

## Developing a Heart of Thanksgiving Selected Scriptures

### Introduction

This year marks the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the thanksgiving celebration by the Pilgrims that survived that first year. We do not actually know the date other than it probably before early November with the *Fortune* arrived according to Bradford's notes, and was certainly prior to December 11, 1621 when Edward Winslow wrote a letter to a friend in England describing what is now referred to as the "first Thanksgiving." However, the truth is that the Pilgrims were a thankful people, and having a thanksgiving feast at harvest time was a fairly normal practice for any group of people that were serious about following the Bible and the examples in it. The practice of national days of thanksgiving trace back into the Old Testament in both the Feast of First fruits, which occurs at the beginning of harvest, and the Feast of Booths, which occurs at the end of harvest (Leviticus 23).

Cultures affected by Christianity would often respond with a special thanksgiving celebration of some type for major events that occurred. In fact, the first "thanksgiving" in American was in 1541 when Spanish explorer Francisco Vázquez de Coronado held one in Palo Duro Canyon in what is now northern Texas. French Huguenots held a thanksgiving service in 1564 in what is now Parris Island, South Carolina. English colonists who established Jamestown held one in 1607 at Cape Henry, Virginia, and so did the thirty-nine English settlers that arrived at Berkley Plantation on the James River, Virginia, on December 4, 1619.

What makes the Thanksgiving held by the Pilgrims special now is that the American tradition of a Thanksgiving Holiday traces its origin to it. What made that Thanksgiving special then is that it followed such a long period of suffering and revealed hearts of thanksgiving. Their example, which followed the examples given in the Scriptures, are a model for us in developing our own hearts of thanksgiving. Their example has been good one to follow throughout the years, but even more important in these present times.

Normal life can have many personal hardships such health concerns, grief, relationships and finance. However, normal stress has been aggravated the last eighteen months due to rapid changes in our society, restrictions on normal freedoms, political upheaval, supply chain constrictions, international threats, inflation and now threats of job loss unless you kowtow to the COVID czars. It has been enough to make normal people cynical, and it would make a cynic happy if such pessimism would allow for some humor and joy.

Praise the Lord that Christians are not normal people! We have the Holy Spirit indwelling us and the promises of Jesus Christ as our foundation for hope which enables us to live a very different kind of life because we have a very different purpose in living. Paul explains in Philippians 4 how he rejoiced, gained peace and learned to be content in all circumstances. We can rejoice even when everything seems to be falling apart because we know our God does not lose control and He is working all things together for good for those that love Him and are called according to His purpose (Romans 8:28). His promises include that nothing - death, life, angels, principalities, things present, things to come, power, height, depth, or any other created thing, can separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:38-39). That gives Christians reasons to be optimistic even when everything seems to support being pessimistic.

The thankfulness of the Pilgrims follows the general thankfulness seen in God's people throughout the ages. It demonstrates the reality of God in their lives. They understood the reason they existed and

why God extended mercy to them to be redeemed from their sins. They held to the things of this world lightly including their very lives for they could see beyond the present to the future and eternity.

### **A Brief Pilgrim History**

The history of the Pilgrims is important to America for many reasons. The most obvious is the establishment of a colony in what is now Massachusetts. The most important is the writing of the Mayflower Compact which established elements in their government that eventually became embedded in the American system of government. They landed in an area outside the jurisdiction of their patent, so they had to create a system that would establish their purpose and enable them to function. The key statement of purpose and organization in the Compact reads as follows (as transcribed from the original), *“haveing undertaken, for the glorie of God, and advancemente of the Christian faith, and honour of our king and contrie, a voyage to plant the first colonie in the Northerne parts of Virginia, doe by these presents solemnly & mutually in the presence of God, and one of another, covenant & combine our selves togeather into a civill body politick, for our better ordering & presrvation & furtherance of the ends aforesaid,; and by vertue herof to enacte, constitute, and frame such just & equail lawes, ordinances, acts, constitutions & offices, from time to time, as shall be thought most meete & convenient for the generall good of the Colonie, unto which we promise all due submission and obedience.”* The Mayflower Compact was signed by forty-one of the sixty-five adult male passengers on November 11, 1620.

