

“Thanksgiving in America - 2020”

Psalm 107

(☐ = advance powerpoint)

☐ Let me begin by saying that this morning’s sermon is an adaptation of the work of Dr. Kenyn Cureton, a pastor who served the Lord as Vice President for Church Ministries with Family Research Council. I am grateful for his historical research that is interweaved with this sermon based on Psalm 107.

When I was a child, Thanksgiving was the focus of November. We would learn about the Pilgrims in public school, and Thanksgiving themed decorations of Pilgrims, harvest and turkeys dominated stores, school and the home. Christmas decorations were never seen until after Thanksgiving. Churches would have special Thanksgiving services the Sunday or Wednesday prior and a few on Thanksgiving Day itself. A lot has changed since then. By the time I was in High School it was popular to call Thanksgiving “Turkey Day” and the focus was on how much you would eat and what football games you would see. It used to be just college games, but the professional leagues soon saw the opportunity for TV to boost their revenues. Thanksgiving was turning into a day of gluttony and watching sports. People complained when some stores started putting up Christmas decorations early, now some stores have Christmas items up in October. ☐ More than a decade ago Black Friday began to become earlier and earlier. By 2012 major retail stores began to open on Thanksgiving Day. I have been getting ads for several weeks now about “early” Black Friday savings. Thanksgiving for retailers and shoppers is about being grateful for such great sale prices. ☐ This year, governors in several states, including our own, are doing their best to cancel family Thanksgiving feasts whether at home or a restaurant, and my guess is that they will use the same reasoning to restrict Christmas celebrations as well. These are secular want-to-be dictators that do not fear God and for whom extended family is relatively unimportant. This is just another effort to reshape society into their socialist dream. But bear in mind that the attack on our holidays that have a religious basis have been going on for a long time.

☐ By the time my children were young, it was not politically correct to talk about God in school, so the reason for the thanksgiving feast of the Pilgrims was changed to being grateful to the Indians. That was when I decided that this church needed to hold a Thanksgiving service to put the emphasis back on being grateful to God and pass down that tradition to our children. We have held thanksgiving harvest dinners on different days in the past, but for many years those have been held on the Sunday prior to Thanksgiving Day and I have held a worship service on that day itself. Our priority of grateful worship of God needs to be exercised, and that priority needs to be established in our children. That is the actual purpose of this holiday. It is also what Scripture directs us to do.

☐ Psalm 107 encourages us to give thanks as the Psalmist recounts the *LORD*’s goodness in dealing with His people as they would humble themselves before Him. ¹*Oh, give thanks to the LORD, for He is good! For His lovingkindness is everlasting.* ²*Let the redeemed of the LORD say so. . .* The psalmist then recounts those who wandered about and could not find their way until they cried out to the Lord and He delivered them by showing them the way. ☐ In verses 8 & 9 the psalmist then implores, ⁸*Let them give thanks to the LORD for His lovingkindness, And for His wonders to the sons of men!* ⁹*For He has satisfied the thirsty soul, And the hungry soul He has filled with what is good.* That has been the natural response of godly people and the trained response of those taught God’s word.

☐ The tradition of holding Thanksgiving observances in America dates back to the early explorers of the 1500's who would have experienced and followed the advice in Psalm 107:1-9.

*1541 at Palo Duro Canyon, Texas (panhandle) with Coronado and 1,500 of his men;

*1564 near Jacksonville, Florida with French Huguenot colonists;

*1598 at El Paso, Texas with Juan de Oñate and his expedition;¹

There were also several times and places where groups of European Christians gave thanks after the discovery and early settlement of America, ■

*1607 at Cape Henry, Virginia with the landing of the Jamestown settlers;

*1619 at Berkeley Plantation, Virginia;¹

But it is primarily from the Pilgrim's Thanksgiving celebration of 1621 and the years following that we get our current tradition of Thanksgiving Day. Their story is one that should often be repeated so that we know well our heritage as Americans.

