

Thanksgiving - Holiday or Attitude?

by Guest Author: W.W. McEad

The English word for “worry” comes from an old Anglo-Saxon word which means “to strangle”. This seems appropriate since worry has the effect of strangling our peace of mind. There is, however, a way to recapture peace of mind even in the midst of trials and tribulations. It involves a process of correct thinking which will lead to correct living; “... as a man thinketh in his heart, so is he” (Prov. 23.7).

As we approach the established “day for thanks giving” it behooves us to remember that *the giving of thanks depends not so much on our state of material prosperity as on our state of mind*. The Pilgrim Fathers celebrated, with thanksgiving, what God had done for them even in the midst of scarcity. It was their state of mind, not just the state of material blessings, that moved them to thanksgiving! We need to learn to think differently if we are to act differently! We can do this by changing the way we see things.

Here are some suggestions to help you see what I mean: I’m thankful:

- that there aren’t twice as many politicians in Washington DC
- that grass doesn’t grow when it snows so we don’t have to do winter mowing as well as winter shoveling
- that the cable news channels have only 24 hours available each day for broadcasting
- that I’m not a turkey (well at least I hope not)
- that houses still cost more than cars
- that the space available for messages on T-shirts and bumpers is limited
- that hugs and kisses don’t add weight or cause cancer
- that telemarketers don’t ring my doorbell
- that I cannot get fat by merely looking at pictures of fattening food
- that my children are not getting younger every day

Scripture indicates that thanksgiving is a heart attitude that produces the peace of God and the perspective of hope in prayer. What begins internally finds expression externally.

In Philippians 4.4 Paul writes, “*Rejoice in the Lord always, again I will say, rejoice!*” We have a tendency to misunderstand Paul’s words. Paul is not exhorting us here to “rejoice in everything”, but rather to “rejoice in the Lord ... always!” It is not a matter of rejoicing in the positive things or even rejoicing in spite of the negative things. The exhortation is to rejoice “in the Lord always.” It is a matter of **“focus.”**



Since the Lord is the only constant in a changing universe, our rejoicing can also be constant since He never changes. It is possible for the believer to live in victory even when he is vanquished by the world! Peter discovered this while strolling on the surface of the Sea of Galilee during the storm. As long as his eyes were on Jesus he was OK. When his focus moved to the storm he started sinking. We also have the tendency to change our focus. Furthermore, the fact of the matter is that most of the things we worry about rarely come to pass!

One particular statistical study reveals that:

- 60% of our fears are totally unfounded
- 20% are already behind us
- 10% are so petty they don’t make any difference
- 4-5% of the remaining 10% are real, but we can’t do anything about them leaving only 5% of our fears that we can do something about.

Paul also speaks about the frequency of our rejoicing. We are to “rejoice always.” He repeats the phrase twice to be sure we get it. This is to be an emphasis for our lives.

Before the Dallas Cowboys walked out on to the field for the 1993 Super Bowl, coach Jimmy Johnson told his players, “*If I laid a two-by-four across the floor, everybody here would walk across it and not fall, because our focus would be on walking the length of that board. But if I put that same board 10 stories high between two buildings, only a few of you would make it because your focus would be on falling.*”

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It was Tertullian who said, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church." That truth is certainly demonstrated in dramatic fashion in the wake of the death of Stephen, the first Christian martyr of the Church age. His murder at the hands

of religious leaders signaled the end of any semblance of restraint on the part of those who opposed the Church. It heralded a period of severe persecution of those who were followers of Christ. At the same time, however, it marked the beginning of a dramatic spread of the Gospel to far reaches of the world and the entrance of many into the Kingdom through faith in Christ.

Thus we read: **"Now Saul was consenting to his death. At that a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the Apostles."**

I am persuaded that this escalation of persecution was directed against the church at Jerusalem because the church had not spread much beyond the boundaries of that city at that particular time. The mandate given by the risen Lord in Acts 1.9 was for believers to be witnesses "in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and to the uttermost parts of the world." The high priest testified that they had "filled Jerusalem with their teaching", so the first phase of that mandate had been fulfilled but beyond that there had been little progress in the extension of the church and the Gospel testimony. Persecution changed all that!

