

WORD STUDY: GIVING THANKS

Study of the Holiday of Thanksgiving and the Giving of Thanks to God in the Bible

INTRODUCTION: Although we do not celebrate the wicked holiday of Halloween, which is totally Satanic in origin, there is not more of Christian holiday that we celebrate than that of Thanksgiving. Thanksgiving was a totally Christian holiday at its outset and is still a Christian holiday even today. Although in modern times (20th and 21st century) it has become only known for turkey, long naps, and football, it is still a great time to stop and have a special time of Thanksgiving to God.

Let us take a look at the Holiday of Thanksgiving and then we will focus on why the holiday of Thanksgiving is so important. The giving of thanks to God is an important theme in the Word of God.

I. HISTORY OF THE HOLIDAY OF THANKSGIVING

I would like to quote from an excellent article on the website <http://wallbuilders.com> written by historian David Barton in November 2008 about the first proclaimed National Day of Thanksgiving:

The Pilgrims set sail for America on September 6, 1620, and for two months braved the harsh elements of a storm-tossed sea. Upon disembarking at Plymouth Rock, they held a prayer service and then hastily began building shelters; however, unprepared for such a harsh New England winter, nearly half of them died before spring. ⁶ Emerging from that grueling winter, the Pilgrims were surprised when an Indian named Samoset approached them and greeted them in their own language, explaining to them that he had learned English from fishermen and traders. A week later, Samoset returned with a friend named Squanto, who lived with the Pilgrims and accepted their Christian faith. Squanto taught the Pilgrims much about how to live in the New World, and he and Samoset helped forge a long-lasting peace treaty between the Pilgrims and the Wampanoag Indians. Pilgrim Governor William Bradford described Squanto as “a special instrument sent of God for [our] good . . . and never left [us] till he died.” ⁷

That summer, the Pilgrims, still persevering in prayer and assisted by helpful Indians, ⁸ reaped a bountiful harvest. ⁹ As Pilgrim Edward Winslow (later to become the Governor) affirmed, “God be praised, we had a good increase of Indian corn”; “by the goodness of God, we are...far from want.” ¹⁰ The grateful Pilgrims therefore declared a three-day feast in December 1621 to thank God and to celebrate with their Indian friends ¹¹ – America’s first Thanksgiving Festival. Ninety Wampanoag Indians joined the fifty Pilgrims for three days of feasting (which included shellfish, lobsters, turkey, corn bread, berries, deer, and other foods), of play (the young Pilgrim and Wampanoag men engaged in races, wrestling matches, and athletic events), and of prayer. This

celebration and its accompanying activities were the origin of the holiday that Americans now celebrate each November.

However, while the Pilgrims enjoyed times of prosperity for which they thanked God, they also suffered extreme hardships. In fact, in 1623 they experienced an extended and prolonged drought. Knowing that without a change in the weather there would be no harvest and the winter would be filled with death and starvation, Governor Bradford called the Pilgrims to a time of prayer and fasting to seek God's direct intervention. Significantly, shortly after that time of prayer – and to the great amazement of the Indian who witnessed the scene – clouds appeared in the sky and a gentle and steady rain began to fall. As Governor Bradford explained:

It came without either wind or thunder or any violence, and by degrees in abundance, as that ye earth was thoroughly wet and soaked therewith, which did so apparently revive and quicken ye decayed corn and other fruits as was wonderful to see, and made ye Indians astonished to behold; and afterwards the Lord sent them such seasonable showers, with interchange of fair warm weather as, through His blessing, caused a fruitful and liberal harvest, to their no small comfort and rejoicing. ¹²

The drought had been broken; the fall therefore produced an abundant harvest; there was cause for another thanksgiving. The Pilgrim practice of designating an official time of Thanksgiving spread into neighboring colonies and became an annual tradition. ¹³ And just as those neighboring colonies followed the Pilgrims' example of calling for days of thanksgiving, so, too, did they adopt their practice of calling for a time of prayer and fasting. The New England Colonies therefore developed a practice of calling for a day of prayer and fasting in the spring, and a day of prayer and thanksgiving in the fall.

The Thanksgiving celebrations so common throughout New England did not begin to spread southward until the American Revolution, when Congress issued eight separate national Thanksgiving Proclamations. (Congress also issued seven separate proclamations for times of fasting and prayer, for a total of 15 official prayer proclamations during the American Revolution. ¹⁴)

America's first national Thanksgiving occurred in 1789 with the commencement of the federal government. According to the Congressional Record for September 25 of that year, the first act after the Framers completed the framing of the Bill of Rights was that:

Mr. [Elias] Boudinot said he could not think of letting the session pass without offering an opportunity to all the citizens of the United States of joining with one voice in returning to Almighty God their sincere thanks for the many blessings He had poured down upon them. With this view, therefore, he would move the following resolution:

Resolved, That a joint committee of both Houses be directed to wait upon the President of the United States to request that he would recommend to the people of the United States a Day of Public Thanksgiving and Prayer. . . .

