

King of the Ages, Revelation 15:2-4

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Introduction

Once again as we treat a text in Revelation, we find ourselves in the throne room of heaven, where a multitude of people is described as being in worship. The theme keeps reappearing: Look, John, here are people who have persevered in their faith. In chapter 7, they have come out of the Great Tribulation by the blood of the lamb; in chapter 11, they have been caught up in the resurrection to which both covenants and the line of saints and prophets bear witness; in chapter 15, they have been victorious over the beast and his image and over the number of his name, to sing the song of Moses and of the Lamb. This reference shows us that they are bearing witness once again to the two covenants that show the world the will and power and grace of God. The reference to victory over the beast and its image and the number of its name, has in mind all those things described in chapter 13 about how the Devil stands behind the world system and its economy. But those things will all pass away, along with those who trusted in them. But those who persevere in their faith, will enter glory, and worship:

“Great and marvelous are your deeds, Lord God Almighty. Just and true are your ways, King of the ages.”

Let us pray: Father God, it is to you that we owe our thankfulness, for your deeds are marvelous, your ways are just, your kingdom is eternal, and that is why we can hope, and enjoy these blessings as foretastes of your much greater, divine glory. In Jesus’ name, amen.

1. Who Will Not Fear?

When Thanksgiving happens annually as a civic holiday, the element of faith can get lost in a society that is divorcing itself from its religious roots. Americans need to be cautious in our spirits about Thanksgiving and how we participate in it. First of all thank you for coming to church. This shows your heart and attitude towards God and true thanksgiving.

True thanksgiving is not like the propaganda that comes from the world: While it is good to “be thankful” as an attitude that reminds you that you are lucky enough to enjoy the world’s highest standard of living, what happens when you are not directing your thankfulness to anyone in particular? That is when the danger creeps in. For the first Thanksgivings that were celebrated in our land were by religious pilgrims living hand-to-mouth, grateful to survive an ocean-voyage and a winter. Some time later Thanksgiving were celebrated for victories in the battles of the Revolutionary War, as it was understood by the delegates to Congress and the senior officers of the Continental Army that no nation like theirs could form in such a way without God’s hand.

Now we sit on top of the world with the highest standard of living in the world. These are the very conditions in which the Beast and the False Prophet thrive, to deceive the nations and to trap them into an economic system based on greed and power.

So as we address this holiday, shall we be religious, or shall we be like many others, forgetful of where this holiday comes from and the hard-scrabble faith and impoverished lifestyles of those who originally brought it into being? To put it another way, thanksgiving cannot just be an abstract attitude, it is an expression of a relationship. Many in our nation, probably not so much those in church tonight but those for whom attending church over Thanksgiving never crosses their mind, need to begin asking the question: To whom am I thankful?

- If you are primarily thankful TO yourself and your spouse for working to earn the money to afford a holiday feast; or TO your boss for cutting the paycheck, if that TO whom you are thankful, work takes over your life.
- If you are mostly thankful TO your family for giving you a sense of belonging and identity, whether it is your kids and marriage or your siblings and parents, you have also missed the true focus. When selfhood gets tied up in the lives of others, some try to bring those others under control while others try to manage through appeasement.
- If you are thankful TO veterans and the combat dead and the government they served, then patriotism and its propaganda can take over your life.

Of course you should be thankful FOR having work and bosses that pay you, and thankful FOR your family whom you can love, and FOR men and women who serve with courage to secure the blessings of liberty, and FOR a government established by a free people to serve a free people. But if your thankfulness is directed TO work, or TO your family, or TO government, those things can become idols in that they take over in the soul that space which belongs TO God alone.

When the job demands something unethical, such as working all the time at the cost of being present for your children's lives or your spouse's needs, what spiritual ground have you to stand on to resist the pressure? When someone in your family is on a path to their own hurt and those of others, what credibility do you have to speak the love and invitation of God into their life? When the boasts of government and its propaganda white-washes all manner of corruption, violence, and legalized absurdities, where do you turn to find a deeper and enduring foundation for truth, justice, and peace?

Revelation shows us, repeatedly, that there is only one being, one Lord, who is worthy of our worship, who is worthy of our praise, who is worthy of being the focus of our thanksgiving. We can be thankful FOR many things and people. We are thankful TO God, who superintends over all of time and history and creation.