The key figure, of course, in this wave of persecution (Acts 8.3) is Saul who "made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison."

The use of the word "havoc" indicates that believers were treated shamefully and with injury calculated to devastate or ruin. Saul was intent on destroying the church, but notice the unintended result in the text when it says: *"therefore those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the Word."*

Verse 1 makes it clear that it was not the Apostles who fled ... it was the people (those in the pews, if you will). This is significant because it reveals that the spreading of the Gospel in the early days of the church was not solely dependent upon the itinerant ministry of the Apostles or church leaders. It was accomplished by the effort of ordinary men and women who had been prepared and equipped by the daily teaching and by their involvement in the life of the church for such a ministry.

These people may have fled for their lives but they were obviously not afraid to share the Gospel as they fled. How many there are today who are afraid to share the Gospel in their safe, comfortable and secure circumstances of life.

The futility of those who orchestrated this persecution is almost amusing in that it did not in any way accomplish their intent. Instead it spread the Church over an ever increasing area!

When one considers the weakness of the Church in fulfilling the Great Commission in our own day in America, it is appropriate to wonder if perhaps the best thing that could happen to re-vitalize that effort, assuring the spread for the Gospel and the growth of the Church, would be some healthy persecution.

Thought: A Great Commission church trains and equips its members to diligently proclaim the Gospel as they move throughout society, whatever the cause of that movement and wherever it takes place



Vision World

IFCA International Church Planting

"Seeing the people, He (Jesus) felt compassion for them because they were distressed and dispirited like sheep without a shepherd. Then He said to His disciples 'The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Beseech the Lord of the harvest to send out workers

into His harvest.' (Matthew 9:36-38, NASB).

In the IFCA Vision World strategy is a commitment to, as the Lord provides, raising up and sending out 100 workers into the harvest field of the Lord. That takes a lot of work. Even before the work is begun, one must **see** that the people of the world are "distressed and dispirited like sheep without a shepherd." Until each of us has this vision, it will be very hard to take the first step in training up and sending out a worker into the world's harvest fields.

This month we are praising the Lord for a church that has seen the sad state of the peoples of the world so desperately in need of someone to bring the Gospel to them and has taken the first step along this path. Evergreen Bible Church (Vancouver, WA) has become the fifth VW church. Pastor Beck writes:

We are a little slow on the response I think but we are now on board with Vision World here at Evergreen Bible Church in Vancouver, Washington. The video was helpful both for understanding the vision as well as for communicating it to our leaders and our church body. Our elder team and Missions Team both gladly suggested that we adopt this vision and so we presented it to the church last weekend. At the end of the service we gave people the opportunity to come forward and sign a copy of Vision World indicating their approval of this decision (pictures were attached). And I encouraged them as they signed to remember that God may call them in answer to these prayers!

Thank you for your leadership in this initiative.

Thinking always precedes doing. The Apostle Paul had the foresight, in the Spirit, to see a region where the Gospel needed to be preached so that he could say *"from Jerusalem and round about as far as Illyricum I have fully preached the Gospel of Christ"* [emphasis added]. How could he have described completing the action of preaching the Gospel through a specific region unless he first **saw** the need to do so? Clearly, he couldn't and didn't.

We at IFCA are praying that each of you that read this article will also develop the vision the Lord wants you to have in sending forth workers into His harvest field. May the Lord bless you as you prayerfully consider your role as co-laborers with Christ in His mighty work.

Enhancing the strength of the Church by equipping for, and encouraging toward ministry partnerships to achieve Great Commission objectives.

He then urged his players not to focus on the crowd, the media or the possibility of falling, but to focus on each play of the game as if it were simply a good practice session. The Cowboys won the game 52-7. A Christian must not focus on what people think, but only on what is “excellent or praiseworthy” (Phil. 4.8).

