

KEEPING AMERICAN HISTORY ACCURATE

THE TRUE HISTORY OF THANKSGIVING

By Pastor Jeremiah J. Sargent

THANKSGIVING — one of the great American holidays that we as Christians can truly celebrate and enjoy! Unlike many of the other national holidays, Thanksgiving Day does not have its roots in paganism or in false religious teaching. It was born out of a desire from our nation's early settlers to publicly thank their Creator for His abundant blessings upon them. As Christians, we should rejoice that our nation still acknowledges this holiday and be proactive in encouraging others to see the good hand of God upon our country. In a day and age when any reference to God or recognition of God's blessings is trying to be silenced, God's people need to set the example of thankfulness (Psalm 105:1) and be a voice that proclaims the merciful compassions and great faithfulness of our Creator (Lamentations 3:22,23).

Many in our nation today are quickly forgetting the important history behind our national Thanksgiving holiday. Its spiritual significance is no longer mentioned by our nation's leaders, and the modern history books are distorting and removing historical accounts. As a result, Thanksgiving is now centered on spending time with family and friends, eating turkey and pumpkin pie, and enjoying a day off from work to watch football. How sad to see such a wonderful American tradition of expressing our gratitude to our Creator turn into an activity of selfishness and gluttony! In an effort to protect this God-honoring holiday and to keep American history accurate for our children and grandchildren, let us be reminded of the events that brought about this great American holiday called Thanksgiving.

LONG VOYAGE TO AMERICA

In the fall of 1620, a group of Pilgrims who were fleeing religious persecution in Europe secured passage on the cargo vessel *Mayflower* and embarked on the extremely difficult journey of crossing the Atlantic Ocean. For two full months, 102 people were wedged in a cargo space with no more than five and a half feet of headroom. Restricted from coming above deck because of the violent storms, they were forced to dwell in the poorly ventilated room for the entire trip. No one could bathe, change their clothes, or even cook food. William Bradford, a prominent member of the group, wrote this concerning the voyage, *"...they put to sea again with a prosperous wind, which continued several days together, which was some encouragement unto them; yet according to the usual manner many were afflicted with seasickness."* This was no pleasure cruise!

The Pilgrims comforted themselves by singing the Psalms, but this "noise" irritated one of the ship's crewmembers. This man called the Pilgrims *"psalm-singing puke-stockings"* and voiced the delight he would have in throwing their dead corpses overboard after they succumbed to disease. As it turned out, this crewmember was the only person on the voyage to become sick and be thrown overboard. William Bradford writes, *"But it pleased God before they came half seas over, to smite this young man with a grievous disease, of which he died in a desperate manner, and so was himself the first that was thrown*

overboard. Thus his curses light on his own head and it was an astonishment to all his fellows for they noted it to be the just hand of God upon him.” God providentially protected His people.

During one of the terrible storms, the main beam of the mast cracked; if not repaired, it threatened to send the *Mayflower* to the bottom of the Atlantic. But again the providential hand of God was at work. A preacher by the name of William Brewster had a burden to print Bibles and brought his printing press on board. They were able to use a large iron screw from the printing press to repair the beam.

SAFE ARRIVAL IN AMERICA

At daybreak on November 9, after sixty-six days at sea, the cry of “Land Ho” was finally heard. Land was sighted off what is now Cape Cod, Massachusetts, but that was not where the Pilgrims wanted to be. They had intended to establish their new colony in the northern parts of Virginia, but two factors interrupted their plans — the winds had blown them off course, and some other Englishmen bribed the crew to land somewhere else so they themselves could settle in the northern part of Virginia. But once again God was watching over them and the Pilgrims were right where God wanted them to be. Had they actually landed near the Hudson River, they would have been attacked by hostile Indians. Instead, there were no Indians on Cape Cod when the Pilgrims arrived there.

Four years before the Pilgrims arrived in Cape Cod, a Frenchman on a fishing voyage was captured by the Patuxet Indian tribe. Just before they killed him, the Frenchman told the Indians that God would destroy them all and would replace them with another nation. The Indians boastfully declared that his God could never kill them. However, when the Pilgrims landed in that same region, the land had already been cleared and the fields had already been cultivated, but those Indians were nowhere to be found. Nearly all of them died of the plague a year or two earlier.

FIRST THANKSGIVING IN AMERICA

Despite safety from hostile Indians, the Pilgrims barely survived their first winter. Only four families escaped without burying at least one family member. But in the spring of 1621, God sent Squanto, a Patuxet Indian who could speak English and teach survival skills, to the Pilgrim’s colony. In 1605, as a young man, Squanto had been captured by British explorers and taken to England as a slave. During his time in England, he mastered the English language and helped supply the Council for New England with valuable information about the New World. After spending nine years in England, he was able to escape and return to his native territory shortly before the Pilgrims arrived.

Probably the most important thing Squanto taught the Pilgrims was how to plant the Indians’ winter crop—corn. The Pilgrims thanked God for this wonderful helper, describing him as *“a special instrument sent of God for their good beyond expectations.”* Squanto died within a few years after coming to the aid of the Pilgrims, but before his death he prayed *“that he might go to the Englishman’s God in Heaven.”* Other Indians whom Squanto had introduced to the Pilgrims were also impressed with their God.

During the summer of 1621, when it appeared the year’s corn harvest would not survive the severe drought, the Pilgrims called for a day of fasting and prayer. By the end of the day, the rains came and

miraculously revived the corn fields back to life. One of the Indians who observed this miracle remarked that their God must be a very great God, because when they prayed to their gods for rain, it always rained so hard that the corn stalks broke. They noticed that the Pilgrim's God had sent a very gentle rain that did not damage the corn harvest. It was that same miraculous corn harvest that provided the grain for the Pilgrims' first Thanksgiving meal with their Indian friends and helpers.

Many today believe that we celebrate Thanksgiving because the Pilgrims were thanking their Indian friends for helping them survive; but the evidence of history shows that on that first Thanksgiving Day, the thanks of both Pilgrims and Indians went to God for His great goodness toward them all.

THANKSGIVING CONTINUES IN AMERICA

Even though the Pilgrims hosted the first Thanksgiving dinner in America, the holiday itself did not actually begin until after the Revolutionary War and our American Constitution had been adopted. (Almost 170 years after the first Thanksgiving dinner!)

In 1789, Congress "*recommended a day of public thanksgiving and prayer*" to thank God for blessing America. President Washington declared November 26, 1789, as the first national day of prayer and thanksgiving to the Lord. Another 75 years later, after the Civil War ended, President Abraham Lincoln established the last Thursday in November as a day to acknowledge "*the gracious gifts of the Most High God*" bestowed upon America. Every president did the same until 1941 when Congress officially made Thanksgiving a national holiday.

Now that you know the true story, this Thanksgiving help keep American history accurate by make sure that your children and your grandchildren learn it too. Let us join with those grateful Americans before us in giving thanks to God for blessing our country. Happy Thanksgiving!

References:

What Hath God Wrought by Dr. William P. Grady
Bradford's History of Plymouth Plantation by William T. Davis
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Assorted articles on the subject

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