

400 Years of Gratitude

By PAUL J. SCHARF

While we are not certain of the exact date, we do know that this year marks the 400th anniversary of the Pilgrims' first Thanksgiving celebration in Plymouth.ⁱ

In the fall of 1621, “the 53 surviving Pilgrims and Chief Massasoit with his 90 Indian braves”ⁱⁱ (of the Wampanoag Tribe) came together to mark the bounty of their harvest and to give praise to God for graciously preserving them and providing for them.

Pilgrim Edward Winslow—signer of the *Mayflower Compact*, three-time governor of Plymouth, the author of five books, and a most interesting man in his own right—shared the most detailed historical account of that blessed assembly in a work commonly referred to as *Mourt's Relation*. In it, he revealed the following details:

Our harvest being gotten in, our governor sent four men on fowling, that so we might after a special manner rejoice together, after we had gathered the fruits of our labors; 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 ninety 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. And although it be not always so plentiful, as it was at this time with us, yet by the goodness of God, we are so far from want, that we often wish you partakers of our plenty.ⁱⁱⁱ

Now, 400 years later, life is much more complicated than it was for our Pilgrim Fathers, who had sought freedom and opportunity in the New World. But our experience is certainly much more comfortable, and we enjoy so much more abundance in our daily lives than the Pilgrims did, for which we should be filled with gratitude.

The Apostle Paul commanded us as follows, in the most basic text in the New Testament regarding Thanksgiving: “In everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you” (1 Thess. 5:18).

Then, in another beloved New Testament Thanksgiving text, he instructed us:

Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. (Phil. 4:6-7)

In a classic sermon for Thanksgiving, Dr. D. James Kennedy shared the following insight into this passage:

... the Christian's magic wand ... is gratitude. It can transform your life. ... It can, first of all, transform anxiety and worry into peace. Are you anxious today? Is your heart filled with worry? Well, with the magic wand of gratitude, that can be transformed!^{iv}

Paul goes on to state: “Meditate on these things. The things which you learned and received and heard and saw in me, these do, and the God of peace will be with you” (Phil. 4:8-9). And Kennedy added:

... if life seems boring and dull, well, use the magic wand of thanksgiving and you will discover that it can transform the commonplace into the sacred—a world that is transformed by the presence of God. ... Thanksgiving can remind us that everything comes from God—that, as soon as we begin to give thanks, we realize suddenly that God is there, wherever we are. And that all of the sudden we find ourselves in an enchanted land, in a Divine land—a land that is fraught with the fragrance of our Redeemer. And our spiritual eyes are opened, and our hearts are filled because in the hour of thankfulness, faith is full and everything is changed.^v

But Paul describes the ramifications of the opposing attitude in Romans 1, where we find that the broken stair tread that plunges mankind into the darkness of depravity, degradation and disgrace is simply this: “Although they knew God, they did not glorify *Him* as God, nor were thankful” (Rom. 1:21).

I want to express my gratitude this Thanksgiving. As an American, and a Christian, I am so grateful for the heritage of the Pilgrim Fathers. I am thankful for evidence of the unusual working of God’s providence in their lives. And I am indebted to them for their example of thankfulness. May it also bless and encourage your heart in this Thanksgiving season, as we mark 400 years of gratitude.

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ⁱ History.com places this inaugural celebration “in November 1621.” “Thanksgiving 2021;” History; Updated: Nov. 11, 2021; Original: Oct. 27, 2009; <https://www.history.com/topics/thanksgiving/history-of-thanksgiving>; Internet; accessed 22 November 2021. However, Lindsay Blanken and Stephen Douglas Wilson conclude an interesting discussion of the matter with this statement: “... the actual date of the first Thanksgiving remains unknown.” They say that William Bradford’s records narrow it down to the period “between the present-day Sept. 28 ... and sometime in mid-November.” “The first Thanksgiving: myth and reality;” Baptist Press; Nov. 23, 2016; <https://www.baptistpress.com/resource-library/news/the-first-thanksgiving-myth-and-reality/>; Internet; accessed 23 November 2021.

ⁱⁱ Ibid. The article adds: “The 143 participants were served by only four surviving adult women from the original group of settlers.”

ⁱⁱⁱ History.com Editors; “Thanksgiving 2021;” History; Updated: Nov. 11, 2021; Original: Oct. 27, 2009; <https://www.history.com/topics/thanksgiving/history-of-thanksgiving>; Internet; accessed 22 November 2021.

^{iv} D. James Kennedy; “The Christian’s Magic Wand;” D. James Kennedy Ministries; Nov. 28, 1996; <https://www.djameskennedy.com/full-view-sermon/djk19647x-the-christian-s-magic-wand/>; Internet; accessed 23

November 2021. Kennedy delivered this message on Thanksgiving Day, 1996, at Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church in Fort Lauderdale, FL.

^ Ibid.