

Joel 2:21-21  
Philippians 4:4-8  
Text: Philippians 4:6-7

St. John's Presbyterian Church  
Devon, Pennsylvania, 19333  
Victor M. Wilson, D.Min., Pastor

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## THANKSGIVING FROM THE BIBLE SHELF

Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. *Philippians 4:6-7*

Remembering is crucial to Thanksgiving. That's why each Thanksgiving over the last six years I've dipped heartily into a store of personal memories as way of encouraging you to do the same. The worst thing is to go through this holiday as though it were another calendar event with certain obligations attached: buy the turkey, dig out festive colors—orange, brown and green to decorate the hearth and table, then launch into the feast as if that were the main event. The main event, as the people of the Exodus were continually reminded, is to *remember* and be thankful. Then they ate.

So here are a few Bible stories that prompt my own Thanksgiving to God; not stories from the Bible, but stories that accompany my Bibles.

This is not a complete Bible but a pocket sized edition of the *Anglican Common Prayer and Hymns Ancient and Modern*, with all the psalms. It was given to my Dad "With love from Len" (his pet name for my mother, Helen) on his birthday, March 17, 1944. He was in the Royal Air Force at the time, as a flight engineer on Lancaster bombers. It's particularly well worn, and the pages show frequent use under not the cleanest hands. That's understandable. In early 1945 his aircraft struggled back from a raid over Germany with quite a bit of damage, and had to go in for maintenance. A couple of days later, in the waning light of day Dad was in a replacement Lancaster taxiing across the airfield for take-off on another mission. He didn't care to be in a strange aircraft, none of the crew did; even though it was essentially the same aircraft, every plane had its own particular feel and in the hands of the crew, and a loss of familiarity was a loss of some confidence. As they taxied, he saw in the distance, being wheeled across the tarmac, his own aircraft leaving maintenance. It's name was Victor. That's how I got my name. That night they went down over eastern Germany with a loss of two crew members: one who hit the tail structure parachuting out, and their skipper, Captain Excel, a Canadian who went down with the aircraft. Dad spent the rest of the war in POW camps, or on the move constantly as the allies closed in. I'm confident he had this prayer book, with psalms, in his breast pocket. I can only imagine how much strength and hope it must have given him. My two older brothers would have been nine and six at the time.

Here's a New Testament called the *Weymouth Bible*. It was inspired by an earlier version from 1902 called the *Twentieth-Century Bible* that about forty people who knew Greek and Hebrew put together because they wanted the Bible to read like a book that sounded a conversational tone with ordinary people. One of the translators was a cowboy, one was a housewife, another was a telegraph engineer. I love that they remind me about how diverse are the people of God. I love that it shows that ordinary people who aren't classically trained scholars can do really good theology. I love the fact that the church, like this cell here in St. John's, is made up of such extraordinarily talented people. I am so really thankful for that. Bless you for who you are.

Here is another Bible that means a lot to me. In the 1960's, on the early morning subway in Manhattan, you could see the man whose brainchild this was, often leaning against the vertical hand rail, swaying like a seasoned veteran as the car lurched in the darkness somewhere underground. He was always staring intently at the dark book before him, scribbling notes in the margin or in a notebook. Lunchtime, nighttime, early morning, he seemed always engrossed in the same single task. But the culmination of years of work resulted in more than twenty rejection slips from publishers. It would simply not be true to say that he pressed on undaunted. There were times when he felt completely

crushed. Thankfully, however, Ken Taylor's story did not end there. An acceptance letter from Tyndale Publishing House, more months of work, and finally, the publication of one of the most popular and influential books in publishing history. Its name is *The Living Bible*. I'm thankful for reminders of perseverance that come from this book, for the ways of God with humankind in the Bible that show God's patient perseverance with us, and for those qualities of God that Ken Taylor put to the test in himself. Billy Graham (not ours but the older one) and his wife, Ruth, sent Jane and me one each of these as wedding presents. Jane knew the Grahams well for some years when she was in college. If ever there was a couple who are faithful to God it is Ruth and Billy Graham. I'm deeply thankful for reminders of their ministry.

This is the first Bible I ever read through completely. It's a *Living Bible*, too. According to my inscription I bought it on June 8, 1972 in Southampton, England, when I was still working on the QE2. This was my first systematic encounter with the Word. I would read it sitting in a lounge chair at lunch time on the after observation deck. I suspect that I was the only person on that great ship who systematically read the Bible—it wasn't a common activity! I finished the whole Bible in nine months and it still ranks as one of my most thrilling accomplishments. I'm thankful for what I learned of the "grand sweep" of Scripture from that first reading.

This Bible has other remembrances attached to it, noticeably through some peculiar markings on the front and back, marks that generate many thanksgivings, too.

Six weeks after Jane and I were married in 1973 I was told to report to the U. S. Naturalization and Immigration authorities in Norfolk, Virginia to get my "green card" (which happened to be blue—go figure!). On the way back from Norfolk, on a four lane highway in dense, speeding, rush-hour traffic, the right rear tire blew on our little Volkswagen Kharman Ghia. I managed to wrestle the car over to a narrow gravel shoulder, and with traffic hurtling by just two or three feet away I started to change the tire, something I'd never done before. But with the sloping shoulder, the jack wouldn't reach the frame. I was getting scared being so close to the road, and it was getting dark. Jane and I prayed for some help, hoping perhaps that a good Samaritan motorist would stop.

