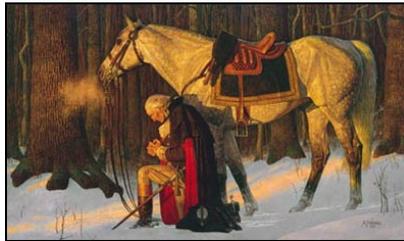


The Christian Heritage of Thanksgiving



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Introduction

The Thanksgiving “holiday” has undergone major secular changes over the years and it is important to remember the true meaning and focus of the original days of Thanksgiving. Betty Miller, author of “The Thanksgiving Holiday”, writes, “The word *holiday* actually means ‘holy day’; hence these events should be remembered and celebrated in a holy manner. We have strayed from that purpose over the years as we have embraced many unholy practices and worldly customs and added them to our ‘holy days’.”

Why is it important to remember our Christian heritage? If we forget our past, we doom our future. Study **Judges 2:10-13 and 3:7-8**.

The purpose of this essay is to return to the heritage of a Christian Thanksgiving day and thereby return the glory to God and to review the Christian foundations of our great nation.

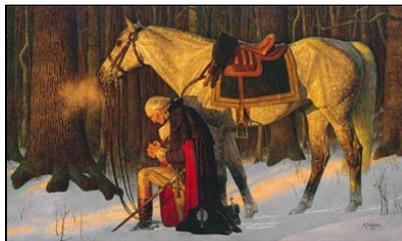
- We will discuss a brief history of the pilgrim’s Thanksgiving Days.
- We will briefly discuss the events leading to our national holiday and President George Washington’s and Abraham Lincoln’s Thanksgiving proclamations.
- We will give biblical foundations and examples of Fasting and Thanksgiving, and outline a Fasting and Thanksgiving event that we may humble ourselves before God and praise him for his blessings.

This essay is meant to work as a guide for small groups of believers to model a Fasting and Thanksgiving event to glorify God.

Let’s pray:

Heavenly Father, we are nothing without You. It is all by Your will and all for Your glory. Please forgive our nation for it’s sins, for becoming proud and refusing to give You the credit. We ask that You may hear our voices as we humble ourselves in repentance and shout out Your praises! May we honor and glorify You our Creator and Sustainer. We pray that our efforts will please You and strengthen our relationships with You. We offer these prayers in Your Precious Son’s name – Amen

Mick Dobra
October, 2005



A Brief History of the Pilgrim's days of Thanksgiving

Who were the pilgrims? The pilgrims were made up of a group of people called Separatists. The Separatists were Christians that were unhappy with the established Church of England and wanted to separate themselves from that church. A closely related group was the Puritans, they were also Christians that were unhappy with the Church of England but chose to remain a part of the established church and purify it from the inside. But most importantly, the Pilgrims were Christians looking to establish a settlement by and for their Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. It was a group of Separatist pilgrims that founded the first colonies in the hopes of civil and religious liberty.

In early September of 1620 the Separatists left for the New World aboard a ship called the Mayflower. They would be undertaking a dangerous journey, but why? Barbara Rainey writes, "Many Separatist church leaders and some Puritans were fined, pressured, persecuted, arrested, or thrown in prison. Some were even executed with the approval of Queen Elizabeth I and later King James I in hopes of squelching these rebellious believers." They were seeking the freedom to worship God. One of the Separatists, William Bradford wrote, "They had a great hope and inward zeal of laying a good foundation, for the propagation and advancing of the kingdom of Christ in those remote parts of the world; yea though they should be but even as stepping stones unto others."

The Pilgrims spent a day in fasting and prayer for the dangerous journey ahead. Edward Winslow, one of the church leaders making the voyage wrote, "We refreshed ourselves, after our tears, with the singing of Psalms... and indeed it was the sweetest melody that ever mine ears have heard."

To the Plymouth colonists, a Thanksgiving was a holy day held for special circumstances. A Thanksgiving holy day was usually preceded by a Fasting day. Fasting days were days for the colonists to humble themselves before God and to search for the cause of God's displeasure leading to unfortunate events; such as epidemics, bad weather, poor crops, or before undertakings of faith such as the departure from the Netherlands to the Americas. Thanksgiving days were days of praise and worship to God, thanking him for His mercy, compassion, and good fortune.

The Plymouth colonists understood that all events were traceable to God. Carolyn Freeman Travers, author of Fast and Thanksgiving Days of Plymouth Colony, writes, "Relief from misfortune would come (they hoped) after reconciliation with God through fasting, prayer and repentance. Fortunate events required public expression of gratitude with praise and thanksgiving."

November 11, 1620, 65 days at sea from Plymouth and a total of 97 days from first launch at Shouthampton Holland, the Pilgrims dropped anchor in New England. William Bradford wrote, "I cannot but... stand half amazed at this poor people's present condition;... Being thus past the vast ocean, and a sea of troubles... they had now no friends to welcome them nor inns to entertain or refresh their weather-beaten bodies;... What could now sustain them but the Spirit of God and His grace?"

After 65 days at sea; stormy seas with food barely edible, over crowded conditions, a ships crew that considered the Christian Pilgrims "psalm-singing puke-stockings", men dying of fevers and scurvy, and storms that opened cracks in the wooden ship, the Pilgrims are now safe on solid ground. Or so one would think, but this was undeveloped country. The Pilgrims now faced the task of building homes and over half of the colonists would die before next winter. But despite the trouble behind and the work ahead, the Pilgrims shouted for joy and celebrated by reading **Psalm 100** to give thanks to God.

A Brief History of Our National Day of Thanksgiving

As a common observance for Christians of the time period, there were many early Thanksgiving Days. But the one we celebrate today took place with the Indians at Plymouth in 1621.

