

November 25, 1999
November 23, 2016
Thanksgiving Day

Giving Thanks in All Things Selected Scriptures

Today is the official U.S. Holiday of “Thanksgiving.” After reading President Obama’s Thanksgiving Day proclamation for this year, I dare say most people do not know its history or purpose. Mr. Obama repeats revisionist history saying, “*The Pilgrims were grateful they could rely on the generosity of the Wampanoag people, without whom they would not have survived their first year in the new land, and together they celebrated this bounty with a festival that lasted for days and prompted the tradition of an annual day of giving thanks.*” I think it wise for us to at least briefly remind ourselves the true origin and nature of our national holiday - and it was not to thank the Indians.

Religious persecution in England in the early 1600's had caused a group of Separatists to leave England in 1609 and settle in Holland. Separatists were those who sought to free themselves from the hierarchy of both Catholicism and Anglicanism and follow the scriptures alone. Because of their “pilgrimage” (moving) to another land they were called “Pilgrims.”

By 1617 several major concerns were compelling them to consider moving again. Their plan eventually settled on going to the “New World” of America. They were finally able to make the arrangements and a portion of their group set sail for America on August 5, 1620 in *Speedwell* and the *Mayflower*. Problems with the *Speedwell* forced their return twice. It was later revealed that the crew had sabotaged the *Speedwell*. This left the colonists with a shortage of supplies and people for the new colony, even so, the *Mayflower* set out alone on Sept. 6.

The delays put them at sea during the Fall storm season, and they experienced many of them, one of which would have sent all of them all to a watery grave except for the cracked main beam being ingeniously repaired with a printing press. The storms at sea were only the beginning of troubles caused by their delay. They first sighted land on November 9, but it was Cape Cod. They were in the wrong place. Efforts to head south were finally abandoned due to the storms and the treacherous shoals of unknown waters. They had no other choice but to try and winter where they were.

They had crossed the Atlantic with only one death, but disease came upon them as they searched for a place to build a settlement. On December 4, Edward Thompson became the first Pilgrim to die in Cape Cod Harbor. They found a place to settle on December 20, but 6 more had already died, and the weather was now so bad they could not even get to the shore to begin building. Several more would die before they would be able to inhabit their partially completed buildings on the shore.

The Pilgrims endured a harsh Winter. They had scarce food and sickness and death plagued them. By Spring, 47 of the 102 that had left England the previous September were dead. Almost half of the *Mayflower's* crew of 50 had also died. In the next few months, several more would die including John Carver, the governor. The coming summer would have its own challenges, but with the help of some of the surrounding Indians, especially Squanto, they planted and harvested a bountiful harvest that Fall.

Governor Bradford issued a Thanksgiving Proclamation for a three day feast that was held

that Autumn after the crops were brought in - October or early November. Elder William Brewster suggested that their good fortune be shared with the friendly Indians and so an invitation was sent to Chief Massasoit who came with 90 others from his tribe. I am sure the Pilgrims were grateful to the Indians for their help, but the celebration was held to give thanks to God, and the Indians were invited to join in that celebration. The event began with a prayer service lead by William Brewster.

The feast they held would be meager by today's standards, but they were truly grateful for what the Lord had provided them. The real proof of their gratitude was not in holding a special time of thanksgiving for the harvest and the friendly relationships that had developed with the Indians, but in the fact that Sunday after Sunday, even during the worse periods of their hardships, they met to worship and praise God. That is not something that can be done when your stomach is longing for something - anything - to eat and you are grieving over the death of your friends and loved ones unless your heart is fixed on God and you see the world from His perspective. How many of us would respond to such harsh conditions and loss of life in the same manner as they did? I really wonder because of the way we respond to hardships that are so much less severe than what they went through. Two questions of greater importance are these: 1) How were they able to respond in that manner? 2) Is it possible for us to follow their example?

