

“The Way of Jesus: Giving Thanks”

1 Chronicles 16:23-26, 31-34 ¹

He had much about which he could have complained. When he was seven years old, his family was forced out of their home and he had to go to work. His mother died when he was nine. He lost his job as a store clerk when he was twenty. He wanted to go to law school, but he didn't have the right preparation. At 23 he went into debt to become a partner in a small store; but three years later his partner died, and the resulting debt took years to repay.

When he was 28, he asked a girl whom he had courted for four years to marry him, and she turned him down. At 37, he was elected to Congress—on his third attempt—but then was not re-elected. His four year-old son, Eddie, died. When he was 45, he ran for the Senate and lost. At 47 he ran for the Vice-Presidency and lost.

But at 51, he was elected President of these United States; and it was in 1863, in the midst of our terrible Civil War, only two weeks after the Union defeat at the Battle of Chickamauga, the second bloodiest battle of the war (after Gettysburg),² that Abraham Lincoln proclaimed Thanksgiving as a National Day of Remembrance 150 years ago last month.³

The origin of our Thanksgiving Day goes back a lot farther, of course. The Pilgrims who sailed to this country aboard the *Mayflower* were originally members of the English Separatist Church, an offshoot of the Puritans. They had earlier fled their homes in England and sailed to Holland to escape religious persecution. They enjoyed more religious tolerance in the Netherlands, but they eventually became disenchanted with the Dutch way of life, thinking it ungodly.

Seeking a better life, the Separatists negotiated with a London stock company to finance a pilgrimage to America. Actually, only about one-third of the original Colonists were Separatists. Most of those making the trip aboard the *Mayflower* were not Separatists, but were really persons hired by an insurance company to protect the stock company's investments!

There were at least two pioneer thanksgivings that happened before the famous celebration with which we're familiar. The first of these took place on August 9, 1607 when a group of English settlers, led by Captain George Popham, met with a group of Indians near the mouth of the Kennebec River in Maine to share a harvest feast.

The second “pre-Thanksgiving thanksgiving” took place on December 4, 1619. On that day, Captain John Woodlief declared to the colonists who had sailed with him up the James River from Jamestown, Virginia, “Wee ordaine that the day of our ship's arrival at the place assigned for plantacon in the land of Virginia shall be yearly and perpetually kept holy as a day of thanksgiving to Almighty God.”

The Pilgrims themselves came ashore at Plymouth Rock on December 11, 1620. Although they were intrepid pioneers, they were unprepared for the harsh New England winter, and by the summer of 1621 they had lost 46 of the original 102 persons who sailed on the *Mayflower*. But the fall harvest of 1621 was a bountiful one, and the remaining colonists decided to celebrate with a feast—including 91 Indians who had helped the Pilgrims survive their first year.

Truth be told, the feast was actually more a traditional English harvest festival than a true “thanksgiving” observance. Governor William Bradford sent “four men fowling” after wild ducks

¹ A sermon by David C. Stancil, Ph.D., delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland on November 24, 2013.

² The Battle of Chickamauga took place on September 19-20, 1863. Lincoln's Thanksgiving Proclamation was made on October 3.

³ John Yates, “An Attitude of Gratitude,” *Preaching Today* tape no. 110.

and geese in preparation for the three-day celebration. Because the term “turkey” was used by the Pilgrims to mean any kind of wild fowl, it’s not at all certain that wild turkey was really a part of their feast . . . but we know they had venison.

Another staple at almost every Thanksgiving table today is pumpkin pie, but it’s unlikely that the first feast included that treat. Their supply of flour was long gone, so there was no bread or pastry of any kind. They did eat boiled pumpkin, though, and they made a semblance of fried bread from corn.

Nor was there any milk, or cider, or potatoes, or butter. There were no domestic cattle from which to get dairy products, and the newly-discovered potato was still considered poisonous by many Europeans. But the feast did include fish, berries, watercress, lobster, dried fruit, clams, venison, and plums.

