

A Day of Thanksgiving

by: Ronald L. Dart

As we approach Thanksgiving Day and we look forward to family and friends, good food, and good football, it might be a good time to ask, not why we do this, but why we are able to do it. How is it that we have so much to be thankful for as a people? It is all too easy to gripe and complain, but we really have it pretty good over all. Why is this the richest country ever, while other nations with great resources stumble around in the dark?

George Washington

Here are a couple of things to consider. First is the proclamation by George Washington in 1789. He actually instituted a single day of thanksgiving. This isn't where the national tradition came from, although it has roots here. This is what President George Washington had to say in 1789: "Whereas it is the duty of all Nations to acknowledge the providence of Almighty God, to obey his will, to be grateful for his benefits, and humbly to implore his protection and favor—and whereas both Houses of Congress have by their joint Committee requested me to recommend to the People of the United States a day of public thanksgiving and prayer to be observed by acknowledging with grateful hearts the many signal favors of Almighty God especially by affording them an opportunity peaceably to establish a form of government for their safety and happiness."

That's just the beginning of this striking document, and one wonders at the reference of Almighty God to a day, not merely of thanksgiving and prayer, but of public thanksgiving and prayer acknowledging with grateful hearts the many and signal favors of Almighty God. Washington continued, "Now therefore I do recommend and assign Thursday the 26th day of November next to be devoted by the People of these States to the service of that great and glorious Being, who is the beneficent Author of all the good that was, that is, or that will be— That we may then all unite in rendering unto him our sincere and humble thanks—for his kind care and protection of the People of this Country previous to their becoming a Nation—for the signal and manifold mercies, and the favorable interpositions of his Providence which we experienced in the course and conclusion of the late war—for the great degree of tranquility, union, and plenty, which we have since enjoyed—for the peaceable and rational manner, in which we have been enabled to establish constitutions of government for our safety and happiness, and particularly the national One now lately instituted—for the civil and religious liberty with which we are blessed; and the means we have of acquiring and diffusing useful knowledge; and in general for all the great and various favors which He hath been pleased to confer upon us."

Looking back from the 21st century, it's an astonishing document. But there was no ACLU in 1789, and the founders of this country knew, and knew well, that there is a God in heaven who should and must be acknowledged. There was no idea of the political correctness which has come on the scene today. They were not sectarian in their beliefs, or if they were, they certainly kept it to themselves. Washington was representative of the founding fathers of this country and, most likely, of the citizenry of the country at that time.

Apostle Paul

Now consider the obverse. It's a letter written by the Apostle Paul to the Christians in Rome late in the first century. "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness; Because that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath showed it unto them. For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse: Because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened. (Romans 1:18-21). Did you notice the elements of this? They knew God, they did not glorify him as God, and they were not thankful. These preconditions led directly to this result: "they became vain in their imaginations and their foolish heart was darkened. That phrase should make your blood run cold.

King Nebuchadnezzar

Here's an example of precisely what this meant and how it worked. There was a famous king in the Bible named Nebuchadnezzar. He took Jerusalem captive, and took Daniel, Ezekiel, and all the children of Israel captive into Babylon. It comes as a little bit of a surprise that this man, Nebuchadnezzar, wrote one of the chapters in the Bible. It is the fourth chapter of the Book of Daniel. "Nebuchadnezzar the king, unto all people, nations, and languages, that dwell in all the earth; Peace be multiplied unto you. Now there's something very strange about this when you consider this chapter was written by Nebuchadnezzar, not by Daniel. Moreover, it was not written in Hebrew as was the rest of the Old Testament. It was written in Chaldean. You should ask yourself, why is this here and why is it here this way? The answer is, it's testimony. It was a fundamental principle of biblical law to have two or three witnesses in order to be believed. Daniel was only one witness. Nebuchadnezzar was another. Nebuchadnezzar wrote down his testimony, Daniel included it in his book, and so there were two witnesses to what took place.

