

A Treasury of Thanksgiving

ILLUSTRATED POETRY,
PROSE, AND PRAISE

Leland Ryken



P U B L I S H I N G

P.O. BOX 817 • PHILLIPSBURG • NEW JERSEY 08865-0817

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Scripture text presented in the literary readings has been reformatted and adapted.

The entry for the hymn “Blest Be the Tie That Binds” is adapted from the entry published in Leland Ryken, *40 Favorite Hymns of the Christian Faith: A Closer Look at Their Spiritual and Poetic Meaning* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2022), 39–42.

The entry for the hymn “Come, Ye Thankful People, Come” is adapted from the entry published in Leland Ryken, *40 Favorite Hymns for the Christian Year: A Closer Look at Their Spiritual and Poetic Meaning* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2020), 108–11.

Cover art is taken from Pieter Bruegel the Elder (ca. 1525–1569), *The Harvesters*, 1565, oil on wood. Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. www.metmuseum.org.

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Ryken, Leland, author.

Title: A treasury of thanksgiving : illustrated poetry, prose, and praise / Leland Ryken.

Description: Phillipsburg, New Jersey : P&R Publishing, [2023] | Includes bibliographical references and index. | Summary: “Thanksgiving is a yearlong Christian practice. In this lavishly illustrated anthology, Ryken presents forty great thanksgiving texts—Scripture, hymns, and prose—with helpful commentary and devotional remarks”-- Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2023016526 | ISBN 9781629959702 (paperback) | ISBN 9781629959719 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Thanksgiving Day--Religious aspects--Christianity.

Classification: LCC GT4975 .R867 2023 | DDC 242/.37--dc23/eng/20230824

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2023016526>

For my grandchildren, with
gratitude:

Joshua, Kirsten, Jacob, Bethany,
Jack, Kathryn, Seth, Alison,
Meredith, Karoline, Annabelle,
Bradford, Pearla, Abigail,
Christianne, Mattaniah







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Introduction

THIS BOOK OFFERS THE PROVERBIAL “two for the price of one.” It is partly a seasonal collection that invites reading and contemplation as part of an annual Thanksgiving celebration. At this level, the entries can reacquaint us with familiar texts associated with one of the United States’ favorite holidays. This is balanced by an educational aim to uncover little-known aspects of the history of the American Thanksgiving and its Puritan roots in Reformation England.

But this book is only partly seasonal. Gratitude and thanksgiving are not once-a-year activities. They are Christian virtues that God expects us to practice as a way of life. Accordingly, this anthology is a book for every day of the year—it is not a seasonal book only but a perpetual one.

Giving thanks does not come entirely naturally to us. It is something that we learn. That is why children need to be prompted with the question “What do you say?” when they receive a favor or compliment. The readings in this book are designed to foster our gratitude and thanksgiving in all situations.

Toward an Understanding of Thankfulness

The key to understanding the subject of this anthology is to picture a ladder. The bottom step of the ladder is our receipt of a favor or benefit that we cherish as a contribution to our well-being.

The next step is our recognition or awareness of this benefit. At this point the etymology of the word *thank* proves to be revealing. If we trace the word to its origin, we find that the root idea of thanks is *think*. A thoughtless person is not a thankful person. Before we can express gratitude for something, it needs to register in our thinking as something we appreciate.

At this point we face a choice, though we may not be aware of it. We can remain at the self-focused level, claiming possession of the benefit and going our self-centered way, or we can ponder the fact that we were sent

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the benefit from a source. It is not only something we receive but something we have been given. Ultimately, it always comes from God—usually also through some intermediary such as a person or a force of nature or a convergence of events.

Having (1) received a benefit, (2) experienced it as a positive infusion into our lives, and (3) acknowledged its source, we can ascend to the next



Paul Cézanne, *Still Life with a Ginger Jar and Eggplants*, 1893–94

step on the ladder, which is gratitude. Gratitude is something that we feel within ourselves. It is likely to be awakened only when we acknowledge the source of a blessing, but it stops short of expressing thanks to that source. Feeling grateful is a prerequisite to giving thanks.

Thanksgiving—the giving of thanks—takes gratitude a step further. Our awareness of having received a benefit and our gratitude for it now flow outward to the source of the benefit. Thanksgiving is relational, as we express gratitude to a giver in word or action.

All of the entries in this anthology fall into the paradigm of the ladder outlined above. Some, as we will see, awaken our gratitude for a given blessing but stop there. In these instances, *we* are the ones who must nudge these texts into the realm of thanksgiving. For example, the hymn “Amazing Grace” is a statement of testimony that continuously awakens our gratitude for God’s grace, but it does not explicitly give voice to that gratitude. The canon of thanksgiving hymns and poetry would be incomplete without this type of latent thanksgiving text.

