

American History chronicles numerous events called the "first" Thanksgiving. Perhaps the earliest recorded Thanksgiving celebration occurred 57 years *before* the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth in 1621.

The first American Thanksgiving was at a small colony of French Huguenots^[1] who established a settlement near present-day Jacksonville, Florida. On June 30, 1564, their leader, Rene de Laudonniere, recorded that "We sang a psalm of Thanksgiving unto God, beseeching Him that it would please Him to continue His accustomed goodness towards us."

In 1610, after a hard winter called "the starving time," the colonists at Jamestown called for a time of thanksgiving. This was after the original company of 409 colonists had been reduced to 60 survivors. The colonists prayed for help that finally arrived by a ship filled with food and supplies from England. They held a prayer service to give thanks.

This thanksgiving celebration was not originally commemorated yearly. An annual commemoration of thanks came nine years later in another part of Virginia. "On December 4, 1619, 38 colonists^[2] landed at a place they called Berkeley Hundred [in Virginia]. 'We ordain,' read an instruction in the charter, 'that the day of our ship's arrival...in the land of Virginia shall be yearly and perpetually kept holy as a day of Thanksgiving to Almighty God.'"

While none of these Thanksgiving celebrations was an official national pronouncement (since no nation existed at the time), they do support the claim that the celebrations were religious. "Thanksgiving^[3] began as a holy day, created by a community of God-fearing Puritans sincere in their desire to set aside one day each year especially to thank the Lord for His many blessings. The day they chose, coming after the harvest at a time of year when farm work was light, fit the natural rhythm of rural life."

By the end of the 19th century, Thanksgiving Day had become an institution throughout New England. It was officially proclaimed as a national holiday by President Abraham Lincoln^[4] on October 3, 1863:

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. 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...

I do, therefore, invite my fellow citizens in every part of the United States and those who are sojourning in foreign lands, to set apart and observe the last Thursday in November next as a day of Thanksgiving and praise to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in Heaven."

So this week we remember what our pilgrim forefathers have done. Even more, it is a time to remember another pilgrim. Sometime in the latter AD 60's, Paul the apostle looked out of the tiny grate that let in light to his subterranean dungeon. The mamertinum prison was only a stone's throw from the epicenter of the world, the Roman Forum.

Outside could be heard the crowds surging to the circus maximus, the games and the great festivals. The mighty legions returned from victory after victory with dazzling displays of plunder and captives.

And there ten feet under the streets of ancient Rome in a damp, dirty hole in the ground, in that solitary dungeon of deprivation and discomfort, once again the Holy Spirit of God overshadowed the great apostle and began to breathe through him the very Word of God. As the victorious armies streamed into the Eternal City they had to pass within yards of that iron barred dungeon. If a legionaire had bothered to take a moment to look down that hole, he might have seen a faint glow of a candle as a worn out old man, bound with chains, hunched over a scroll and laboriously wrote some words to an old friend.

So, in the late Autumn of life sits the Apostle who dominates the early years of the church. Here awaiting execution in this most undesirable spot, is Saint Paul. Look at his last words from this very spot... [2 Timothy 4:6](#) For I am already being poured out (spendomai) as a drink offering (an Old Testament sacrifice of thanks to God), and the time of my departure is at hand. What is this? It is the voice of the "The Apostle of Thanks"

Add to this the constant walks up and down those Roman roads and all that it entailed of over 1200 **WALKING** miles.

- Paul endured every form of hardship, encountering every extremity of danger ([II Cor. 11:23-27](#)).
- Paul was attacked by angry townspeople, punished by cruel magistrates ([Acts 16:19-24](#); 21:27).
- Paul was scourged, beaten, stoned, left for dead ([Acts 14:19-20](#)).
- Paul could only expect more of the same treatment and the same dangers ([Acts 20:23](#)).
- Paul was driven from one city, so he just went on to preach in the next ([Acts 13:50-51](#); 14:5-7,19-21).
- Paul invested his whole life in missionary work, sacrificing to the Lord all of his personal time for pleasures, ease, and security ([Acts 20:24](#); [Rom. 1:14-15](#); [Phil. 1:20](#); 3:8).
- Paul chose to keep on this course to old age, unaltered by the experience of hardness ([Acts 28:17](#)); thankless Christians ([Gal. 1:6](#); 4:14-20); unjustified prejudice ([II Cor. 12:15](#)); and even desertion by his closest friends ([11 Tim. 4:10](#), 16).
- Paul was unstopped by circumstances that caused anxiety, by personal wants, by hard and exhausting labor, by fierce persecution, by month after month of confinements, or even the specter of death ([Acts 21:13](#); [II Cor. 12:10](#); [Phil. 2:17](#); 4:18; [11 Tim. 4:17](#)).
- From the bone-weary journeys across the rugged terrain of Asia Minor, Greece and northern Syria, to the perilous sea crossings that marked Paul's travels, comes a theme that flavored his life - thanks to God.
- The crushing rocks of Lystra in Acts 14 only pushed his thanks to the God of all grace and peace and hope deeper, into the very fiber of his life.
- Stripes beaten into his back by a pagan jailer in Philippi could not muffle that melody of thanks to God. It swelled out in the darkness of Acts 16.
- Paul's thanks to God through Christ welled up from the depths of a Roman dungeon in II Timothy 4 as he neared life's end.

