

Remembering Whom to Thank

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

November 22, 2015

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Deuteronomy 8:6–18 (CEB)

⁶Keep the commandments of the LORD your God by walking in his ways and by fearing him, ⁷because the LORD your God is bringing you to a wonderful land, a land with streams of water, springs, and wells that gush up in the valleys and on the hills; ⁸a land of wheat and barley, vines, fig trees, and pomegranates; a land of olive oil and honey; ⁹a land where you will eat food without any shortage—you won't lack a thing there—a land where stone is hard as iron and where you will mine copper from the hills. ¹⁰You will eat, you will be satisfied, and you will bless the LORD your God in the wonderful land that he's given you.

¹¹But watch yourself! Don't forget the LORD your God by not keeping his commands or his case laws or his regulations that I am commanding you right now. ¹²When you eat, get full, build nice houses, and settle down, ¹³and when your herds and your flocks are growing large, your silver and gold are multiplying, and everything you have is thriving, ¹⁴don't become arrogant, forgetting the LORD your God: the one who rescued you from Egypt, from the house of slavery; ¹⁵the one who led you through this vast and terrifying desert of poisonous snakes and scorpions, of cracked ground with no water; the one who made water flow for you out of a hard rock; ¹⁶the one who fed you manna in the wilderness, which your ancestors had never experienced, in order to humble and test you, but in order to do good to you in the end.

¹⁷Don't think to yourself, My own strength and abilities have produced all this prosperity for me. ¹⁸Remember the LORD your God! He's the one who gives you the strength to be prosperous in order to establish the covenant he made with your ancestors—and that's how things stand right now.

Luke 17:11–19 (CEB)

¹¹On the way to Jerusalem, Jesus traveled along the border between Samaria and Galilee. ¹²As he entered a village, ten men with skin diseases approached him. Keeping their distance from him, ¹³they raised their voices and said, "Jesus, Master, show us mercy!"

¹⁴When Jesus saw them, he said, "Go, show yourselves to the priests." As they left, they were cleansed. ¹⁵One of them, when he saw that he had been healed, returned and praised God with a loud voice. ¹⁶He fell on his face at Jesus' feet and thanked him. He was a Samaritan. ¹⁷Jesus replied, "Weren't ten cleansed? Where are the other nine?" ¹⁸No one returned to praise God except this foreigner?" ¹⁹Then Jesus said to him, "Get up and go. Your faith has healed you."

We have so much. Do we remember to give thanks? Do we remember whom to thank?

One out of Ten!!

What's up with the lepers?¹ Ten are hanging out together one day as Jesus makes his way through northern Samaria. Evidently, they recognize Jesus as he approaches and they know of his reputation as a healer. Quickly, they begin to plead for mercy, for healing. And why shouldn't they? What other hope do they have? And, not surprisingly, Jesus responds to their pleas with the mercy they seek. He treats them as if they had already been healed, telling them to go show themselves to a priest, as required by the Law. So they head off directly, realizing that they had been healed. But one of them hangs back, praises God at the top of his lungs and throws himself on the ground in front of Jesus, thanking him over and over.

Why does only one turn back and thank Jesus? The other nine seem so ungrateful. Yet, Jesus told them to go to the priest and that is what they did. Why condemn them for it?

¹Though the skin disease is usually translated as leprosy, the Greek word here was used for a variety of skin diseases. Still, these ten people were outcasts not only because people feared their disease, but because people believed that their affliction was punishment for sins they or someone in their family had committed. Lepers kept to themselves, lived in colonies of their own, and lived near major thoroughfares so they could more easily beg for charity.

Fred Craddock suggests that this story has two parts. The first (v. 11-14) is a “typical” healing story. The second part (v. 15-19) is then the story of a foreigner’s salvation. After all, what is a Samaritan doing in the bunch, for if they are not Jews, then why would Jesus send them to a priest? And the statement, “Your faith has made you well,” could just as easily be translated, “Your faith has saved you.” That would be even a more typical translation of the Greek root word, *sozo*. Thus, it is an outsider that *sees* and *understands* Jesus and the Kingdom of God better than do the insiders, the Jews.

In this way, the second half of the story carries much the same punch as the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), for there it is the Samaritan outsider, not the priest and Levite, who knows the right answer to Jesus’ question, “Who is my neighbor?” The healing of this Samaritan leper also has strong echoes of Elisha’s healing of Naaman the foreign commander who had leprosy (2 Kings 5:1-17). Naaman too is not only healed of his affliction, but comes to know that Yahweh, the god of the Israelites, is the only god, the LORD God. Just as the Samaritan sees the truth about Jesus’ kingdom announcement, so Naaman comes to see the truth of Elisha’s ministry of life.