Paul commands us not to be *“anxious about anything but in everything by prayer and petition with thanksgiving, to present our requests to God.”* Even our prayer requests are to be framed in the context of thanksgiving because asking in the context of thanksgiving helps us to panic less, have faith more, and to stay “moderate” or balanced. It also keeps us God-oriented. If you are not thankful for what you already have been given, it is doubtful that you will be thankful for what you will yet receive. Rejoicing and thankfulness create the proper kind of framework for faith to operate and to keep our lives in proper spiritual balance.

Paul goes on then to explain how to create this attitude of gratitude in verse 8. We are to become occupied with the right kind of things. We are to focus our lives on the positive things of life, even when terrible things are happening around us. Paul says to *“think on those things that are true, noble, right, pure, lovely or admirable, if there is anything excellent or praiseworthy, to think about such things”!* It is not so much what happens to us in life that matters; it is how we choose to respond to what happens to us. Paul is not suggesting an occasional positive bent, but a constant or fixed positive attitude of heart and mind. We can choose to change the bent of our heart and mind by focusing and feeding our souls the right kind of things.

In verses 7 and 9 we see the fruit of a response of rejoicing is “peace”; not just any kind of peace, but an internal peace that is steadfast even in the midst of conflict.

There is a freedom for those who have learned the secrets of thanksgiving and
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rejoicing even in the midst of external turmoil. Many people waste all their emotional energy trying to get rid of external conflicts only to discover that it is either impossible or unending. It is far more important to be at peace internally than to have peace externally. When genuine inner peace exists there will be a more balanced response to external trials.

Lucy once said to Charlie Brown, *“I hate everything. I hate everybody. I hate the whole wide world!”* Charlie said, *“But I thought you had inner peace.”* Lucy replied, *“I do have inner peace. But I still have outer obnoxiousness”*

God’s peace will act as a “sentry” for our hearts and minds, to “guard” them against damage. The word is a military term describing a *“sentry that stands his post as guard”* and assures your safety. God’s peace is not just an end product of thanksgiving and rejoicing, it is actually a guard against attacks on the mind and soul.

Paul concludes in verse 9 by asking us to take this teaching on rejoicing and thanksgiving and *“put it into practice!”* Theory and theology are fine and good, but only if they result in action! Paul says, if we *“put it into practice, then the God of peace will be with us.”*

We tend to want the peace first and then we will be thankful. That isn’t the way it works biblically. We are first thankful and rejoicing and then we get peace! This is much more than what the world popularly calls “positive thinking”, it is “positive living.” Positive thinking denies the negative. Positive living conquers the negative. There is real peace for thanks givers and those who rejoice!

Thanksgiving is much more than a *holiday celebration*, it is a *heart condition!* It is more than a *celebration of food*; it is the *celebration of faith!* May we learn to come to God with a grateful heart, even when we come with prayer requests, so that our faith is balanced and positive. God always responds to a thankful heart!

Thanksgiving Declaration



“The year that is drawing towards its close, has been filled with the blessings of fruitful fields and healthful

skies. To these bounties, which are so constantly enjoyed that we are prone to forget the source from which they come, others have been added, which are of so extraordinary a nature, that they cannot fail to penetrate and soften even the heart which is habitually insensible to the ever watchful providence of Almighty God ... Population has steadily increased, notwithstanding the waste that has been made in the camp, the siege and the battle-field; and the country, rejoicing in the consciousness of augmented strength and vigor, is permitted to expect continuance of years, with large increase of freedom. “No human counsel hath devised nor hath any mortal hand worked out these great things. They are the gracious gifts of the Most High God, who, while dealing with us in anger for our sins, hath nevertheless remembered mercy.

“It has seemed to me fit and proper that they should be solemnly, reverently and gratefully acknowledged as with one heart and voice by the whole American people. I do therefore invite my fellow citizens in every part of the United States, and also those who are at sea and those who are sojourning in foreign lands, to set apart and observe the last Thursday of November next, as a day of Thanksgiving and Praise to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the Heavens”

Abraham Lincoln, October 3, 1863

