"A Sacrifice of Thanksgiving"
(Psalm 116:17)

Introduction: We come now to the last of the extraordinary elements of worship, which is really not an extraordinary element, but an extraordinary occasion of worship, that of thanksgiving. There are things that you should give thanks to the Lord for every day. Every day He showers you with His blessings. He gives you food and clothing, health and strength, the warmth of family love, as well as the encouragement of Christian fellowship. He gives good gifts to the unrepentant as well. Luke says, "FOR HE HIMSELF IS KIND TO UNGRATEFUL AND EVIL MEN" (6:35). They never give Him thanks or praise, and because of this, they store up wrath for themselves in the day of His judgment. But don’t you let the praises of God lie unspoken when there is so much for you to thank Him for. This daily thanksgiving, which should be lifted to the Lord with your prayers, is not what we are considering this evening, rather, we will look at those situations in which we should lift up special thanks because of the special occasions which God brings for giving it. And what I want you to see from this text is that,

It is right at times to offer to the Lord a special sacrifice of thanksgiving because of His special mercy received. There are times when in God’s providence He brings terrible dangers through sickness or persecution or oppression. And when in His kindness and mercy He delivers us out of them, it is fitting for us to set aside a special time to give special thanks to Him.

I. In Our Passage This Evening, the Psalmist Had Received Deliverance from Some Great Danger Which Brought Him into the House of God to Pay a Vow of Thanksgiving Before to Him.

A. There Are Different Kinds of Psalms in the Book of Psalms. This Particular Psalm Is Known as a Thanksgiving Psalm, or a Psalm of Praise.
   1. The psalms are grouped together according to their similarities in order to better study and understand them.
   2. This particular psalm is called a thanksgiving psalm because that is its main purpose: to give thanks to God for His mercies.
   3. Typically, the thanksgiving psalm, or the psalm of praise, has these six parts.
      a. First, the psalmist proclaims what he is coming to do, such as, "Come and here what the Lord has done for me".
      b. Second, he then describes in a very brief account what it was that the Lord has done: "He saved me out of all my troubles".
      c. Third, he recounts the danger was that he was faced with: "I was sinking down even unto death."
      d. Fourth, he tells how God delivered him: "But the Lord lifted me up and set me in a level place."
      e. Fifth, he tells how he had promised the Lord that if He would deliver Him that he would give Him praise: "I called upon the Lord and said, 'O Lord, deliver my soul, and I will give you praise.'"
      f. And lastly, he gives Him that praise which he vowed: "I love you my Lord and my God."
      g. All of the thanksgiving psalms don’t follow this pattern
exactly, but have this general shape and character.

B. And So It Is with Our Passage Tonight.
1. The psalmist tells us of some great danger that he was faced with and how the Lord delivered him.
2. He proclaims, "I LOVE THE LORD."
3. He tells us briefly why he loves the Lord, "BECAUSE HE HEARS MY VOICE AND MY SUPPLICATIONS. BECAUSE HE HAS INCLINED HIS EAR TO ME."
4. He tells us in very general terms what the danger was that he was faced with, "THE CORDS OF DEATH ENCOMPASSED ME, AND THE TERRORS OF SHEOL CAME UPON ME; I FOUND DISTRESS AND SORROW."
5. He recounts for us that the Lord was the One who saved him, "THEN I CALLED UPON THE NAME OF THE LORD: 'O LORD, I BESEECH THEE, SAVE MY LIFE!' GRACIOUS IS THE LORD, AND RIGHTEOUS; YES, OUR GOD IS COMPASSIONATE. THE LORD PRESERVES THE SIMPLE; I WAS BROUGHT LOW, AND HE SAVED ME. RETURN TO YOUR REST, O MY SOUL, FOR THE LORD HAS DEALT BOUNTIFULLY WITH YOU. FOR THOU hast RESCUED MY SOUL FROM DEATH, MY EYES FROM TEARS, MY FEET FROM STUMBLING. I SHALL WALK BEFORE THE LORD IN THE LAND OF THE LIVING."
6. He tells us that he had made vows to the Lord, "WHAT SHALL I RENDER TO THE LORD FOR ALL HIS BENEFITS TOWARDS ME? I SHALL PAY MY VOWS TO THE LORD, O MAY IT BE IN THE PRESENCE OF ALL HIS PEOPLE. . . TO THEE I SHALL OFFER A SACRIFICE OF THANKSGIVING, AND CALL UPON THE NAME OF THE LORD."
7. And of course, he pays what he vowed, "I LOVE THE LORD, BECAUSE HE HEARS MY VOICE AND MY SUPPLICATIONS. . . . GRACIOUS IS THE LORD, AND RIGHTEOUS; YES, OUR GOD IS COMPASSIONATE." Really the whole psalm is arranged and then delivered to compel all the people of God in the great congregation to praise Him for what he had done for his poor servant.
8. It is appropriate then for the people of God to give special thanks to the Lord in the case of special deliverances.

