

The Significance of Thanksgiving

by the Rev. Douglas Taylor

Three times you shall keep a feast to Me in the year: You shall keep the Feast of Unleavened Bread (you shall eat unleavened bread seven days, as I commanded you, at the time appointed in the month of Abib, for in it you came out of Egypt; none shall appear before Me empty); and the Feast of Harvest, the first fruits of your labors which you have sown in the field; and the Feast of Ingathering, which is at the end of the year, when you have gathered in the fruits of your labors from the field (Exodus 23:14-16).

This law, repeated in similar words in other places in the Word, is included in the Heavenly Doctrines among those that “may serve a use if one pleases” (*Arcana Coelestia* 9349:4). In the passage where this is stated, the laws given in the book of Exodus are classified into three groups: those that must still be observed in their literal sense; those that may be observed if we wish and if a use is served by them; and those that were merely representative laws and are now set aside, since the age of representatives has passed. The laws about thanksgiving are therefore no longer mandatory or binding. We are free to observe them or not, according to the use that is seen in them. It is because there does seem to be a use in ceremonially giving thanks to the Lord that we continue to celebrate the Feast of Harvest—Thanksgiving—even in urban and industrial areas where the “harvest” is not from “the field” but takes other forms.

These laws concerning offerings and thanksgiving are a very striking instance of thanks being commanded by the Lord. They seem to be the very opposite of free-will offerings. In fact, there seems to be no place at all for any spontaneous giving, but only compelled giving.

Yet the Lord does not demand thanks for His own sake, so that He may have glory from us. How could human beings add to the Divine glory? And how can we think that the Lord of love and wisdom would wish to receive honor and glory at the hands of human beings, that He would want to make us submit and bow down before Him, just for the sake of tasting some Divine delight in our submission and gratitude? To think that the Lord commands these things for His own sake is almost blasphemous, so contrary is it to the real Divine essence.

No, the Lord does not command thanksgiving, offerings, and external worship for His own sake, but for our sake. It is so we will come into a state of humble acknowledgment of the Lord, and of our own unworthiness compared with His Divine goodness. It is so we may come into a state in which we may receive all the more fully from the Lord, and be all the more blessed. It is for our sake that the Lord commands thanksgiving, not His own.

He commands it because, from His Divine wisdom, He knows the hearts of people. He knows that it is necessary for us to begin with a rather formal giving of thanks; without this ceremonial thanksgiving, we will never advance to a spontaneous expression of genuine gratitude for all the Lord’s wonderful works to His children. He knows that we must first do from *duty* what we may later do from *delight*.

When, in obedience to the Lord's command, we pause to count our blessings, even on the natural plane alone, we find the task quite beyond us. People who believe in the Divine Providence of the Lord can be entirely over-awed when they contemplate all that the Lord has provided in the way of natural good things. We may feel like exclaiming with the psalmist: "Oh, that men would give thanks to the Lord for His goodness, and for His wonderful works to the children of men!" (Psalm 107:8). "O Lord, how manifold are Your works! In wisdom You have made them all. The earth is full of Your riches" (Psalm 104:24).

There can be no doubt in our minds that the Lord is the Creator of these natural gifts, for, we read in the Heavenly Doctrines:

Those who confirm themselves in favor of the Divine give attention to the wonders that are displayed in the production both of plants and animals. In the production of plants, how out of a little seed cast into the ground there goes forth a root, and by means of the root a stem, and branches, leaves, flowers, and fruits in succession, even to new seeds, just as if the seed knew the order of succession, or the process by which it is to renew itself. Can any reasonable person think that the sun, which is nothing but fire, has this knowledge, or that it is able to empower its heat and light to bring about these results, or is able to fashion these wonderful things in plants, and to contemplate use? Any man of elevated reason who sees and weighs these things cannot think otherwise than that they come from Him who has infinite reason, that is, from God. Those who acknowledge the Divine also see and think this, but those who do not acknowledge the Divine do not see or think this because they do not wish to (Divine Love and Wisdom 350).

The Lord, then, is the Creator of every good natural gift; indeed, He is the Sower of life itself. So we should give thanks to the Lord from a grateful heart for all these things. But we must remember that in everything the Lord does He looks to what is eternal. He never fails to see the eternal in the temporal, the infinite in the finite. All the natural good things that He gives are not meant to be ends in themselves. They are meant to serve eternal uses; they are meant to be means to eternal ends. We also have to learn from Him to see the infinite and the eternal in the finite and the temporal.