I needed two inches more to lift the car. The only thing I could put my hands on was this Bible. But I was reluctant to put the jack directly on the Bible so I hunted around in the gloom by the side of the road and found a discarded Colt 45 beer can that I stomped flat and put between the Bible and the base of the jack. It worked. So that's how I changed a wheel with a Bible and a Colt 45! You can still see the imprint of the jack on one side and the gravel on the other side.

Thank you, Lord: for traveling mercies, for prayers answered, and for caring for us the way you do.

Here's a *Good News Bible*. Roger Bullard, my professor of Bible and Greek in college, was one of the five member translation team that did the Old Testament for this version. The idea was to do a simple English translation for people for whom English was a second language, using a simple vocabulary of about six-hundred words. It turned out to be a blockbuster that took its publishers, the American Bible Society, by storm. It seemed that everyone, especially young people, wanted it, not least because of its delightfully simple and evocative line drawings by a Swiss artist.

When we could get Dr. Bullard off on a tangent in class he'd take us on flights of imagination and insight that were thrilling. He'd get more and more animated, grabbing a piece of chalk and in a blur of lighting fast flourishes he'd create a whole scene on the blackboard to illustrate some point. He was a brilliant teacher to whom I'm immensely indebted. And so I say, Lord, thank you for our teachers—for their wisdom, their enthusiasm, and the way they have channeled and directed our lives.

Here's the Bible that I had through seminary. It's so bent and worn that it looks like a Mack truck ran over it. Seminary was a long, hard road that I wouldn't want to repeat. Yet it was absolutely necessary to put faith under the microscope, to disassemble it, challenge it, and reconstruct it; as Paul encouraged, setting aside what is not worthy and adhering to what is of value. I'm thankful that seminary reminded me that I am always a work in process. Thank you, Lord, for widening horizons, for demanding that we always struggle to refine and mature our thinking and our actions.

Here's the Bible that launched me into ministry—though perhaps it was less of a launch, more

like an ostrich trying to get airborne. It was a gift from my first church at ordination. This is the Bible I put all my meticulous notes in for my first funeral as an ordained minister. I left on my desk, walked out of the office two minutes before the service, and heard that hideous little click as the door locked behind me with my keys still on the desk. The service started fifteen minutes late because we couldn't find a spare key and I was prepared to be defrocked and pilloried rather than have to walk into the sanctuary for my first funeral and having to wing it.

This is also the Bible that I used for my first wedding, which went beautifully, so one guest complimented me. Until, that is, I went over the small print of the wedding license an hour later and discovered that the license had been issued in the wrong county. In a cold sweat, two weeks out of seminary, I called a minister friend. "Sorry, ol' buddy," he drawled, "But they ain't legally married." So we had to drive almost two hours west to the Chatham County line in North Carolina (whereas the honeymoon was to be two hours east!) and I married them by a ditch on a little dirt shoulder at the side of the road in the middle of nowhere.

Thank you, Lord, for mercies large and small.

Here is a Bible that taught me never to undervalue the power of prayer. In June of 1988 I had been asked to preach at two consecutive women's conferences in Montreat, North Carolina. There would be almost 2,000 women from the leadership of the southern churches, and I was nervous. On my arrival I went early into an empty Anderson Auditorium and felt the hovering spirits of the greatest preachers of the century who had all been there. I looked out at the rising rows of now empty seats, then down at the pulpit. Some years before, someone had put a small plaque on the shelf that only the speaker could see. "Sir," it said, "*we would see Jesus.*" It was from John 12:21. Suddenly I was so nervous that I could hardly see the first row.

On the first night Paul Eckel from Atlanta would preach. He was perhaps the dean of southern preachers. On the second night would be Joan Salmon Campbell of Philadelphia, the next Moderator of the General Assembly of our Church and a preacher known for coming on like a train and leaving her audience limp in their seats. Each morning, the Bible studies would be led by the Elijah-like figure of Walter Brueggemann, perhaps the preeminent Old Testament Scholar in North America. And then, on the last night, which they reserved for the sacrificial lamb--there was me. I was in the company of the immortals, I felt, and I wanted to go home.

I had worked extremely hard on the sermon for weeks, principally because our Presbyterian Women were at a major watershed in their history and they were facing some tough issues coming out of the reunion of our two former denominations. "Sir," they were saying, "*we would see Jesus.*" I had wanted the sermon to really speak to them.

On the night I was to preach I was so nervous I could hardly stand. In my room at the Assembly Inn, clutching this little red Bible, I let it fall open where it would and it opened to this text:

Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. *Philippians 4:6-7*

And then I knelt to pray. "Lord, please release me from these emotions; let nothing be in me but Christ and him only."

I remember, as I preached later, that was precisely what I felt--nothing! Not a flicker, not a breath of emotion, not a whisper from within . . . nothing! It felt completely lifeless and flat. As I finished I remember feeling, "Lord, this was not what I had in mind." After communion we were to leave for a candlelight vigil around the lake. Thankfully, I thought, I won't have to face the music immediately. Maybe I could slip away into the night, or into the lake!

But the response of the women over the next two days was incredibly affirming. Clearly something had spoken to them that was not my own. Something powerful had gotten through. The affirmation took me completely by surprise. I remembered my prayer, how I had asked to be released from the emotions. The whole event reminded me ever after to be careful what we pray for: we might get it!

Tell your stories to each other this Thanksgiving. Especially those that spring from faith enlivened, faith tested, and faith affirmed. Stories that teach your children and inspire each other. Nothing generates thankfulness more than stories of God's grace set loose within our journeys.

Amen.