■ The group we now refer to as the Pilgrims were religious separatists that lived in Scrooby, England. Because they worshiped separately from the Church of England, they, like all others that would not conform to the nation's official church, were persecuted by the government. ■ King James I said they must "*Conform or I will harry them out of the land.*" Their property was confiscated; they were physically abused, and some were martyred. ■ The Pilgrims finally escaped England and re-established their church in Holland. But as the years went by, there was concern that their young people were being lured away by the wickedness of that society, that they were losing their English identity, and that the threat of a Spanish invasion would result in persecution by the Roman Catholics. ■ Under the leadership of their pastor, John Robinson, they prayerfully decided to re-locate their church in the New World of America.

After several setbacks including the sabotage of the *Speedwell*, the first group of church members joined with a group of adventurers and set sail for America on September 6, 1620 in the *Mayflower*. ■ For two months they braved the harsh elements and storm-tossed sea which caused them to miss their target of Virginia and land instead at Cape Cod, Massachusetts. They were now in a land outside the King's authority, so they drafted a document for self-governing they called ■ the Mayflower Compact before they disembarked. This document laid a foundation for the American idea of self-government in the centuries that followed. It began, "*In the Name of God*" and gave this reason for their coming: "*For the Glory of God and the Advancement of the Christian Faith.*"² ■ William Bradford described the Pilgrims' thankfulness when they disembarked:

Being thus arived in a good harbor and brought safe to land, they fell upon their knees & blessed ye God of heaven who had brought them over ye vast & furious ocean, and delivered them from all ye periles & miseries therof, againe to set their feete on ye firme and stable earth, their proper elemente... What could now sustain them but the Spirit of God and His grace?"³

Their response was the same as in ■ Psalm 107:23-32. They had cried out to the LORD as they experienced the dangers of the sea, and they responded in like fashion"³¹*Let them give thanks to the LORD for His lovingkindness, And for His wonders to the sons of Men!* ³²*Let them extol Him also in the congregation of the people, And praise Him in the seat of the elders.*"

After trying to sail south to Virginia and being rebuffed by strong winds, the Pilgrims prayed and discerned that God would have them settle near where they had originally landed in what is now Provincetown Harbor. Already late December by this point, they hastily began building shelters, beginning with the "common" or meeting house on Christmas Day.⁴ However, they were not prepared for such a harsh New England winter, and nearly half of the Pilgrims died before spring.⁵

When spring came they were out of food. ■ In March, an Indian named Samoset surprised the Pilgrims by greeting them in English, which he had learned from traders on fishing expeditions. A week later, Samoset returned with Squanto, a former captive of English slave traders, who had taken him to Spain, where a monk reportedly rescued him and taught him the Christian faith. Squanto eventually made his way to England and then back to America in 1619, a year before the Pilgrims would arrive. When Squanto returned to his native village, he found that everyone had been wiped out by a plague – no doubt brought to them by English traders. He was one of the last Patuxet Indians in America.⁶

▣ Governor Bradford described Squanto as “*a special instrument sent of God for their good beyond their expectation.*”⁸ Indeed he was for the Pilgrims were craftsmen and townspeople with little experience as farmers or hunters. In four months time they had caught only one codfish. Squanto offered his services and taught the Pilgrims how to provide for the necessities of life, including how to fish for cod, how to plant corn with a fish as fertilizer, how to stalk deer, plant pumpkins, skin beavers, and what berries were edible.⁷ He was a Native American who understood the English language and customs, ate English foods, and he became committed to the same Christ. He was the right man, at the right place, at the right time. Only God can do that. Squanto’s story is not unlike Joseph in the Old Testament – he was shaped and molded through suffering and slavery to be the instrument of God to literally keep the people of God alive.

