

**THANKSGIVING** (תודה, *todah*; εὐχαριστία, *eucharistia*). The act of offering thanks or being thankful, usually to God. Often connected to provision, deliverance, or God's character. Commonly associated in Scripture with meals and worship.

## General Usage in the Bible

The concept of thanksgiving evolves theologically throughout the Bible. In the Old Testament, it is closely tied with the verb "to bless" (ברך, *barakh*; e.g., [Deut 8:10](#)). The most common Hebrew noun used for "thanks" (תודה, *todah*) derives from the verb "to praise, confess" (יָדָה, *yadah*). While Genesis bears little evidence of individuals offering thanks to God, by the time of [Leviticus](#) the Israelites had instituted a thanks offering as part of the sacrificial system ([Lev 7:11–15](#)). Thanksgiving bears a prominent place in the [Psalms](#), both on an individual (e.g., [Psa 116](#)) and communal (e.g., [Psa 100](#)) level.

In the New Testament, thanksgiving is tied to the concept of "grace" (χάρις, *charis*). Most Greek words related to "thanks" are semantically connected, including the noun "thanksgiving" (εὐχαριστία, *eucharistia*), the adjective "thankful" (εὐχαριστος, *eucharistos*), and the verb "to give thanks, be thankful" (εὐχαριστεῶ, *eucharisteō*). People in the New Testament offer thanksgiving to God in worship (e.g., [1 Tim 2:1](#)), individual prayer (e.g., [Acts 28:15](#)), and at meals (e.g., [Matt 15:36–37](#)). Expressions of thanksgiving appear throughout Paul's writings (e.g., [Phil 1:3–8](#)). In the New Testament, thanksgiving is often a response to the redemptive work of Jesus (e.g., [Rom 7:25](#)). Texts like [Luke 24:30](#) indicate that thanksgiving held an important part in Jewish and Christian meals.

## Jewish Prayers of Thanksgiving

According to the Mishnah, the standard prayer for food begins with, "Blessed are you, O Lord, our God, King of the Universe" ([Berakhot 6:1](#); Neusner, *Mishnah*, 9). Those praying then acknowledge God's sovereignty over the specific item being blessed, whether fruit, wine, vegetables, or loaves of bread.

The Babylonian [Talmud](#) forbids anyone from enjoying any pleasure from the world until they have first offered a "blessing" to God, who has provided it ([Berakhot 35a](#); Simon, *Tractate Berakoth*, 134–36). The Babylonian Talmud views the blessing as a means of thanks because pleasure is only made available through God's goodness and love (Kadushin, *The Rabbinic Mind*, 168).

## Jesus' Prayers of Thanksgiving

The New Testament records Jesus offering thanksgiving to God on several occasions. For example, when reflecting upon the division between those who accepted Him and those who rejected Him, Jesus thanks God for hiding His plans from the wise and revealing them instead to little children ([Matt 11:25](#); [Luke 10:21](#)). Also, before raising Lazarus from the dead, Jesus thanks God for hearing Him ([John 11:41–42](#)). The most notable accounts of Jesus giving thanks are during His feeding miracles and at the Last Supper.

### Feeding Miracles

Each Gospel account of Jesus multiplying loaves and fishes ([Matt 14:14–21](#); [15:29–39](#); [Mark 6:30–44](#); [8:1–13](#); [Luke 9:10–17](#); [John 6:1–15](#)) mentions that He "gave thanks" (εὐχαριστεῶ, *eucharisteō*; or

εὐλογέω, *eulogeō*) before miraculously distributing the food. While the two Greek terms used in these accounts hold slightly different meanings—εὐχαριστέω (*eucharisteō*) means “to give thanks,” while εὐλογέω (*eulogeō*) properly means “to bestow a blessing”—the term εὐλογέω (*eulogeō*) seems to be an idiomatic expression meaning “to give thanks” (Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 644). The idea is that Jesus was offering thanks to God as provider, not “blessing” the food in order that it might multiply.

The four main verbs used in the accounts of these [miracles](#) (“took,” “gave thanks,” “broke,” and “gave”) reflect the Jewish pattern of blessing at a meal (Boobyer, “Eucharistic Interpretation,” 162). The New Testament authors’ decision to include such specific details may demonstrate their intention to point toward the [Last Supper](#) (Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, 361–363). The most explicit support for this comes from the Gospel of John. John’s Gospel does not include an account of the Last Supper. Instead, it associates the feeding of the 5,000 with [Passover](#) ([John 6:4](#)) and follows the event with Jesus’ declaration that He is “the bread of life” whose flesh and blood provide eternal life ([John 6:25–59](#)).