One might ask what the Pilgrims had to give thanks for just one year after their difficult journey and long winter in a new land. For one, they held on to the hope of faith in Jesus Christ and the mission to establish a colony to glorify Him. Second, they learned that it could have been much worse, for the Indians living nearby had murdered every white man who had ever landed in their territory. But prior to the Pilgrims arrival had suffered a deadly plague that had killed them all and kept neighboring tribes out of the area for fear of the plague. And perhaps most importantly, it's Biblical. The same faith and obedience that led them across the ocean into foreign lands led them to praise God always for His provision.

December 22, the day when the Pilgrims were able to go ashore and start building their meeting house, was set aside as Founders' day or Forefathers' day to celebrate our nations founders in the 1760s.

As the revolution approached, there were many regional and national Thanksgiving days. In 1774 the colonial assembly of Massachusetts declared a day of Thanksgiving to celebrate the failure of a British blockade meant to starve Boston into submission.

The first national Day of Thanksgiving by the Continental Congress was declared in 1777 following the defeat of the British army at Saratoga on October 17.

In 1789 the new U.S. Congress passed a resolution requesting a day of thanksgiving. Our first American Thanksgiving day. From President George Washington's proclamation, "Now, therefore, I do recommend and assign Thursday... to be devoted by the people of these states to the service of that great and glorious Being Who is the beneficent Author of all that was, that is, or that will be – that we may then all unite in rendering Him our sincere and humble thanks..."

Each president after Washington would declare a Thanksgiving day, but it wasn't established as a national holy day until 1863 after a campaign by Sarah Hale. President Abraham Lincoln issued a proclamation making the last Thursday of November a day of Thanksgiving "... to set apart and observe... as a day of Thanksgiving and Praise to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the Heavens."

What a wonderful gift of freedom God has granted us! We live today in a nation of wealth and abundance. We have freedom to congregate and worship God for all that he has granted us. It is of vital importance that we not forget "... the Lord or what he had done for..." us (Judges 2:10). To forget would lead to "The anger of the Lord..." burning against us (Judges 3:8).

Barbara Rainey says, "As a nation, we have inherited a remarkable gift in our freedom to worship, but we have strayed far from our roots and heritage. We must return to the faith of our fathers. Developing a heart of gratitude is the beginning step in growing a stronger faith. Remember what God has done and believe that He will take care of us in the future."

Biblical Foundations of Fasting and Thanksgiving

Fasting

Thanksgiving events are usually preceded by a day of fasting.

Fasting is defined in the Life Application Study Bible NIV as: to abstain from food, especially as a religious discipline. The focus seems to be primarily on abstaining from food. However, as noted on gotquestions.org, “Although fasting in Scripture is almost always a fasting from food, there are other ways to fast. Anything you can temporarily give up in order to better focus on God can be considered a fast...”

Fasting can be done prior to important decisions or undertakings like the Pilgrims did prior to setting sail for the new land. **Acts 13:2-3** shows an example of the apostles fasting and praying prior to sending Barnabas and Paul on their mission. See also **Acts 14:23**.

The purpose of fasting as described on gotquestions.org, “should be to take your eyes off the things of this world and instead focus on God. Fasting is a way to demonstrate to God and to yourself that you are serious about your relationship with Him.... Fasting is not intended to punish your flesh, but to focus on God. By taking our eyes off the things of this world, we can focus better on Christ”

Study **Matthew 6:16-18**.

Thanksgiving

Is there any doubt that we are to be thankful to our God? Read **1 Thessalonians 5:16-18**.

Three times a year the Lord declared a feast for his chosen people; the Feast of Passover, the Feast of Pentecost, and the Feast of Tabernacles, also called the Feast of Ingathering. Let's read about the Feast of Tabernacles. Read **Leviticus 23:33-36** and **Deuteronomy 16:13-17**.

There are common elements for celebratory gatherings (1) remembering what God has done, (2) telling others what God has done, (3) showing God's glory to others, (4) offering gifts of time, resources and talents. As Christians we should remember our deliverance from the bondage of sin through Jesus Christ. The Pilgrims had another deliverance to remember, the deliverance from religious persecution in England. I think King David sums it up best in his psalm of thanks:

Study **1 Chronicles 16:7-36**. [Reader 1 verses 7-22 and Reader 2 verses 23-36]

Fasting and Thanksgiving Event

Day 1: Introduction and Lesson

- Spend an hour or so discussing this essay. Then pick dates for Day 2, Fasting Day, and Day 3, Thanksgiving Day.
- Explain the concept of Fasting and have everyone chose how they will Fast. Assign accountability partners to hold members accountable to a day of fasting.
- Assign roles and tasks to prepare for the Thanksgiving day.

Day 2: Fasting Day

All participants participate in a day of fasting.

Day 3: Thanksgiving Day

All participants come together in a day of Thanksgiving. Come together in fellowship to worship, praise, and thank God for his grace and provision!

Resources

- Gotquestions.org;
<http://www.gotquestions.org/fasting-Christian.html>
- History Channel, <http://www.historychannel.com/exhibits/thanksgiving/thnkmyth.html>
- Kennedy, James D., Ph.D. et al; “Restoring the real meaning of Thanksgiving”, Copyright 1989, 2003 Coral Ridge Ministries
- Miller, Betty; “The Thanksgiving Holiday”; <http://www.bible.com/answers/athanksg.html>
- Rainey, Barbara; “Thanksgiving A Time to Remember”, copyright 2002 by Barbara Rainey; Published by Crossway Books
- Travers, Carolyn Freeman; “Fast and Thanksgiving Days of the Plymouth Colonies”; From Plimoth Plantation: Living Breathing History, <http://www.plimoth.org/learn/history/thanksgiving/fastandthanks.asp>