This history is also important to me personally since I am a descendant of three of the men that signed the Compact and two of the women that were on the Mayflower. However, that is not actually that big of a deal since it is estimated that about 30 million people are descended from that little band of Pilgrims that were on the Mayflower. But that is another aspect of the importance of Pilgrim heritage for this nation and the world. Many significant people in this nation’s heritage in every aspect of life - government, business, military, exploration, inventions, literature, education, etc. - are descendants. America would not be America without them. Even England would not be the same since it includes Winston Churchill who is a descendant of Mayflower passenger John Howland.

But Pilgrim history does not start with the arrival of the Mayflower to harbor in Cape Cod on November 11, 1620. It begins many years earlier, and what they went through in England and Holland explains a lot about their character.

**Scrooby.** The Pilgrims, so called because of their journeys, were a church of religious separatists originally from Scrooby, England. The Reformation was suppressed in England until Henry VIII broke away from Rome to establish himself as head of the Church of England in 1536. That church remained largely Roman Catholic in its doctrine and practices, but Reformation theology was spreading. Roman Catholic Queen Mary brought great persecution against Protestants during her reign (1547-1558) including martyrdom and it caused many to flee to the Continent. Many of these returned during Queen Elizabeth I’s reign (1558-1603), and there developed in the Church of England those that desired to see it reorganized and changed according to ideas of the Reformers. They were called Puritans. There were also those that agreed with these Puritan reformers theologically, but they could not in good conscience continue to abide in the Church of England, and so they formed independent congregations. They were called Separatists or non-conformists, and they were often persecuted and that increased under King James I (1603-1625). ( I will quickly note here that the theological ancestry of this church also goes back to the Separatists of England).

William Bradford wrote about this in his retrospective history, *Of Plymouth Plantation*. Richard Clyfton and William Brewster organized a Separatist congregation at Scrooby, Nottinghamshire. Bradford started attending this church in 1602 and became a member in 1606 at 16 years old. Bradford wrote that they *“were hunted and persecuted on every side, so as their former afflictions where but flea-*

*bitings in comparison of these which now came upon them. For some were taken and clapped upon in prison, others had their houses beset and watched night and day, and hardly escaped their hands; and the most were fain to flee and leave their houses and habitations, and the means of their livelihood.”* The people of the church “*not withstanding all the diligence and malice of their adversaries, they seeing they could not longer continue in that condition, they resolved to get over into Holland as they could, Which was in the year 1607 and 1608.*” Getting to Holland proved to be difficult as several groups striving to make the trip were swindled or stranded resulting in some losing all their goods, families separated, and those left in England being jailed.

**Leyden.** Many did eventually make it to Holland and the church eventually settled in Leyden, and by 1620 it numbered between 400-500. It would have been more, but as immigrants, life was hard with difficulties related to language, culture and low end jobs of physical labor. These factors kept many from also immigrating to join them and caused others to leave. Bradford writes, “*Yea, some preferred and chose the prisons in England rather than this liberty in Holland with these afflictions.*” As the years in Holland progressed, it was also recognized that these difficulties were a cause of those who were older to age before their time and for the youth to become bowed and decrepit or to depart to find better jobs. The temptations of the Dutch culture were also taking a toll on their youth. There was also a strong missionary desire among some to lay a foundation for the propagating the gospel in remote parts of the world. To these factors is added the fact that the twelve year truce with Spain was ending and the beating of drums and preparation of war had already started. If the war was lost to the Spanish, the Low Countries would come under the cruelties of a Roman Catholic authority.

The result of these many factors was that it was decided that a portion of the church would venture to establish a colony in the Americas despite the known great risks and hardships that would have to be endured to do so. Others could then follow. The pursuit of these ideas began 1617 but it was not until 1620 that investors were secured and contracts were made.

