

THANKSGIVING VESPERS

2 Chronicles 29

Judah had fallen on hard times, hard times of its own making. Gradually they had fallen further and further from the LORD, the true God of Israel, and fallen into idolatry and immorality as a result. God's Word had become another word among many, and His glory faded in the midst of the alluring glow of the worship of other faiths. There had been a string of bad kings, which only added to the problems, and the Temple, the house of God among them, had fallen into disrepair wherever it wasn't turned into a home for false teaching and bad practice. Judah had fallen on hard times, hard times of its own making, and they had reaped the consequences. If they wanted to chase after the Gentiles, the LORD had removed His protective hand so that the Gentiles could have them, and the Gentiles turned out to be anything but the good friends the people of Judah had expected. Hezekiah recalls for them, *"Therefore the wrath of the LORD came on Judah and Jerusalem, and he has made them an object of horror, of astonishment, and of hissing, as you see with your own eyes. For behold, our fathers have fallen by the sword, and our sons and our daughters and our wives are in captivity for this."*

The heart of the matter was the heart. The hearts of the people of Judah had grown cold. The LORD had been slowly evicted as new roommates, sinful roommates, were welcomed into His habitation, into the hearts of His chosen people. He had chosen them, but they had again and again rejected Him. The problem in Judah was not merely a group issue. No, it was an individual issue. They were a group of individuals who had turned their back on Him who made them who they were at their best throughout history and without whom they could be nothing but their stiff-necked and hard-hearted worst.

When they had been duly humbled, God spoke through Hezekiah, and He did not speak anything new—no, He spoke what He has spoken to His straying sheep since the beginning. He called them back. He called them to repentance. He urged them to be cleansed of their sins. He offered them another chance, a new day, a fresh robe of righteousness where the filthy rags of their sins had previously clung. *"Now it is in my heart to make a covenant with the LORD, the God of Israel, in order that his fierce anger may turn away from us,"* Hezekiah says.

And what did they do next? They took the LORD at His Word. They put His house in order, in the order He had said it should be. They knew that there would be no presence of the LORD among those who would not have Him as He's promised to come. The Temple was the heart and core of their relationship with the LORD. The Temple was where they were to seek His mercy and beg His grace. The Temple is where life was to be taken for life to be saved: the lives of beasts for the lives of men, the blood of innocents substitutes for the forgiveness of sinners. The writer to the Hebrews reminds us in chapter nine, *"In fact, the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood,*

and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.” How clear this was in the Temple, especially in the days of our lesson, as beast after beast was butchered to remind the people of the horrible cost of sin, and its terrible wage, as their eyes focused on the altar and their hope rested in the sacrifice!

We read:

So they slaughtered the bulls, and the priests received the blood and threw it against the altar. And they slaughtered the rams, and their blood was thrown against the altar. And they slaughtered the lambs, and their blood was thrown against the altar. Then the goats for the sin offering were brought to the king and the assembly, and they laid their hands on them, and the priests slaughtered them and made a sin offering with their blood on the altar, to make atonement for all Israel. For the king commanded that the burnt offering and the sin offering should be made for all Israel.

Why all this throwing of blood and laying of hands? Can you imagine what the Altar Guild would say! Blood is life, and this blood was for the life of the people. The blood was thrown against the altar as a reminder that God is a holy God, a God who punishes not only sin, but sinners, who demands justice. They placed their hands on the sacrifices as a reminder that in His mercy God forgave these sinners their sins through the sacrifice of another. They placed their sins on their substitute before their substitute paid the horrible price of their sins.

And the hearts of the people were moved by the prospect of forgiveness and new life. They rejoiced in a new day, in a restored relationship with their God. They consecrated themselves to the LORD, that is, they set themselves apart for Him, to be His own, to be His holy vessels. To consecrate is to set apart. We set apart the bread and wine for the Supper. God sets aside His own, not only in word, but in deed. The people, moved by God’s grace, brought sacrifice after sacrifice. There were not enough priests. The people wanted mercy, and so they put their substitutes before the LORD.

This Thanksgiving, let us put our sacrifice before the LORD. The writer to the Hebrews promises later in that same chapter, *“Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.”* *“Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness,”* and Christ has shed His blood, our perfect, innocent Substitute and the Sacrifice for our sins.

Consecrate yourselves today. Set yourselves apart for the LORD to be His own, to be His holy vessels. To consecrate is to set apart. Separate yourselves from your sins and take heart, for as we set apart the bread and wine for the Supper, Christ has set you apart as well, not to bring grace, but to live grace. Give thanks this year for your Lamb of God. Lay your hands on Him. Know that He bears your sins. Place His cross before the

LORD with the same zeal as those Jews at the time of Hezekiah and know that He has cashed the pay check for your sin, that He has paid the cost of your disobedience.

So give thanks, and you don't have to try hard to do so. *“And Hezekiah and all the people rejoiced because God had prepared for the people, for the thing came about suddenly.”* And you may rejoice as well, for God has already prepared for you, prepared in advance ways for you to thank Him as a father or mother, son or daughter, employee or employer, teacher or student, friend and relative, neighbor and citizen, and, yes, as His own children in His own house. So let us give thanks. We are the Lord's and He is ours. He has taken our place on the cross that we might take His place in the resurrection. Amen.