II. Because of This Biblical Principle, It Has Been the Practice in Our Church's History to Also Set Aside Special Days of Giving Thanks to God for His Mercies.
A. In the Original "Directory for the Public Worship of God" Developed at the Westminster Assembly, We See This Described for Us.
1. In the section called, "Concerning the Observation of Days of Public Thanksgiving", we read, "When any such day is to be kept, let notice be given of it, and of the occasion thereof, some convenient time before, that the people may the better prepare themselves thereunto.

"The day being come, and the congregation (after private preparations) being assembled, the minister is to begin with a word of exhortation, to stir up the people to the duty for which they are met, and with a short prayer for God's assistance and blessing, (as at other conventions for public worship,) according to the particular occasion of their meeting.

"Let him then make some pithy narration of the deliverance obtained, or mercy received, or of whatever hath occasioned that assembling of the congregation, that all may better understand
it, or be minded of it, and more affected with it.

"And, because singing of psalms is of all other the most proper ordinance for expressing of joy and thanksgiving, let some pertinent psalm or psalms be sung for that purpose, before or after the reading of some portion of the word suitable to the present business.

"Then let the minister, who is to preach, proceed to further exhortation and prayer before his sermon, with special reference to the present work: after which, let him preach upon some text of Scripture pertinent to the occasion.

"The sermon ended, let him not only pray, as at other times after preaching is directed, with remembrance of the necessities of the Church, King, and State, (if before the sermon they were omitted,) but enlarge himself in due and solemn thanksgiving for former mercies and deliverances; but more especially for that which at the present calls them together to give thanks: with humble petition for the continuance and renewing of God's wonted [desired] mercies, as need shall be, and for sanctifying grace to make a right use thereof. And so, having sung another psalm, suitable to the mercy, let him dismiss the congregation with a blessing, that they may have some convenient time for their repast and refreshing."

2. But this isn't the end. This was not simply a service of thanksgiving, but an entire day set aside to give thanks to the Lord. So the minister then charges the people that they not spend the day in worldliness, but to sanctify it, much like the Sabbath, so that when they gather together again in the evening for public worship, they will be prepared to give further thanks and praise to the Lord. It continues, "When the congregation shall be again assembled, the like course in praying, reading, preaching, singing of psalms, and offering up more praise and thanksgiving, that is before directed for the morning, is to be renewed and continued, so far as the time will give leave.

"At one or both of the publick meetings that day, a collection is to be made for the poor, (and in the like manner upon the day of publick humiliation [this referring to a day of public fasting],) that their loins may bless us, and rejoice the more with us. And the people are to be exhorted, at the end of the latter meeting, to spend the residue [remainder] of that day in holy duties, and testifications of Christian love and charity one towards another, and of rejoicing more and more in the Lord; as becometh those who make the joy of the Lord their strength" (392-3).

3. What is described here is a day of public thanksgiving which is called by the elders of the church to give thanks to the Lord for some remarkable deliverance that He has brought about.

a. It doesn't appear from what we've read that this day was the Christian Sabbath. The Sabbath is a day set aside by divine appointment to celebrate the birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension of our Lord. It is a day that we
set aside by God’s command to give Him public and private praise and thanksgiving for His delivering us from our bondage to death, sin and hell.

b. What they are referring to is another day of the week which is set apart solely to give praise to the Lord for some particular mercy received for which all of God’s people ought to meet to give God thanks.