In Daniel 4:2-6, Nebuchadnezzar writes, I thought it good to show the signs and wonders that the high God hath wrought toward me. How great are his signs! and how mighty are his wonders! his kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and his dominion is from generation to generation. I Nebuchadnezzar was at rest in mine house, and flourishing in my palace: I saw a dream which made me afraid, and the thoughts upon my bed and the visions of my head troubled me. Therefore made I a decree to bring in all the wise men of Babylon before me,

that they might make known unto me the interpretation of the dream. They paraded in the magicians, the astrologers, the Chaldeans, the soothsayers, and Nebuchadnezzar told them the dream, but not one of them would give him an interpretation of the dream. Either they didn't know, or they were afraid to say what it suggested to them. "But at the last Daniel came in before me, Nebuchadnezzar writes, "whose name was Belteshazzar, according to the name of my god, and in whom is the spirit of the holy gods: and before him I told the dream, saying, O Belteshazzar, master of the magicians, because I know that the spirit of the holy gods is in thee, and no secret troubleth thee, tell me the visions of my dream that I have seen, and the interpretation thereof."

At this stage, this fellow is still a rank pagan. He believes that Daniel's God is the high God, but he's a long way from accepting him as the only God. To him, Daniel is a master magician. Daniel's God simply outranks the other gods in his mind. He said, "Thus were the visions of mine head in my bed; I saw, and behold, a tree in the midst of the earth, and the height thereof was great. The tree grew, and was strong, and the height thereof reached unto heaven, and the sight thereof to the end of all the earth." It's a dream—anything is possible in a dream—and he's telling this to a great tree that is so tall you can see it anywhere in the world. The leaves thereof were fair, and the fruit thereof much, and in it was meat for all: the beasts of the field had shadow under it, and the fowls of the heaven dwelt in the boughs thereof, and all flesh was fed of it" (Daniel 4:12).

Note the comprehensive nature of this tree, food and shelter for everyone. What's interesting about this is that Nebuchadnezzar was the first of the great kings to dominate the world, and to dominate it, for the most part, to the world's betterment. Because of what these men did, he brought in a kind of Pax Babylonia. Later in history we become familiar with the term Pax Romana which, basically, was that period of time in which the world was at peace under Roman domination.

A gentleman named John Glubb, who wrote *A Short History of the Arab People*, made the comment that the Arab peoples have never been united at any time in their history, except briefly under force of arms. Basically, what he's saying is that the world is full of evil influences and it takes a strong ruler to keep it under control. So, Babylon had brought about a kind of peace in the world. They were protecting everyone so commerce could go on, agriculture could be developed, people could be fed, and people could live in reasonable happiness. In some ways, it harkens back to George Washington's declaration about the benefits that we enjoy right here in the United States.

Nebuchadnezzar continued, "I saw in the visions of my head upon my bed, and, behold, a watcher and an holy one came down from heaven; He cried aloud, and said thus, Hew down the tree, and cut off his branches, shake off his leaves, and scatter his fruit: let the beasts get away from under it, and the fowls from his branches:" There's little doubt in my mind that, as he watched this take place, somewhere in the back of his mind Nebuchadnezzar feared for himself. And whereas the king saw a watcher and an holy one coming down from heaven, and saying, Hew the tree down, and destroy it; yet leave the stump of the roots thereof in the earth, even with a band of iron and brass, in the tender grass of the field; and let it be wet with the dew of heaven, and let his portion be with the beasts of the field, till seven times

pass over him" Daniel 4:13-16). What they're doing is taking away Nebuchadnezzar's mind for seven years. "This matter is by the decree of the watchers, and the demand by the word of the holy ones: to the intent that the living may know that the most High ruleth in the kingdom of men, and giveth it to whomsoever he will, and setteth up over it the basest of men." What a statement: "This matter is by the decree of the watchers, and the demand by the word of the holy ones: to the intent that the living may know that the most High ruleth in the kingdom of men." It's intriguing that Nebuchadnezzar used the Chaldean word for watchers because, obviously, he was describing a heavenly messenger, someone we would call an angel. In fact, if this had been written in Greek, they probably would have used the Greek word for angel. Nebuchadnezzar summarized, "This dream I king Nebuchadnezzar have seen. Now thou, O Belteshazzar, declare the interpretation thereof, forasmuch as all the wise men of my kingdom are not able to make known unto me the interpretation: but thou art able; for the spirit of the holy gods is in thee."