Alan Culpepper helps us grasp that there are really two questions here: What do we see? And just as importantly: What do we *do* when we see?

The second question goes to the heart of the story [of the ten lepers]. What do you *do* when you see? Jesus saw need and acted to meet it. When the leper saw healing, he did not just celebrate his good fortune; he returned to praise God and fall on his face before Jesus. Gratitude may be the purest measure of one’s character and spiritual condition. The absence of the ability to be grateful reveals self-centeredness or the attitude that I deserve more than I ever get, so I do not need to be grateful.

Did it take a Samaritan—an outcast—to recognize grace for what it was? The grateful person reveals a humility of spirit and a sensitivity to love expressed by others. The grateful person, therefore, regards others’ acts of kindness and experiences of God’s grace with profound gratitude. Life itself is a gift. Health is a precious gift—the friendship of others and the love of family and special friends are an overwhelming grace to be treasured and guarded with gratitude. What do you see? And what do you do?

This story also challenges us to regard gratitude as an expression of faith. At the end, Jesus says to the Samaritan, “Your faith has made you well.” That faith was expressed not primarily in the lepers’ collective cry for help but in the Samaritan’s individual act of recognition and his cry of grateful praise. Only his “loud voice” of praise matched the lepers’ raised voices to call out for help at the beginning of the story.

In what sense, then, is gratitude an expression of faith? Does not gratitude follow from faith? Or is gratitude itself an expression of faith? If gratitude reveals humility of spirit and a sensitivity to the grace of God in one’s life, then is there any better measure of faith than wonder and thankfulness before what one perceives as unmerited expressions of love and kindness from God and from others? Are we self-made individuals beholden to no one, or are we blessed daily in ways we seldom perceive, cannot repay, and for which we often fail to be grateful? Here is a barometer of spiritual health: If gratitude is not synonymous with faith, neither response to God is separable from the other. Faith, like gratitude, is our response to the grace of God as we have experienced it. For those who have become aware of God’s grace, all of life is infused with a sense of gratitude, and each encounter becomes an opportunity to see and to respond in the spirit of the grateful leper.²

All that said, we still have nine lepers who can’t make the time to turn and offer heartfelt thanks to Jesus for their healing. We have trouble imagining how they could be so ungrateful, or at least so neglectful of showing their thanks. Yet, how often do we

² Culpepper, R. A. (1994–2004). The Gospel of Luke. In L. E. Keck (Ed.), *New Interpreter’s Bible* (Vol. 9, pp. 327–328). Nashville: Abingdon Press.

ourselves turn forgetful? In today's Scripture passage from Deuteronomy, Moses reminds the people that they will have to guard against their own forgetfulness or they will quickly turn ungrateful.

"Take care that you do not forget . . ."

Much of the industrialized world is post-Christian, even post-religion. Less than 5% of the French go to a church, synagogue, or mosque weekly. In England, though more than 25 million people identify themselves as members of the Church of England, only a million of them go to services weekly. Even in Italy, less than 25% attend Mass weekly. Though sizeable majorities profess belief in God and even the importance of services at key moments in life, in truth, they have forgotten nearly all that there is to remember about God and the Christian faith. All this stands in sharp contrast to the developing world, the world of disease and deprivation, where the growth of Christianity is exploding. In 1900, just 9% of Africans were Christian. Today, it is nearly half. By 2025, 50% of the world's Christians will be in Africa and Latin America.

Why has so much been forgotten in the West? A young lawyer in Lagos, Nigeria, sees it this way: "In countries where everything is very o.k., where they take care of their citizenry, people are very lethargic when it comes to religion. They are not encouraged to ask for any help. They seem to have it all." Moses said basically the same thing more than 3,000 years ago.

Today's passage from Deuteronomy is taken from Moses' final speech to the Israelites as they prepared to enter the Promised Land without him. He warns them that in this land of milk and honey it would be very easy to forget God. They would build fine homes. They would grow rich and comfortable. Being human, they would be tempted to stand on the mountaintops shouting for all to hear – "Look what I have done! Behold my accomplishments!" Moses knew how easy it would be for the Israelites to become "full of themselves," thinking "I did all this. And all by myself. I'm rich. It's all mine!"³ How were the Israelites to avoid the temptation to forget God in their affluence and achievement? By keeping God's commandments, his instructions to them. Every day and in all ways, they were to love God and to love neighbor.

A life of thanksgiving

The holiday of Thanksgiving is a great time to embrace anew the thankful hearts that ought to characterize us all year. In his book, *Prayer: finding the heart's true home*, Richard Foster writes, "Jesus was the ultimate grateful person. The signature written across his heart was the prayer 'I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth'" (Matthew 11:25). Jesus was of one heart and mind with the psalmist who wrote "I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart" (Psalm 9:1) and with Paul who wrote "I thank God for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed throughout the world" (Romans 1:8) and with the writer of Hebrews, "let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name" (13:15).

