurling the ship toward menacing rocks, he felt compelled to give thanks to God.

In an old church of Cambridge, England, there was a cushioned kneeler with the words "think" and "thank" embroidered on it. The two words are related, even etymologically -- think and thank. This was meant to remind all who knelt there in prayer that to be thankful is to be thoughtful or mindful of benefits received. If we stopped to think more, undoubtedly we would thank more. Just a little reflection on the past year, or even the last fourteen days, will reveal to us, as it did to Paul, that things are not occurring by chance; no, not even when our ship of life is being battered by storms of affliction. Over and above all that is happening to us is the merciful providence and eternal protection of our God, who, as the hymn-writer says, "plants His footsteps on the sea and rides upon the storm."

Were it not for our Lord's countless blessings, we'd all be gone long, long ago. With all the hazards of high speed travel -- the many hundreds and thousands of miles most of us travel each year by land, sea or air -- is it not amazing that we are still here, safe and sound? We've probably all had that near miss on some highway, where we stop, catch our breath and say, "Thank you, Lord!" Or the car is totaled, but I am unhurt, and we think that's wonderful. But don't we have still more reason to be thankful for the many days and years that we've driven the highways and never had an accident? Does it take some tragedy, or near miss, or remarkable recovery to make us thankful for God's mercies? What about his daily and hourly protections -- the crack-ups that didn't occur, the sickness we didn't contract, the losses we never suffered -- are they not an even greater reason to give thanks to God?

It was not only the past but also the present that Paul was considering in his thanksgiving on that sinking ship. After 14 days of fearful suspense and fasting, we are told that he urged the weakened passengers and crew to eat. Just how much edible food was available on that boat, and how edible was it? Likely there was nothing more than bread, water-soaked and stale. Yet how fortunate, thought Paul, to have that much; it will provide the strength we need when it comes to abandoning ship.

He not only urged his fellow passengers to eat, but he himself ate of it. And before eating he acknowledged it as a gift from the Lord. He said grace before the meal, sparse as it was. "He took some bread, St. Luke reports, "and gave thanks to God in the presence of them all."

What? for a bit of bread he thanked? "How foolish!" many would think. Or to

give thanks, like our forefathers did, for the few things they had. Many today are so supplied with thousands of good things, sweets and meats, that they have lost the perspective of thanksgiving.

"We have forgotten," said an American economist, "that we in America are better off in most ways than are 90% of all other people. How many in drought-stricken Africa and famine-ridden India would be thankful for just one slice of bread! Must the Lord take away some of our plenty and send us some shortage of food, gas or energy before we realize that every drop of water, every crumb of bread, every ray of light, every thread of cotton, every chip of wood, even the least of these benefits is a gift of his mercy that calls for daily thanksgiving?"

And let us not forget about the spiritual meat and drink which our Lord daily grants us, the bread of life, our dear Savior himself, his saving word and forgiving grace, his loving presence and assured salvation. "Do not work for food that spoils," he said to those who were intent only on earthly food, "but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you." [John 6:27] We have his salvation. Ought he not to be thanked?

Notice that St. Paul's thanksgiving on the sinking ship included even more. He gave thanks not only for the protections of the past, and not merely for the bread at hand, but also **for the deliverance to come**.

In a vision the night before, he had received from the Lord an assurance that, while the ship would be wrecked, not one of the 276 passengers would be lost. This he accepted at face value. Not a moment did he doubt and think, "Before saying anything, I had better wait and see what happens to this vessel and its people." No! While the storm was still raging and the ship helplessly drifting, he spoke up. Before the possibility of rescue became apparent, Paul gave thanks to God in the presence of them all.

It's not unusual for people to acknowledge past mercies on Thanksgiving, and to recount the rich blessings that have crowned their labors. Nor is it uncommon to praise the Lord for the bounties at hand. But how many will thank him for the good things still to come, the great and wondrous material and spiritual blessings he intends to bestow in the days ahead and has guaranteed to all his followers not simply in a dream-like vision, but in his far more certain and reliable word!

It's true that to many the future looks dark and ominous. To them our world, with its tragedies, violence, war, destruction and death, appears like the sinking ship on which Paul was traveling. But in all this are we Christians without assurance of deliverance? Hasn't our Savior told us that in the midst of all the tribulations of these latter days we need not be afraid or troubled, but that we should rather lift up our heads because our redemption is drawing near? [Luke 21:28]

Even if our future appears dismal, like we're sinking in a turbulent sea of woes, and we wonder how we'll even get through the year, why be dismayed? Hasn't our Lord promised us, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you"? Doesn't that enable us to declare as confidently and gratefully as Paul did, "The Lord will rescue me from every evil, and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom." To him be glory forever and ever"? Didn't Jesus say, "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life" -- has, not will have, but has it right now by faith as his possession? What troubles may still befall us in the days ahead, we cannot tell; but we do know, as believers in Christ, his greater good that will attend us: his shepherding care, his mighty help, his powerful comfort, his

sustaining presence, and at last, not death, but life, not hell but heaven, a destiny full of eternal joys and glory, all dearly won for us and guaranteed to us by his holy word and sacraments. Is not that enough to brighten our outlook of the future and move us to give thanks!

In the case of Paul, the deliverance came exactly as foretold. The ship ran aground on the island of Malta, its stern broken to pieces by the pounding surf. But the passengers and crew, strengthened by the bread they had eaten, managed to swim ashore, some on planks or pieces of the ship. When the captain counted, not one of the 276 was missing. What a miracle! And more astounding still, the whole experience resulted in eternal blessings. People were deeply moved by the Apostle's witness. He had thanked God in the presence of them all, and now they saw how right he had been in doing so. They were in awe and were won for the true God. Jesus our Savior was glorified, and eventually the entire island of Malta was Christianized.

Wouldn't it be great if our public Thanksgiving celebrations had a similar effect upon our fellow travelers through this stormy world! May our Thanksgiving celebrations have a gracious impact also on our own souls, drawing us nearer to our Lord and moving us to sing with trusting, thankful hearts:

Jesus, Savior, pilot me Over life's tempestuous sea,
Unknown waves before me roll Hiding rock and treach'rous shoal.
Chart and compass come from Thee. Jesus, Savior, pilot me.

When at last I near the shore And the fearful breakers roar
'Twixt me and the peaceful rest, Then, while leaning on Thy breast,
May I hear thee say to me, "Fear not, I will pilot thee." Amen.