

## Thanksgiving

Rod Reynolds

We are admonished throughout the Bible to offer thanksgiving to God (Psalm 30:4-5; 92:1; 97:12; 1 Thessalonians 5:18; Psalm 100:1-5, a psalm of thanksgiving). Lack of an attitude of thanksgiving can lead to spiritual blindness and sin (Romans 1:20-21). It's always fitting for us to reflect on our obligation to give thanks.

Each fall in the United States the nation observes a thanksgiving holiday. Yet, how many are truly thankful? How many of us in this country or in this world acknowledge God as the source of our blessings and take the time to express genuine and heartfelt thanks to God for all he gives us?

We should thank God daily for his blessings. Nevertheless to set aside a special time to offer thanksgiving to God for our blessings is a sound Biblical principle. The Thanksgiving custom in the United States is often traced to the Puritan English pilgrims who were among the first in modern times to settle this land from across the ocean.

Actually, festivals of thanksgiving have a far more ancient history, and a number of thanksgiving feasts are recorded in the Bible. In the tabernacle and later the temple the daily sacrifices were accompanied by prayers of thanksgiving (1 Chronicles 23:30). Among the sacrifices were offerings especially designated as thanksgiving offerings (Leviticus 7:12). The annual festivals were given to Israel as occasions of rejoicing and thanksgiving (Deuteronomy 16:9-16; note: the "freewill" offerings included festal offerings of thanksgiving).

David organized a thanksgiving feast for Israel on the occasion of bringing the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem. On the occasion everyone was provided with "a loaf of bread, a piece of meat, and a cake of raisins" (1 Chronicles 16:1-3). On this occasion he specifically appointed a group of Levites "to commemorate, to thank, and to praise the LORD God of Israel" (1 Chronicles 16:4).

In the psalm of thanksgiving David wrote for this occasion, we are admonished to give thanks to God (1 Chronicles 16:7-8, 34-36).

On a later occasion, after Israel had given a substantial offering for the building of the Temple, David led the people in a thanksgiving celebration (1 Chronicles 29:13-22).

When the foundation of the second temple had been laid the people joined together to celebrate with praise and thanksgiving to God (Ezra 3:10-11).

Likewise, a thanksgiving service was held at the time of the dedication of the Jerusalem wall in the days of Nehemiah (Nehemiah 12:27, 31, 40, 43).

Few if any have been blessed as greatly as our nation in modern times. So it's certainly fitting and proper that we especially offer profuse thanksgiving to God. And this is especially true for those of us in the Church of God who have the added blessings of spiritual understanding and forgiveness of our sins.

Some have recognized our obligation to give thanks to God for the blessings he has given us who live in the United States of America.

In December 1620 102 passengers disembarked from a ship called the Mayflower at Plymouth, Massachusetts. These sojourners from England were fleeing religious persecution and hoped to establish a "New Zion" in the land called America.

The winter that followed their landing was a severe one and by the next April about half of the settlers were dead. However, the following summer brought an abundant harvest and that fall the Governor of the Plymouth colony, William Bradford, decreed that a three day feast be held.

During the first summer a Patuxet Indian named Squanto had shown the newcomers how to gather seafood and cultivate corn, squash and beans. For three days that fall the colonists and about 90 of the friendly Wampanoag people, who had given food to the pilgrims in their time of need, feasted together in a spirit of rejoicing and, undoubtedly, thanksgiving, on wild turkey, venison, geese, duck, fish, cakes, nuts, cornbread and succotash, though there seems to be no reliable record of an official "thanksgiving proclamation," as such, on this occasion.

Even before the arrival of the pilgrims, however, thanksgiving services had long been routine in Virginia. The charter of the Berkeley Hundred settlement in Virginia required that the anniversary of their day of arrival (December 4, 1619) be celebrated annually as a "day of thanksgiving to Almighty God."

During its existence, the Continental Congress issued thanksgiving proclamations annually over a period of several years. Presidents George Washington, John Adams, and James Madison issued thanksgiving proclamations. Over time local thanksgiving celebrations became common over most of the United States, and many states issued

official proclamations of thanksgiving. However, a special day of thanksgiving did not become a permanent yearly American nationwide holiday until many years after the pilgrims' feast in 1621.