Squanto not only taught the Pilgrims much about how to live in the New World, he and Samoset helped forge a long-lasting peace treaty between the Pilgrims and the Wampanoag Indians.⁹ In the fall of 1621, the Pilgrims gathered a bountiful harvest. They invited their Indian friends for a Thanksgiving celebration. ▣ Pilgrim Edward Winslow records: “*Our harvest being gotten in, our governor sent four men on fowling (turkey hunting), so that we might after a special manner rejoice together after we had gathered the fruit of our labors.*” ▣¹⁰ Winslow expressed their thanksgiving: “*God be praised, we had a good increase of corn... by the goodness of God, we are far from want...*”¹¹

As in Psalm 107:10-20, they had gone through very dark days and they had cried out to the LORD in their distress. ▣ They followed the pattern set in Psalm 107:21-22, ²¹*Let them give thanks to the LORD for His lovingkindness, And for His wonders to the sons of men!* ²²*Let them also offer sacrifices of thanksgiving, And tell of His works with joyful singing.*

▣ The grateful Pilgrims declared a three-day feast in December 1621 to thank God and to celebrate with their Indian friends – 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.¹² ▣ As was their custom, Elder William Brewster would have led them in a prayer of thanksgiving to God for His goodness. This celebration and its accompanying activities were the origin of the holiday that Americans now celebrate each November.

The practice of giving thanks to the Lord and of setting aside special days of thanksgiving traces back to the ancient Israelites and continued to be practiced among the followers of Christ. The traditions set by the Pilgrims spread into neighboring colonies. The New England colonies typically called for a day of prayer and fasting in the spring and a day of prayer and thanksgiving in the fall. It was not until the War for Independence that these traditions spread southward. ▣ The Continental Congress issued eight proclamations for a Day of Thanksgiving and Prayer and seven proclamations for a Day of Fasting and Prayer, for a total of 15 official prayer proclamations during the American Revolution.¹⁴ For example, following the amazing victory at Saratoga, a congressional committee consisting of two signers of the Declaration of Independence, Richard Henry Lee and Samuel Adams, along with General Daniel Roberdeau, recommended the following resolution on November 1, 1777:

“Forasmuch as it is the indispensable duty of all men to adore the superintending Providence of Almighty God; to acknowledge with gratitude their obligation to Him for benefits received and to implore such further blessing as they stand in need of; and it having pleased Him in His abundant mercy not only to continue to us the innumerable bounties of His common Providence... It is therefore recommended to the legislative or executive powers of these United States, to set apart Thursday, the eighteenth day of December next, for the solemn thanksgiving and praise:

That with one heart and one voice the good people may express the grateful feelings of their hearts, and consecrate themselves to the service of their Divine Benefactor; and that together

with their sincere acknowledgements and offerings, they may join the penitent confession of their manifold sins, whereby they had forfeited every favour, and their humble and earnest supplication that it may please God, through the merits of Jesus Christ, mercifully to forgive and blot them out of remembrance; ...

That it may please Him, to prosper the trade and manufactures of the people, and the labour of the husbandman, that our land may yet yield its increase; to take school and seminaries of education, so necessary for cultivating the principles of true liberty, virtue and piety, under His nurturing hand, and to prosper the means of religion for the promotion and enlargement of that kingdom which consisteth “in righteous, peace and joy in the Holy Ghost.”¹⁵

▣ Psalm 107:33-43 speaks of the Lord’s hand to chasten the wicked and bless the righteous. ⁴² *The upright see it, and are glad; But all unrighteousness shuts its mouth,* ⁴³ *Who is wise? Let him give heed to these things; And consider the lovingkindness of the LORD.*

The forefathers of our nation understood this and heeded the Scriptures. ▣ America’s first national Thanksgiving proclamation under the U.S. Constitution was made in 1789 with the commencement of the federal government. On the day after the Framers of the Bill of Rights voted to approve them, ▣ the Congressional Record for September 25 relates:

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: for instance, the solemn thanksgivings and rejoicings which took place in the time of Solomon after the building of the temple was a case in point. This example he thought worthy of a Christian imitation on the present occasion...¹⁶