Over the course of the history of the United States there have been many government proclamations for a day or days to be set aside for Thanksgiving. The 1789 proclamation by George Washington was the first by a U.S. President. Similar proclamations were made sporadically by other Presidents and governors. It was the 1863 Thanksgiving Proclamation by Abraham Lincoln that established a yearly national day of Thanksgiving and set it to be on the last Thursday in November (It was moved to the fourth Thursday by FDR). What Lincoln said in the middle of the Civil War is worth noting as an example of other people in stressful times responding with thanksgiving just as the Pilgrims had done over two centuries prior. Let me read it for you:

IT is the duty of nations as well as of men to own their dependence upon the overruling power of God; to confess their sins and transgressions in humble sorrow, yet with assured hope that genuine repentance will lead to mercy and pardon; and to recognize the sublime truth, announced in the Holy Scriptures and proven by all history, that those nations are blessed whose God is the Lord.

WE know that by his divine law, nations, like individuals, are subjected to punishments and chastisements in this world. May we not justly fear that the awful calamity of civil war which now desolates the land may be a punishment inflicted upon us for our presumptuous sins, to the needful end of our national reformation as a whole people?

WE have been the recipients of the choicest bounties of heaven; we have been preserved these many years in peace and prosperity; we have grown in numbers, wealth and power as no other nation has ever grown.

BUT we have forgotten God. We have forgotten the gracious hand which preserved us in peace and multiplied and enriched and strengthened us, and we have vainly imagined, in the deceitfulness of our hearts, that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own. Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace, too proud to pray to the God that made us.

IT has seemed to me fit and proper that God should be solemnly, reverently, and gratefully

acknowledged, as with one heart and one voice, by the whole American people. I do therefore invite my fellow citizens in every part of the United States, and also those who are at sea and those who are sojourning in foreign lands, to set apart and observe the last Thursday of November as a day of Thanksgiving and praise to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the heavens.

Abraham Lincoln

Are we not still a nation which has grown in wealth and power as no other nation has ever grown? Are we not still a nation that has forgotten God and His gracious hand which has been extended to us in so many blessings? I would say much, much more so on both accounts than back then. This year's Thanksgiving proclamation does not reference God except in the dating of the document.

It is apparent in President Lincoln's proclamation that he knew something of the Pilgrim's understanding of the view of life. It is not the immediate circumstances of life that should make us thankful to God, but rather our understanding of our supreme dependency upon Him, and that we in fact deserve nothing from Him.

Turn to Psalm 111 and let me make a few comments about what this Psalm tells us of these great truths.

The first verse tells of the action and attitude of the godly - the same actions and attitude exhibited by the Pilgrims.

Psalm 111:1 (NASB) *Praise the Lord! I will give thanks to the Lord with all [my] heart, In the company of the upright and in the assembly.*

The action is giving praise and thanks to God. Praise is acclaiming God's character and actions while thanks is expressing gratitude for God's character and actions. Notice that the praise and thanks are given with "all heart." This is not done with resignation or reluctance. This is something the individual desires to do. How often do we wrongly come to God to give praise or thanks much in the same way that a child comes when forced by his parents to say thank you for a gift he needed (like a shirt), but didn't really want?

When is such praise and thanks given? In this case it is in the presence of those who also profess faith in the Lord - *the company of the upright and in the assembly* - but we know from other passages that there is no restriction in giving praise and thanks to God. Psalm 34:1 states, *I will bless the Lord at all times; His praise shall continually be in my mouth.*

What is it that we should give praise and thanks to God for? The rest of the Psalm describes that in two sections. The first gives some general statements and the second some more specific expansions on the first.

2 Great are the works of the Lord; [They are] studied by all who delight in them.

3 Splendid and majestic is His work; And His righteousness endures forever.

4 He has made His wonders to be remembered; The Lord is gracious and compassionate.

5 He has given food to those who fear Him; He will remember His covenant forever.

6 He has made known to His people the power of His works, In giving them the heritage of the nations.

In general it is the works of God that should bring to our mouths praise and thanks. In this section those works are described as "great," "splendid" and "majestic." Each of those words can also be applied directly to God. In fact, it would be more proper to say that the works of God

have these characteristics because He is great, splendid and majestic. His works are simply a reflection of Him.

