**Genesis 32:9-12**

God, I thank you that I am not like other men - robbers, evildoers, adulterers - or even like this tax-collector. I suppose some might call that the Pharisee's prayer a prayer of thanks - it does use the word thanks. But I am sure all of you recognize it as anything but. As Jesus told this parable, he made it clear that the Pharisee was praying about himself.

But how often does our thanks fall short? The Pharisee at least used the word thanks. Do we think of Thursday more as Turkey Day rather than Thanksgiving Day? I realize some people say Turkey Day for humor or variety, not intending to deny giving thanks. But where is your focus tomorrow/today? Is it more on the gift rather than the Giver? Do we focus on the food that fills our bellies and the family that fills our home, rather than on the One who alone can fill our souls?

Today, may the Holy Spirit stir in us true thankfulness to our God and Savior, the Giver of all good. May he work in us through his Word, as we take to heart this prayer that Jacob prayed when he returned to the land of Canaan. Then we will call out this Thanksgiving Day: O LORD, HOW GREAT YOUR BLESSING IS!

From the very beginning of the prayer, Jacob knows from whom he has received all that is good. His thanks is not a generic attitude of gratitude that even an atheist can give. He is not thanking an unnamed god or a higher power or something beyond himself. He knows that he owes all that he has and all that he is to the Lord, the God who keeps his promises, the God who spoke to his grandfather, Abraham, and his father, Isaac. The Lord had promised to send the Savior through them to crush Satan's power and reconcile sinners to God. It is to the Lord, Jacob raises his prayer as he says: O God of my father Abraham, God my father Isaac, O Lord.

When our thanks is directed to the true God, the Lord who keeps his promises, what do we realize about ourselves? The same thing Jacob confesses as he prays: I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness you have shown your servant.

Do you remember why Jacob had left? He had tricked his father into giving him the blessing instead of his older twin brother Esau. Esau was furious. He planned to kill Jacob as soon as their father died. So his mother, Rebekah, sent Jacob to her brother, Laban, in the land of Haran. Jacob left with nothing except the staff in his hand. We might say he fled with only the shirt on his back.

But the Lord had blessed him tremendously during those 20 years at Laban's! He returned with cattle and donkeys, flocks of sheep and goats, menservants and maidservants. He now had family with him as well. In fact they were able to camp as two groups - so greatly had the Lord blessed him.

As Jacob reflected on those blessings, he realized that he deserved none of them. He in no way measured up to even the least of these blessings. He fell far short. As he confessed: I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness you have shown your servant.

That, my friends, is our confession this Thanksgiving as well: O Lord, how great your blessing is, so much greater than I measure up to! I am unworthy of all your kindness. I do not deserve any of the mercies or faithfulness you have shown your lowly servant. Resist the world's whisper: You are worth that new blouse, new car, new video game. You deserve that turkey on the table. You have worked hard for it. Resist it. The Lord has already blessed us so richly. He may bless you with more. But give him thanks for what he has given you. We do not deserve any of what we already have. It is all a gift of his mercy and kindness. It is a gift of his faithfulness, for he does not change. He keeps his promises, though we in no way deserve it. I confess my total unworthiness.

Now the world will say that you cannot think like that. You need some sense of
worthiness, some sort of self-esteem. But those feelings are deceptive when they are built on what I have or what I am or what I can do. Rather only the Lord's promises bring us true worth.

Notice how Jacob begins and ends his prayer - with the Lord's promise: O Lord, who said to me, Go back to your country and your relatives, and I will make you prosper. And again at the end: I will surely make you prosper and will make your descendants like the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted. There is no greater way to give God thanks than to cling to his promises alone.

Jacob no longer relied on his skill and intrigue. He relied on the Lord's promises. He heard that Esau was coming to meet him with 400 men. How could Jacob stand up against that? His servants were shepherds and workers, not soldiers. What would happen to the mothers and their children? He was filled with fear.

So he went to the Lord in prayer. He held God to his promises: You promised to make it go well when you told me to return. You promised to bless me with many descendants like the sand of sea shore, through whom my Savior would come. You promised, O Lord! Jacob clung only to the Lord's promises.

Even later when Jacob sent gifts on ahead to appease Esau, he knew that only the Lord's blessing would make that work. He was not trusting his skill or planning. He was clinging to the Lord's promises. What a marvelous way to give thanks to God!

My friends, give thanks for past blessings by clinging to God's promises no matter what lies ahead. Like Jacob, we also face the uncertainty of the future. What about the economy and politics? What about your personal finances, your job, your family? What about your health or the health of a loved one? What about our congregation's finances or the synod's budget?

The same Lord who has blessed us in the past, has made his promise for us to hold on to as we go forward. As we reflect on his blessings this Thanksgiving, we can pray: O Lord, how great your blessing is! So I will continue clinging to your promises alone.

Like Jacob, open and close your prayers with the Lord's promises. When faced with financial worries, pray: Lord Jesus, you point me to the birds of the air and the lilies of the field. You say, 'Look at them, they do not sow or reap or store away in silos and barns. They do not labor or spin to make clothes. But see how your heavenly Father takes care of them. Aren't you much more valuable than they? So do not worry.' Help me to lift my eyes from these worries to see how great your blessing is, so that I seek first your kingdom and your righteousness. You have promised that everything I need will be added well.

When faced with illness, sickness, pain, or disease, pray: Lord Jesus, you came in mercy to those who were sick and suffering. Stand by my side in this hour of need. You have promised, 'Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you. Strengthen me to bear up underneath this load, and, if it is your will, relieve me of this suffering. Yet not my will, but yours be done. You work all things for the good of your people. Help me hold to that promise in faith that sees how great your love is. You did not spare your own Son but gave him up for us all. How great your blessing is!

When plagued with doubt, despair, and the agony of guilt, pray: O Lord, the darkness of my sin is so deep. Shine into my heart with the light of your promise. You have said, Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool. Your promise of forgiveness touched my forehead with the water of baptism. It touches my lips in bread and wine. Wash me clean. Your blood, Lord Jesus, purifies me from all sin. Yes, because you live, I too shall live. How great your blessing is!
No matter what the circumstance - as you face a fearful future, as your Esau comes at you, pray the Lord's promises. Cling to his promises. Only his promises give us real worth. You have been ransomed, not with perishable things like silver and gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, a Lamb without blemish or defect. How great the Lord's blessing is! For that, we say: Thank-you! Amen.

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