



FOCUS ON

faith

Essays by Curtis Shelburne

Series 6, Volume 1

THE CHRISTIAN
Appeal

Preface



Curtis Shelburne

“Iwould maintain,” wrote G. K. Chesterton, “that thanks are the highest form of thought, and that gratitude is happiness doubled by wonder.” In fact, “think” and “thank” spring from the same root word and, evidently, the same root Source. And giving thanks? What a “wonder-full” way to be happier people! In this issue, Managing Editor Curtis Shelburne encourages us to give thanks as we “Focus on Faith.”

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“We ought always to thank God for you, friends, ... because your faith is growing more and more...”

Second Thessalonians
Chapter 1

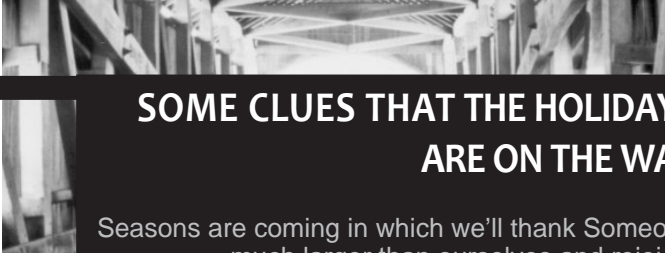


Dear Lord,
Increase our
faith as we walk
with you, and
may the sweet
fruit of gratitude
and hope abound
in our lives.”

Amen



Curtis Shelburne



SOME CLUES THAT THE HOLIDAYS ARE ON THE WAY

Seasons are coming in which we'll thank Someone
much larger than ourselves and rejoice!

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Well, it's official! The holidays are on the way. The calendar says so, of course, but other clues abound.

I just spent a day singing Christmas songs for folks at a great Christmas craft bazaar. I've often fussed about "rushing the season" and worried that Halloween goblins and Thanksgiving turkeys are increasingly at risk of being run down by out of control and out of season Christmas sleighs, but a Christmas bazaar in early November is not rushing the season; it's right on time.

So I got a chance to tune up, sing "Have Yourself a Merry Little Thanksgiving" (just kidding), and get myself ready for the soon-to-come prime time Yuletide crooning. Fun! (I could only, that early, bring myself to sing "Christmas Must Be Tonight" once, but I'll be singing it with gusto a good many days before it becomes literal!)

You don't need a calendar to see leaves turning. It seems to me that our area foliage has never been more deeply crimson and glittery gold. Do your leaf-looking early in the afternoon, though. Daylight Saving Time is gone again, and it'll be getting dark ten minutes or so after lunch. (Still kidding, but DST's demise is indeed another clue.)

Ah, and here's a clue. The toughest flowers of all have arrived. When other plants retreat, seek shelter, and hide in the greenhouse, here come the pansies in full bloom, daring the frost and snow.

Not much fun, but a clue nonetheless . . . flies are relentlessly

trying to become houseflies indeed. They can't freeze fast enough to suit me, but the soon-to-be-deadsters are mounting a full-on autumn assault.

Yes, but the best clue of all at our house is that the candles have been banished from the fireplace, and we've just had the first fire of the season. I love it! I like living in an area and at an altitude where fireplaces are much more than decorative. I know that in lots of homes, the fireplace and the TV are battling for "focal point" status. My vote is firmly cast for the former, and it's one of my favorite features of this time of year. It's burning now! Big clue!

Along that line, my wife and I are like most couples thermostatically speaking—wired differently. She likes thin bed covers and a fast-moving ceiling fan; I like cover that's six inches thick and right up to my nose, the better to help me seek refuge from the ever-present fan. I'll wait another month (for an ice storm and/or snow) before my seasonal plea for the down comforter has any chance for a fair hearing. But, the annual comforter kerfuffle notwithstanding, I take comfort in the fact that life has a way of balancing out. She can turn on the fan; I can build a fire.

All of this—thermostatic skirmishes and all—is as predictable as the seasons themselves.

Calendars are fine. But I like these additional clues that, right around the chronological corner, seasons are coming in which we'll thank Someone larger than our turkey-gorged selves and rejoice that a Heaven-filled manger proclaims that love and hope are always in season.





CHRISTIANS ARE CALLED TO BE THE “SALT OF THE EARTH”

Jesus' metaphor says a lot about the kind of people Christ's followers are to be.

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“**You are the salt** of the earth,” Jesus once said to his disciples.

A German theologian named Helmut Thielicke makes an important point regarding Christ's words when he notes that Jesus did not say, “You should be the salt of the earth.”