Daniel

Daniel was stunned and he sat and stared into space for an hour. His thoughts troubled him. Daniel must have seen immediately what this meant and it put him in shock, because it meant that the entire world was going to be turned upside down for seven years. The leadership would be gone, and the attendant consequences would follow. The king said, "Belteshazzar, let not the dream, or the interpretation thereof, trouble thee. Belteshazzar answered and said, My lord, the dream be to them that hate thee, and the interpretation thereof to thine enemies. The tree that thou sawest, which grew, and was strong, whose height reached unto the heaven, and the sight thereof to all the earth; Whose leaves were fair, and the fruit thereof much, and in it was meat for all; under which the beasts of the field dwelt, and upon whose branches the fowls of the heaven had their habitation: It is thou, O king, that art grown and become strong: for thy greatness is grown, and reacheth unto heaven, and thy dominion to the end of the earth" (Daniel 4:19-22). Indeed, evil can only be subdued by great power and God had granted this great power to King Nebuchadnezzar. "And whereas the king saw a watcher and an holy one coming down from heaven, and saying, Hew the tree down, and destroy it; yet leave the stump of the roots thereof in the earth, even with a band of iron and brass, in the tender grass of the field; and let it be wet with the dew of heaven, and let his portion be with the beasts of the field, till. . ." Till? till thou know that the most High ruleth in the kingdom of men, and giveth it to whomsoever He will" (Daniel 4:23-25). Daniel sidestepped the expression "the basest of men" because, after all, he was talking to the man face to face, but it was in the original and Nebuchadnezzar himself mentions it. You must come to understand, God's in charge. He puts man up and takes man down, and he places over the kingdoms of the earth even the basest of men. "And whereas they commanded to leave the stump of the tree roots; thy kingdom shall be sure unto thee, after. . ." There's another qualifying word—after, after that thou shalt have known that the heavens do rule." What Daniel said next is truly fascinating and, since it was written by Nebuchadnezzar and included by Daniel, we have our two witnesses. He said, "Wherefore, O king, let my counsel be acceptable unto thee, and break off thy sins by righteousness, and thine iniquities by showing mercy to the poor; if it may be a lengthening

of thy tranquility" (Daniel 4:26-27). It's fascinating that it was a call to repentance and the repentance was not merely a state of mind. It required acts of righteousness and active mercy to the poor. These things were required of this man for the lengthening of his peace.

Faith

The fundamental values of the faith of the Bible are found throughout the Bible. In the teachings of Jesus, when he called the sheep and the goats before him, he blessed the sheep and said, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: For I was an hungered, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me. Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungered, and fed thee? or thirsty, and gave thee drink? When saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in? or naked, and clothed thee? Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee? And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me" (Matthew 25:34-40). Those words of righteousness resulted in these words of the king, "Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." These good works that were imposed on, or asked of, Nebuchadnezzar are part of the Christian faith. And in fact, they've been a part of the Jewish faith down through generations of time. Even in the writings of Paul. Paul once said, "And when James, Cephas, and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given unto me, they gave to me and Barnabas the right hands of fellowship; that we should go unto the heathen" (Galatians 2:9). They just had this one qualification: "Only they would that we should remember the poor; the same which I also was forward to do."

Written by Nebuchadnezzar

Remember that all this was being written by Nebuchadnezzar himself. It was in Chaldean, his own language. He said, "All this came upon the king Nebuchadnezzar. [He writes of himself in the third person.] At the end of twelve months he walked in the palace of the kingdom of Babylon. The king spake, and said, Is not this great Babylon, that I have built for the house of the kingdom by the might of my power, and for the honour of my majesty?" This is inescapable, because as we read on we're going to realize that Nebuchadnezzar realized that his vanity, his pride, had done him in. He wrote, "While the word was in the king's mouth, there fell a voice from heaven, saying, O king Nebuchadnezzar, to thee it is spoken; The kingdom is departed from thee. And they shall drive thee from men, and thy dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field: they shall make thee to eat grass as oxen, and seven times shall pass over thee, until thou know that the most High ruleth in the kingdom of men, and giveth it to whomsoever he will" (Daniel 4:28-32)..

