

# THE HISTORY OF THANKSGIVING

Excerpts taken from "History of the Plymouth Plantation"

By William Bradford 1647

(Edited and condensed by Pastor Steve Dittmar)

***"But that I may come more near my intention: when as by the travel and diligence of some godly and zealous preachers, and God blessing on their labors, as in other places of the land, so in the North parts, many became enlightened by the word of God, and had their ignorance and sins discovered unto then, and began by His grace to reform their lives and make conscience of their ways."*** Thus William Bradford begins his account of the History of the Plymouth Plantation.

In England the Pilgrims became enlightened to the word of God, this brought great persecution on their lives, families and possessions. So much so that they fled to Holland. Here they gained religious freedom but at the cost of their riches and with great hardships. They had to learn a new language and began their life and work over again.

After about 12 years of living in Leyden, Holland they decided to venture to the new land. This decision was predicated on four reasons:

1. The hardships of the new land began to become harder to endure (in the minds of some) than the prisons in England.
2. Their children were in danger of succumbing to the ungodly land by pressure surrounding them.
3. Because they had given up all to come to Holland even their children had to work under very heavy burdens.
4. Lastly, let me quote William Bradford, "Lastly (and which was not least) a great hope and inward zeal they had of laying some good foundations, or at least to make some way thereunto, for their propagating and advancing of the gospel of the kingdom of Christ in those remote parts of the world. Yea, though they should be but even as stepping stones unto others for the performing of so great a work."

On August 6, 1620 they departed for the new world, their journey took 66 days of difficult sailing. They arrived at Cape Cod November 11, 1620. Before getting off the boat they wrote the Mayflower compact. This was to be one of the first civil covenants written where individuals covenant together to form a representative government. It begins, ***"In the name of God, Amen. We whose names are underwritten, the loyal subjects of our dread sovereign Lord, King James, by the grace of God, of Great Britain, France and Ireland, king defender of the faith. Having undertaken, for the glory of God, and the advancement of the Christian faith and honor of our king and country, a voyage to plant the first colony in the Northern parts of Virginia."*** Within three months of their landing at Cape Cod half of the 100 plus pilgrims had died. In January and February as many as two or three died daily. This was because they had no houses to protect them from the winter and were already infected with scurvy and other diseases which their long voyage and miserable living conditions on the boat had brought upon them.

The hardship continued into spring with the Indians all along watching them and stealing from them. On March 16 however, an Indian came into their camp who spoke broken English. They were amazed and after much talk they discovered that he had learned his English on ships that had come to fish. He then introduced them to Squanto who spoke even better English. From these meetings the Pilgrims were able to make peace with the Indians which continued well over 24 years. (It has been 24 years at the writing of William Bradford's ***"History of the Plymouth Plantation"***).

Squanto taught the Pilgrims how to plant corn and fertilize with fish. He also showed them how to secure many other provisions which they needed. However, with the coming of another 35 people they scarcely had enough to survive and famine set in again during the winter. This happened for two whole years to the spring of the third year (1623). They then decided to remove themselves from communal living (under their original charter with the investors, who had financed the voyage, they were to live with all things in common, no one owned his own land or planting his own seed.) They did this by assigning each family a parcel of land according to their number and gave each man his own corn seed.

This proved very profitable as William Bradford says in his account. ***“This had very good success; for it made all hands very industrious, so as much more corn was planted then other wise would have been by any means the Governor or any other could use, and saved him a great deal of trouble, and gave far better content. The women now went willingly into the field, and took their little ones with them to set corn, which before would allege weakness, and inability; whom to have compelled would have been thought great tyranny and oppression. The experience that was had in this common course and condition, tried sundry years, and that amongst godly and sober men, may well evidence the vanity of the conceit of Platos and other ancients applauded by some of later times; that the taking of property and bringing in community into a commonwealth, would make them happy and flourishing as if they were wiser than God. For this community (so far as it was) was found to breed much confusion and discontent, and retard much employment that would have been to their benefit and comfort.”***

Bradford goes on to explain that communal living was destructive to their self-respect, productivity and family relationships. A lesson to be heeded in this hour while some cry for equality by redistribution of wealth. This never brings equality but poverty, as witnessed in many communist nations.

Having planted all their corn they had nothing left except to trust in God's providence. They would throughout the spring and summer send out a small boat (the only one they had left) to fish. This boat would not return until those in it were successful in netting some fish (though it would sometimes take five or six days). To come back empty handed would have been too disheartening on the rest since there was no food at home. Apart from this a great threat hung over them. Their new crop having been planted and having come up was threatened by a great drought. From the third week of May to the middle of July there was no rain, and the ground became parched and the corn wilted.

The pilgrims set apart a solemn day of ***“humiliation, to seek the Lord by humble and fervent prayer.”*** When they began their fast in the morning and throughout the afternoon the skies were clear and very hot and there was not a cloud in sight. Yet toward the evening it became overcast, and shortly after began to rain. When the rain came down it came in such sweet and gentle showers, thus causing a great rejoicing among all. Further more the rain came without thunder or wind or any violence, which caused the Indians to be astonished at this act of God. From that day God gave them seasonal rain and warmth and granted them a fruitful and bountiful harvest.

To thank God for His mercies they decided ***“...to set apart a day of thanksgiving.”*** This was the inception of our tradition of Thanksgiving.

Although these are many holidays celebrated in our country, this is one holiday filled with godly heritage. The pilgrims, the pioneers of our nations, were saved time and again by the hand of God. During that drought they trusted and sought God and God answered them with His sweet rain. This act was to become crystalized in our nation's history, the truth that God hears and answers prayer and that man's labors apart from God will surely come to naught.

As you celebrate Thanksgiving take time as a family to rehearse the reason for the first Thanksgiving in 1623. Look back into your “history” and find reasons to thank your God for His goodness and mercies, as He has time and again delivered you from destruction.

To God be all glory Amen.