



"I would maintain that thanks are the highest form of thought, and that gratitude is happiness doubled by wonder."

—G.K. Chesterton

20-Nov-15

Thanksgiving: Honorable Origins

Some have questioned Christians keeping Thanksgiving because of information on the Internet. The concern is that it stemmed from paganism, and thus a member of God's church should not observe it. It is true that pagan peoples in the past have given thanks to their gods for their crops and herds, ascribing great powers to their deities that really belonged to the true [God](#).

Does this mean that, just because pagans were thankful to idols, we should not be thankful for all that the great God has provided us? Should we *not* show gratitude for our liberties and the seemingly limitless bounty we have? If we fail to give thanks, what will that produce?

Were our forefathers wrong in giving thanks? In 1630, aboard the *Arbella*, a 350-ton ship that was plowing through the stormy Atlantic, a minister, John Winthrop, preached a sermon on its deck that accurately predicted the future of this country:

We shall be as a city on a hill, the eyes of all people are upon us; so that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have

undertaken, and so cause Him to withdraw His present help from us, we shall be made a story, and a byword through [the world](#).

The first day of thanksgiving on this continent was a harvest festival held by Plymouth Colony in December 1621. The Pilgrims from England had landed at Plymouth Rock in December 1620 and had endured a hard year. On that first Thanksgiving Day, they thanked God they were still alive and had food to eat. Most of the Pilgrims recognized God as the source of their blessings, so they held that first Thanksgiving Day in gratitude and praise to Him.

Thanksgiving Day has been preserved and passed on to us by presidents who believed in God and the Bible as the source of national greatness and integrity. George Washington in 1789 issued the first presidential Thanksgiving Proclamation in honor of the new Constitution. He said, "It is impossible to govern the world without God and the Bible."

Abraham Lincoln believed that, saying, "I believe the Bible is the best gift ever given to man. All the good from the Savior of the world is communicated to us through this Book." On April 30, 1863, President Lincoln proclaimed a national day of fasting and prayer, writing:

...[I]t is the duty of nations as well as of men, to own their dependence upon the overruling power of God . . . and to recognize the sublime truth, announced in the Holy Scriptures and proven by all history, that those nations only are blessed whose God is the Lord. . . . 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 ever has grown. But we have forgotten God. We have forgotten the gracious hand which preserved us in peace, and multiplied and enriched and strengthened us; and we have vainly imagined, in the deceitfulness of our hearts, that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own.

He saw a nation and a people who were unthankful and taking credit for all God had done for them, and he called on them to fast and, in prayer, confess

this national [sin](#) before God. Later that same year, on October 3, 1863, Lincoln proclaimed the last day of November as Thanksgiving Day, a day to give thanks to God for the copious blessings He had bestowed.

As the years progressed America indeed had become a city on a hill, as John Winthrop had predicted, and at the conclusion of the Civil War, the downtrodden masses of the world looked upon America as the new land of [hope](#). During the nineteenth century, an increasing number of states observed the day annually, each state appointing its own date. Today, Thanksgiving is observed on the fourth Thursday of November, as set by Congress in December 1941.

We have seen our country descend from a God-fearing nation to one that barely considers God. Its citizens have gone from a people who valued biblical, moral character to a society that mocks it. America is still the richest, most powerful nation on the face of the earth, and many of its people seem to think it impervious to disaster. Many now take this great nation and its God-given blessings for granted. It is a national shame.

God's instruction through [Moses](#) as Israel prepared to enter the land that God was giving them provides some excellent instruction. In [Deuteronomy 8:7-9](#), God describes the beautiful and bountiful land just across the Jordan, and then in verses 10-11, 19, He warns:

When you have eaten and are full, then you shall bless the LORD your God for the good land which He has given you. Beware that you do not forget the LORD your God by not keeping His commandments. . . . Then it shall be, if you by any means forget the LORD your God, . . . I testify against you this day that you shall surely perish.

Many prophecies show that all the nations of modern Israel will suffer greatly for their lack of being thankful for all that has been given to them. They will with terrible privation and destruction be humbled before God, and part of the reason for their troubles will be their lack of gratitude that has caused them to forget God.

So, does God approve of our celebration of Thanksgiving? Does a national holiday that is not listed in God's Word find acceptance in His eyes? Would [Jesus Christ](#) feel comfortable celebrating it today? Jesus attended the Feast of Dedication with other Jews ([John 10:22-23](#)), a festival commemorating the purification of the Temple in 164 BC. Jesus' example suggests that it is fine to attend or celebrate a national holiday established for an honorable purpose. There was nothing wrong in the Jews celebrating the dedication of the Temple and giving God special gratitude on that day.

The Thanksgiving Day that we celebrate does not have a pagan origin, as do [Christmas](#), [Halloween](#), [Easter](#), and Valentine's Day. Their study of God's Word led our forefathers and a few of our presidents to set aside a day each year to give thanks to God for all the many blessings He has bestowed on our people. That is good and right for any people.

For many, this day is just Turkey Day, a day to eat a lot and watch football. For us who understand where all the blessings come from, it should be a reminder to give effusive thanks on this day for the many blessings that belong to us because of God's faithfulness to His promises to Abraham. It should also be a reminder to each of us to thank Him, not just one day a year, but every day, for our wonderful calling and the innumerable things He does for us.

Have a wonderful Thanksgiving!

- John O. Reid (1930-2016)

From the Archives: Featured Sermon

[A Time For Thanksgiving](#)

by John W. Ritenbaugh

Our annual Thanksgiving, as developed from the early settlers who called themselves Pilgrims (temporary dwellers on a journey), was derived from the harvest festivals, patterned after the annual Holy Days such as Pentecost and

Tabernacles. Unfortunately, the modern descendants of Jacob have all but forgotten their relationship with God, neither recognizing Him nor obeying Him. The cumulative result of this disobedience will be a harsh yoke of iron.

From the Archives: Featured Article

[Thanksgiving or Self-Indulgence?](#)

by John W. Ritenbaugh

Should Christians celebrate Thanksgiving Day? Are all this world's holidays off limits? John Ritenbaugh shows the proper balance Christians should have in determining their propriety.

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