The same hour was the thing fulfilled upon Nebuchadnezzar:" (Daniel 4:31-33). Immediately he was gone. His mind was gone. The watchers drove him out from among

men. His body was wet with the dew of heaven. He lived in the out-of-doors, when it rained he was wet, when it was hot he was dry and dusty. He was out there until his hairs had grown like eagle's feathers and his nails like birds claws. He became a madman, a pitiable creature living in the out-of-doors and the wilderness. And at the end of the days I Nebuchadnezzar lifted up mine eyes unto heaven, and mine understanding returned unto me, and I blessed the most High, and I praised and honoured him that liveth for ever, whose dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom is from generation to generation: And all the inhabitants of the earth are reputed as nothing: and he doeth according to his will in the army of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth: and none can stay his hand, or say unto him, What doest thou?" This is the object of the whole exercise: Nebuchadnezzar learned the lesson. He learned who was in charge and he praised and honored God. At the same time my reason returned unto me; and for the glory of my kingdom, mine honour and brightness returned unto me; and my counsellors and my lords sought unto me; and I was established in my kingdom, and excellent majesty was added unto me." He knew that none of this could have happened without God's hand because he would long since have been killed by his enemies, his adversaries, and by jealous men. Concluding his testimony, he says this, "Now I Nebuchadnezzar praise and extol and honour the King of heaven, all whose works are truth, and his ways judgment: and those that walk in pride he is able to abase" (Daniel 4:34-37). The words of Paul echo back through this episode. Do you remember what he said? Because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened." We see it in the world around us all the time. A terrible poison is at large in the world. There's evil afoot in the world, and there are few places where people are free of it.

Glorify God and Be Thankful

I think back to George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and other presidents who, year by year, proclaimed this a day for thanksgiving. All this time, there has been recognition that the most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whomever he will. I think we can be thankful for the men in the earliest days of this country who, whatever their foibles and failings, recognized the Most High God and declared that this country would give thanks to Him for what he had done for us. The antidote to the poison is for you and me to glorify God and be thankful. Remember that those who walk in pride, those who are not thankful, God is able to abase and they can end up in total, terrible darkness.

This is something to keep in mind on Thanksgiving Day this year. I'm thankful beyond words that we have had national leaders who were thankful to God for this great land of ours. We could have been led by arrogant, prideful men who did not glory God and whose foolish hearts were darkened. Imagine what our country might look like if it were otherwise. Two funerals in 2004 illustrated the difference. One was the burial of Yasser Arafat. There was something appropriate about bulldozers having to clear away rubble to find a place to bury that evil old man. And words can't describe the scene of bedlam surrounding those trying to get him from the airplane to his grave. It reminded me of the funeral of Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran, when the mob took over his coffin, carrying it over their heads with such

violence they eventually dumped his body out onto the street. Their leader was everything; their dignity was gone. Discipline? It never existed among them.

Contrast this with the state funeral of Ronald Reagan, and you see two very different examples. Reagan was honored greatly at his death, but he was a reminder of the frailty of men in the disease that afflicted him late in life. Reagan was a man who, although not greatly religious, honored the God of the Bible and knew all too well that he was not the Great One. He was buried with dignity and respect. Arafat was buried in a frenzy of chaos and confusion and the adoration of the mob. There are some evil days ahead. What will we use as a shield against the evil to come? It is so simple—glorify God and be thankful. Simple thanksgiving makes all the difference.

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Ronald L. Dart is an evangelist and is heard daily and weekly
on his Born to Win radio program.

You can contact Ronald L. Dart at Christian Educational Ministries
P.O. Box 560 Whitehouse, Texas 75791
Phone: (903) 839-9300 — 1-888-BIBLE-44

www.borntowin.net