In response to the congressional resolution, ▣ President George Washington issued the first federal Thanksgiving proclamation on October 3, 1789, 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; and

Whereas both 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 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 and assign Thursday, the twenty-sixth day of November next, to be devoted by the People of these United 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...; for the signal and manifold mercies, and the favorable interpositions of His Providence...¹⁷

Following this initial proclamation, national Thanksgiving proclamations approved by Congress and issued by the President occurred only sporadically thereafter.¹⁸ Most Thanksgiving observances were proclaimed by civil authorities at the state level. By 1820, the various state governments had issued at least 1,400 official prayer proclamations, almost half for times of thanksgiving and prayer and the other half for times of fasting and prayer, following the pattern set in early New England.¹⁹

▣ Credit for the adoption of Thanksgiving as an annual national holiday mostly goes to Mrs. Sarah Josepha Hale, the editor of *Godey's Lady's Book*, a popular women's publication. For nearly three decades, Hale promoted the idea of a national Thanksgiving Day to president after president, without success, until President Abraham Lincoln responded to her request in 1863, setting aside the last Thursday of that November as a national “*Day of Thanksgiving and Praise.*”

The Thanksgiving proclamation issued by Lincoln was remarkable not only for its strong religious content but also for its timing. It was issued during some of the darkest days of the Civil War, with the Union having lost more battles than they had won, and the outcome of the war still very much uncertain.

▣ Yet Lincoln called the American people to adopt the attitude of gratitude:

*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...*²⁰

This remarkable Thanksgiving Proclamation came just three months after the Battle of Gettysburg, resulting in the loss of some 60,000 American lives. ▣ Over the seventy-five years following Lincoln's Thanksgiving proclamation, every American president faithfully followed Lincoln's precedent, annually declaring a national Thanksgiving Day (though 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.²¹

Let's go back to the Pilgrims for one final story. ▣ The Pilgrims planted their crops in the spring of 1623, anticipating another bountiful harvest, but summer brought a severe drought, “*which continued from ye 3 week in May till about ye middle of July without any rain and with great heat for ye most part insomuch as ye corn began to wither away.*”²² With no rain in sight and their crops dying, Governor William Bradford “*set apart a solemn day of humiliation to seek ye Lord by humble & fervent prayer in this great distress.*”²³

Everyone gathered in the meeting house early and spent that clear, hot day in repentance and prayer. When they opened the doors of the meeting house that evening, the skies were cloudy, and then it began to rain a gently soaking rain – on and off for the next two weeks, which gave them cause for “*rejoicing & blessing God.*”²⁴ ▣ 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.*²⁵

During that “*lean year,*” before the harvest came in, the ration was reportedly five kernels of corn per person. However, with the abundance of rain, Edward Winslow records that they had a great harvest that

October.²⁶ So they had another Thanksgiving festival with the Natives, inviting Chief Massasoit and the Wampanoags. This time they came with 120 braves and all their women and children, and they had another tremendous time of feasting and celebrating. ■ But before they filled their plates with all that God had blessed them with, the Pilgrims reportedly placed five kernels of corn on each plate as a reminder of God's goodness, lest they should forget.²⁷

As you continue to celebrate Thanksgiving today, don't forget to take time to genuinely and sincerely thank God personally and with your family and friends for all His many blessings, material and spiritual and ■ so fulfill the instructions of the Psalmist -⁴³*Who is wise? Let him give heed to these things; And consider the lovingkindness of the LORD.* . . . ■ ²¹*Let them give thanks to the LORD for His lovingkindness, And for His wonders to the sons of men!* ²²*Let them also offer sacrifices of thanksgiving, And tell of His works with joyful singing.*

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Original Sermon at:

http://downloads.frc.org/EF/EF13K37.pdf?utm_source=Thanksgiving+resources&utm_campaign=Faith+%26+Freedom&utm_medium=email

¹ See <http://www.wallbuilders.com/libissuesarticles.asp?id=17984> for all the historical reference notes on Thanksgiving celebrations before that of the Pilgrims in 1621.

