

# What Is Thanksgiving?

Introduction: As we are approaching Thanksgiving Day, I thought I'd share some history and some thoughts about this special holiday. I think it is important that we keep things in perspective and show respect toward those who believe thanksgiving to be a part of our life and a part of our calendar.

Discussion:

## I. Thanksgiving is a Time for Celebration

Thanksgiving is really a harvest festival. Harvest festivals have been celebrated in nearly all cultures around the world since the beginning of time. It is quite probable that the American Pilgrims used the Bible as their basis. History teaches us that the pilgrims were had a lot of baggage after their departure from England, their narrow escape from religious persecution, their pilgrimage to America a land they knew little about. They were took a long and very dangerous voyage across the Atlantic. They had depended on God to survive the wilderness of America and their adversaries. They found themselves around pagan natives of the land who were of a constant concern and threat. After all of this hardship they enjoyed a bountiful harvest, they wanted to praise God for His harvest. Since they were people who respected and admired the Bible they were no doubt motivated by biblical texts that encouraged periods of thanksgiving.

Consider **Deuteronomy 26:1-2**: *“When you go into the land the LORD your God is giving you as your own, to take it over and live in it, you must take some of the first harvest of crops that grow from the land the LORD your God is giving you. Put the food in a basket and go to the place where the LORD your God will choose to be worshiped.”* Let me talk more about this as we go along in our study.

## II. Thanksgiving is a Time for Contemplation

Every person needs to take time to reflect and meditate. Our Lord celebrated harvest festivals every year of his life. He participated in Thanksgiving every year with his family when he celebrated the Feast of the Tabernacles or the Ingathering called Sukkoth (meaning booths). This was one of the three great feasts that they Israelites were called to celebrate annually. It was the last and most important festival of the year, and occurred in the Seventh Month. It begins five days after Yom Kipper in either September or October (depending on the calendar that year) and lasted for seven days, ending on the 21st day of the month Tishri. The booths symbolize the homes of the people in their great 40-year trek through the wilderness in route to the Promised Land.

Consider **Leviticus 23:39-43**: *“So on the fifteenth day of the seventh month, after you have gathered in the crops of the land, celebrate the LORD's festival for seven days. You must rest on the first day and the eighth day. On the first day you will take good fruit from the fruit trees, as well as branches from palm trees, poplars, and other leafy trees. You will celebrate before the LORD your God for seven days. Celebrate this festival to the LORD for seven days each year. This law will continue from now on; you will celebrate it in the seventh month. Live in shelters for seven days. All the people born in Israel must live in shelters so that all your descendants will know I made Israel live in shelters during the time I brought them out of Egypt. I am the LORD your God.”* It was during the thanksgiving festival of booths that Jesus and all other Jews would have reflected on the goodness and provision of God.

### III. Thanksgiving is a Time for Consideration

Harvest festivals are found in nearly every culture. It offers a time to consider the blessings one has received. Every agricultural culture has them, including the English, who inherited customs from the Roman colonists of the second, third, and fourth centuries. The Romans celebrated their thanksgiving feast in early October - close to the time of Sukkoth. In their culture they dedicated their feast to the pagan goddess of the harvest who they named Ceres (Seer-e-as). The thanksgiving festival was named Cerelia (Seer-lia), and we still live with the remnants of that festival every morning as we eat our "cereal." The Romans brought their fall thanksgiving festival with them to England when they conquered it, and the festival remained when the Empire withdrew. The Roman and Celtic people who remained in England continued to celebrate this festival even to this day. They adopted the fertility rites associated with the harvest; and made little dolls from the corn sheaves that symbolized the goddess of grain - dolls that are seen to this day. They traditionally celebrated the Thanksgiving festival on the Harvest Moon, the full moon of September that falls around the Fall Equinox. Like the Roman feast, the English selected a Harvest Queen.