Mr. Roger Sherman justified the practice of thanksgiving on any single event not only as a laudable one in itself but also as warranted by a number of precedents in Holy Writ. . . . This example he thought worthy of a Christian imitation on the present occasion. [15](#)

That congressional resolution was delivered to President George Washington, who heartily concurred with the request and issued the first federal Thanksgiving proclamation, declaring in part:

Whereas it is the duty of all nations to acknowledge the providence of Almighty God, to obey His will, to be grateful for His benefits, and humbly to implore His protection and favor. . . . Now, therefore, I do recommend and assign Thursday, the 26th day of November [1789] . . . that we may all unite to render unto Him our sincere and humble thanks for His kind care and protection. [16](#)

Much of the credit for the adoption of Thanksgiving as an annual national holiday may be attributed to Mrs. Sarah Josepha Hale, the editor of *Godey's Lady's Book*, a popular lady's books containing poetry, art work, and articles by America's leading authors. For two decades, she promoted the idea of a national Thanksgiving Day, [20](#) contacting president after president until Abraham Lincoln responded in 1863 by setting aside the last Thursday of that November. The Thanksgiving proclamation issued by Lincoln was remarkable not only for its strong religious content but also for its timing, for it was delivered in the midst of the darkest days of the Civil War, with the Union having lost battle after battle throughout the first three years of that conflict. Yet, despite those dark circumstances, Lincoln nevertheless called Americans to prayer with an air of positive optimism and genuine thankfulness, noting that:

The year that is drawing toward its close has been filled with the blessings of fruitful fields and healthful skies. To these bounties, which are so constantly enjoyed that we are prone to forget the Source from which they come, others have been added which are of so extraordinary a nature that they can not fail to penetrate and soften even the heart which is habitually insensible to the ever-watchful providence of Almighty God. . . . No human counsel hath devised nor hath any mortal hand worked out these great things. They are the gracious gifts of the Most High God, Who, while dealing with us in anger for our sins, hath nevertheless remembered mercy. [21](#)

That remarkable Thanksgiving Proclamation came at a pivotal point in Lincoln's spiritual life. Three months earlier, the Battle of Gettysburg had occurred, resulting in the loss of some 60,000 American lives. It had been while Lincoln was walking among the thousands of graves there at Gettysburg that he first committed his life to Christ. As he later explained to a clergyman:

When I left Springfield [Illinois, to assume the Presidency], I asked the people to pray for me. I was not a Christian. When I buried my son, the severest trial of my life, I was not a Christian. But when I went to Gettysburg and saw the graves of thousands of our soldiers, I then and there consecrated myself to Christ. [22](#)

The dramatic spiritual impact resulting from that experience was not only visible in Lincoln's Thanksgiving Day proclamation (and also his 1864 call for a day of prayer and fasting) but especially in his 1865 Second Inaugural Address.

Over the seventy-five years following Lincoln's Thanksgiving Proclamation, presidents faithfully followed Lincoln's precedent, annually declaring a national Thanksgiving Day (but the date of the celebrations varied widely from proclamation to proclamation). In 1933, President Franklin D. Roosevelt began celebrating Thanksgiving on the fourth Thursday of each November, and in 1941, Congress permanently established that day as the national Thanksgiving holiday. ²³

II. GIVING OF THANKS TO GOD IN SCRIPTURE

A. GIVING THANKS TO GOD DURING SPECIAL EVENTS:

King Hezekiah after he was installed the King of Judah:

2Ch 31:2 *And Hezekiah appointed the courses of the priests and the Levites after their courses, every man according to his service, the priests and Levites for burnt offerings and for peace offerings, to minister, and to give thanks, and to praise in the gates of the tents of the LORD.*

King David's Psalm the day the ark of the covenant was put into its own tent. Almost all of these verses were quoted from Psalm 105:

1Ch 16:8 *Give thanks unto the LORD, call upon his name, make known his deeds among the people.*

1Ch 16:34 *O give thanks unto the LORD; for he is good; for his mercy endureth for ever.*

1Ch 16:35 *And say ye, Save us, O God of our salvation, and gather us together, and deliver us from the heathen, that we may give thanks to thy holy name, and glory in thy praise.*

