



THANKSGIVING

The Story of an American Tradition

“An Indian who spoke English? How could this be?” The Pilgrims sat in amazement and listened as this new visitor shared his incredible story. It was Squanto, the last remaining Indian of the Patuxets—a tribe once hostile toward the white man. Four years before the Pilgrims arrived in the New World, a mysterious disease had killed every member of his tribe—everyone except him.¹

Why was Squanto so important? In 1605, Squanto had been captured and taken to England for nine years. This is where he learned how to speak English. He eventually returned to his village with an English fishing expedition headed up by Captain John Smith. Unfortunately, he was taken prisoner shortly afterwards along with several other members of his tribe. The captain of the ship then took him and the others to Spain where he sold them as slaves. Providentially, Squanto was sold to some Spanish monks. They rescued him, brought him back to their monastery, and taught him about Jesus. A few years later, in 1619, he was able to return home to the area that would become Plymouth. When he discovered his tribe had been wiped out by disease, Squanto sought out a neighboring tribe and joined up with them until the Pilgrims arrived in 1621.² God had supernaturally ordered the steps of this Native American to fit into His plan for America.

Amazingly, Squanto chose to stay with the Pilgrims to ensure their survival. For the first time since discovering that his tribe had been wiped out, Squanto found a reason for living—to teach and care for the English settlers. To him, they were like babes who needed to know how to survive in their new environment. He taught them how to catch fish, pick berries and discern which herbs were good to eat and good for medicine. He also taught them how to stalk deer, plant pumpkins and refine maple syrup. But the two things Squanto showed them that would impact their lives the greatest were how to plant corn the Indian way and how to trap and trade beaver pelts. The beaver pelts became an avenue for *economic* blessing and the corn an avenue for *physical* blessing. By the time harvest came their first year, they had nearly twenty acres of corn and more than enough crops to make it through the entire winter!³

“Squanto...was a special instrument sent of God for their good beyond their expectation.” These were the words of William Bradford, the man who eventually became the first governor of Plymouth.⁴ The Pilgrims were overflowing with gratitude. They were not only thankful to Squanto and the Wampanoag, his adopted tribe, they were also very grateful to God for honoring their obedience. In response, Governor Bradford declared a day of public thanksgiving, which was to be held in October. Squanto and Massasoit, the chief of the Wampanoag, were invited, and much to the Pilgrims’ surprise, ninety other members of the tribe showed up. They came with five dressed deer and more than a dozen fat wild turkeys. They taught the Pilgrim women how to make hoecakes and a tasty pudding made from

cornmeal. They also showed them how to roast corn kernels in an earthen pot until they popped fluffy and white—making popcorn.⁵

Naturally, the Pilgrims provided plenty of vegetables, and they also took the summer fruits that the American Indians had dried and presented them with their first taste of blueberry, apple and cherry pie. Between times of feasting, many participated in foot races, wrestling matches, military drills and shooting contests with gun and bow. Chief Massasoit and the other tribe members were having so much fun they stayed for three days. Of course, along with their celebrating came times of prayer and thanks to God for providing for all their needs. They also thanked God for the wonderful friendship they had developed with the Indian Natives. Unlike the settlers of Jamestown, the Pilgrims of Plymouth treated the local tribes with respect and the love of Christ. As a result, they won their favor.⁶

This thanksgiving festival of 1621 celebrated by the Pilgrims of Plymouth, Massachusetts, and the Wampanoag Indians became the model and reference point for our American tradition. From that time forward, sporadic celebrations took place. In October 1777, all thirteen colonies joined together for the first time to celebrate thanksgiving for victory over the British at Saratoga.⁷ In 1789, President George Washington proclaimed a day of thanksgiving to God for America's independence and its newly formed constitution. But the year of 1863 was the pivotal year. It was then that President Abraham Lincoln proclaimed the last Thursday in November as a national day of thanksgiving. Every president since then proclaimed a day of thanksgiving, and in 1941, Thanksgiving was finally sanctioned by Congress as a legal holiday on the fourth Thursday in November.⁸