² William Bradford, Bradford's History "Of Plimoth Plantation:" From the Original Manuscript with a Report of the Proceedings Incident to the Return of the Manuscript to Massachusetts (Boston: Wright & Potter, 1898), 110.

³ Ibid., 95.

⁴ Ibid., 107.

⁵ Ibid., 111.

⁶ Ibid., 114-119.

⁷ Ibid., 121.

⁸ Ibid., 116.

⁹ Ibid., 115.

¹⁰ Dwight Heath, ed., Mourt's Relation: A Journal of the Pilgrims at Plymouth, (Bedford, MA: Applewood Books, 1963), 82, which contains Edward Winslow's letter written to George Morton of London on December 21, 1621.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ See DeLoss Love, Jr, The Fast and Thanksgiving Days of New England (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin & Co, 1895), 87-90.

¹⁴ See the online version of the Journals of the Continental Congress 1774-1789, 34 vols., (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1907-37) at: <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/amlaw/lwjclink.html> and search for June 12, 1775; March 16, 1776; December 11, 1776; November 1, 1777; March 7, 1778; November 17, 1778; March 20, 1779; October 20, 1779; March 11, 1780; October 18, 1780; March 20, 1781; October 26, 1781; March 19, 1782; October 11, 1782; October 18, 1783.

¹⁵ Ibid., 9:854-855.

¹⁶ Joseph Gales, Sr., comp., The Debates and Proceedings in the Congress of the United States, (Washington, DC: Gales and Seaton, 1834), 1:949-50. Hereafter, Annals of Congress.

¹⁷ Jared Sparks, ed., The Writings of George Washington; being His Correspondence, Addresses, Messages, and Other Papers, Official and Private, Selected and Published from the original Manuscripts, 12 vols. (Boston: American Stationer's Company, 1837), 12:119.

¹⁸ See examples provided by H. S. J. Sickel, Thanksgiving: Its Source, Philosophy and History With All National Proclamations (Philadelphia: International Printing Co, 1940), such as "Thanksgiving Day 1795" by George Washington, 156-157; "Thanksgiving Day 1798" by John Adams, 158-159; "Thanksgiving Day 1799" by John Adams, 160; "Thanksgiving Day 1814" by James Madison, 161; "Thanksgiving Day 1815" by James Madison, 162, etc.

¹⁹ David Barton cites Deloss Love, in his work The Fast and Thanksgiving Days of New England, who lists some 1,735 proclamations issued between 1620 and 1820, in a non-exclusive list. Of those, 284 were issued by churches and 1,451 by civil authorities. See <http://www.wallbuilders.com/libissuesarticles.asp?id=17984> at note 19.

²⁰ Roy P. Basler, Jr., ed., The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln, 9 vols., (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 6:496-97.

²¹ David Barton cites the following at note 23: The National Archives, "Congress Establishes Thanksgiving" (at: <http://www.archives.gov/legislative/features/thanksgiving/>); see also Pilgrim Hall Museum, "Presidential Thanksgiving Proclamations 1940-1949: Franklin D. Roosevelt, Harry S. Truman" (at: <http://www.pilgrimhall.org/ThanxProc1940.htm>), Proclamation 2571: Days of Prayer: Thanksgiving Day and New Year's Day, November 11, 1942, referring to a "joint resolution of Congress approved December 26, 1941, which designates the fourth Thursday in November of each year as Thanksgiving Day."

²² Bradford, 170.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., 171.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Edward Winslow, Good Newes From New England: A True Relation of Things Very Remarkable at the Plantation of Plimoth in New England (Bedford, MA: Applewood Books, 1624/ND), 54-55. Corroborated by Bradford, 127.

²⁷ Peter Marshall and David Manuel, The Light and the Glory (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1977), 144.