The feast was not repeated the following year, but in 1623, during a severe drought, the pilgrims gathered in a prayer service, praying for rain. When a long, steady rain followed *the very next day*, Governor Bradford proclaimed another Day of Thanksgiving, again inviting their Indian friends. It was fifty-three years before another Day of Thanksgiving was proclaimed.

On June 20, 1676, the governing council of Charlestown, Massachusetts held a meeting to determine how best to express thanks for the good fortune that had now seen their community securely established. By unanimous vote they instructed Edward Rawson, their clerk, to proclaim June 29 as a Day of Thanksgiving. It’s interesting that this thanksgiving celebration probably did not include the Indians, because the celebration was partly meant to commemorate the colonists’ recent victory over the “heathen natives.”

It was not until October, 1777, more than a century later, that all 13 colonies joined in a unified thanksgiving celebration. That meal commemorated the nation’s victory over the British at Saratoga, New York . . . but it, too, was a one-time affair.

George Washington proclaimed a National Day of Thanksgiving on November 26, 1789, although some were opposed to it. There was discord among the colonies, and many felt that “the hardships of a few Pilgrims” didn’t warrant a national holiday.

It was Sarah Hale, a magazine editor, whose efforts eventually led to what we know as Thanksgiving. Hale wrote many editorials championing her cause in her *Boston Ladies’ Magazine*, and later, in *Godey’s Lady’s Book*. Finally, after decades of writing editorials and letters to Governors and Presidents, Hale’s passion became a reality when, on October 3, 1863, President Lincoln designated the last Thursday in November as an annual Day of Thanksgiving for the nation.

Thanksgiving Day has been proclaimed by every President since. The date was changed a couple of times, most notably by Franklin Roosevelt, who moved it back a week in 1939 in order to create a longer Christmas shopping season (!); but public uproar caused Thanksgiving to be moved back to its original date two years later. So it was that on December 26, 1941, three weeks after Pearl Harbor, Thanksgiving Day was sanctioned by Congress as a legal holiday, on the *fourth* Thursday in November, as it is today.⁴



⁴ www.historytelevision.ca/archives/thanksgiving/american;
[http://wilstar.com/holidays/thankstr.htm;](http://wilstar.com/holidays/thankstr.htm) www.wcg.org/lit/spiritual/thanksgiving.htm

The day had not begun well. She had overslept and was late for work. It was an awful day at work, and by the time she reached the bus stop for the trip home, her stomach was tied in multiple knots.

As usual, the bus was late, and because it was packed, she had to stand up. The bus started, stopped, turned left, then right, pushing and pulling her in all directions. The day wasn't getting any better even as it came to an end. Then she heard a man's voice up front proclaim, "Beautiful day, isn't it?"

Because of the crowd she couldn't see the speaker, but he continued to comment on everything the bus passed that added to his gladness: a church here, an ice cream store there, a baseball diamond here, a library there. The atmosphere in the bus became happier, as did her own heart. In fact, the man's enthusiasm was so winsome that she found herself smiling in spite of herself. When the bus finally reached her stop, she worked her way through the crowd to the door, and as she did so, she glanced at the "tour guide." He was a plump man, wearing dark glasses, and carrying a white cane. He was blind.

As she stepped off the bus, she realized that the day's tensions had disappeared. God had sent a man without physical sight to help her see that, though things sometimes do go wrong, it's still a beautiful world. We have much for which to be thankful.⁵

William Law, author of the 1728 devotional classic, *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*, understood what this blind man knew when he wrote, commenting on Ephesians 5:20, "If anyone would tell you the shortest, surest way to happiness and all perfection, he must tell you to make it a rule to yourself to thank and praise God for everything that happens to you. For it is certain that whatever seeming calamity happens to you, if you thank and praise God for it, you turn it into a blessing."⁶

For the Christian, a life of thankfulness is lived, not in denial of the hard things in our lives, but with them in full view. Fleming Rutledge wrote that "As the life of thanksgiving deepens, we discover that the more mature prayers of thanksgiving are not those offered for obvious blessings, but those spoken in gratitude for obstacles overcome, for insights gained, for lessons learned, for increased humility, for help received in time of need, for strength to persevere, for opportunities to serve others."⁷