### *At the Last Supper*

The Synoptic Gospels’ accounts of the Last Supper record Jesus offering thanksgiving ([Matt 26:17–29](#); [Mark 14:12–25](#); [Luke 22:7–38](#)). Jesus acts as the “head of the family” at the meal by offering the thanksgiving prayer both for the bread and the wine. The verbs “gave thanks” (εὐχαριστέω, *eucharisteō*) and “gave the blessing” (εὐλογέω, *eulogeō*) are used interchangeably in these accounts, sometimes for the bread (εὐλογέω, *eulogeō*; in Matthew and Mark, εὐχαριστέω, *eucharisteō*; in Luke) and sometimes for the wine (εὐχαριστέω, *eucharisteō*; in Matthew and Mark, no mention in Luke). In [1 Corinthians 11:23–25](#) the Apostle Paul confirms the tradition by noting how Jesus “gave thanks” (εὐχαριστέω, *eucharisteō*) between taking the bread and breaking it, and how “in the same way” He took the cup after the meal, presumably also giving thanks.

Scholars debate what type of meal the Last Supper actually was (Routledge, “Passover and Last Supper,” 205), whether a Passover Seder ([Mark 14:12–16](#)), a farewell meal ([Matt 26:29](#)), a preview of the end-of-the-age banquet ([Luke 22:29–30](#); compare [Rev 19:9](#)), or something entirely new. Nodet suggests that the historical dating from the Jewish calendar and John’s association of the Passover with the crucifixion indicate the Last Supper could not have been a Passover meal (Nodet, “On Jesus’ Last Supper,” 348–369). However, Brumberg-Kraus notes that the Synoptic Gospels seem to have the Passover in mind in their narrations of the Last Supper (Brumberg-Kraus, “Not by Bread Alone,” 166).

According to the Mishnah, the Passover meal proceeds through four cups of wine with various food, elements, and stories between ([Pesahim 10:1–7](#); Neusner, *Mishnah*, 249–251). Each person was “to regard himself as if he personally has gone forth from Egypt” ([Pesahim 10:5](#); Neusner, *Mishnah*, 250). It is difficult to say how different a Passover meal in the first century would have been from the Jewish traditions of the Mishnah or today’s practices, but likely there would have been similarities (Routledge, “Passover and Last Supper,” 208).

If the Last Supper was or was modeled after the Passover, the bread for which Jesus gave thanks would likely have been the unleavened bread. However, rather than talking about it as the “bread of affliction” ([Deut 16:3](#)), Jesus described it as His own body (France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 568). The wine for which He gave thanks would likely have been either the second cup of the meal, which was closer to the eating of the unleavened bread, or the third, which was known as the “cup of blessing” and came after the meal (Bowman, *Gospel of Mark*, 263–265). Later tradition has each person drinking from their

John D. Barry et al., eds., *The Lexham Bible Dictionary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

own individual cups ([Pesahim 10:1](#); Neusner, *Mishnah*, 249), but it is difficult to tell whether this would have been true in the first century or whether Jesus intentionally passed only the one cup for emphasis.

## Thanksgiving in the Early Church

Thanksgiving played an important role in the life of the early church, whether in letters, worship, the Lord's Supper, or private prayer.

### *In New Testament Letters*

Most of Paul's letters contain a section of thanksgiving, typically after the formal greeting and address. This was a common feature of Hellenistic letters in Paul's time, which offered thanks to the gods for personal blessings (O'Brien, "Letters," 707). Paul offers thanks to God the Father, usually in regard to the faith of the specific church he is addressing (e.g., [1 Thess 1:2–10](#)). His thanksgiving statements also serve to introduce the primary themes of his letters.

### *At Christian Meals*

The [book of Acts](#) and the New Testament letters mention thanksgiving in relation to Christian meals. For example, the book of Acts recounts that after enduring a storm at sea, Paul "took some bread and gave thanks to God in front of them all. Then he broke it and began to eat" ([Acts 27:35](#) NIV). Paul also mentions thanksgiving in association with meals in his discussions of proper eating for Christians.