**Voyages.** On July 22, 1620 a portion of the group from Holland left on the *Speedwell* for Southampton, England where others and the larger ship, *Mayflower*, would join them. However, they were again swindled as the investors (adventurers) changed the terms of the contracts and the port fees were not paid forcing them to sell off needed cargo to pay them. This also delayed their departure until August 5. By August 8, the *Speedwell* was leaking which forced the ships to put into port at Dartmouth for repairs which were completed August 22 and the ships sailed the next day. By August 25 the *Speedwell* was leaking again, which later turned out to be sabotage by the crew, and the ships returned to Plymouth. The *Speedwell* had to be abandoned, which left them with less people for the colony, less supplies, and without a ship that would stay in the colony to help establish it. The *Mayflower* finally left on September 6 with 102 passengers and 25 crew.

The eight week trip took over nine as the ship was battered by Autumn storms which had also cracked the ship’s main beam which was then ingeniously fixed by the use of a screw type iron printing press. Though many storms battered them, the ship stayed afloat and sailed on. Though the storms left them wet and cold and sickness began, only one profane crew member, and one Pilgrim, young William Button, had died in the crossing, but a baby, Oceanus, was also born.

**Cape Cod.** Land was sighted on November 6, but they were far north of where they had planned to be. Efforts to sail south proved to be too dangerous, so it was decided they would need to settle somewhere in the Cape Cod area, and the Mayflower Compact was drawn up and signed on Nov. 11. After a month of exploring, a suitable place for a settlement was finally found on December 11. Seven Pilgrims had died in harbor by then and two more by the time construction began on December 25 for a common storehouse. Weather and accidents would hinder their settlement efforts, and several more would die before they could inhabit their partially completed buildings on shore.

The Pilgrims endured a harsh Winter, scarce food, sickness and death, yet they were still able to establish a small settlement in Plymouth. By March and the first signs of Spring, Bradford wrote, "*the Spring now approaching, it pleased God the mortalitie begane to cease amongst them, and the sick and lame recovered apace, which put as it were new life into them; though they had borne their sadd affliction with much patience & contentednes.*" Forty seven out of the 102 that had left England that previous September were now dead. Almost half of the *Mayflower's* crew of 50 had also died. In the next few months, several more would die including governor John Carver.

The coming summer would have its own challenges as they developed relations with the surrounding Indian tribes, planted and harvested their first crops, and made preparation to survive the coming winter. All the hardships, suffering and death the Pilgrim's had gone through would be a tale of woe if it were not for their continued trust in God's goodness that enabled them to overcome them with hope for eternity and to see His hand as work even in their sorrows. Where natural men see only troubles, trials and oppression, the godly also see mercy, grace and love. The Pilgrims who settled Plymouth understood God's character and they believed His promises. Nothing could separate them from the love of God, and He was working all things together for good for them whether they understood how at the moment or not (Romans 8:28, 38-39).

**Providence & Miracles.** The title of Jonathan King's book, *The Mayflower Miracle* is a fitting description of the story of the Pilgrims and the establishment of Plymouth Colony. He explains, "*They were the 'wrong' sort of people to create the settlement and generally made a mess of it.*" He continues, "*It was a miracle that these simple and disorganized country folk overcame the obstacles that fell in their path . . . no other group could ever have had the tenacity and good fortune to overcome them. Perhaps no other group would ever have been prepared to sacrifice half their number to achieve their goals either.*" What King calls "good fortune" is God's intervention and providence.

