

# THANKSGIVING

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Besides symbolizing a time when many of us gather to feast on turkey, cranberry sauce, and pumpkin pie—what does the Thanksgiving holiday truly mean? A few years ago I did a bit of research and shared with you a bit of the modern history of Thanksgiving in North America. This week I revisited that research and thought that I would again bring out some of this information. The history of thanksgiving in America has been somewhat glamorized with beautiful pictures of the Pilgrims enjoying great feasts with tables laden with food. That is partly true, but there is more to the story.

This morning I would like to share some historical information about Thanksgiving in the U.S. and Canada and then go to the Scriptures to look at some Scripture passages that exhort us to give thanks to God and some of the reasons for thanksgiving.

(Some of this material is quoted directly from various sources.)

America's revered holiday was founded by a group of struggling Pilgrims during the fall of 1621. Peter Marshall and David Manuel's account, *The Light and the Glory*, tells how the Pilgrims at Plymouth Rock endured extreme hardship to pioneer a new land. Three long months at sea aboard *The Mayflower* and a brutal winter left them ragged, malnourished, and susceptible to disease. During the first four months of that year, nearly half of the emigrants had succumbed to illness and died under the harsh strain of their barren lifestyle.

The Pilgrims' daily existence was a life-or-death battle to overcome constant hunger, sickness, and exposure to the elements. Crudely assembled houses made of mud daub were their only shelter from the icy New England weather. Because they were not yet knowledgeable about their new environment's agriculture, planting gardens in the hostile conditions proved virtually fruitless. Every meal was portioned out meticulously. The death toll, a constant reminder of their fragility, rose steadily. At one point only 5 men were well enough to care for the sick. Despite their tribulations, the Pilgrims thanked the Lord every day, petitioning Him for rehabilitation. One morning, during an ordinary Sunday worship service, The Lord sent tangible evidence that He had heard

their prayers. Their church service was interrupted by an unexpected guest, an Algonquin Indian chief who assessed their hopeless situation and returned with a helper named Squanto. The Pilgrims, who have warred with Indians before and lived with a continuous fear of being attacked by them, were astonished by their new friends' eagerness to provide much needed assistance.

Squanto, a Pateuxet Indian who spoke perfect English, taught the Pilgrims how to hunt game, trap beavers, and plant Indian corn, a staple that would eventually save their lives.

When the harvest yielded more than the Pilgrims could eat, Governor William Bradford, their elected leader, declared a day of public thanksgiving. He invited the chief of a friendly neighbouring Indian tribe to join in their tribute of Thanksgiving. The Pilgrims were excited to celebrate with their honoured guest but were completely shocked when he arrived with 90 other Indians.

Although God had provided abundantly, their food supply would not accommodate a group of this size, and they had no idea how to feed their visitors. Despite their quandary, all worries were soon dismissed. To their amazement and ever-increasing thankfulness, the Indians had bought with them 5 dressed deer and a 12 fat wild turkeys. Over time they taught the women how to make pudding, maple syrup, and an Indian delicacy-roasted pop corn.

But the Pilgrims' trials were far from finished; their plentiful autumn was followed by a particularly treacherous winter. Unfortunately, the weather proved to be the least of their ailments. In November a ship called *The Fortune* dropped anchor in their harbour. Aboard the ship were 35 more colonists who had brought with them no provisions—no food, no extra clothing, and no equipment for survival. Additionally, the oppression of the physical environment had become almost unbearable after a 12-week drought dried up their crops and withered their spirits. The newcomers' arrival had drained already inadequate food rations and there was no obvious resource for sustenance. At their lowest point, the Pilgrims were reduced to a daily ration of 5 kernels of corn apiece. In utter desperation they fell to their knees and prayed for 8 hours without ceasing.

Again God heard their supplications: 14 days of rain followed. A second Day of Thanksgiving was declared. The neighbouring Indian chief was again their honoured guest; He brought with him 120 braves. The pilgrims feasted on game and turkey as they had during the previous celebration, only this time one dish was different. The first course, served on an empty plate in front of each person, consisted of 5 kernels of corn, a gentle reminder of God's faithful provision for them.

The Pilgrims humble response to their affliction is evidenced by their many writing which express deeply thankful hearts. We can learn countless lessons about sincere thankfulness from their example.

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The history of Thanksgiving in Canada goes back to an explorer, Martin Frobisher, who had been trying to find a northern passage to the Pacific Ocean. Frobisher's Thanksgiving was not for harvest but homecoming. He had safely returned from a search for the Northwest Passage, avoiding the later fate of Henry Hudson and Sir John Franklin. In the year 1578, he held a formal ceremony in Newfoundland to give thanks for surviving the long journey. The feast was one of the first Thanksgiving celebrations by Europeans in North America.

At the same time, French settlers, having crossed the ocean and arrived in Canada with explorer Samuel de Champlain, in 1604 onwards also held huge feasts of thanks. They even formed 'The Order of Good Cheer' and gladly shared their food with their First Nations neighbours.

After the Seven Years' War ended in 1763 handing over of New France to the British, the citizens of Halifax held a special day of Thanksgiving. Thanksgiving days were observed beginning in 1799 but did not occur every year. After the American Revolution, American refugees who remained loyal to Great Britain moved from the newly independent United States and came to Canada. They brought the customs and practices of the American Thanksgiving to Canada. The first Thanksgiving Day after Canadian Confederation was observed as a civic holiday on April 5, 1872 to celebrate the recovery of the Prince of Wales (later King Edward VII) from a serious illness.

Starting in 1879 Thanksgiving Day was observed every year, but the date was proclaimed annually and changed year to year. The theme of the Thanksgiving holiday also changed each year to reflect an important event to be thankful for. In its early years it was for an abundant harvest and occasionally for a special anniversary.

Finally, on January 31st, 1957, Parliament proclaimed...

"A Day of General Thanksgiving to Almighty God for the bountiful harvest with which Canada has been blessed" ... to be observed on the 2nd Monday in October.

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God commands us to live our entire lives with gratitude and thanksgiving. "Rejoice always; pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." (1 Thes.5:16-18).

I would just like to recount some of the things we ought to give thanks for as they are recorded in the Scriptures.

First, His steadfast love (KJV – mercy – faithfulness, goodness)...

Psalm 107:8, 15, 21, 31 – "Let them thank the LORD for his steadfast love (goodness – KJV), for his wondrous works to the children of men!"

Psalm 106:1; 107:1; 118:1, 29; 136:1 – "Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever!"

Some other sources of thanksgiving...

"But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness." (Ro 6:17-18 ESV)

"The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." (1Co 15:56-57 ESV)

"Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift!" (2Co 9:15 ESV)

“May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light.” (Col 1:11-12 ESV)

“I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service,” (1Ti 1:12 ESV)

“giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ,” (Eph 5:20 ESV)

And ultimately we will one day give thanks for his kingdom and reign in power and glory.

“Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever.” And the twenty-four elders who sit on their thrones before God fell on their faces and worshiped God, saying, “We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, who is and who was, for you have taken your great power and begun to reign.” (Re 11:15-17 ESV)

Thanksgiving – it is certainly a time to give thanks for the provision of God in the day-to-day business of living:

- Food, clothes, shelter
- Health
- Family and friends
- Protection from harm and danger

But, even more than that, it is a time to give thanks for who He is and what He has done in providing salvation and eternal life for us who believe.

So what are you going to do this Thanksgiving Day? I pray that our thanksgiving will not be confined to just a day each year, but that it will be a way of life, always on our lips, even as we find with King David in the Psalms.

Read Psalm 100 ...