1Ch 16:41 *And with them Heman and Jeduthun, and the rest that were chosen, who were expressed by name, to give thanks to the LORD, because his mercy endureth for ever;*

King David making final arrangements of the Kingdom of Israel before his death:

1Ch 25:3 *Of Jeduthun: the sons of Jeduthun; Gedaliah, and Zeri, and Jeshaiiah, Hashabiah, and Mattithiah, six, under the hands of their father Jeduthun, who prophesied with a harp, to give thanks and to praise the LORD.*

Upon completion of the new Jerusalem wall after returning from Babylon:

Neh 12:24 *And the chief of the Levites: Hashabiah, Sherebiah, and Jeshua the son of Kadmiel, with their brethren over against them, to praise and to give thanks, according to the commandment of David the man of God, ward over against ward.*

B. GIVING OF THANKS COMMANDED IN SCRIPTURE

At different times of the day and the most unusual times of the day:

Psa 119:62 *At midnight I will rise to give thanks unto thee because of thy righteous judgments.*

On a regular basis and continuously :

Psa 30:12 *To the end that my glory may sing praise to thee, and not be silent. O LORD my God, I will give thanks unto thee for ever.*

Eph 1:16 *Cease not to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers;*

Col 1:3 *We give thanks to God and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you,*

1Th 1:2 *We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you in our prayers;*

In All Things:

1Th 5:18 *In every thing give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you.*

Among those who are not his children:

2Sa 22:50 *Therefore I will give thanks unto thee, O LORD, among the heathen, and I will sing praises unto thy name.*

Psa 18:49 *Therefore will I give thanks unto thee, O LORD, among the heathen, and sing praises unto thy name.*

When Assembling with believers:

Psa 35:18 *I will give thee thanks in the great congregation: I will praise thee among much people.*

Psa 79:13 *So we thy people and sheep of thy pasture will give thee thanks for ever: we will shew forth thy praise to all generations.*

Psa 92:1 *A Psalm or Song for the sabbath day. It is a good thing to give thanks unto the LORD, and to sing praises unto thy name, O most High:*

Psa 105:1 *O give thanks unto the LORD; call upon his name: make known his deeds among the people.*

Psa 122:4 *Whither the tribes go up, the tribes of the LORD, unto the testimony of Israel, to give thanks unto the name of the LORD.*

Psa 140:13 *Surely the righteous shall give thanks unto thy name: the upright shall dwell in thy presence.*

For Giving Us Salvation:

2Th 2:13 *But we are bound to give thanks alway to God for you, brethren beloved of the Lord, because God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth:*

His Holiness:

Psa 30:4 *Sing unto the LORD, O ye saints of his, and give thanks at the remembrance of his holiness.*

Psa 97:12 *Rejoice in the LORD, ye righteous; and give thanks at the remembrance of his holiness*

His Wondrous Works of Creation:

Psa 75:1 *To the chief Musician, Altaschith, A Psalm or Song of Asaph. Unto thee, O God, do we give thanks, unto thee do we give thanks: for that thy name is near thy wondrous works declare.*

His Enduring Mercy:

Psa 106:47 *Save us, O LORD our God, and gather us from among the heathen, to give thanks unto thy holy name, and to triumph in thy praise.*

Psa 106:1 *Praise ye the LORD. O give thanks unto the LORD; for he is good: for his mercy endureth for ever.*

Psa 107:1 *O give thanks unto the LORD, for he is good: for his mercy endureth for ever.*

Psa 118:1 *O give thanks unto the LORD; for he is good: because his mercy endureth for ever.*

Psa 118:29 *O give thanks unto the LORD; for he is good: for his mercy endureth for ever.*

Psa 136:1 *O give thanks unto the LORD; for he is good: for his mercy endureth for ever.*

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C. REDEEMED AROUND GOD'S THRONE IN THE FUTURE GIVING THANKS:

Rev 4:9 *And when those beasts give glory and honour and thanks to him that sat on the throne, who liveth for ever and ever,*

Rev 11:17 *Saying, We give thee thanks, O Lord God Almighty, which art, and wast, and art to come; because thou hast taken to thee thy great power, and hast reigned.*

APPLICATIONS:

- 1) Has the holiday of Thanksgiving become just a time to see family, turkey, long naps, and football or does it have a special meaning for you?
- 2) Thanksgiving is a day you stop to remember what God has done for you and give special thanksgiving to God for all the blessings He has bestowed upon you.
- 3) Scripture teaches us that we should give thanks to God often, daily, and in the most unusual of times, not just on Thanksgiving Day in November.
- 4) When was the last time you stopped to have a time of thanksgiving to God other than Thanksgiving Day for all that he has done for you?