

For the Love of the Family Ministries

Missionaries To America's Forgotten

Mission Field, the Family

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Then shall the trees of the wood sing out at the presence of the LORD, because he cometh to judge the earth. O give thanks unto the LORD; for he is good; for his mercy endureth for ever. 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."

1 Chronicles 16:33-35

Thanksgiving, what a tremendous heritage given to us by our forefathers. The Pilgrims came to America, for religious freedom. They had left England and came to Holland for religious freedom, but found that they still were not going to be able to worship freely and they believed that the people of Holland defiled the Lord's day, Sunday, by seeking entertainment on Sunday rather than setting it aside as a day for worship, reflection, and thankfulness.

The trip to America was a harsh trip. The Atlantic crossing in the fall of 1620 had been an extremely difficult journey for the Pilgrims. For two months, 102 people were wedged into what was called the "tween decks" of the Mayflower—the ship's cargo space with only about five-and-a-half feet of headroom. No one was allowed above deck because of the terrible storms. This was no pleasure trip. The Pilgrims comforted themselves on their journey by singing from the Book of Psalms. This "noise" irritated one of the ship's paid crew members. He told the Pilgrims he was looking forward to throwing their corpses overboard after they succumbed to the routine illnesses common on such voyages. As it turned out, this crew member himself was the only person to die on the voyage and be thrown overboard. God providentially protected His own people. A little-known fact about the Mayflower is that this ship normally carried a cargo of wine; and the wine spillage from previous voyages had soaked the beams, acting as a disinfectant to prevent the spread of disease.

During one terrible storm, the main beam of the mast cracked. Death was certain if this beam could not be repaired. At that moment, the whole Pilgrim adventure could very easily have ended on the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean. Providentially, the Pilgrims had with them a large iron printing press screw. That screw repaired the beam, saving the ship and all on board.

After sixty-six days at sea, land was sighted off Cape Cod, Massachusetts, not the place these Pilgrims wanted to be. They intended to establish their new colony in the northern parts of Virginia (which then extended to the Hudson River in modern-day New York), but two factors interrupted their plans. The winds had blown them off course, yes; but they later learned that other Englishmen who wanted to settle in the same part of Virginia had actually bribed the ship's crew to land them farther north.

Despite this chicanery, God was in charge and the Pilgrims landed exactly where God wanted them to be. Had they actually made landfall near the Hudson River, they most certainly would have been immediately attacked by hostile Indians. Instead, they arrived at the one spot along the coast where hostile Indians had been providentially removed from the land.

Many years before the Mayflower journey, local Indians had captured a Frenchman on a fishing expedition to that region. Just as they were about to kill him, the Frenchman warned them God would be angry, would destroy them all, and would replace them with another nation. The Indians boastfully replied that his God could never kill them. Yet, a year or two before the Pilgrims arrived in this very same region, nearly all the native inhabitants had been wiped out by a plague.

Despite this miraculous provision of safety from hostile Indians, the Pilgrims barely survived their first winter on the Cape. Only four families remained intact; but God was still faithful. In the spring of 1621, He sent Squanto, an English-speaking Indian who offered to teach the Pilgrims how to survive in this strange new land.

Squanto was one of only a few local Indians who escaped the plague. He had been captured as a young man and taken to England as a slave. During that time he mastered the English language. When he was freed, he returned to his native territory on the Cape shortly before the Pilgrims arrived. Probably the most important thing Squanto taught the Pilgrims was how to plant the native winter staple crop--corn.

The Pilgrims thanked God for this wonderful helper. They also repaid Squanto by sharing with him the most valuable treasure they had brought with them from England—the Gospel. Squanto died a year or two after coming to the aid of the Pilgrims, but before his death he asked them to pray with him that he might go to be with their God in Heaven.

The first winter in New England after they arrived was extremely harsh. Many died in the brutal winter. As history records, William Bradford, Myles Standish, John Alden, Priscilla Mullins and the rest of the folks who founded Plymouth in 1620 and survived their first brutal winter had much to be thankful for in the fall of 1621.

Only 55 of the more than 100 original settlers had survived to see their first winter thaw. Their labors had paid off and they had a good first harvest. William Bradford proclaimed a day of prayer and thanksgiving and extended an invitation to the local Indians, Wampanoags, who had helped with the cultivation of the colonists first crops. Around 90 of the Indians participated and brought along 5 deer to help out with the meal.