Our text also tells something of the nature of those that are giving God this praise and thanks. They delight in God's works and so they study them. That is, they pay attention to them and examine their nature and intricacies and find joy in doing so. This is one of the reasons for my interest in science in general and entomology in particular. The more you examine the things God has made the more splendid they are in reflection of His handiwork. And, as verse 4 states, these works are remembered. Having seen either a majestic picture of a distant galaxy or looked through a microscope at the delicate structure of a diatom, you never forget them.

The writer of the Psalm also points out for specific praise the eternal righteous character of God (vs. 3) and His graciousness and compassion (vs. 4). He then points out His provision of food and His covenant with Israel as examples of these character qualities.

We must remember that the food we have comes because of God's grace and compassion. It is God that gives "bread to the eater" (Isaiah 55:10). "Every good thing bestowed and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights" (James 1:17). This is what the Pilgrims understood. This is what Abraham Lincoln understood.

Neither you nor I deserve the blessings we have. They come to us because God has compassion upon us and in His grace gives us what we do not deserve. When we forget that we start taking God's compassion and grace for granted and soon begin to think we deserve what we have and accuse God of being mean and miserly when we do not get what we want. Tragically, that is a state of many in our nation. The result is that they are miserable even though by any standard we are an extremely affluent people - especially by any historical standard. Ingratitude robs a person of joy. They may have an abundance but are still discontent and dejected. Those who know they deserve nothing and understand that God's grace and compassion have provided what they do have are content and joyful even if they are in meager circumstances as were the Pilgrims in 1621.

God's works toward the nation of Israel stand out as the grand example of His grace and compassion. There was nothing to set that nation apart from any other except that God lovingly choose them for Himself. In fact, Deuteronomy 9:6 and many other verses point out that they were a stubborn and obstinate people. Yet, God did choose them and blessed them with His covenant and gave them the heritage of the nations - the revelation of the Creator of the universe.

In verses 7-10 more specifics about God's works are given.

7 The works of His hands are truth and justice; All His precepts are sure.

8 They are upheld forever and ever; They are performed in truth and uprightness.

Truth and justice are a characteristic of God's works because they are characteristics of Him. God's precepts, the principles of His commandments that we are to obey, are sure. They are trustworthy. They will not harm you or lead you astray. You can follow them knowing they are true forever. They are sure because they do not change as do the tastes and mores of society.

9 He has sent redemption to His people; He has ordained His covenant forever; Holy and awesome is His name.

It is in the redemption of God's people that we see His compassion and grace extended to meet truth and justice, for truth and justice would demand our condemnation, but when in His compassion and grace He paid the price of our sin in Jesus Christ, we received redemption. It

was not deserved by us by any means or any manner. It came out of His love and grace. God does not go back on His word. He is not a man that He should lie or the son of man that He should change His mind (Numbers 23:19). His covenant of redemption through Jesus Christ will last forever. His name, therefore, is Holy and awesome. His undeserved love towards us causes us to wonder in amazement at His holy character.

The Psalm writer concludes: *10 The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; A good understanding have all those who do [His commandments]; His praise endures forever.*

When we consider the awesome nature of our Creator and who we are in comparison to Him, there should be a fear within us. For those that reject Him, it should be the fear of terror of knowing that one day they will stand before Him who is holy and just and be judged by truth. They will be condemned by their own words and actions (Matthew 21:37; Revelation 20:13).

Those that love the Lord God will have the utmost respect and reverence for Him, and their response will be to do His commandments. They will desire and seek to do His will because they do understand God' nature and the blessing He bestows on those who love Him. So it is that they will praise Him with praise that will continue forever.

What about you? Can you be like the Pilgrims of old who were truly thankful even in the midst of very harsh circumstances? Absolutely yes! - if you will see clearly God's compassion and grace to you as they did in their time. According to Romans 2:4, the kindness of God should cause us to turn from our sin and selfishness to marvel at the wonders of His grace.

Today is Thanksgiving Day. May you use it to give praise, glory and honor to our merciful and gracious Lord as you recount to Him and to others the manifold blessings He has bestowed upon you.