Consider **Deuteronomy 31:9-13**: *“So Moses wrote down these teachings and gave them to the priests and all the elders of Israel. (The priests are the sons of Levi, who carry the Ark of the Agreement with the LORD.) Then Moses commanded them: “Read these teachings for all Israel to hear at the end of every seven years, which is the year to cancel what people owe. Do it during the Feast of Shelters, when all the Israelites will come to appear before the LORD your God and stand at the place he will choose. Gather all the people: the men, women, children, and foreigners living in your towns so that they can listen and learn to respect the LORD your God and carefully obey everything in this law. Since their children do not know this law, they must hear it. They must learn to respect the LORD your God for as long as they live in the land you are crossing the Jordan River to take for your own.”* Moses intended that the Harvest festival be a period of thanksgiving and a time of consideration. He instructed the people to read the Word of God during this time.

### IV. Thanksgiving is a Time for Commendation

Like the Romans, people of all lands and creeds have felt the irresistible urge to celebrate the success of their harvest. We must choose not to give thanks to the plants, or false gods, or even our own hands, but to give thanks to our God. The Israelites did this with special sacrifices, rituals, and offerings. As Christians we need to acknowledge that God is good, His creation is good, and His gifts to mankind are good. Remember what James says in **James 1:16-18**: *“My dear brothers and sisters, do not be fooled about this. Every good action and every perfect gift is from God. These good gifts come down from the Creator of the sun, moon, and stars, who does not change like their shifting shadows. God decided to give us life through the word of truth so we might be the most important of all the things he made.”* God bestows his gifts on those who labor and work the land through his gift of creation. Jesus told us not to worry about what we will eat, or drink, but that God will provide for us as He does the birds of the air and the flowers of the field. We are told to give thanks to God and to seek first the Kingdom of God, and all these things will be added unto us.

### V. Thanksgiving is a Time for Communication

All of the feasts of the Lord were meant to teach. **Deuteronomy 16:13-15** says, *“Celebrate the Feast of Shelters for seven days, after you have gathered your harvest from the threshing floor and winepress. Everybody should rejoice at your Feast: you, your sons and daughters, your male and female servants, the Levites, strangers, orphans, and widows who live in your towns. Celebrate the Feast to the LORD your God for seven days at the place he will choose, because the LORD your God will bless all your harvest and all the work you do, and you will be completely happy.”* As we gather together as Christians to give thanks for God's blessings, we should thank God and honor Him by returning that which God desires. We need to offer Him a gift of praise! We are God's chosen people, His children. He calls for our obedience and service while we are on earth. This is why our forefathers saw the need to make this a national holiday. . . .

(CLICK) As I mentioned earlier, the first American Thanksgiving was celebrated less than a year after the Plymouth colonists had settled in the new land of America in the Fall of 1621. (CLICK) On *July 30, 1623* it was declared the first official “Thanksgiving Day” and colonists were told to set aside that day for the special purpose of prayer and celebration by Governor William Bradford. (CLICK) You can trace back other harvest festivals to the Revolutionary War. On *November 26, 1789*, President George Washington issued a general proclamation for a *day of thanks* but it was not until *October 3, 1863* (CLICK) when it became a national day of thanksgiving and proclaimed to be a yearly holiday by President Abraham Lincoln.

It is said that Sarah Josepha Hale, a prominent magazine editor, wrote a letters to him repeatedly begging him to make it a national holiday. Her last letter, which finally persuaded him said, "You may have observed that, for some years past, there has been an increasing interest felt in our land to have the Thanksgiving held on the same day, in all the States . . . . It now needs National recognition and authoritative fixation, only, to become permanently, an American custom and institution." She would not rest until she saw an “annual Thanksgiving made a National and fixed Union Festival” for all of the United States. Listen to his own words:

By the President of the United States of America.

A Proclamation.