In fact, it was almost 250 years later, on October 3, 1863, that President Abraham Lincoln, during the midst of a bloody civil war, cited the national blessings of peace from foreign oppression, wealth of field, industry, commerce and mines, and the blessing of increasing population. President Lincoln, who was a student of the Bible but not so far as I know a member of any Church, went on to say, "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...." He went on to declare, "It has seemed ... fit and proper that they should be solemnly, reverently, and gratefully acknowledged, as with one heart and one voice, by the whole American people." Lincoln then proclaimed the last Thursday of November as a national day of Thanksgiving and Praise to the beneficent Father who dwells in Heaven.

Today we live in a nation that has by and large forgotten that God is the Source of all blessings. As a physical nation we became the richest on earth, the wealthiest in all history! And although now through foolishness and greed we have become the world's greatest debtor nation, nevertheless even now we have more to be thankful for than perhaps any other people. Yet, as Paul prophesied, we have become a nation of people who are "lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy..." (2 Timothy 3:2).

While the physical nation at large may refuse to be genuinely thankful, however, we as individuals must remind ourselves from whence our blessings flow and how much we have to be thankful for, not only physically but spiritually. It is fitting, especially at this time of year, that we should reflect on our blessings and their Source. God reminds us that "it is He who gives you the power to get wealth" (Deuteronomy 8:18). And also, "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning" (James 1:17)

David wrote, "Yours, O LORD, is the greatness, The power and the glory, the victory and the majesty; for all that is in heaven and in the earth is Yours; Yours is the kingdom, O LORD, and You are exalted as head over all. Both riches and honor come from You, and You reign over all. In Your hand is power and might; in Your hand it is to make great and to give strength to all. Now therefore, our God, we thank You and praise Your glorious name" (1 Chronicles 29:11-13).

This prayer of Thanksgiving encompasses both physical and spiritual blessings. All of us in this nation share in its physical blessings. But all of us can also share in the spiritual blessings God has to offer if we are willing to genuinely seek him and yield to his will in our lives (1 Chronicles 28:9; 2 Chronicles 15:2; Psalm 119:2; Isaiah 55:6-7; Lamentations 3:25-26; Hebrews 11:6).

Millions in our world live aimlessly -- searching for some meaning or purpose to life. We can know our purpose and destiny if we have spiritual eyes to see. Jesus Christ said, "I thank You Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and prudent and have revealed them to babes" (Matthew 11:25). We should give thanks also that God has given us access to such knowledge.

Today much of the world lives in chaos and fear. The word of God warns that if we continue to walk in the way of lawlessness and rebellion in the days and years to come the fears of our people will not lessen but multiply. God warns that the very things we fear will come upon us if we refuse to hear him (Isaiah 66:4; Ezekiel 11:8). Scripture warns of war, pestilence, famine, tribulation. But we need not fear, if we are anchored in God who is our Refuge and the Rock of our salvation (Psalm 46:1-2).

God promises to deliver from every trial and to set on high those who trust in and obey Him (Exodus 19:5-6; Psalm 107:41-43; Psalm 91:1-16). Some of these promises will not be ultimately fulfilled until the resurrection (cf. 1 Peter 1:3-9; Romans 8:28, 35-39; Revelation 21:3-4). Yes, God has the power to deliver us even from the grave (1 Corinthians 15:50-58).

The world seeks peace, but finds war, trouble, and destruction. But we can have access to the Source of Peace, who can teach us the way of peace. Paul wrote, "...to be spiritually minded is life and peace" (Romans 8:6). And the psalmist wrote, "Great peace have those who love Your law, and nothing causes them to stumble" (Psalm 119:165). These are just some of the things for which we may be thankful.

When President Lincoln made the proclamation establishing Thanksgiving he also asked the people in their prayers to "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, tranquility and union."

As we pause each day to give thanks and offer praise to God let's not forget that our nation is still sick and in need of healing. Our nation is confused and divided and has lost its way. In many ways it's in even greater need of restoration now than at Lincoln's time.

God promises that one day, Jesus Christ is going to establish his kingdom on the earth, and with it universal peace and tranquility among all nations (Isaiah 2:1-4). Let us pray that God will bring these blessings to all of mankind, even the whole world, soon, as he has promised.

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