While many people today follow the Pilgrims' example of feasting at Thanksgiving, they ignore the original intent of the holiday—they don't give thanks to God for all He's done. Why are so many people *thankless*? It's because we have an abundance of blessings, as well as the false belief that we've achieved success and acquired wealth in our own strength. But the truth is, apart from God, we can do nothing.⁹

I encourage you to give thanks to God for all that He's done—both big and small. Remember, EVERY good and perfect gift comes from Him, and we are to give Him thanks in EVERY circumstance.¹⁰ One of the best ways to develop an "attitude of gratitude" is by making a list of everything you can think of that He's blessed you with or protected you from. If you can see, thank God for sight. If you can walk, thank God for your legs. If you can breathe, thank God for healthy lungs.

There is so much for us to be thankful for, and that's where we need to keep our focus—not just on Thanksgiving Day but *every day*. So fill your mind with memories that are true, pure, lovely, excellent, and worthy of praise.¹¹ Then open your mouth and ...*be thankful and say so to [God], bless and affectionately praise His name!*¹²

(1) Peter Marshall and David Manuel with Anna Wilson Fishel, *The Light and the Glory for Children* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Fleming H. Revell, 1992), p. 67. (2) Mark A. Beliles & Stephen K. McDowell, *America's Providential History* (Charlottesville, VA: Providence Foundation, 1989), pp. 73,74. (3) Peter Marshall and David Manuel, *The Light and the Glory* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Fleming H. Revell, 1977), pp. 132,133; see note 2, p. 74. (4) See note 2, p. 73. (5)

See note 3, pp. 135,136. (6) See note 3, p. 136. (7) The Origin of Thanksgiving Day, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thanksgiving>. (8) What is the origin of America's annual Thanksgiving Day? www.christiananswers.net. (9) See John 15:5. (10) See James 1:17; 1 Thessalonians 5:18. (11) See Philippians 4:8. (12) See Psalm 100:4.

First Missionaries to America by Peter Marshall

What keeps modern Americans from properly understanding who the Pilgrims were and the pivotally important role they played in our history is that we are not properly taught the truth about **why** they came to America. Every school child has been told for decades upon decades that the Pilgrims came to America for religious liberty, or religious freedom. Wrong. Shallow history teaching.

The fact is that **they were missionaries** coming to the new world to plant the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the wilderness. As their great governor and chronicler, William Bradford, wrote:

"They had a great hope and inward zeal of laying some good foundation...for the propagating and advancing the Gospel of the kingdom of Christ in those remote parts of the world; yea, though they should be but even as stepping-stones unto others for the performing of so great a work."

Obviously, they had a strong sense of call and mission.

What is special about the Pilgrims is that these English evangelical Christian exiles actually laid the moral, spiritual and governmental foundations of America at Plymouth.* *But it was only by God's repeated intervention that they survived to accomplish their calling.*

With other Puritans, they had endured vicious religious persecution in England, having been arrested often by the King's soldiers and imprisoned by sheriffs. Finally fleeing for their lives to Holland, they settled in the town of Leyden. There they had experienced religious freedom for twelve years. But toward the end of this time, it became increasingly clear to them that God was calling them to leave Holland and come to America.

Clearly, if their motivation had been primarily about religious liberty, they could have stayed where they were. But it was much deeper than that. **They were missionaries.** They weren't running away from anything when they came to America—they were obeying the call of Christ on their lives!

This excerpt is taken from *The First New England Thanksgiving*, posted 11/24/05, <http://www.petermarshallministries.com/commentary.cfm?commentary=28>

* See Peter Marshall's book *The Light and the Glory*, his DVD *Pilgrims, Puritans, and Patriots*, and the VHS teaching seminar *Restoring America*. www.petermarshallministries.com.

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