The Lord's gifts that last for ever—His spiritual provisions—are even more precious than His natural provisions (if for no other reason than that they do last forever). But, besides that, they are the ends for which the natural good things are only means. The supreme gift, of course, is the life that belongs to heaven, eternal life where happiness is enjoyed unceasingly. Above all else, we should give thanks to the Lord because He leads us into heavenly states and saves us from the hell of misery. This is why the reason given in the Word for thanksgiving: "O give thanks to the Lord, for He is good! For His mercy endures forever" (Psalm 106:1). Because His Divine love is goodness itself, He has made us; because His mercy is forever, He continually redeems us from hell and leads us to heaven. For these Divine gifts we should be profoundly grateful. For these blessings we should give thanks to the Lord.

The feasts commanded in the Word represent our conjunction with the Lord that gradually deepens as we are led by Him to a heavenly state of mind. The gathering together of the people

on appointed feast days is a picture of heavenly gatherings together or convocations. Something of heaven can be seen in such gatherings in obedience to the will of the Lord. That is why they were commanded to the Children of Israel who were a representative church.

Three feasts were commanded: the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Feast of Harvest or firstfruits, and the Feast of Ingathering. The Feast of Unleavened Bread was a reminder of the Lord's deliverance of the Children of Israel from slavery in Egypt, in particular of the time when the plague upon the first-born passed over the Israelites and did them no harm. This was also known as the Feast of the Passover. The second feast was for giving thanks for the firstfruits of the harvest, the first sign that the planting had been successful. The third feast, of ingathering, was held at "the going out" or the "end" of the year, when the harvest was completed and all the fruits of the field had been gathered in.

In the spiritual sense, referring to our rebirth or regeneration by the Lord, these three feasts represent three stages in the process by which we are brought into a heavenly state, which is a state of perpetual thanksgiving to the Lord. The Feast of Unleavened Bread (in memory of deliverance from Egypt) represents the first state, that is, deliverance from the falsities springing from evil, represented by Egypt. After we have begun to be instructed in the truths of the Word, severe conflicts arise in our minds, caused by the falsities that cling to our inherited will, which in itself is evil. We are quite content to be in slavery, or bondage, to the loves of self and the world. We are quite willing to believe only the things we see with our own eyes and nothing else. We are full of doubts and wonderings. This state continues until (in the Lord's strength) we succeed to some extent in bringing the truths of the Word into our daily lives—by sheer self-compulsion and from a sense of duty. We obey the Lord with a heavy heart because we feel we have to, not because we freely want to.

This is an arduous, undelightful state, pictured also by the later wanderings of the Children of Israel in the wilderness, when they hungered and thirsted, complained and rebelled. But, by dutiful obedience to Divine commands, there is deliverance from the ever-present falsities and doubts. We begin to have a stronger faith in the Divine truth revealed in the Word. This is the first state of regeneration, represented by the Feast of Unleavened Bread or the Passover.

The second state of regeneration is one in which we are affected by the truth as a result of making it our own. The truth moves us into action. We have delight in *doing* it. Then, doing it begins to become second nature to us. We begin to think, not just *about* the truth, but *from* it. We use the truth to fight evils—our own freely acknowledged evils. The truth is in us—fighting. And so the firstfruits of the planting are beginning to appear. The truth that affects us is being planted in our minds in such a way that it will remain there. It is implanted in the good affections of love toward the neighbor that are beginning to appear. This is represented by the Feast of Harvest, "the firstfruits of your labors," as it is called in the text.

The Heavenly Doctrines describe this second state, represented by the second annual feast, as one in which "truth is being implanted in good." The good affections come primarily from the "remains" of good received from the Lord by means of angelic influences during infancy and childhood. To these are added any moral goods, or moral virtues, that we have acquired in adolescence, and also everything good that was in our obedience from duty to the Lord's

commands. Because the truth is now affecting us more deeply, it is more deeply implanted. We begin to possess it. This stage is also meant in the Word by the process of occupying the land, which the Children of Israel achieved under Joshua, who represents “truth fighting.”

