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## Thanksgiving

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## Thanksgiving

**Mark W. Harris**

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It had been an awful week.

Oh, I don't need to go into all of the details, but you know what they are like. One of those weeks in which you have given everything that you have had to give...and then some...but it still isn't enough.

It was one of those weeks

in which everyone wants something from you; the phone was ringing constantly; there had been one meeting after another; and you came out of it feeling discouraged, demoralized, unappreciated.

I was tired; that probably had a lot to do with it.

I don't often give in to self-pity—nor even have cause to do so—but this was a day for such indulgence.

“Good God, I wish that you would just take all this, and just leave me alone for awhile,” I muttered to myself.

It was lunch hour, and things had quieted down—at least for a while.

Muriel, our secretary, had locked the office door on her way out to grab some lunch, so I closed the door to my study and lay down on the couch, hoping to get ten minutes of rest before I headed up to the hospital.

I had just barely closed my eyes when there was a knock at my door.

“For Pete's sake, who can that be?” I grumbled. I got up and opened the door...and there she was, a total stranger, someone whom I had never seen before in my life, standing at the door to my study!

“How did you get in here?” I asked, wondering how she had got past

the locked outer door. But she ignored my question. "Oh, that doesn't matter. I came to honour your request."

"My request? What request?"

"Why, the one you off-handedly proposed just a few moments ago: 'God, I wish that you would just take all this, and just leave me alone for a while.' I think those were your exact words, weren't they?"

"What's this all about?" I demanded. "Are you trying to sell me something?"

"Oh, no. Perhaps I didn't make myself clear. I am here because God heard your appeal. In fact, God has decided to do just what you asked. God is going to take all this bothersome stuff away, and just leave you alone. In fact, God has decided to take back everything that God has given you, and then you will be free to do whatever you want with what's left!"

You know, it is a strange and ludicrous thing how arrogant and short-sighted we can be.

Oh, I could make the excuse that I was tired and irritable, tinged with more than just a bit of self-pity. But that is not really an excuse. For the fact is that arrogance and short-sightedness are just as likely to happen when we feel on top of things, when we feel we have the world by the tail, when we imagine that we have everything so "in control" that we can handle it all on our own, no matter what might come our way.

On that particular day when I was just fed up to here, God answered my plea, and offered to take it all away. And with an arrogance which reflected my own pride, and foolishness, I accepted the offer. "Sure sounds good to me!" I replied sarcastically.

"DONE!" said the stranger. And she turned and started to walk away. But just as she reached the door into the hallway she stopped and turned to me with a look of almost...well, sadness, in her eyes.

"So how does it feel not to have a care in the world?" she asked

"Doesn't feel any different than it did just a few moments ago," I replied, not even trying to conceal the irritation in my voice. "I still have a sermon to finish for Sunday, and a sick child at home, and...."

"Oh, no, you don't have to worry about any of that," she interrupted.

“You don’t have a sermon to write because you have never been called to serve this congregation—or any other congregation for that matter. In fact, you never went to school. You never had anything to do with the church. Why, you don’t even have the skills that are necessary to fulfill what would have been your life’s calling. And as for your sick daughter, well, there is nothing to worry about there, either, because you don’t have a daughter...or sons, for that matter. You don’t have a wife who loves you, or parents who pray for you each and every night. You don’t have friends, or colleagues.”

Now I have to admit that, for some days, I had just been itching for a fight of some kind. Have you ever felt like that? Well, this woman was really beginning to irritate me.

“I really don’t like your game. I want you to stop this foolishness right now!” I barked.

“But this is no game,” she replied, almost matter-of-factly. “This is just the way it is. After all, you are the one who just wanted to be left alone for a while.”

“I’ve had enough of this foolishness,” I said, and turned to go into my study...But it was empty! It was absolutely bare!

The family photos were gone from my desk, as were the photos of holidays and of the communities I had served in the past. The memorabilia which had hung on my bulletin board had vanished. The book shelves were empty. The hangings, given to me by friends and loved ones, were nowhere to be seen. My diplomas, recounting years of academic work, were gone. There was no hint, no reminders, in that room that I had ever existed!