Please stand with me as we read in unison from the Word of God:

[Psalm 136:1-3](#)

Oh, give thanks to the Lord, for He is good!

For His mercy endures forever.

Oh, give thanks to the God of gods!

For His mercy endures forever.

Oh, give thanks to the Lord of lords!

For His mercy endures forever:

Revelation 7:10-12

And crying out with a loud voice, saying,

"Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!"

All the angels stood around the throne

And the elders and the four living creatures,

And fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying:

"Amen!

Blessing and glory and wisdom,

Thanksgiving and honor and power and might,

Be to our God forever and ever.

Amen."

Thanksgiving to the Lord reminds all of us Pilgrims, that He has provided all things. It develops in us an appreciation for the countless ways He cares for us. Thanksgiving protects our hearts from the lure of materialism by pointing out God's fingerprints on our lives.

- First, THANKSGIVING CHARACTERIZES CHRIST'S LIFE
- Second, THANKSGIVING CHARACTERIZES THE LIVES OF THE OLD TESTAMENT SAINTS:
- Third, THANKSGIVING FLOWS FROM SPECIAL NEW TESTAMENT SAINTS.
- Fourth, THANKSGIVING IS COMMANDED.
- Fifth, THANKSGIVING IS PART OF OUR ETERNAL OBLIGATION.

A medieval legend tells of two angels sent to earth by the Lord to gather the prayers of the saints. One was to gather the petitions and the other the thanksgivings. The angel responsible for petitions was not able to carry them back to heaven in one load, while the angel responsible for thanksgivings carried his back in one hand.

That legend developed from the sad fact that God's children are more prone to ask than to thank. The Psalms are instructive in this regard, in that they contain more praise than petition. Believers come into their Father's presence through thanksgiving. We "enter His gates with thanksgiving, and His courts with praise" ([Ps. 100:4](#)). William Hendriksen picturesquely commented that "when a person prays without thanksgiving he has clipped the wings of prayer so that it cannot rise." In [Ephesians 5:20](#) Paul tells when, for what, how, and to whom the Spirit-filled believer is to be thankful.

First, **THANKSGIVING CHARACTERIZED CHRIST'S LIFE**

- As Jesus **TAUGHT**. Thanksgiving to the Lord reminds us that He has provided all things. It develops in us an appreciation for the countless ways He cares for us. Jesus said that where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. [Matthew 6:21](#) Thanksgiving protects our hearts from the lure of materialism by pointing out God's fingerprints on our lives. He knows our needs and the difference between our needs and wants. He instructs us to seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore, do not worry about tomorrow ..[Matthew 6:33-34a](#). Thanking Him renews our eternal perspective.
- As Jesus **LED** in the Lord's Supper. [Matthew 26:27](#) Then He took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you.

Second, **THANKSGIVING CHARACTERIZED THE LIVES OF THE OLD TESTAMENT SAINTS:**

- **DAVID** offers thanks to god as he offers the materials gathered in dedication for God's temple [1 Chronicles 29:13](#) "Now therefore, our God, We thank You And praise Your glorious name.
- **LEVITES** offer thanks to god As the glory first fills the temple. [2 Chronicles 5:12-13](#) and the Levites who were the singers, all those of Asaph and Heman and Jeduthun, with their sons and their brethren, stood at the east end of the altar, clothed in white linen, having cymbals, stringed instruments and harps, and with them one hundred and twenty priests sounding with trumpets—13 indeed it came to pass, when the trumpeters and singers were as one, to make one sound to be heard in praising and thanking the Lord, and when they lifted up their voice with the trumpets and cymbals and instruments of music, and praised the Lord, saying: "For He is good, For His mercy endures forever," that the house, the house of the Lord, was filled with a cloud,
- **DANIEL** offer thanks to god as He revealed the secret of the dream. [Daniel 2:23](#) "I thank You and praise You, O God of my fathers; You have given me wisdom and might, And have now made known to me what we asked of You, For You have made known to us the king's demand."
- **JONAH** offered thanks to god from the depths of the sea in the midst of a great fish! [Jonah 2:9](#) But I will sacrifice to You With the voice of thanksgiving; I will pay what I have vowed. Salvation is of the Lord."

Third, **THANKSGIVING FLOWED FROM SPECIAL NEW TESTAMENT SAINTS.**

- **SIMEON** [Luke 2:28](#) - At Christ's presentation [Luke 2:28](#) he took Him up in his arms and blessed God and said: "Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace, According to Your word;
- **ANNA** [Luke 2:38](#) And coming in that instant she gave thanks to the Lord, and spoke of Him to all those who looked for redemption in Jerusalem.
- **PAUL** [Acts 28:15](#) - Thanked God for saints. [Acts 28:15](#) And from there, when the brethren heard about us, they came to meet us as far as Appii Forum and Three Inns. When Paul saw them, he thanked God and took courage.