The persecution in England and Holland deepened their faith and bound them together to work through problems and care for one another. The hardships caused those controlled by fear or selfishness to depart or back out of being part of the colony which included some who stayed in Holland and some that would have otherwise come on the *Speedwell*. While some exploited them, others sympathized and helped them. They had gifted leaders who not only had the vision for a future far beyond mere survival, but the skills to inspire others to sacrifice in the pursuit of that vision. They were creative in finding solutions in using what they had because they lacked what was normally needed. John Howland fell overboard, but managed to grab a trailing rope, was seen, and hauled back aboard. The blasphemous sailor that early in the voyage was causing them the most grief and causing contention between the pilgrims and the crew died suddenly of a unknown sickness and the contention died too. The storms pushed them north to a location that allowed them to set up an independent colony. The spot they finally chose to settle was the only location that would not have been attacked and destroyed by local Indians because the Patuxet tribe that had lived there had died off from a plague of small pox only a few years before. That explained the empty Indian villages, the crowded cemeteries and stored corn they found that helped to relieve their starvation.

In mid-March, 1621, Samoset, a Pemaquid Indian from Maine who spoke English learned from traders, introduced himself to the Pilgrims and became a friend and liaison to the Indian Sachem (chief) Massasoit which enabled friendly relationships between the Pilgrims and local natives to develop. He also introduced Squanto to them. Squanto was a Patuxet who had been in England when small pox decimated his tribe and had only returned the year before. He also spoke English and ended up teaching the Pilgrims how to plant local crops and catch fish with traps.

**Thanksgiving.** Edward Winslow's letter of 11 Dec. 1621 printed in *Mourt's Relation* describes their "first thanksgiving" as follows: "*Our harvest being gotten in, our Governor sent four men on fowling, so*

*that we might after a more special manner to rejoice together, after we had gathered the fruit of our labours. They four in one day killed as much fowl as, with a little help beside, served the Company almost a week. At which time, amongst other recreations, we exercised our arms, many of the Indians coming amongst us, and amongst the rest their greatest king, Massasoit with some 90 men, whom for three days we entertained and feasted. And they went out and killed five deer which they brought to the plantation and bestowed on our Governor and upon the Captain and others.”*

I will point out here that Bradford also notes this feast and the good harvest that would sustain them through the winter. Bradford also notes that in mid-November, the *Fortune* arrived unexpectedly with thirty-six more people for the colony. Bradford comments, “*The plantation was glad of this addition of strength, but could have wished that many of them had been of better condition, and all of them better furnished with provisions. But that could not be now be helped.*” The new arrivals were without food and had inadequate bedding, clothing and equipment. The *Fortune* did not bring “relief” to the colony, but those on it were relieved to get off it. The colony would be hungry in the coming winter, but they would not be starving, so there was still cause for rejoicing.

The focus is usually on the celebration and feasting held in mid-Autumn of 1621 as the proof of their thanksgiving to God for His provision for them. But the real proof was that Sunday after Sunday throughout even the worst of times they gathered to publicly thank God for what He had done and petition Him for His grace and mercy. That is a godly heart of thanksgiving. That is the heart that every Christian should be developing as they go through life including its trials and tribulations.

### **Developing a Thankful Heart**

Traditions can help in developing a thankful heart by both providing a reminder of its importance and setting aside time to do so. That is actually the purpose of the Thanksgiving holiday, though I think there are few that actually understand that anymore. The actual meaning and purpose of the day has been eclipsed by having a feast, obligations to have a family gathering, football, and preparing for the Christmas shopping season. The later flips the holiday from one of thanksgiving for what you have to a quest to get more. For our remaining time this morning, I want to point out a few things that can help you in developing a thankful heart.

1) Recognize your true condition. In Luke 7:36-50 Jesus uses the response of sinful woman to Him to teach an important lesson. Those who have been forgiven much, will love much. Many Scriptures make it clear that man is utterly sinful. As stated in Psalm 14 and Romans 3:10-18, there is no one that is righteous, does good or seeks God on their own. This Biblical truth is known as the doctrine of total depravity and it forces man to acknowledge the truth that God owes them nothing except the eternal punishment their sins against Him have earned. This both removes the complaints about God allowing bad things to happen to you, and it escalates exponentially the joy and thanksgiving of the blessings God bestows because they are then recognized as gifts of grace. The response of gratefulness for an unexpected and undeserved gift is very different than receiving a gift of obligation or a wage. True thankfulness begins with the humility of being poor in Spirit (Matthew 5:4).