Now I was getting scared. This was just too weird. I ran over to the phone and dialed our home number. “I am sorry,” a computer generated voice replied, “the number you have dialed is not in service.”

“You don’t have a home,” she offered, off-handedly. “That is all gone.”

“Come on, now! What’s going on here?” I pleaded.

“Just what you asked,” the stranger replied.

“Remember, you are the one who wanted to be left alone. A lot

of people act like that, these days. They take all the gifts that God has freely and graciously given them, and then act as though these gifts were nothing at all. Or they act as if this precious gift of life, and the friends and loved ones whom God gives to us as gifts, are just one big nuisance. Or else, they take the gifts for granted, imagining these gifts to be their right, or something that they've gained on their own. It is pretty easy to make that mistake if all you have ever known has been a life of plenty. But sometimes...well, sometimes maybe you have to lose everything before you realize what you had all along. Maybe you have to lose everything before you understand what is really important."

"So you've taken everything?"

"Oh, no, I've hardly started," she replied.

Have you ever opened your eyes in the middle of the night to discover a dark so deep that you could see nothing—no hint of light, no break in the tapestry of gloom? That is the only way I know to describe what I beheld in the next instant.

"Where am I?" I cried out in alarm.

"You are nowhere," the voice replied.

"In fact, you are nothing. Your world, or at least the world you liked to claim as your own, is gone. Your world of autumn leaves and pumpkin pie, of the first warmth of the spring sun upon your face and the bite of a frosty winter morning, of the delight of a child falling asleep in your lap, of the embrace of your wife, of the gift of your own body, wondrously made, your life...it is all gone. God has done what you asked. God has taken it all back, and will leave you alone...But not quite yet. God wants to give back something that was taken from you."

Several years ago I had a friend who suffered a severe heart attack. He told me about that experience.

About the crushing heaviness in his chest which had overwhelmed him, blotting out all sight and sound. Such a ponderous weight came upon me as I was filled with all the accumulated remorse and sorrow which had been the detritus

of my life: deeds done and left undone; hurts inflicted, whether intentionally or by accident; all the anguish and disappointment I had caused; the opportunities for caring and love I had let pass by...all, all fell upon me like a great millstone.

"Here," said the voice, "God is giving you back what was taken from you—the burden that was relieved, the forgiveness and forgetfulness so freely given. God has taken all back, just as you asked."

"Have you left me nothing?" I cried out, "nothing but this crushing burden and this gloom?"

"Oh, there is one other thing left you," the voice responded, "the one thing that not even God will take back once it has been given, no matter how dimly it may fade, no matter how feebly it may burn. God will not seize the one thing that is left. Hope."

I cannot tell you how long I was there. Was it a moment? An eternity? I had always heard that they were the same in God's sight, and now I believe it.

My world was gone. All those whom I had loved, yet had taken for granted...everything that I had held precious, yet assumed...it was all gone.

She had been right.

Perhaps one of the greatest tragedies of life is that we don't realize what we have; we don't understand what we have been given; we don't celebrate the joyous demands of responsibility. Until it is too late.

It sounded like a telephone ringing, and a faraway voice saying, "Mount Zion, may I help you?"

I opened my eyes and shook myself awake. I was in my office. The air was filling my lungs.

The photos of my family were back on my desk, and the shelves were packed with books. The walls were hung with their familiar photos and hangings and diplomas.

I had been given back my life. Or, rather, not so much "my" life, but the life that had been granted me, the life that has been given us all as a free and gracious gift.

Mere “Thanks,” seems to fall far short—much too far short—considering the magnitude of the gift. Maybe, I thought, maybe nothing less than my life—maybe nothing less than our whole lives—are a suitable offering of thanks.

I arose, and wondered about my sick child at home, and pulled myself together to head out to the hospital.

“What a gift!” I thought. “What a gift! Every sweet and demanding moment, every joyous and worrisome bit of it.”

And with that I left, hoping—hoping in a way I had never hoped before—that in the sharing of this gift that I, that we, may ever praise the Giver in all that we say and do.