

Enter His Gates with Thanksgiving

Deuteronomy 26:1-11 | Psalm 100 | Philippians 4:4-9 | John 6:25-35

DEUTERONOMY 26:1-11

¹ When you have come into the land that the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, and you possess it, and settle in it, ² you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from the land that the LORD your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for his name. ³ You shall go to the priest who is in office at that time, and say to him, 'Today I declare to the LORD your God that I have come into the land that the LORD swore to our ancestors to give us.' ⁴ When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the LORD your God, ⁵ you shall make this response before the LORD your God: 'A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. ⁶ When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labour on us, ⁷ we cried to the LORD, the God of our ancestors; the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. ⁸ The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; ⁹ and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. ¹⁰ So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O LORD, have given me.' You shall set it down before the LORD your God and bow down before the LORD your God. ¹¹ Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the LORD your God has given to you and to your house.

INTRODUCTION

A very old couple were on holiday in northern France. Among other places, they made a special visit to Omaha Beach. As they went along, quite slowly, they spotted a café. As they sat down, the wife gestured to the waitress: 'we were hoping to have some dessert.' The looked them over and noticed that the man was missing most of his right leg. He also strained forward, suggesting he might have difficulty hearing. Suspecting he might be a veteran, the waitress asked if they had been here before. The wife confirmed that her husband had fought in the Battle of Normandy and that he'd lost his leg and most of his hearing during the shelling. Without saying another word, the waitress went off to the kitchen. A few minutes later she returned with a massive tray full of every cake, and torte, and French pastry one could imagine. With a large smile on her face, she said to the man: 'Thank you for your service and for protecting freedom. The chef and I wanted to express our gratitude. Please eat whatever you like and take home the rest. Free of charge.' The man smiled and then slowly motioned to the waitress to come near and whispered to her: '*Vielen dank, das ist sehr nett.*'¹

It's been a while since I started a sermon with a joke. But this one seemed to be appropriate in that it is about gifting food in gratitude. Indeed, the Deuteronomy reading you heard is an important reading on the subject of gratitude. It can also be an awkward reading because it deals with one of those things we never should talk about, giving. In particular, it articulates expectations about tithing—which in our day, generally means giving money to the church. However, today, we are afforded the opportunity to consider it along a slightly different angle, in part because, when God begins to talk about tithing, the first thing he does is set a context

¹ This is a variation on an old joke of unknown origin.

that helps us answer the question *why*. Why should God's people give of the fruits of their labour, their earnings, back to God and in a worship context? To put it differently, why would someone contribute to the church, to the offering that we will take shortly? Why is this important? In exploring this Deuteronomy passage, I want to suggest that the answer lies within the concept of gratitude. It's not just the reason for today, the celebration of Harvest Thanksgiving, but it is what is behind our very sense of giving to God in any context. And as we explore it, I will offer a slight corrective, and then demonstrate three reasons from the passage as to why someone might tithe. But again, in the end, it all distils down to this: gratitude to God.

1. GRATITUDE IS TO GOD

First, a corrective. Often, people assume their offering is for the church. It is for the good working of the church and the church's mission to take care of those in need. And in a very practical sense, that is true. The passage itself notes this in the last verse: *"Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the LORD your God has given to you and to your house."* The offering is to be used for the Levites—that is, the temple workers—and the aliens who reside among you—that is, those without land or means to provide for themselves. But the offering is not merely for them. Rather, it is fundamentally given to God. It is primarily given to God. We see this throughout. Verse 2: *"go to the place that the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for his name."* Verse 3: *"Today I declare to the LORD your God..."* Verse 4: *"...sets it down before the altar of the LORD your God..."*

If we looked elsewhere in the Old Testament, the cycle of sacrifices in Leviticus, for example, we could see this is the case.² The LORD is mentioned 14 times in these 11 verses. The offering, while used in a practical sense, is given to the LORD. To put it differently, in the mind of the worshipper, the gift is for God. This is essential for us to understand because the church is not merely some community association. Your tithe is not your entrance fee or your dues to get the social benefits of being a part of this club. It is first and foremost a group of people who gather to worship our LORD, the God of Creation and all that therein is. And the directive here is not the maintenance of the institution, but the act of reverence and devotion to our LORD.

2. GRATITUDE IS FOR GOD'S PROVISION

Having understood that it is God for whom the offering is made, we can consider why and the three reasons that emerge from the passage. And I will be somewhat brief here.

Firstly, our gratitude should be to God for his provision of the Land. We see it there in the first verse. They have entered the land which God gave them: the Promised Land. And of course, remembering that we are concluding Creationtide today, we recall that all the land of the earth is provided by God. He is the Creator of all things. This whole earth is his. And whatever space we occupy is given by his grace. But in particular, this is the Promised Land, the land which he had been assuring his people they would possess since he first made the covenant promise to Abraham back in Genesis 12.³ It has represented a place of rest and provision from the beginning. Even while they were enslaved in Egypt, the land they were about to possess had

² Lev 1:1 – 6:7.

³ Gen 12:1-3.

been the place of hope, the hope of salvation and eternal peace and prosperity. It was not without cost, but it was the extravagant gift of God to his people.

Secondly, our gratitude should be to God for his provision of the produce of the land. This idea is captured there at the end, in verse 10: *“So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O LORD, have given me.”* The produce, the resources, the wealth of the land God gave us also comes to us because the LORD makes it so. Everything is by his provision. Anything we have is by his grace. It is not just that he promised the land, but he promised ongoing provision from the land. He did not just create, but he directs creation for the good of his people, for the provision of his people.

Thirdly, our gratitude should be to God for his salvific work. The worshipper, in this passage, is to recite not just God’s acts of provision, but recall his saving work in freeing them from the tyrannical rule of Egypt.

...the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm... he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.⁴

As Christians, we have even more cause to be grateful. For in the gospel, God saved us from far more than slavery. In the death and resurrection of Christ Jesus, God has saved us from the tyrannical rule of sin in our lives, giving us eternal life by faith. This, an eternity of life in glory, of being in the presence of God as a new creation, this is the true Promised Land to which all faithful Christians are being led. How can this not evoke a profound sense of gratitude?

CONCLUSION

There it is. We have three reasons here in this passage that show us that we ought, we must be grateful to God for his provision to us. What better reasons could we have than these three? For the LORD has given us much. Beyond the material world, he has given us salvation and life. But it is easy to lose sight of this, to focus on what we do not have or to focus on the challenges and difficulties of this world. We stress out about projects at work, when we should be grateful to God that we have jobs at all. We get annoyed by the noisy people on the airplane, when we should be grateful to God that we can fly home to Vienna from Toronto in eight hours instead of six weeks at sea. We get angry by pandemic restrictions, when we should be grateful to be alive and to have had so much more time at home. We look for more and for better instead of being happy and grateful to God—God who has given us far better than we deserve, who in the words of the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans, *“proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.”*⁵ Our offerings and our attitudes, each and every day, should be acts of worship in gratitude to the LORD for all he has done.

⁴ Deut 26:7b-9.

⁵ Rom 5:8.

Let me pray: *Yours, LORD, is the greatness, the power, the glory, the splendour, and the majesty; for everything in heaven and on earth is yours. All things come from you, and of your own do we give you. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Amen.*⁶

⁶ The Archbishop's Council 2000, *Common Worship* (London: Church House Publishing, 2000), 172. This prayer is taken, in part, from 1 Chron 29:11, 14.