The Pilgrims were people who believed in God and stood for what they believed. The time that was set aside was to thank God for the blessings He had given to them. So, 387 years ago our forefathers because of their religious faith began a tradition that has left us with a great heritage and an example concerning thankfulness. We have much to be thankful for in our country and the Pilgrims understood the teaching of the Bible on thankfulness, and surely quoted I Thessalonians 5:18 on the special time they had set aside. Each year at this time I encourage our family to make sure we give thanks for the blessings we have received.

In studying the history of the Pilgrims, I found out something else interesting. In 1623 there was no harvest because of drought so they turned that day into one of prayer, fasting, and also thanksgiving. They had been many days without water and God answered their prayers that

while they were praying and fasting for rain, rain came.

So, what we celebrate the fourth Thursday of November each year that began on the cold shores of the Atlantic Ocean several hundred years ago and has become a lasting heritage for us concerning the matter of thankfulness.

How has it changed since that first time in 1621? In June 1676, the governing council of Charleston, Mass proclaimed June 29 as a day of giving thanks for the success of the community. In October 1777, all 13 colonies celebrate Thanksgiving. In October 1779, George Washington writes the Thanksgiving Proclamation. It was lost, but recovered and installed in the Library of Congress' archives in 1921. In October 1863, Abraham Lincoln proclaims the annual holiday as the last Thursday in November.

In 1863 America was pitted against itself in a battle of states' rights, preservation of the union, and the issue of slavery. Families were torn between relatives on one side of the fight and others on the opposite side. We had defeated the mighty English empire nearly a century before, yet bureaucracy and politics were forcing an inner struggle that threatened to tear our nation apart. It was during that time that our fearless President Abraham Lincoln, in the midst of his struggle to keep peace in our land, took time to draw the focus on the American people to a single act—the act of thankfulness. He pointed out the fact we were an independent nation, free from tyrannical rule. The fact God had blessed America's fields with crops and food. The fact that God Almighty had been good to America. The following is part of the proclamation he made, establishing a day to stop and give thanks to God for the blessings He had given America:

"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; Whereas, both the houses of Congress have, by their joint committee, requested me 'to recommend to the people of the United States a day of public thanksgiving and prayer, to be observed by acknowledging with grateful hearts the many and signal favors of Almighty God, especially by affording them an opportunity peaceably to establish a form of government for their safety and happiness!"

"Now therefore, I do recommend next, to be devoted by the people of the states to the service of that great and glorious being, who is the beneficent Author of all the good that was, that is, or that will be, that we may then all unite in rendering unto Him our sincere and humble thanks for His kind care and protection of the people of this country."

President Lincoln and the Congress knew that even in the midst of severe conflict, Americans had much for which to be thankful. No matter how bad the debate, disagreements, and fighting became; Americans had been blessed by God and needed to stop and thank Him.

The same is true in our lives today. No matter how difficult a trial we face, how great a loss we experience, or how tough a circumstance; God has been good to us. If nothing else, He has given His only Son to die on the Cross so we might spend eternity with Him. That is enough to fill a year with days of thanksgiving!

In 1939, Franklin Roosevelt moves it back a week to extend the Christmas shopping season. Congress ruled that after 1941, the fourth Thursday in November will be Thanksgiving day, a legal federal holiday.

Traditionally, this is the time of year that we take time to remember our blessings and give thanks for them. We take one day out of November to remember the countless ways God has blessed our

lives. But there isn't enough time in just one day to thank God for everything. I want to challenge you to make a list right now of things for which you are thankful. It could be a new job, daily provisions, a loving spouse, eternal security, or many other ways.

Don't become so consumed with the holiday that you forget the reason for it's institution. Let the month of November be a month of praise and thanksgiving to God for all He's done. Remember the verse, and allow a spirit of thankfulness to overflow you this month: "*O give thanks unto the LORD; for he is good; for his mercy endureth for ever.*"

Well, folks that is it. I hope you have a wonderful Thanksgiving and take time like our forefathers did and intended to give thanks to the One who has given us so many blessings. I also hope that you were able to take it and use it to teach your family the heritage and the importance of thankfulness in our lives, Phillipians 4:4-7, Ephesians 5:20, Romans 8:28, and Hebrew 13:15.

Dr. Terry L. Coomer is the Pastor of Elwood Bible Baptist Church, and the Director of For the Love of the Family Ministries. He has also served as the Publisher of the nation's fastest growing daily newspaper. Pastor Coomer holds Family Conferences in the local church. To have a meeting at your church or other needs he may be contacted at (765) 552-1973, tlcoomer@juno.com. There are many helpful articles and material on our web site to help you change your life at www.fortheloveofthefamily.com. We serve the God of answers. If you need help finding those answers you may contact us at tlcoomer@juno.com. To be removed from our mailing list send an e-mail to tlcoomer@juno.com.