Fourth, **THANKSGIVING IS COMMANDED.**

- As a sacrifice to God [Psalm 50:14](#) Offer to God thanksgiving, And pay your vows to the Most High.
- As an overflow of a Spirit filled life that is thankful [Colossians 3:15](#) And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which also you were called in one body; and be thankful.
- Thanksgiving expresses our humility: The only person who can genuinely give thanks for all things is the humble person, the person who knows he deserves nothing and who therefore gives thanks even for the smallest things. Lack of thankfulness comes from pride, from the conviction that we deserve something better than we have. Pride tries to convince us that our job, our health, our spouse, and most of what we have is not as good as we deserve.
- A mark of the unsaved person is thanklessness to God ([Rom. 1:21](#)), but a mark of the Spirit-filled believer is always giving thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God, even the Father. He is “anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving [lets his] requests be made known to God” ([Phil. 4:6](#)). He is “overflowing with gratitude” ([Col. 2:7](#)) and he continually offers “up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name” ([Heb. 13:15](#)).
- A city missionary in London was called to an old tenement building where a woman lay dying in the last stages of a terrible disease. The room was cold and she had nowhere to lie but on the floor. When the missionary asked if there was anything he could do, she replied, “I have all I really need; I have Jesus Christ.” Deeply moved, the missionary went home and penned these words:

In the heart of London City,

Mid the dwellings of the poor,

These bright and golden words were uttered,

“I have Christ. What want I more?”

Spoken by a lonely woman dying on a garret floor,

Having not one earthly comfort,

“I have Christ. What want I more?”[5]

Fifth, **THANKSGIVING IS PART OF OUR ETERNAL OBLIGATION**

- As soon as the veil of Heaven is opened [Revelation 4:9](#) Whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to Him who sits on the throne, who lives forever and ever,
- As the privilege of the Redeemed to partake [Revelation 7:11-12](#) All the angels stood around the throne and the elders and the four living creatures, and fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God,12 saying: “Amen! Blessing and glory

and wisdom, Thanksgiving and honor and power and might, Be to our God forever and ever. Amen.”

- As we Continue in God's presence [Revelation 11:16-17](#) And the twenty-four elders who sat before God on their thrones fell on their faces and worshiped God,17 saying: “We give You thanks, O Lord God Almighty, The One who is and who was and who is to come, Because You have taken Your great power and reigned.

Finally, **WHEN SHOULD WE GIVE THANKS?**

- [Daniel 6:10](#) - IN PRIVATE
- [Psalm 35:18](#) - IN PUBLIC
- [I Thess. 5:18](#) - IN EVERYTHING
- [Acts 27:35](#) - BEFORE EATING ([John 6:11](#))
- [Nehemiah 12:31/40](#) - AFTER ACCOMPLISHING
- [Ephesians 1:16](#); 5:20; [I Th. 1:2](#) - ALWAYS

WHO SHOULD WE THANK? GOD...

- For his goodness and mercy, [Psa. 106:1](#); [107:1](#); [136:1-3](#)
- For Christ's power and reign, [Rev. 11:17](#)
- For deliverance through Christ, from indwelling sin [Rom. 7:23-25](#)
- For victory over death and the grave, [I Cor. 15:57](#)
- For the triumph of the gospel, [2 Cor. 2:14](#)
- For the conversion of others, [Rom. 6:17](#)
- For faith exhibited by others, [Rom. 1:8](#); [2 Thes. 1:3](#)
- For love exhibited by others, [2 Thes. 1:3](#)
- For nearness of God's presence, [Psa. 75:1](#)
- For the supply of our bodily wants, [Rom. 14:6](#)

SO WHAT SHOULD WE DO?

- If you are a man who has a family you need to plan to bring your Bible and plan a brief scripture and prayer at your Thursday meal.
- If you do not have a godly husband (or even any husband) take the lead and read God's Word at The Thanksgiving Meal.
- If you don't know where to start ask any elder or any deacon in this church today what they read at Thanksgiving and try to pattern yours after theirs. The key is to pause and let God into your meal!
- And one more thing, once you get started, why not just try and do something from the Word of God each day with your family!

The next time you sing “Now Thank We All Our God,” try to remember that Martin Rinkhart wrote it during the Thirty Years' War when his pastoral duties were most difficult. He conducted as many as forty funerals a day, including that of his own wife; Yet out of this devastating experience, he wrote a “table grace” for his children which today we use as a hymn of thanksgiving:

Now thank we all our God,

With heart and hands and voices,

Who wondrous things hath done,

In whom His world rejoices!

[1] Diana Karter Appelbaum, *Thanksgiving: An American Holiday, An American History*, Facts on Files Publications, New York, 1984, pp. 14-15.

[2] Jim Dwyer, ed., *Strange Stories, Amazing Facts of America's Past*, The Reader's Digest Association, Inc., 1989, Pleasantville, NY, 1989, p. 198.

[3] Appelbaum, *Thanksgiving*, p.186.

[4] Gary DeMarr, *America's Christian History: The Untold Story*, American Vision Inc., Atlanta, GA, 1995, p. 205

[5] MacArthur, John F., *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary*, (Chicago: Moody Press) 1983.