

Lessons from the Thanksgiving Pilgrims (Part 1)

By PAUL J. SCHARF

There is no question about it—Thanksgiving is my favorite holiday, bar none.

The mere word warms my heart and causes my mind to click through the memories of Novembers long past. It conjures up images of family and dear friends—some now departed—gathered around a bountiful table; of special services at church and shortened weeks of school; of singing grand old hymns which we re-learn usually just once every year; and, most importantly, of giving thanks to God for bringing us safely through another season of life.

For many, many years, there was little secular, commercial connection to Thanksgiving at all—except for sales on turkey, and the occasional silly commercial message, in which those advertising a product dressed up in supposed 17th-century garb. For the most part, though, the closest that retailers got to this celebration was speaking of the day which follows it.

Thanksgiving also has never really been corrupted by worldliness. Few seem to talk about getting drunk for Thanksgiving Day or staying out all night beforehand.

Somehow Thanksgiving—both the day and the action—seems to have a calming effect within our souls. Celebrating it helps us draw a mental line between the cares of the old year and the onset of the new one, while preparing us to remember the birth of Christ in the meantime.

And, perhaps never before has a season of Thanksgiving been as necessary as a healing balm for our spirits as it is during this most trying year of 2020.

Personally, I also enjoy this holiday because I love to study and teach about the Thanksgiving Pilgrims. I first tackled that undertaking in 1996, with a single sermon on the Pilgrim congregation, including several lessons that we can learn from them. Since then, that sermon has grown into a multi-media series of messages that I have been privileged to present numerous times, and my knowledge of the Pilgrims has continued to expand.

And now this year of 2020 marks the 400th anniversary of the Pilgrims' arrival on these shores!

In this series of articles, I would like to share some lessons that I believe to be evident from the Pilgrims' lives. Before we look at those lessons, however, I must make three introductory and explanatory statements:

First, I want to make it clear that I am merely a student of the Pilgrims. I do not fancy myself to be an expert on them like those who have devoted a great deal of their lives to researching Pilgrim history. That is not my particular calling. However, I have come far in my understanding of them over the past quarter century, and my own theological interests intersect with Pilgrim history on a number of key points.

Second, my love for the Pilgrims does not mean that I wholly endorse all aspects of their doctrine and practice. While appreciating their importance to both church and American history, I nevertheless find myself in disagreement with numerous significant points to which the Pilgrim Church held.

Third, the purpose of this series of articles is not to tell the Pilgrims' whole story. I will refer to some details for the sake of illustration, but mostly presume that the reader is already familiar with the outline of Pilgrim history. Suffice it to say that the Pilgrims were a group of separatists who—having come out of the Church of England—left England completely (and illegally) in 1608 in search of religious freedom. They traveled first to Holland. Twelve years later, a portion of them boarded the Mayflower, landing at Provincetown Harbor on Nov. 9, 1620.

With those details in mind, we will be considering five brief lessons which we may learn from the Pilgrims, and in so doing we must allow those historic saints to fulfill the role which Gov. William Bradford envisioned when he spoke of the possibility that “they should be but even stepping stones unto others for the performing of so great a work” (*Of Plymouth Plantation*).

Later Puritan leader John Winthrop would refer to his Massachusetts Bay Colony as “a city that is set on a hill” (Matt. 5:14). The Pilgrims, likewise, modeled these five essential truths for us in such a way that their light would “so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven” (Matt. 5:16).

We will begin to consider those lessons in the next installment.

Paul J. Scharf (M.A., M.Div., Faith Baptist Theological Seminary) is a church ministries representative for The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry, based in Columbus, WI, and serving in the Midwest. For more information on his ministry, visit sermonaudio.com/pscharf or foi.org/scharf, or email pscharf@foi.org.

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