In verse 4 the heavenly choir sings, “All nations will come and worship before you.” This is going to happen, eventually it must happen, because there is only one King and one Lord who is eternal and holy. Long after Rome falls, there is heaven. Long after the Kaiser is deposed, long after the Tsar is murdered, long after the sunset on the British empire, and long after the greatness of America is only remembered as a chapter in a school textbook, there is heaven, and the one, who alone is holy, who sits on the throne, the King of the Ages.

Thanksgiving, rightly directed, is to the Lord of Heaven alone. Eventually all the people in the world are going to figure that out. Many will have sold their souls to their jobs and gotten laid off after already alienating the people closest to them; they will have been had been defined by their own family and then been betrayed or disappointed that their own love was not capable of saving them, they will have been deceived by the propaganda that their country was the master of their souls and their consciences and they ended up sharing in decisions that have done violence to others and unsettled their own consciences. All the people of the nations will see the trail of the ruin of these idols all through history, and they will affirm the truth that God alone is eternal and worthy of thanksgiving and praise.

2. Revealed

The heavenly multitude sings further, “All nations will come and worship before you, for your righteous acts have been revealed.” There is a good reason to be thankful to God alone, and that is, that all things that are truly good, that are inherently righteous in their character, that

bring redemption and joy, come from God. Those things don't really come in the shape of a turkey. The whole effort behind making a special meal and sharing it with family and friends comes from being thankful for one's family and friends. Of course the food is something to be thankful for, but in our country we are feasting all the time. To suppose that Thanksgiving is an excuse for more gluttony is really not a God-honoring thankfulness.

The things that are truly good and truly righteous are the Word of God, the faith of the heart, the fellowship of the saints, and redemptive actions that have brought salvation and justice into the world. One set of righteous acts that John has in mind in this vision, is the Exodus story in which God brought an enslaved community out of the nation of its oppressors. The community was Israel and the oppressing nation was Egypt. When they passed through the Red Sea on dry land, and Pharaoh pursued them with chariots, the sea came back on them and destroyed his army.

It is said that Moses sang a song of victory. And then Miriam took a harp and sang the chorus of that song. In verse two of tonight's text, you see that the saints in heaven have been given harps, and they are singing, like Miriam. God's righteous acts of deliverance had been revealed to Israel, and similar convulsions over the world can also be seen by believers as God's righteous acts. Just as Israel had been covered under the blood of the Passover Lamb, so the blood of Jesus Christ, the Heavenly lamb of God, protects all those in faith. Once again, the two witnesses, the two covenants, stand together.

Now John has just seen that some angels are ready to do a ritual act in heaven of turning bowls over, which will introduce plagues on the world. God had brought plagues on Egypt, and while Israel suffered from some of the early ones, they did not suffer from the later ones. In this reference John is saying that those who persevere in faith need not worry that God's wrath will

overtake them; the plagues that fall are not to the destruction of their souls, as they persevere they will enter into glory just as Israel was brought through the Red Sea.

When John sees the sea of glass, now appearing to be mixed with fire, most scholars agree that the righteousness of God experienced as wrath on unbelievers will be discernible in heaven but it will not in any way be a threat or harmful to those in heaven. What is experienced by the violent and oppressor as the waves of the sea coming back over them, is in heaven as clear and unshifting as a sheet of glass.

These are the reasons to praise. Eventually the nations will understand this for themselves, and they too will repent of the beast and the economy of greed and the propaganda of worldly power, and they will worship, bending the knee. For many people this will be an admission of defeat rather than a celebration of victory, but it will happen, and the saints and the prophets and the Community of the Two Covenants, the People of God, will be vindicated forever.

Conclusion

You are right to be thankful FOR many things, just as our Thanksgiving tree here shows us. If the leaves of the world could be counted, they would not measure up to all the blessings of God's goodness in the world. But consider this evening, and tomorrow in the midst of your preparations and your feasting, the one TO whom you are thankful. Faith is more than having a thankful attitude; thankfulness is not an abstraction, and if that is what you think it is, you are already pointing your thankfulness to the wrong things. Thankfulness is an expression of a personal relationship, and there is only one person who is worthy of our highest thanksgivings and deepest gratitude. Be thankful to God, the King of the Ages, and glorify the name of the one who alone is holy. In the name of Jesus, Amen.