Differentiating Thanks from Praise

For purposes of this anthology, it is important for us to keep the line of demarcation clear between thanks and praise. In principle, it is easy to distinguish a thanksgiving poem from a praise poem. A *poem of thanksgiving* is marked by (1) a description of blessings received and (2) a response of thanksgiving specifically for those blessings. A *praise poem* does not primarily record gratitude but instead extols the worthiness of God. Although praise poems may resemble poems of thanksgiving because they catalog benefits to a person or people, they have a different goal and orientation: their purpose is to contemplate the praiseworthy acts of God rather than to explore how these acts have benefitted a recipient.

Even though we can thus distinguish between poems of thanks and poems of praise, confusion arises because the vocabulary of praise is often used in hymns and poems that are actually expressions of thanks. In this anthology, I have done two things to ensure that unrecognized classics of thanksgiving are not overlooked. One is to use my explications to clarify how poems and hymns that are not traditionally included in the canon of thanksgiving texts nonetheless deserve to be. The other is to adapt public domain texts to make them fit a specific purpose and occasion—a common practice among editors and compilers of hymnbooks—in this case by occasionally changing the vocabulary of praise to that of thanks.

For any of my readers who might find this unsettling, a quick visit to the website *Hymnary* will reveal that most familiar hymns exist in numerous variants. My substitution of the word *thank* for *praise* in the hymn “We Praise Thee, O God, for the Son of Thy Love,” for instance, is in keeping with common practice. In fact, many readers of this anthology will be familiar with a version of that hymn whose opening stanza develops the theme “we praise thee, O God, for the days of our youth,” which is not only a modification of the original hymn but an addition to it.

The Nature of This Anthology

My primary goal as I compiled this anthology was to collect the forty greatest thanksgiving texts of the English-speaking world. The most obvious trait of the resulting collection is its variety. There is variety of genres, first of all. I did not set out to include specific genres but simply allowed them to assert themselves. As I did, the following genres emerged:

- psalm
- additional biblical passages, both prose and poetry
- hymn
- poem
- prayer
- novel
- sermon
- classic prose devotional text
- public proclamation and historical document
- diary entry
- creed
- catechism
- theology book

The principle of variety extends to the organization of this anthology as well. After I had determined the contents of the book, I divided the material into four sections of ten entries and placed an equal number of various genres into each. This arrangement ensures a pleasing variety and guards against monotony.

Each text is accompanied by a short analysis, or what literary scholars call an *explication*. One way to integrate the texts and explications is first to read a text, then to assimilate the accompanying explication as casting a retrospective look on the first reading of the entry, and then to reread the text through the lens provided by the explication. ■

John Whetten Ehninger,
October, 1867





Now Thank We All Our God

MARTIN RINKART (1586–1649)

Now thank we all our God
With heart and hands and voices,
Who wondrous things hath done,
In whom his world rejoices;
Who from our mothers' arms,
Hath blessed us on our way
With countless gifts of love,
And still is ours today.

O may this bounteous God
Through all our life be near us,
With ever-joyful hearts
And blessed peace to cheer us;
And keep us in his grace,
And guide us when perplexed,
And free us from all ills
In this world and the next.

All praise and thanks to God
The Father now be given,
The Son, and him who reigns
With them in highest heaven—
The one eternal God,
Whom earth and heav'n adore;
For thus it was, is now,
And shall be evermore. ■

IT IS APPROPRIATE TO BEGIN this thanksgiving anthology with the exuberant hymn that is sung at the beginning of many Thanksgiving church services. The poem gives us just the right words to express what is inside us when we are primed to thank God for his blessings to us. On such occasions, we want to thank God now, not later.

The most infectious aspect of this hymnic poem is its “all out” exuberance. In the opening lines, for example, we do not simply *thank* God but do so with *heart and hands and voices*. This triad foreshadows a technique used throughout the poem of enumerating two, three, or more items as though one is totally inadequate to express a gratitude that is ready to explode. In the middle stanza, for example, having mentioned the hope that God will be *near us*, the poem goes on to pour out five more anticipated blessings—from *ever-joyful hearts* to freedom from *all ills*—in a stream of clauses.

After we have been caught up in this general spirit of thanks, it is natural for us to shift our attention to the content and organization of the poem. Its opening stanza is a summons to thank God, accompanied by expansive and open-ended blessings, such as *wondrous things* and *countless gifts* that date from our infancy in *our mothers' arms* to today.

The middle stanza shifts from corporate thanks to a petitionary prayer. In keeping with the hymn's theme of gratitude for blessings, this prayer is addressed to a *bounteous God*. A list of petitions may seem surprising in a hymn of thanks, but even as we ask that God will shower us with particular blessings, we are made aware that these blessings are already ours. Thus we experience the list as one of received blessings for which we are grateful.