The year that is drawing towards 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 cannot fail to penetrate and soften even the heart which is habitually insensible to the ever watchful providence of Almighty God. In the midst of a civil war of unequalled magnitude and severity, which has sometimes seemed to foreign States to invite and to provoke their aggression, peace has been preserved with all nations, order has been maintained, the laws have been respected and obeyed, and harmony has prevailed everywhere except in the theatre of military conflict; while that theatre has been greatly contracted by the advancing armies and navies of the Union. Needful diversions of wealth and of strength from the fields of peaceful industry to the national defence, have not arrested the plough, the shuttle or the ship; the axe has enlarged the borders of our settlements, and the mines, as well of iron and coal as of the precious metals, have yielded even more abundantly than heretofore. Population has steadily increased, notwithstanding the waste that has been made in the camp, the siege and the battle-field; and the country, rejoicing in the consiousness of augmented strength and vigor, is permitted to expect continuance of years with large increase of freedom. 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. It has seemed to me fit and proper that they 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 next, as a day of Thanksgiving and Praise to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the Heavens. And I recommend to them that while offering up the ascriptions justly due to Him for such singular deliverances and blessings, they do also, with humble penitence for our national perverseness and disobedience, commend to His tender care all those who have become widows, orphans, mourners or sufferers in the lamentable civil strife in which we are unavoidably engaged, and fervently implore the interposition of the Almighty Hand to heal the wounds of the nation and to restore it as soon as may be consistent with the Divine purposes to the full enjoyment of peace, harmony, tranquillity and Union.

In testimony whereof, I have hereunto set my hand and caused the Seal of the United States to be affixed. Done at the City of Washington, this Third day of October, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three, and of the Independence of the Unites States the Eighty-eighth.

By the President: Abraham Lincoln

(CLICK) It was on December 26, 1941 President Roosevelt signed this bill, for the first time making the date of Thanksgiving a matter of federal law. It was this bill that declared that all government offices be closed for the holiday. We need to communicate to our children that this special day has been set aside by our nation to thank God for all that he has done for us and for our nation. I fear that a day is coming, maybe in my lifetime, when this freedom and privilege will be seen as a thing of the past. (VIDEO)

## **VI. Thanksgiving is a Time for Consecration**

The Israelites used their harvest festival to seek renewal, to be rejuvenated. They offered sacrifices. The Lord instructed that each day of the Feast of Tabernacles be different. Seven days of different sacrifices. Each day celebrated part of God's blessings (**Numbers 29:12-40**) and they digressed in sacrifice (for instance you start with 13 bulls, then 12, 11, 10, 9, 8, 7, then one on the last day). The rest of the sacrifices are similar except on the closing day of the festival. These animals were to be without spot of blemish. They were to be offered with grateful and thankful hearts. When we celebrate Thanksgiving we should praise God but also offer Him something. Maybe we could rededicate ourselves to God as a living sacrifice to Him (**Romans 12:1-2**).

## **VII. Thanksgiving is a Time for Contribution**

We often think of Christmas as a time for giving, but this is a great time for giving. It's the only holiday with the word "giving" in it! I'm not talking about giving to others, though that will make this time of year special too . . . . I'm talking about giving to God. In **I Chronicles 16:8** King David tells the nation of Israel "*Give thanks to the Lord and pray to him. Tell the nations what he has done.*" Other nations should see that we are a nation that praises God! In **II Chronicles 29:31** King Hezekiah told Judah to "*come near to the Temple of the Lord. Bring sacrifices and offerings*" to give thanks to Lord. You might take this time to contribute some praise upwardly toward the God has given you the greatest gifts ever given. Re-evaluate what your doing to contribute to the growth of the kingdom, the future of the church, and to the spreading of God's word in our community. Praise God with your mouth! Praise God with your hands! Praise God with your actions! Praise Him and give Him thanks!

Conclusion: We don't praise God because our government says it's a national holiday. We don't praise God because we have permission. WE PRAISE GOD BECAUSE WE CAN'T HELP IT! We want to give Him thanks for everything He has done. **Psalms 136:1** says, "*Give thanks to the LORD because he is good. His love continues forever.*" Let's make this the greatest season of giving thanks that we have ever experienced. Let's make this Thanksgiving a time of revival for our faith. Give God the glory and praise!