

Just before dawn Paul urged them all to eat. “For the last fourteen days,” he said, “you have been in constant suspense and have gone without food—you haven’t eaten anything.”³⁴ Now I urge you to take some food. You need it to survive. Not one of you will lose a single hair from his head.”³⁵ After he said this, he took some bread and gave thanks to God in front of them all. Then he broke it and began to eat.³⁶ They were all encouraged and ate some food themselves.³⁷ Altogether there were 276 of us on board.³⁸ When they had eaten as much as they wanted, they lightened the ship by throwing the grain into the sea. (Acts 27:33-39)

When Should We Give Thanks to God?

Tomorrow we will celebrate Thanksgiving Day. Most of us will have a special meal, probably including turkey and perhaps some pumpkin pie. Some of us will watch football. Many of us will get together with family and friends. And I trust that if you are here tonight, I don’t need to remind you that Thanksgiving means first of all, giving thanks to God who has supplied all that we have. I don’t think you’d be here tonight if that wasn’t on your mind. But isn’t it a little bit sad that we need a holiday to remind us to give thanks to God? When we consider all that God does for us every day, all the blessings he gives us, it only seems right that our whole lives should be an exercise in thanksgiving. Yet, it is also true that there are specific moments in our lives when we see God’s blessing more clearly. There are also times when it’s good for our faith to make an extra effort to see God’s blessings and give thanks to him. When are those moments? Well, tonight I want to look at a specific time when St. Paul gave thanks to God and use his experience to consider that question: **when should we give thanks to God?**

I.

Paul gave thanks before a meal. We do that, too, obviously. But did you notice what he said before he gave thanks and ate? **“For the last fourteen days, you have been in constant suspense and have gone without food—you haven’t eaten anything.”** What was going on? St. Paul was on a ship. More than two years before this he had been arrested and held in Judea. As a Roman citizen, he had appealed to Caesar for judgment. So he was shipped under guard to Rome. On the way there, the ship hit a huge storm. For two weeks, it was pushed along, slammed by the wind and the waves. This was no modern ship made of iron and steel. It was a wooden ship with a sail and oars. To the 276 people on board, it seemed like only a matter of time before it would be swamped or broken up or flipped over.

How would you feel in that situation? Terrified, right? It might be hard to sit down to a meal in those circumstances. But it was precisely when these people were in terror of their lives that Paul urged them to eat a meal and he gave thanks in front of them and ate something himself. Why did he do that? Obviously, he was trying to change their mindset about the situation. What he did teaches an important practical lesson about our lives. Now, it’s rare for us to find ourselves in a storm at sea. It’s rare for our lives to truly be in danger. But how many of us have had to face serious medical issues? How many of us have been in the car when the roads were icy and we started to slide and we wondered how this was going to end? How many of us have been the victims of crime? It does happen to us. And there are a whole host of other fears that torment us. There are those parents’ fears for their children when they go off to college, when they start driving on their own, when they’re little and they get separated from you in a store. There are all the financial worries when your shop is negotiating a new contract, when business falls off, when your house winds up costing more than you anticipated. There are relationship fears and who knows what else we could add to the list.

Paul shows us by example that these are times to stop and give thanks to God. Why? First of all, because we do still have his blessings in our lives. Even if you’re in hospice and your time on this earth is coming to an end, you can still rejoice in the love of your family. Like those people on board that ship, we can obsess about life’s real fears and worries and dangers. We can stop eating and sleeping and drain our strength on those things. But stopping and remembering that God has still blessed us gives us a break from those worries. It gives us a chance to renew our physical and emotional strength.

But it does more than that. It reminds us that God keeps his promises. No matter how hard or scary this life gets, God promises that he will be with us. God promises that he will love us and turn every disaster into blessing for us. God promises that he will bring us home to heaven and, in fact, he tells us that he uses hard

times to purify our faith. How does that work? When life hurts, when life is scary, we face the temptation to turn our backs on God. The devil whispers in our ear and tells us that this just isn't fair. Why do we have to face this? Our sinful flesh rebels. If we let the devil and our sinful flesh have their way, we'll wallow in self-pity and call God a liar and turn from him altogether. But when we remember God's promises, then we cling to Jesus. That exercise of faith purges out the unbelief. It drowns the Old Man in the waters of God's love. It renews our hope and strengthens our faith because it remembers what Christ has done for us and what he swears that he will do for us.