No, Christ said, “You are the salt of the earth.” Jesus is calling his disciples, Thielicke says, to become in real life what he has already proclaimed them by his power to be.

Jesus knew quite well what his disciples were by themselves. They were inconspicuous “nobodies” by the world's standards. Peasants, fishermen, rabble-rousers. They were “insignificant” people, a miserable little crowd. Only Jesus knew how miserable. He knew better than they where they would falter and fail, how they would sleep when they should have been watching, how they would deny when they should have been confessing.

Christ knew that the Twelve themselves would be fussing at the holiest meal they would ever eat with their Lord, and he would be the only one who would stoop to serve. He knew that Peter would whip out a sword to defend him one moment and whip out a tongue to deny him in the next. He knew that they would scatter like frightened quail when he needed them most.

Those early disciples were, Thielicke points out, a wretched little troop. They looked an awful lot like his modern-day disciples, when you think about it. But Jesus looked at them knowing full well who

they were and what they would do, and he proclaimed them to be the salt and the light of the world. Just like he does us.

Obviously, the power to become what he had called them to be lay not in them, but in their Lord. The greatness wasn't in them; it was in their Savior. What they had, Thielicke writes, was a “borrowed greatness, but it was greatness.” And so those disciples of Christ became what their Lord had called them to be.

In affairs of state, in their homes, in prisons, even in the Roman Coliseum, all over the known world, they spread salt, sometimes the salt of their own blood, but they seasoned the whole world.

Today we still taste their influence. We still see traces of the reflected light they shared. They became what they were called to be. And so must we today if we wear Christ's name.

Salt and light. Simple things. But they say a lot about the kind of people Christ's followers are to be and the kind of lives they are to lead in God's world.



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HAVE A WONDERFUL THANKSGIVING!

Even when unpleasant frustrations pile high,
God's blessings are piled much higher.

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Generally speaking, even though I really enjoy my daily work, I enjoy holidays a great deal. I like special times when most folks take a much-needed day or two off to enjoy each other, eat too much, and goof off a bit. Taking a little time off on occasion, holidays included, almost always helps us be worth more when we're back on the job. Most holidays also remind us in one way or another that our relationships with the people we love are more important than the work we do to make a living, and that the fellow was right who remarked that he'd never seen a tombstone with this epitaph: I WISH I'D SPENT MORE TIME AT THE OFFICE.

As holidays go, among my very favorite is Thanksgiving. It's such a fine holiday based on such a great and noble principle! The whole idea behind giving thanks makes this holiday filled with gratitude marvelously immune to the crass commercialization attacking the great holiday that follows it—unless, I suppose, you happen to be a turkey merchant or cranberry pusher. So I particularly like Thanksgiving— which is why it grieves me that I seem to be allergic to it.

I really don't mean to be such a turkey that I start griping right here in the midst of a column about Thanksgiving. But it just seems to be a fact that too many years at about this time, I end up with a world class cold. Then, we naturally do what most people do at Thanksgiving—stuff not just a turkey but stuff a house full

of four times as many folks as the Surgeon General and the fire codes say is healthy. It's like trying to cram a full maternity ward into a Volkswagen bug and keep everyone comfortable all through their labor. When we do that, I end up camped out in a corner like Typhoid Mary, sniffing and sneezing, tossing on a blow-up bed, buried under spent Kleenex, zombied with antihistamine, shooting up nose spray to stave off suffocation, and hoping just to expire quietly. I confess that the whole mucus-swamped and terminally congested situation sometimes stretches the bonds of gracious gratitude just a tad.

Yes, but we're enjoined by Scripture to "give thanks in all circumstances."

I believe that. I aspire to that. I'm not there yet, but I'm working on it. I really am.

Yes, I'm presently germ-ridden and lit up red-nosed like Rudolph loaded with a double dose of Nyquil. But the family still seems to want me around for some reason. The germs will soon be vanquished. And one thing piled higher than my Kleenex right now is the pile of blessings with which God has absolutely filled my life.

Yours, too, I'll bet.

So, happy [SNIFF!], Thanksgiving!



THINKING SHOULD ISSUE IN THANKSGIVING

As the blessings from God's hand keep on coming, every day is a good day for gratitude.

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In a recent issue of *Leadership* journal, Chris T. Zwingelberg observes that though everyone is familiar with Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes and his amazingly keen powers of observation, few of us are aware of Holmes' belief that deduction and observation are even more necessary in faith and religion than they are in detective work.

In Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Adventure of the Naval Treaty*, Doyle pictures his famous sleuth studying a simple rose. Holmes' famous sidekick Watson observes, "He walked past the couch to an open window and held up the drooping stalk of a moss rose, looking down at the dainty blend of crimson and green. It was a new phase of his character to me, for I had never before seen him show any interest in natural objects.

"There is nothing in which deduction is so necessary as in religion," said he, leaning with his back against the shutters . . .

'Our highest assurance of the goodness of Providence seems to me to rest in the flowers. All other things, our powers, our desires, our food, are really necessary for our existence in the first instance. But this rose is an extra. Its smell and its color are an embellishment of life, not a condition of it. It is only goodness which gives extras, and so I say again that we have much to hope from the flowers.'

Think about it. (By the way, as already mentioned in our issue preface, the root word from which "thanksgiving" comes is also the root for "think." To really think is to be truly thankful.)

God has absolutely showered us with extras. With his brush God has painted a world dripping with color when, for most things, a few shades of gray would do. He has given us the ability to enjoy an astonishing variety of tastes. He has populated our lives with wonderfully interesting people not even the most creative author could have envisioned. (We tend to be the dullards who dislike variety and difference; God absolutely exults in them!)

Thanksgiving is approaching and will soon be over, but as the "extras" keep right on coming from the hand of God, every day is a good day for gratitude.



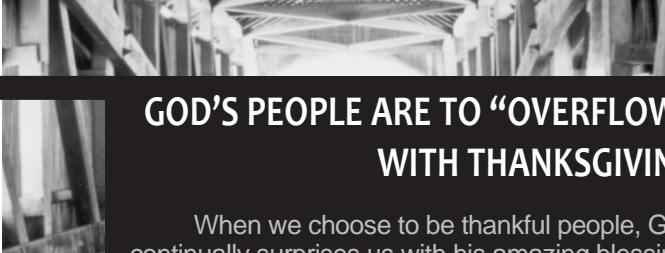
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GOD'S PEOPLE ARE TO "OVERFLOW" WITH THANKSGIVING

When we choose to be thankful people, God continually surprises us with his amazing blessing.

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Sometimes we just make things too hard.

I was listening to one of Garrison Keillor's "News from Lake Wobegon" stories one day as he was talking about the deer hunting season that had just closed up in (fictitious) Lake Wobegon right before Thanksgiving.

Keillor painted a word picture (which I've embellished a bit) of the locals watching as city folks came up in droves in their high dollar Hummers and SUVs. The city guys flocking over to the Chatterbox Cafe for Dorothy's coffee (any way you want it as long as it's black and doesn't end in é—as in latté or brevé) and a chance to retell last year's hunting tales, were armed with brand new rifles with electronic scopes. They had their faces painted black, anti-scent sprayed all over their skin and the "camo" clothing engulfing their bodies, a dozen assorted deer calls stuck in their pockets along with their GPS devices, and you knew they'd just been tracking deer because of the tell-tale pieces of bark still stuck behind their ears from the tree branches they'd been wearing on top of their hats. If you walked in the café door and hollered, "Hey, Bubba!" half the guys in the restaurant would break their necks, even though these guys might be computer programmers or investment financiers in their day jobs. They went up to Lake Wobegon both to bag a deer and to snag the unique excitement that buying meat at \$200 per pound gives.

But the local guys who can go out and get a deer pretty much whenever they want one? Keillor says they drive out and park their old pickups, set up purple and lilac recliners, smoke cigars, play cards, tell jokes (often about city boys who dress like Rambo and spend \$200 per pound for meat) and "ever so often a deer comes along and they shoot him."

I'll leave you to guess whose deer-bagging average is better.

Sometimes we just make things too hard.

Like giving thanks.

I'll admit it—some biblical commands in that regard are a bit daunting. Giving thanks "in all circumstances" is a pretty tall order. I'm still working on "most"—with somewhat modest results. "In everything give thanks"? Well, ditto.

I'm afraid the witness of the church and Christian experience is unanimous: we don't get to pick just the easy commands to try to obey. But the "giving thanks" injunction I'm focusing on this week, also from St. Paul's pen, is this one: "overflow with thanksgiving."

In my experience, "overflowing" usually holds a significant element of surprise. I'm thinking of "overflowing" sorts of experiences after eating too much Halloween candy as a child. Or too much paper down the porcelain. Or forgetting to turn off the water while filling the baptistry. Nobody plans those things; they surprise you—negatively.