Matthew Henry's 1706 *Commentary on the Bible*⁸ had a prominent place in our home as I grew up. It may well have been the first Bible commentary I ever read. The famous scholar was once attacked and robbed by thieves, after which he wrote these words in his diary: "Let me be thankful. First, I was never robbed before. Second, although they took my purse, they didn't take my life. Third, although they took all I had, it was not much. Fourth, let me be thankful because it was I who was robbed and not I who did the robbing."⁹

Henry Ward Beecher, the famous abolitionist preacher of Lincoln's own day, wrote that "If one should give me a dish of sand and tell me there were particles of iron in it, I might look for them with my eyes and search for them with my clumsy fingers and be unable to detect them; but let me take a magnet and sweep through it and it would draw to itself the almost invisible particles by its powers of attraction.

⁵ Barbara Johnson, *Stories of Hope for a Healthy Soul* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), p. 17.

⁶ William Law, quoted in *My Heart Sings*, compiled by Joan Winmill Brown, *Christianity Today*, 34:1.

⁷ Fleming Rutledge, *The Bible and The New York Times* (Eerdmans, 1999).

⁸ Available online at www.study-light.org/com/mhc-com/.

⁹ Yates, op. cit.

“The unthankful heart, like my finger in the sand, discovers no mercies; but let the thankful heart sweep through the day, and as the magnet finds the iron, so the grateful heart will find, in every hour, some heavenly blessings, only the iron in God’s sand is gold!”¹⁰

When I was doing my residency as a hospital chaplain during the mid-70’s at Baylor Medical Center in Dallas, Dr. Bruce McIver was pastor of a prominent Baptist church near the medical center, and he met with our student group from time to time. In those days, open heart surgery was still pretty new, and the danger was a good bit greater than it is today.

It happened during those days that Dr. McIver needed such surgery, and from his hospital bed the night before he asked his surgeon, Dr. Dudley Johnson, “Can you fix my heart?”

Dr. Johnson, known for being short and to the point, said, “Sure,” and then quickly turned and walked away.

Following the 12-hour surgery, McIver asked Johnson, “In light of the blocked arteries that I had when I checked into the hospital, how much blood supply do I have now?”

“All you’ll ever need,” replied the terse surgeon, who again ended the conversation by walking away.

After Bruce was discharged from the hospital, his wife, Lawanna, asked Dr. Johnson, “What about my husband’s future quality of life?”

Johnson paused and then said, “I fixed his heart; the quality of his life is up to him.”¹¹

And that is indeed the point, isn’t it? Brennan Manning, a Catholic priest and author, commented that “I believe that the real difference in the American church is not between conservatives and liberals, fundamentalists and charismatics, nor between Republicans and Democrats. The real difference is between those who are aware and those who are unaware.”

“When somebody is aware of [being loved with] the same love that [God] the Father has for Jesus, that person is just spontaneously grateful. Cries of thankfulness become the dominant characteristic of his or her interior life, and the byproduct of such gratitude is joy. **We’re not joyful and then become grateful—we’re grateful first, and that makes us joyful.**”¹² The deepest quality of our lives comes from inside, not outside.

The Pilgrims were very poor in material things, but they were rich in gratitude. Though many had died the previous winter, their grief did not paralyze them. They were thankful for the life they had. Their faith was not shaken, and they were thankful for their food, simple as it was.

The Pilgrims always kept God in the picture. Whatever happened, God allowed, and whatever their circumstances, they were to be used for God’s glory. With that same conviction, you and I, too, can be thankful for all things. May it be so, today, and every day, until Jesus comes!

¹⁰ Henry Ward Beecher, *Leadership*, vol. 7, no. 2.

¹¹ Bruce McIver, *Stories I Couldn’t Tell While I was a Pastor* (Guideposts, 1991), pp. 244-247.

¹² “The Dick Staub Interview: Brennan Manning on Ruthless Trust,” www.ChristianityToday.com (12/10/02).