As in all things, we are called to be Christ-like. We must allow ourselves to be drawn more often into the praise of God and the joyful giving of thanks to him. Foster reminds us of Augustine's phrase, "God thirsts to be thirsted after" and writes "Our God is not made of stone . . . Like the proud mother who is thrilled to receive a wilted bouquet of dandelions from her child, so God celebrates our feeble expressions of gratitude."

Let's not pretend that even feeble expressions of thanks are easy. Living every day in a spirit of thanksgiving does not come naturally to us; there is much in life that wants to crowd out any sense of gratitude. Nonetheless, as we come again to the glories of Advent and Christmas, we can remind ourselves to be a grateful community, seeking ever to grow in our ability to see and to experience God in all his goodness.

³These phrases are from Peterson's paraphrase of the Bible, *The Message*.

Deuteronomy

Deuteronomy is one of the most important books in the Bible. It is the most-quoted book in the New Testament. Here are a few things to keep in mind when you come to Deuteronomy.

Though the book contains many laws, it is much more a book of the heart. Look for the spirit of the law, the instruction given by God to Israel. Notice that the book reads much more like a sermon than some sort of legal code.

There are several ways to outline or organize the book. The authors of the Open Bible see the book as a series of three sermons. What God has done for Israel (1:1 – 4:43), What God expects of Israel (4:44-26:19), and What God will do for Israel (27:1 – 34:12). Many scholars see the book as a covenant that elaborates on the Ten Commandments. (Compare Deuteronomy 5:6-21 with Exodus 20:1-17 and remember that Exodus is set nearly 40 years before Deuteronomy!)

In its structure and much of its language, Deuteronomy is a treaty/covenant between a king and his people. It can be compared to a standard ancient near-eastern treaty. They both have preambles, a reminder of all the things the king has done for his people, laws/regulations, blessings that come from keeping the law, and curses that will flow from breaking the laws. But, of course, Israel's covenant was not with some earthly king, but with God himself, the one true god.

The Law given by Moses was seen as a delight by the Israelites, not a burden. The Law is God's instruction to Israel on how they are to live in relationship with him. There is one God, one people, one land, one place to worship, and one law.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. The story of Jesus and the ten lepers links together faith and gratitude. Alan Culpepper asks us, "In what sense is gratitude an expression of faith? Does not gratitude follow from faith? Or is gratitude itself an expression of faith? . . . Is there any better measure of faith?" What do you think?
2. Remembering God . . . it seems so straight-forward, so easy. It is not. Sure, we might be able to say grace before meals and come to church each Sunday. But remembering God, as Moses spoke of it, meant centering one's life upon God, in all moments and in all places. I think that is what Paul means when he speaks of praying without ceasing. Paul knew that we can't spend our entire day on our knees, but he knew that for most of us, it can be hard to give God more than a passing thought during our busy days. You might begin your discussion or reflection by considering what it really means to be immersed in God, to center your life upon him. For example, it might mean seeing each person we meet as bearing the image of God – try that in the mall sometime! It might mean going into each business meeting asking yourself . . . what would God really want me to do in this meeting? You might also make a list of the major obstacles we face as we try to remember God in the "real world."
3. "Don't think to yourself, 'My own strength and abilities have produced all this prosperity for me'." Wow, that verse is a conversation stopper. I'm convinced that this is the sort of Bible verse to which we often pay lip service, but rarely let seep into our souls. I was trained in the gospel of self-reliance and achievement, as if to scream out "I am the master of my ship; darn right it is by my hand . . . who else do you think it was!?" Somehow, we have to figure out how to hang on to the goodness of hard work and accomplishment but still acknowledge that all we have is a gift from God. I bet that most of us would like to trust God more and cling less tightly to our bank accounts. We'd like to believe Jesus when he says "do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear." (Matthew 5:25). But we lack the spiritual resources to actually do so. How can we begin to wear our wealth lightly, to be more generous, and to place our security in God's hands rather than our own?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Deuteronomy 6:1-9; 7:7-11 Remember God, always knowing that what we have is his gift to us.</p>	<p>Tuesday, Psalm 30 A psalm of Thanksgiving</p>
<p>Wednesday, Psalm 105 Another psalm of thanksgiving</p>	<p>Thursday, Psalm 111 One of the great psalms of thanksgiving</p>
<p>Friday, 1 Thessalonians 1 Paul is always grateful to God for the faithfulness of the Thessalonian believers</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