- In [Romans 14](#), Paul addresses a division between those who feel they can eat anything and those who eat only vegetables ([Rom 14:2](#)). He clarifies that each was acceptable to God because "Whoever eats meat does so to the Lord, for they give thanks to God; and whoever abstains does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God" ([Rom 14:6](#) NIV).
- In First Corinthians, Paul addresses whether Christians should eat meat that had previously been sacrificed to idols ([1 Cor 10:25–28](#)). After encouraging his audience to be sensitive so as not to offend another's conscience ([1 Cor 10:28–29](#)), he states, "If I take part in the meal with thankfulness, why am I denounced because of something I thank God for?" ([1 Cor 10:30](#) NIV).
- In First Timothy, Paul counters false teachers who forbid marriage and the eating of certain foods ([1 Tim 4:3](#)). He argues that God created all foods as good and they should be received with "thanksgiving by those who believe and who know the truth" ([1 Tim 4:3–4](#) NIV). To Paul, "nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer" ([1 Tim 4:4–5](#) NIV).

### *In Communal Worship*

Thanksgiving seems to have been a regular part of the early church's [worship life](#) (e.g., [1 Cor 14:16](#)). Paul instructs the churches to give thanks to God for all things ([Eph 5:20](#)), which was part of God's will for them ([1 Thess 5:16–18](#)). They were to be anxious about nothing, but instead to present their requests to God with thanksgiving ([Phil 4:6](#)). [First Timothy 2:1–2](#) notes that as part of worship, Christians should offer petitions, intercessions, prayers, and thanksgiving for all people, including earthly rulers ([1 Tim 2:1–2](#)). News of the spreading of the gospel and generosity were to result in thanksgiving overflowing toward God ([2 Cor 4:14–15](#); [9:11–12](#)). In the visions of [Revelation](#), the four living creatures ([Rev 4:9](#)), the angels

([Rev 7:12](#)), and the 24 elders ([Rev 11:17](#)) in the [heavenly throne room](#) provide a model for offering thanksgiving to God.

### *At the Lord's Supper*

Thanksgiving was likely an important part of the celebration of the [Lord's Supper](#). In First Corinthians, Paul indicates that “the cup of blessing” (εὐλογία, *eulogia*) was the cup for which they “offer a blessing” (εὐλογέω, *eulogeō*; [1 Cor 10:16](#)). This followed the tradition of Jesus, who “gave thanks” before passing the bread and wine ([1 Cor 11:24–25](#)). Paul notes that he had received this tradition himself and subsequently handed it down to the Corinthian church ([1 Cor 11:23](#)).

The *Didache* refers to the Lord's Supper as the Eucharist ([Didache 9:1](#); Milavec, *Didache*, 31), which comes from the Greek noun for “thanksgiving” (εὐχαριστία, *eucharistia*). The document presents the prayer for the cup as follows: “We give you thanks, our Father, for the holy vine of your servant David which you revealed to us through your servant Jesus. To you is the glory forever” ([Didache 9:2](#); Milavec, *Didache*, 31). The prayer for the bread is: “We give you thanks, our Father, for the life and knowledge which you revealed to us through your servant Jesus. To you is the glory forever. Just as this broken loaf was scattered over the hills, and, having been gathered together, became one; in like fashion, may your church be gathered together from the ends of the earth into your kingdom. Because yours is the glory and the power through Jesus Christ forever” ([Didache 9:3–4](#); Milavec, *Didache*, 31–33). The name Eucharist reflects the church's view of the Lord's Supper as an occasion of “thanks” for Christ's offering of Himself in redemption. Ignatius ([To the Philadelphians 4:1](#); [To the Smyrnaeans 7:1](#); [8:1](#)) and Justin ([First Apology 66:1](#)) also mention the name Eucharist.

### *In Private Prayer and Life*

Guthrie notes that thanksgiving is a characteristic of the entire Christian life (Guthrie, *Theology as Thanksgiving*, 181–216). Christians are to thank God for creating and sustaining the world and for His ongoing redemption of it through Jesus. They are expected to pray to God privately ([Matt 5:6](#)) and thank Him for what He has done ([Luke 17:12–19](#)). The Psalms display individual prayers of thanks ([Psa 69:30–36](#)), and the New Testament includes individual thanks for fellow believers ([Phlm 1:4](#)). Thanklessness is regarded as a rejection of God, which leads to further sin and eventual judgment ([Rom 1:21](#)).

Ultimately, Christians are to do all things in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him ([Col 3:17](#)). From this perspective, all of an individual's life in Christ—whether in worship, at meals, or otherwise—becomes an opportunity to offer thanks.

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