B. Think of How Appropriate Such A Day Would Have Been in Days Past.
   1. Things were very different in the past than they are today.
      a. Those were the days of greater uncertainty. For instance, at the time that the Westminster Assembly was meeting to prepare this document, the country of England was in a state of civil war. The Parliamentary forces under Oliver Cromwell were fighting the royalist forces of King Charles I of England. If Charles were to win, the Assembly would have been disbanded, for it was called by the Long Parliament to do a work which the King would not have approved of. During the time of the Assembly’s meeting there was regular fasting and prayer for their work, and undoubtedly for the war that was then being fought. And it would not be hard to imagine, that after the Parliamentary forces defeated the royal army, that there were days of public thanksgiving for the preservation of their churches, ministers, and their faith.
      b. Or think of what it must have been like for Jonathan Edwards and his family and congregation when he lived in the small frontier town of Stockbridge, west of New England. At that time the French-American Indian wars were being fought. The French were enlisting the Indians to help them fight against the British in their struggle to control North America. At Stockbridge there were only a few American soldiers, and a few Indians. And Stockbridge, as I’ve said, was a frontier town, which means that it was many miles from the more populated areas of the colonies, about fifty miles, which at that time was a long distance. What could they do when faced with the onslaught of French Soldiers and their Indian allies? Help would never arrive on time. As a matter of fact, Edwards has written more than one letter asking for additional help, but because of the extensiveness of the war, there were no additional soldiers to be deployed. Do you think that Edwards and his congregation fasted and sought the Lord in those days? They surely did. And the Lord mightily answered and kept them safe. Only a few casualties and little loss of property occurred. When the Lord in His gracious Providence brought them through those dark days with such small losses do you think that they had a day of public thanksgiving to the Lord? Surely they did. And you would as well if you had seen the Lord act on your behalf in such a powerful way.

C. But Moving into the Present Day, It Seems We Are Rarely Faced with Such Situations.
   1. During WWII, with the threat of Nazi invasion into the Allied nations, many churches probably called for public fasting. For if Hitler had succeeded in conquered Europe, either Russia or the United States would probably have been next. And on the day of their defeat, those churches which fasted and prayed surely
held days of public thanksgiving.

2. Perhaps the same thing may have taken place during the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the Persian Gulf War. But these wars were a little farther removed, and seemed less immediately threatening, unless those you love were involved in them. Because of this there were probably fewer who were stirred up to seek the Lord.

3. To the best of my recollection, there has not been one day of public thanksgiving in any of the churches that I have been a part of, except for the observation of a Thanksgiving Day service, which is more of an accommodation to our culture, than it is a day of special thanks for some special deliverance from God.

4. Days for giving public thanks is one of those things which has been lost from the rich Puritan heritage that the Lord gave to us in the Westminster Assembly’s work. As you’ve already seen, it was a common practice under the Old Dispensation of the church. And just because we don’t see it repeated in the New Testament doesn’t mean that it is no longer valid. We certainly don’t see anything that abrogates it.

5. People of God, the Lord may bring such days of distress and persecution upon us in His gracious Providence to cause us to seek Him with public humiliation and prayer. He often brings about dark dispensations in His church so that His love and His mercy towards us will shine through. Perhaps you are personally going through one such trial now. But if He should bring upon us such a day, whether it be in the form of some personal affliction or of public, let us be ready to fast and pray, and seek the Lord for His grace and mercy. And when He brings the awaited answer, for He most assuredly will, let us be ready to offer praise to Him on a day of public thanksgiving. Let our hearts respond to Him, even as the psalmist’s did, "TO THEE I SHALL OFFER A SACRIFICE OF THANKSGIVING, AND CALL UPON THE NAME OF THE LORD. I SHALL PAY MY VOWS TO THE LORD, OH MAY IT BE IN THE PRESENCE OF ALL HIS PEOPLE, IN THE COURTS OF THE LORD’S HOUSE." Amen.