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A Forgotten Art (Oct 1958)

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—Glasgow, Scotland

It was the custom of Edinburgh's Dr. Alexander Whyte to make the weather a subject of thanksgiving in his public devotions. On a particularly inclement morning in the Scottish capital, it is reported that one of the elders of the church remarked to a friend, "He'll no' say onythin' aboot a mornin' like this." But when the Doctor's prayer began, the elder was more than astonished to hear the saintly voice intone, "Lord, we thank Thee that is not always like this!"

For most of us, however, thanksgiving is a forgotten art. If we may judge by our Lord's experience with the cleansed lepers, nine out of ten people never stop to count their blessings or take the trouble to thank the Blesser; yet nothing disappoints Him more! "Were there none found that returned to give glory to God, save this stranger?" He asked in wounded tones (Lk. 17:18. R.V.).

How easy it is to fall into the sin of ingratitude! How needful to recall the words of the Psalmist, "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits"! (Ps. 103:2). How profitable to seize every opportunity to turn our experiences into occasions of thanksgiving!

The spirit of thanksgiving is the distinctive mark of a devoted believer, for Paul has set it in the context of God's good pleasure. ''In everything give thanks," he wrote, "for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you" (1 Thess. 5:18). Ingratitude is

disobedience to the revealed plan of God for the Christian life.

Why Give Thanks?

Let us begin by counting our BLESSINGS IN NATURE. “Every creature of God is good,” wrote Paul, “and nothing to be refused, if it be received with thanksgiving” (1 Tim. 4:4). Here is an echo of the “sevenfold refrain” of the great creatorial poem of Genesis 1: God’s gifts in nature are all good!

Furthermore, these gifts are bestowed without partiality, for He “sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust” (Matt. 5:45). Because we are priests, we should give thanks not only on our own behalf, but also on behalf of those who never pause to utter a word of appreciation for God’s providence in their lives.

It is no mere childish sentiment to sing:

We thank Thee, then, O Father

For all things bright and good,

The seed-time and the harvest,

Our life, our health, our food.

Our chief concern, of course, must be with our BLESSINGS IN CHRIST. These are the subject of Paul’s praise in Ephesians 1:3 — “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Who hath blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ” (R.V.). In the succeeding passage, he enumerates these blessings, and shows how the Trinity works together to accomplish His purpose, “that we should be … to the praise of His glory” (Eph. 1:12).

Firstly, we have been chosen by the Father (v. 4). Here is a great mystery that may baffle our understanding, but must command our adoration. Nothing invests the believer's life with more dignity than does the knowledge of divine election before the foundation of the world.

Secondly, we have been redeemed by the Son (v.7) "through His blood". In these words, Paul carries us straight to the cross. If the sovereignty of the Father's choice is the foundation of our blessings, the sufficiency of the Saviour's sacrifice is the corner stone. Our redemption means deliverance from the guilt and bondage of sin; by it, we obtain a new destiny and a share in the ultimate glory of Christ, Who will be revealed as the Head of all things, the coming Monarch of the universe.

Thirdly, we have been sealed by the Spirit (v.13). The indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit, denoting divine ownership, is the confirmation of the Father's choice; and this blessed seal, indicating also divine destination, is the pledge of the Son's redemption. The Spirit is described as "the earnest of our inheritance" (v. 14). W. E. Vine has remarked that in modern usage the Greek word for "earnest" signifies an engagement ring, a token of future bestowals; and we pause to observe that, if the pledge is so wonderful, truly indescribable bliss awaits the Bride of Christ!

As we try to survey our blessings in Christ, surely we become conscious of striving to express what is inexpressible. We gladly borrow the words of the Apostle, and say "Thanks be unto God for His unspeakable gift!" (2 Cor. 9:15).

Some account must be taken, moreover, of what we may call BLESSINGS IN DISGUISE. As James wrote, “Count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations” (Jas. 1:2). The trials of life are a means of blessing. They are not just to be borne stoically or heroically, we must discover within them a divine purpose. Trials test faith, and produce patience; without them, Christian character would be defective in its development.

The writer to the Hebrews observes, “Whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth …If ye are without chastening, … then are ye …not sons …All chastening seemeth for the present to be not joyous but grievous; yet afterward it yieldeth peaceable fruit to them that have been exercised thereby” (Heb. 12:6-11. R.V.). Herein lies a true estimate of suffering: it is the hallmark of sonship. By it, we are made partakers of His holiness, and we come to reflect His character. Chastening is certainly a blessing — howbeit in disguise — and, as such, it should give us cause for joy and thanksgiving.

How To Give Thanks

A thorough review of our blessings prompts the question posed by the Psalmist: “What shall I render unto the Lord for all His benefits toward me?” (Ps. 116:12). His own answer reveals the form of his thanksgiving.

First, he declared, “I will take the cup of salvation and call upon the name of the Lord” (v.13). Taken with their parallel in verse 17, these words suggest that he planned to offer a drink offering to the Lord, on his next visit to the house of God.

The New Testament saint can interpret this in a variety of ways, for God requires certain sacrifices of him also.

God asks for the sacrifice of praise (Heb. 13:15), for the language of a grateful heart is an acceptable offering to the Lord.

God also asks for the sacrifice of our substance (Phil. 4:18), for Christian giving is a fragrant act of worship that rejoices the heart of God.

Supremely, He asks for the sacrifice of ourselves (Rom. 12:1), and this is only "reasonable" in the light of God's mercies. We cannot give more; we dare not give less. As Isaac Watts once wrote,

Love, so amazing, so divine,

Demands my heart, my life, my all!

But the Psalmist's response carried him still further. He declared, "I will pay my vows unto the Lord NOW in the presence of all His people" (Ps. 116:14). These vows were not prescribed; rather, they were the voluntary expressions of his devotion to God — but they had been left unpaid. Now gratitude spurs him to action: overwhelmed by a sense of his indebtedness to the goodness of God, he hastens to fulfil his obligations; "I will pay my vows … NOW!"

Have you had cause to bless God at the remembrance of His goodness? Have you stopped to count your blessings and to confess your amazement at the abundance of His benefits?

If you have not, put down this magazine at once, and fulfil that long-forgotten vow! You owe it to Him! Do it now! There is no better way of saying thanks and of rediscovering the forgotten art.