The third and final feast commanded—the Feast of Ingathering at the end of the year—represents the fullness of regeneration. Then there is a veritable harvest of good things: good affections; good will; feelings of charity expressed in a harvest of genuine good works that can properly be offered back to the Lord from whom they came. The great rejoicing that was always part of this feast was a natural expression of the spiritual and heavenly joy that comes with the completion of the stages of regeneration, when we really do acknowledge the Lord, thanking Him from the heart for the good things of regeneration. It is not that we are at all conscious that we have completed the journey to the heavenly state (that we have come into full possession of the Heavenly Canaan), rather it is just that we feel permanently thankful to the Lord. We have a true and deep acknowledgment of the persistent teaching of the Word that everything good and true comes from Him. This has become a delightful matter of belief with us—something we see and acknowledge from insight. Consequently, our whole life is ruled by charity, our words and our deeds. Love toward the neighbor shines forth in all we do and say and think and feel. It is a state of perpetual thanksgiving—one in which the opportunity to give thanks to the Lord with the mouth is eagerly embraced because there is thanksgiving in the heart also.

This is the gift to give back to the Lord—a true testification that the good of charity has indeed been received. It was to this kind of gift that the Lord referred when He commanded: “none shall appear before Me empty,” that is, without a gift. The natural fruits of the field that were offered in the ceremony of thanksgiving correspond to spiritual gifts—the reception of good affections from the Lord. And, if there is genuine thanksgiving from the heart, they represent them also.

It is manifestly true that when this third state of regeneration has been reached, the thanksgiving is complete and full and perpetual. That is why the number “three” is mentioned explicitly—because, wherever it is used in the Word, “three” signifies completeness. But we can give thanks to the Lord even if we feel that we are only in the first state of regeneration—being delivered from falsities and wandering in the wilderness of temptation. Even if, in our spiritual lives, we do not yet eat of unleavened bread, if the good we do is tainted with impurities, we may still give thanks to the Lord for whatever knowledge of the truth we have and for the deliverance from falsities that He has granted us. And let us remember, too, that the first state reigns throughout, and that there can be something of genuine thanksgiving even in the beginning.

If we have reached the Feast of Harvest or firstfruits—if the truth is now affecting us more deeply so that it is being implanted in good—our thanks to the Lord can be even more interior. For He is the Sower who goes forth to sow, and it is from His strength alone that we prepare the ground. If we are fighting from the Lord’s truth to possess the land, we may still sing songs of glad thanksgiving unto the Lord, “for His mercy is forever.”

And if we have reached the Feast of Ingathering, when the good things of charity begin to shine forth, we thank the Lord from a full heart—persistently, perpetually, and spontaneously. We know then, from within, that the Lord has been the Redeemer and Savior and Regenerator in each stage of our liberation from damnation and our regeneration or entrance into heaven.

The ceremonial giving of fruit-offerings by the Children of Israel was meant to represent this acknowledgment of the Lord from the heart, the acknowledgment that the fruits of the field, *and* the fruits of charity that they represent, have alike been given by the Lord and should be returned to Him with glad thanksgiving.

Amen.

Lessons: Exodus 23:14-19; Luke 17:11-18; *Arcana Coelestia* 9286

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Three times thou shalt keep a feast unto Me in the year. That this signifies the persistent worship of the Lord and thanksgiving on account of liberation from damnation is evident from the signification of “keeping a feast” as being the worship of the Lord from a glad mind on account of liberation from damnation (see n. 7093), and from the signification of “three times in the year” as being a full state even to the end; for “three” signifies what is full from beginning to end (n. 2788, 4495, 7715, 9198), and a “year” signifies an entire period (n. 2906, 7839, 8070), here therefore a full and complete liberation. For by “the feast of unleavened things” is signified purification from falsities; by “the feast of harvest” the implanting of truth in good; and by “the feast of in gathering” the implanting of good thence derived, thus full liberation from damnation; for when a person has been purified from falsities, and afterward brought into good by means of truths, and finally when he is in good, he is then in heaven with the Lord, and consequently is then fully liberated.

The successive steps of liberation from damnation are circumstanced like the successive steps of regeneration, because regeneration is liberation from hell and introduction into heaven by the Lord; for the person who is being regenerated is first purified from falsities, then the truths of faith are implanted with him in the good of charity, and lastly this good itself is implanted, and when this is done the person has been regenerated, and is then in heaven with the Lord. Wherefore by “the three feasts in the year” was also signified the worship of the Lord and thanksgiving on account of regeneration. As these feasts were instituted for the perpetual remembrance of these things, therefore it is said the “persistent” worship and thanksgiving, for the chief things of worship are to continually endure. The things which continually endure are those which are inscribed not only on the memory, but also on the life itself, and they are then said to reign universally with the person (n. 5949, 6159, 6571, 8853-8858, 8865).