Giving thanks is really all about remembering God's love and promises. Giving thanks is all about focusing on the gospel. No matter how terrible life is, we can give thanks that our Lord loved us so much that he came down here and he endured a life that was just as terrible. He suffered all that sin does to us. Now, that doesn't mean he had every disease or suffered every identical hurt that we do. He never had cancer. He never got into a car accident. He never lost a job. But Jesus experienced physical pain when he was tortured and killed. He experienced the hardships of being poor and slandered. Jesus suffered all the kinds of things that sin does to us so that he can set us free from all those things.

Sometimes the things we fear have to do with our own sins. What would happen if people really knew about me? What will God say when he finally reviews my life and my sins in heaven? God will say that we were perfect. God will say that we are forgiven. God will say that Jesus has taken our place and paid for our sins and now they are gone forever. So he will give us a new and perfect life with him. Jesus was perfect in our place and he died and paid for our sins so that we can have peace from the torments of our conscience.

In all those situations and every other one that you can think of, God still loves you. God still blesses you. God still promises to give the strength you need to endure the things he calls you to bear and he promises to protect you from the things you couldn't stand. God still promises to bring you home to heaven, which is your greatest good. So he promises that everything that he brings into your life is part of his work to bring you home, even the hard and scary things. So **when should we give thanks to God? When life is scary!**

II.

In a very tight situation, St. Paul encouraged people with God's promises and with his example of thanksgiving. But he wasn't only interested in their mood. He was also preparing them to do things they needed to do. You see, God had promised that none of them would die. But they were in a storm at sea. Even though their survival depended on what God was about to do, there were still things they could and should do. They all ate and were encouraged and then they undertook basic first century seamanship. They threw what was left of their food into the sea to lighten the ship and they made ready for whatever God had planned. So **when should we give thanks to God? When we roll up our sleeves to do his work.**

Now, these men were not missionaries. But they still had duties to attend to. You and I are missionaries. The whole Christian Church is called to share the gospel personally in our lives and through our support of missionaries throughout the world. Fear paralyzes us. But giving thanks to God for all that he has done for us in Christ encourages us to do the work he calls us to do. At the same time, God has given all of us – even those of us who work full time in the church – many other responsibilities. God tells us all to work to support our families. He even says, "He who will not work, neither shall he eat." God tells us parents to care for our children, to discipline them in love, to teach them to know their Savior and to live useful and self-controlled lives in this world. God tells us to do all that we do in a way that gives glory to him, even when we eat and drink. So certainly, the way we take care of our property and perform our jobs is part of what he is telling us to do.

Whenever we prepare to do the things God calls us to do, at home or at work or at church, thanksgiving is in order. We give thanks to God that he has given us family and friends, jobs and homes, a congregation and his word. We give thanks to him that he has called us to do useful work in this world. It is a joy and a privilege to parent our children – even though we all know there are days when it's hard to think of it that way. We even give thanks when he calls to pass through hard times and challenges, because in love he is molding our faith.

That thanksgiving brings spiritual renewal – but not because our effort at doing it makes us better. It brings spiritual renewal because it reminds us of God and his love. His greatest act of love was to send his Son into this world to save us from all that sin does to us here and to give that new and better life that's coming. The truth is, we haven't even seen all that God is going to do for us yet. We can't imagine the new world that's coming, a world without pain or fear, a world without hatred or violence, a world without sin or unbelief, and so

a world without illness or old age or death. That gift is something we can only dream of. Yet it is ours in Christ. When we contemplate that gift and when we give thanks for it, we are encouraged to live a life of thanksgiving to God.

The truth is, my friends, our new life is one of the best ways that we can say thank you to God. It begins by coming here to hear about his love. That is our first duty – and that's all about God loving us and giving to us. That new life shows itself in service to our families, in care for elderly parents and small children, in guidance and counsel and support for each other, especially for our spouse. That new life builds up our family of faith and joins into the work God has given us here to do. That new life reaches out into the world, through faithful work and being good neighbors and also through speaking the good news about Jesus and supporting our congregation and our synod with our prayers and our offerings. All those things say thank you to God. They all come from knowing what he has done for us.

Tomorrow is a wonderful holiday. I know that you will all keep God and his love at the heart of your celebration. Remember not to wait for Thanksgiving to give thanks. Remember your Savior's constant love for you and be constant in thanking him, with your lives and your lips. Amen.