The final stanza returns to an expression of thanks to God. All the stops of the proverbial organ continue to be pulled out, as (1) all three persons of the Trinity are named, (2) both earth and heaven are said to adore God, and (3) the time span of the stanza covers what *was, is now, and shall be evermore*.

One more surprise remains. This over-the-top hymn of thanks was forged in the crucible of utmost suffering. Its author was a Lutheran pastor in Ellenberg, Saxony, during the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648). He arrived the year before the war broke out and died the year after it ended. The walled city of Ellenberg was not only overrun three times by hostile armies but also subjected to famine and epidemic illness. During his pastorate in the besieged city, Martin Rinkart presided over more than four thousand burials, including that of his wife.

We can claim the devotional potential of this hymn by going with its flow and allowing its words to unleash our feelings of gratitude to God. ■

Multiple websites note that this hymnic poem is a cornucopia of biblical references—as many as sixty or seventy in number. An evocative parallel to the poem as a whole is David’s prayer when the people of Israel assembled to bring contributions for the building of the temple. After extolling God’s greatness, David prayed, “Now we thank you, our God, and praise your glorious name” (1 Chron. 29:13). This hymn likewise begins, *Now thank we all our God*.



Jean-François Millet, *The Potato Harvest*, 1855

Bless the Lord, O My Soul

PSALM 103

Bless the Lord, O my soul,
and all that is within me,
bless his holy name!
Bless the Lord, O my soul,
and forget not all his benefits,

who forgives all your iniquity,
who heals all your diseases,
who redeems your life from the pit,
who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,
who satisfies you with good
so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.

The Lord works righteousness
and justice for all who are oppressed.
He made known his ways to Moses,
his acts to the people of Israel.

The Lord is merciful and gracious,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
He will not always chide,
nor will he keep his anger forever.
He does not deal with us according to our sins,
nor repay us according to our iniquities.
For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him;

as far as the east is from the west,
so far does he remove our transgressions from us.
As a father shows compassion to his children,
so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear him.

For he knows our frame;
he remembers that we are dust.
As for man, his days are like grass;
he flourishes like a flower of the field;
for the wind passes over it, and it is gone,
and its place knows it no more.
But the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to
everlasting on those who fear him,
and his righteousness to children's children,
to those who keep his covenant
and remember to do his commandments.

The Lord has established his throne in the heavens,
and his kingdom rules over all.
Bless the Lord, O you his angels,
you mighty ones who do his word,
obeying the voice of his word!
Bless the Lord, all his hosts,
his ministers, who do his will!
Bless the Lord, all his works,
in all places of his dominion.
Bless the Lord, O my soul! ■

THIS IS A POEM OF SELF-ADDRESS, as highlighted by the speaker's command to his own soul in the opening and closing lines. It is also a poem of summons in which the speaker awakens *all that is within* him to take stock of God's blessings and respond to them with gratitude. The key to experiencing this psalm as a thanksgiving poem is to embrace its command, in line 5, to *forget not all his benefits*. If we heed this admonition, we avoid a great deterrent to gratitude, namely, taking blessings for granted.

The backbone of a psalm of thanks is the technique of the *catalog* or list. We will appreciate catalog-of-blessings psalms most accurately if in our thinking we transmute such verbs as *bless* and *praise* to the verb *thank*. In Psalm 103, the poet thanks God for his benefits, both personally and in the believing community.

Psalm 103 is so exalted in tone and expansive in scope that the clarity of its design might surprise us. The poem unfolds, stanza by stanza, according to the following outline: a threefold call to bless God; a catalog of five benefits from God in the speaker's and our own personal lives; God's acts of benefit in the life of Israel and by extension the believing community throughout history; the magnitude of God's forgiveness; the permanence of God's steadfast love in contrast to the brevity of human life; God's universal kingship. The magnitude of all this is breathtaking, but, in a master stroke, the poem ends in quietude: *Bless [or thank] the Lord, O my soul*.

As a psalm of gratitude, Psalm 103 has proved versatile in the life of the church. In some families it is a "birthday psalm" that is read during birthday celebrations. In some churches it is read at the conclusion of Communion services. In liturgical churches, it is an all-purpose poem for feast days.

The psalm's devotional takeaway is expressed in line 5, as it commands us not to forget but to remember God's blessings, to rehearse them to ourselves, and to be grateful to the great God who confers them. ■

The importance of not forgetting to thank God for the blessings he confers is declared in striking fashion in Romans 1, in which one of the indictments of sinful humanity is that those who rejected God "did not . . . give thanks to him" (v. 21).