Ah, but "overflowing" with thanksgiving is a great experience! When we choose to be grateful people, God surprises us by opening our eyes over and over again to the bottomless depth of his goodness and grace, and the countless reasons, large and small, we have to be thankful.





THANKSGIVING CAN BE A WONDERFUL TIME

We focus on the bounty and beauty, the love
and joy, that come from our loving God.

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Everybody I know, except turkeys (take that any way you wish), likes Thanksgiving! What's not to like?

I'm sure there are people who are utterly alone for whom Thanksgiving is a difficult time. If, by the way, there was no other reason to be part of a church family, and I think there are many, the need for human companionship is itself a pretty good one! Even a person who is not at all sure about the claims of Christianity, but who doesn't want to be lonely and alone, would do well to attend a church where an honest and unpretentious doubter would at least be made to feel cared for and loved. Thank God, there are many such churches!

Those who have to be at work on Thanksgiving may find it more difficult than most of us to enjoy the day as it was intended.

Those who are grieving over the loss of loved ones or weeping over the death of a marriage, those who have chosen to nurse a bitter spirit rather than to nurture their relationships, those who are dealing with deep depression and hurt, those in the midst of caring for loved ones who are seriously ill, I am sure may find Thanksgiving difficult.

But for most of us, Thanksgiving is a great time! It reminds us, even in the midst of some pretty difficult times, that we have much, much indeed, for which to be thankful to the Giver of all good gifts.

Ah, but what about those who don't acknowledge the beneficence or even the existence of the Giver?

Understand, I don't mean to be harsh. I have known some fine

people who were skeptics, honest agnostics who, as the term implies, were truly searching and simply didn't know what to believe. (Most atheists, on the other hand, have an axe to grind and some reason they can't afford for God to exist.) For such people, Thanksgiving must be a bit of a strange time. As author Cornelius Platinga observes, "It must be an odd feeling to be thankful to no one in particular."

Though the holiday is not, of course, one that comes from the ancient Christian calendar, it is uniquely and deeply rooted in faith. Faith that this world is no accident. (I don't have enough faith, if you know what I mean, to believe otherwise!) Faith that men and women are created in the image of a personal and loving God. Faith that all of the bounty and beauty, the love and joy, that fill our lives come from Someone who is the Wellspring, the Source.

Bible scholar A. W. Tozer put it this way: "Gratitude is an offering precious in the sight of God, and it is one that the poorest of us can make and not be poorer but richer for having made it."

Let's give thanks!



Past Issues—Free!

We are about to downsize our overflowing stock of past issues of *The Christian Appeal*. Recently we sent bound copies of more than fifty years to several key historical collections. But now we need to clear out our storage area. The issues for decades past will soon be available only digitally on our website. Between now and the end of the year, we will send any available past issues in any quantity desired to anyone who requests them. Order them via e-mail (geneshel@aol.com) or by snail-mail at 2310 Anna Street, Amarillo, TX 79106.



“PEACE, BE STILL!” AND THE SOONER THE BETTER

One day our Lord will banish forever every wind of pain.

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I wish the wind would let up. I don't like it.

I can deal fairly well with hot or cold, rain or shine, and just about as many varieties of weather as you care to mention. (Okay, I admit that I don't care for swamp weather: 90-plus degrees and 90-plus humidity. Given the choice, I'd much prefer a blizzard.)

But, generally speaking, you can usually find a way to cool down or warm up. I'm almost always thankful for rain, and I absolutely love snow. Nothing is more beautiful than a blanket of white, especially if you're looking at it through a window and sitting in your recliner by the fireplace drinking coffee and reading a good book. The only way that picture could get better is if you have a grandchild or two in your lap.

But wind's a different deal. Whether it's being produced by La Niña, El Niño, or butterfly wings in Canada, I don't care. I just don't like it. The less we have of it, the better.

I admit that my opinion is colored. When my wife and I spent some days in East Texas a few springs ago, it was a bit windy. But I learned something. I discovered that wind that is not brown is much less objectionable than wind that *is* brown, gritty, and completely annoying. I guess it hadn't occurred to me that wind could actually blow and not move a good bit of acreage around with it. Yes, indeed, clear wind is better than brown wind.

But no wind is best of all.

By the way, was there wind in the Garden of Eden before the human tenants besmirched Paradise? I doubt it. Cool, gentle breezes, yes. Wind and dust storms, no.