2) God is good and good things come from Him. The majority of our culture seems very willing to blame God for everything and glorify Him for nothing. The truth is the opposite. It is man’s rebellion against God that is the cause of sin and the trouble it brings due to the consequences of your own sin, the sin of others, and living in a sin curse world (Genesis 3; James 1:14-15).

The humble know that God is holy and does not tempt anyone to evil much less be the cause it (James 1:13). The humble also recognize that “*Every good thing bestowed and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation, or shifting shadow*” (James 1:17). Goodness is an attribute of God, and the greatest demonstration of that goodness is His grace to offer forgiveness of sin to all who will place their faith in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

3) God wants to change you. Change begins with repentance, which is a change of mind about self, sin and the Savior so that you turn from self righteousness and sin to believe the truth and place your faith in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. God uses both good and bad things to bring about that change. Romans 2:4 states that the kindness of God including His tolerance and patience should lead you to repentance. Jesus commonly warned people about sin and its consequences and would also point out tragedies and warn people to repent lest they suffer the same consequence (Luke 13:1-5).

God continues to change those that believe the gospel as He conforms them into the image of Christ (Romans 8:29) for the purpose that they would be holy and blameless before Him (Eph. 1:4). God brings about this change into greater holiness which we call sanctification through several means including the Bible, God's word (John 17:17; 2 Timothy 3:16-17), the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:11; 1 Peter 1:2), and the trials of life which is my next point.

4) God uses the troubles and trials of life for your good. Part of the ability of the Pilgrims ability to be thankful when going through so much suffering is because they understood both this principle and that life is about much more than what is happening in the present. James 1:2-4 is direct on this point. <sup>2</sup> *"Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, <sup>3</sup> knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. <sup>4</sup> And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing."* This matches what Paul writes in Romans 5:1-8, <sup>1</sup> *"Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>2</sup> through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand; and we exult in hope of the glory of God. <sup>3</sup> And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; <sup>4</sup> and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; <sup>5</sup> and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us. <sup>6</sup> For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. <sup>7</sup> For one will hardly die for a righteous man; though perhaps for the good man someone would dare even to die. <sup>8</sup> But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."*

Don't despair because troubles come upon you. We live in a sin filled world and trials should be expected. Remember always that God can and will use them to make you more like Jesus Christ if you will allow them to be a test of faith in trusting God to respond in a godly manner instead of succumbing to temptations to respond in an ungodly way. This is a common difference between the godly and the ungodly, so in the midst of your current trial or the next one that comes upon you, look for both what God can do through it in your own life - in what specific ways do you need to trust Him and His word - and look for how God will glorify Himself as you do.

5) Count your blessings. Don't let the pessimism of the world destroy your joy and blind you to blessings our good God as bestowed upon you as well as what He is doing for others. Many of the Psalms start off with a complaint and end with praises as the Psalmist recounts the goodness of God and then expresses trust in Him for the present and future. Psalm 57 is a short example of this:

*"For the choir director; set to Mikhtam of David, when he fled from Saul in the cave. <sup>1</sup> Be gracious to me, O God, be gracious to me, For my soul takes refuge in You; And in the shadow of Your wings I will take refuge Until destruction passes by. <sup>2</sup> I will cry to God Most High, To God who accomplishes all things for me. <sup>3</sup> He will send from heaven and save me; He reproaches him who tramples upon me. Selah. God will send forth His lovingkindness and His truth. <sup>4</sup> My soul is among lions; I must lie among those who breathe forth fire, Even the sons of men, whose teeth are spears and arrows And their tongue a sharp sword. <sup>5</sup> Be exalted above the heavens, O God; Let Your glory be above all the earth. <sup>6</sup> They have prepared a net for my steps; My soul is bowed down; They dug a pit before me; They themselves have fallen into the midst of it. Selah. <sup>7</sup> My heart is steadfast, O God, my heart is steadfast; I will sing, yes, I will sing praises! <sup>8</sup> Awake, my glory! Awake, harp and lyre! I will awaken the dawn. <sup>9</sup> I will give thanks to You, O Lord, among the peoples; I will sing praises to You among the nations. <sup>10</sup> For Your*

