What Does Thanksgiving Mean?

1 Corinthians 10:10-13, “Neither murmure ye, as some of them also murmured, and were destroyed of the destroyer. Now all these things happened unto them for ensamples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come. Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall. There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it.”

It is only natural, even anticipated, that anyone understands a word and interprets it by the meaning the culture he lives in has given that word. However, one of the basic problems in understanding the Bible is that cultural definition of a word determines the interpretation of a Bible truth. Because of our present day conception of the meaning of a word, we miss the divine principle God seeks to impart.

For instance, our word “thanksgiving,” is so foreign to what the Biblical meaning is that many miss the whole impact of this wonderful truth. Webster states that “thanksgiving” is, “The act of giving thanks; grateful acknowledgment of benefits or favors; an expression of gratitude for something received, or done for, one.” That is NOT what the Bible means by the word “thanksgiving!”

The Biblical meaning of the word “thanksgiving” is not something you do. It is not something that is spontaneous, or an extemporaneous expression of thanks for some good deed done, or good that that has come our way. The biblical concept of the word “thanksgiving” does not depend on something one has, or has received. This word has nothing to do with “outward” circumstances, but rather, has to do with one’s spiritual attitude toward life.

Paul declared, in Philippians 4:11, “I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content.” Thanksgiving is a learning process. It is allowing the Holy Spirit to place within us contentment – or a real praise of thanksgiving to God for everything in one’s life. Biblical thanksgiving is not what one does, but rather it is what one is – what one has become as a result of absolute and complete trust in Christ Jesus. It is the “spirit” in which one accepts “all things.”

Our problem often is that we have in mind what a word means – our definition of the word – and, it is almost impossible for us to divorce that word from the meaning we have given it.

Let me illustrate. When Jesus came into our life, we were “born-again.” We have the same body and the same “soul” (mind, will and emotions); however, our “spirit” was made new – given birth (John 3:6). Now Jesus lives within us and He desires to express His life through our life.

Ephesians 3:20 refers to “the power that worketh in us…” 2 Peter 1:4, states, “We are partakers of His divine nature.” For instance, Christ’s love lives within us and we are to love others – not with our own love – but with Christ’s love. He is “love,” and needs to express His love for others through us. Jesus said, “I am Life” and He desires to live that divine life through our daily life.
The Biblical meaning of the word “thanksgiving” is not something someone does, but rather it is, because Jesus lives within us, a life of thanksgiving becomes a daily expression of His life.

This is not self-improvement. No! It is God manifesting His life through us.

Now, let’s read Ephesians 5:18-21, “And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit; Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord; Giving thanks always for all things unto God and the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of God.”

The power of God lives within us – however, it is often “bottled up” inside, imprisoned, locked up tightly inside us. A “thanksgiving-attitude” is the valve to express God’s goodness. The way to get at the resource within us is to express “praise” to God. Thanksgiving releases this great ability and power within us.

Let’s also read 1 Thessalonians 5:18-19, “In every thing give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you. Quench not the Spirit.”

There are only two ways to face life: The natural way of complaining, murmuring and grumbling; the other way is to, “In everything give thanks” – “to count it all joy when you fall into various trials (James 1:2) – ‘rejoice evermore’ (1 Thessalonians 5:16) – and remember, “All things work together for good to those who live God and are willing to fit into His purpose” (Romans 8:28).

It is the easiest thing in the world to complain. We complain about the weather, a neighbor, the boss, our wife or husband, the kids, our parents, etc. God commands us to, “In everything give thanks.”

Let’s look 1 Corinthians 10:13. It says, “There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it.” What a wonderful promise God has given to us here.

Now, let’s look at verse 11, “Now all these things happened unto them [That is, to the children of Israel] for ensamples: and they are written [Throughout the Old Testament] for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come.” The stories in the Old Testament that tell us of Israel’s experiences are for a warning to us.

Look at Numbers 11:1, “And when the people complained, it displeased the LORD: and the LORD heard it; and His anger was kindled.” We are told the people of Israel were complaining about all their misfortunes, the Lord heard them, and His anger flared against them because of their complaints.

Let’s go back to 1 Corinthians 10 and look at verse 10. We’ll see what verse 11 was talking about. “Neither murmur ye, as some of them also murmured, and were destroyed of the destroyer.”
Our “spiritual-attitude” is to constantly be one of praise to the Lord. If God sees fit to take one of our loved ones home to be with Him – if we lose our job and source of income – if things get difficult at school – if I have to go to the hospital for two months – my inner spiritual-attitude must always be one of “Praise” to God.

I am not speaking of a fatalistic attitude – a “what-will-be-will-be” outlook toward life. I’m not talking about just glibly saying, “Praise, or thanks, God” for what has taken place. No! I’m speaking about what the Holy Spirit, by Christ’s life within us, can enable us to become – not something we do!

Praise means “to extol, to laud, to honor, to acclaim, to express approval – it is giving a positive affirmation.” It simple means that we accept – and even approve – of this circumstance as a part of God’s plan for me!

The Living Bible renders 1 Thessalonians 5:18, “No matter what happens, always be thankful for this is God’s will for you who belong to Christ Jesus.”

Our attitude can hinder us. 1 Corinthians 10:13 promises, “There hath no temptation (trial) taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape.” This power within us – that is release through praise – will enable us to face any circumstances.

What God Wants to Do

God’s eternal purpose for our life is to bring us into divine fellowship and communion with Him. The highest form of communion with God is thanksgiving! We are to have an inner “spiritual-attitude” of thanksgiving, not because we feel good, but as an act of obedience to His Word and spiritual development of our Christian life.

God has promised to achieve this within our life however, in addition to God’s power within; it requires a “setting of our will.” God will not force His design for our life upon us, but, if we will co-operate with the life of Christ within us, and be thankful, God will release His power into whatever situation we go through.

God commands us to “Be thankful in all things.” These “things” may be tragedies, irritations or uncomfortable situations. Therefore, when the Bible says, “be thankful,” it cannot have the same meaning as our word, “be thankful.”

When one gathers up all the Scriptures on “thanks” and “praise,” and studies them, he comes up with quite a different meaning than our English words would imply.

We can allow an “attitude” (or “spirit”) to rule us. We meet someone who is discontented and unhappy – because he has allowed this spirit to rule him. He cannot blame heredity, environment or influence, because he has allowed an inner attitude to possesses him and decide how he will feel toward a given situation.

God commands that we be “cheerful.” Jesus said, “I have come that your joy might be full” (John 15:11). Jesus often said to His followers, “Be of good cheer!” In the same manner that God has commanded us to be honest, to be truthful and to be kind, it has commanded us to
be cheerful. We have a duty to give happiness to those whom we meet. Being cheerful is a Christian duty, even when we don’t “feel” like it!

   Jesus had a very difficult, hard life. He was a “man of sorrows” however His life was always radiant. He had an inner joy. No one was ever depressed by His presence.

   The Bible commands us to “Rejoice!” This does not take out the pain and the sorrow of our life. Jesus said, “In the world you will have tribulation, but be of good cheer, for I have overcome the world – things are in My hands – I am victorious – in Me you have peace.”

   Thanksgiving is not a question of whether we are going to give thanks or not, but it is a question of what spirit we will allow to rule us. We have the characteristics of the Holy Spirit within us and He expresses Himself through praise.