I don't need or much appreciate the wind's loud and obnoxious in-your-face reminder that we live in a fallen, windswept world, a world often oppressed by gale-force wind-waves of suffering and heartache, trouble and trial. People get hurt here, and I'm plenty aware of that fact without needing to watch West Texas blow by my window.

As I write, it's a couple of days before Thanksgiving. I'm sitting out in my shed, man-cave, sermon-factory. I've got my computer in my lap, and I'm listening to the wind howl. I'd not be surprised to see small neighborhood pets flying past the window. Less wind would surely make it seem a lot more “Thanksgiving-y.”

But then I remember H. W. Westermayer's comment that “the pilgrims made seven times more graves than huts . . . nevertheless, set aside a day of thanksgiving.”

And I remember the Apostle Paul's always-challenging words: “Give thanks in all circumstances.”

I'm working on it.

Still, one of my favorite pictures of the Lord is when he stood in that boat on wind-swept Galilee and calmly told the wind to quieten up and shut down. We have it on good authority—Christ's!—that one day he'll do it again, and every wind of pain will be forever stilled. That hope is itself a great reason to give thanks.





TWO WORDS MAKE ALL THE DIFFERENCE

When we simply say “thank you,” we become more like
the God who fills our lives with blessings.

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No one has to convince me of the power of words.

So why am I so often surprised by the power of the two little words, “thank you,” as they lift the corners of my mouth and make my heart soar?

It was 1992 when a good-hearted fellow named Jerry Frear was visiting with some friends at church about how they might be of some help and encouragement to their preacher. Groundhog Day was approaching and, moving just a tad on up the phylogenetic scale, he reasoned that a special day to encourage pastors might be an idea that could catch on. Down the line, October was proclaimed as Clergy Appreciation Month, with the second Sunday of October as Clergy Appreciation Day.

The online calendar I just browsed through didn’t have it listed, though it did have Save the Eagles Day, Amelia Earhart Day (on my birthday!), Patriots’ Day, National Safe Boating Week, and Paul Bunyan Day. And though much slandered these days, Columbus still gets his day in most of our land.

It occurs to me that if they would just wait a bit longer and move Clergy Appreciation Day to sometime in November, churches like ours with turkeys as pastors could save time and kill two birds with one stone.

Seriously, I’ve generally felt very much appreciated, no special day required, which is a major reason I’ve been in the same pulpit for

almost 35 years, rather than three, which I’m told is now the national average pastorate (for a number of reasons, almost none of them good). Two cards I got back in October are still on my desk: “Thank You, Pastor” and “Thanking God for You,” they say. They make me very thankful indeed for the people behind those cards and for all the sweet people in a little church large in love.

Two words make such a difference in all our lives.

Thank you.

When we say those words, we become more like our God who makes sunrises and sunsets and bids the morning stars to sing. He fills the birds with songs and suffuses the streams with sparkling light. They thank and glorify him by beautifully fulfilling the purpose for which they were created.

And consider the breathtakingly divine humility of the Creator. Our God, who need never say “thank you” to anyone, says in a thousand ways to the children to whom he has given life and breath and a million blessings, “Thank you for loving me. It’s the one real gift you can give to the Father who loves you so deeply.”

Imagine! A God who says “thank you.” God grant that we become more like him each day as we choose to live in the beautiful glow of those two words each moment of our lives.

G. K. Chesterton gives me some perspective when he says, “You should not look a gift universe in the mouth.”

True, but if we look around not as critics but as deeply loved children, we’ll find more than ample reason to say to our Creator, “Thank you!”



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—by—

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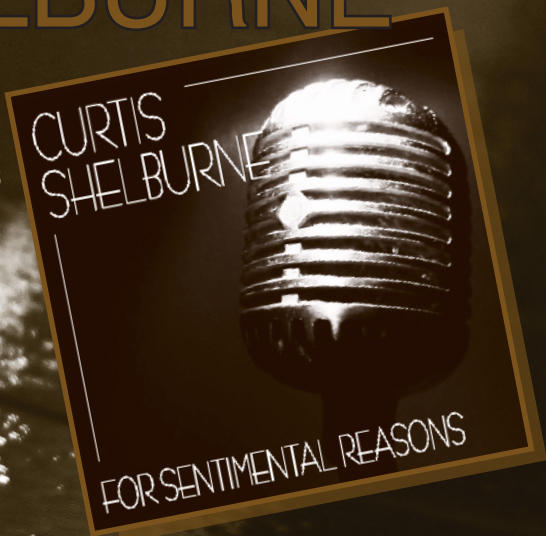
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