*lovingkindness is great to the heavens And Your truth to the clouds. 11 Be exalted above the heavens, O God; Let Your glory be above all the earth.”*

## **Conclusions**

What is your own heart of thanksgiving? Do you want to have such a heart developed in you? History should serve to both teach and inspire us in our own lives in the present. The Pilgrims serve as a good example of godliness by their response of thanksgiving to God for blessings bestowed upon them even though they had suffered greatly. Their example is only one of many repeated throughout history and on the pages of the sacred Scriptures.

Thursday is a National Day of Thanksgiving. Most of America will stuff themselves and not even express their appreciation for the food much less God's other blessings upon them. I pray that you will be like the Pilgrims in 1621 who gave thanks not only when there was a bountiful harvest, but also in the midst of starvation, sickness and death. They were grateful for God's mercy and grace which saved them from their sins and was changing them even through the trials. They recognized goodness of God and His manifest blessings upon them. They counted their blessings. May you do the same.

Sermon Notes - 11/21/2021  
Developing a Heart of Thanksgiving - Selected Scriptures

Introduction

Thanksgivings in Biblical Cultures

Our Thanksgiving Holiday traces back to the celebration by the Pilgrims in 1621

Christians are not normal people - so we can respond differently even to life's hardships & tragedies

A Brief Pilgrim History

Pilgrim history is important: Establish a colony in Massachusetts; the Mayflower Compact, descendants

Scrooby, England

Leyden, Holland

Voyages

Cape Cod

Settling

Winter

Summer

Providence & Miracles

Thanksgiving



## Developing a Thankful Heart

- 1) Recognize your true condition
- 2) God is good and good things come from Him
- 3) God wants to change you
- 4) God uses the troubles and trials of life for your good
- 5) Count your blessings

## Conclusions

### Examples of Psalms of Thanksgiving

Psalm 18:9 - deliverance from evil

Psalm 30:4 & 97:12 - remembrance of His holiness (i.e. - all His attributes)

Psalm 30:11,12 - Turning our sorrow into exuberant joy (salvation, death no longer has victory - 1 Cor 15:54)

Psalm 42:5 - Because even in turmoil we have hope

Psalm 100 - We are His creatures. He cares for us as His sheep. He is good (Ps 107:1). His mercy is everlasting (Ps 106 & 136), His enduring truth

Psalm 105:1-5: His marvelous works, wonders, & judgements

Psalm 119:62 - His righteous judgments

Psalm 140:12,13 - the Lord maintains the cause of the afflicted and the right of the poor.

## KIDS KORNER

Parents, you are responsible to apply God's Word to your children's lives. Here is some help. Young Children - draw a picture about something you hear during the sermon. Explain your picture(s) to your parents at lunch.

Older Children - 1) Count how many times the word "thanksgiving" is mentioned. 2) Talk with your parents about the importance of thanksgiving and what you are thankful to God for.

THINK ABOUT IT! - Questions to consider in discussing the sermon with others. List some of the first "thanksgivings" held in the Americas. What enables Christians to respond to hardship different than non-Christians? Why is pilgrim history important to America? What were the distinguishing beliefs of the Separatists? Why were they persecuted in England? Why did the Pilgrims go to Holland and why did they decide to go to America? Why were they sailing so late in the season? What happened to the Speedwell? What "miracles" enabled them to settle in Plymouth? Why did so many die? What was their response to the hardships & tragedies? How can you develop a thankful heart? How does God want you to change? What role do trials play in the change? List at least 10 the blessings God has poured out on you? Use a couple of the Psalms listed above to prompt your own worship, praise and thanksgiving to God - alone or with your family? Resources: Of Plymouth Plantation, William Bradford. The Mayflower Miracle, Jonathan King