

Pilgrims and the First Thanksgiving

We celebrated Thanksgiving last Thursday. I want to conclude our study of Reformation History by remembering why we celebrate Thanksgiving. I want to start with the general setting of the 17th century world.

I. The early 17th century world

Francis Xavier, the great Roman Catholic missionary, evangelized Japan in 1549 and the years following. By 1606 there were approximately 750,000 Christians in Japan.

In 1614 a brutal persecution began which, within two generations, almost completely wiped-out Christianity in that nation. "The Japanese converts," notes Paul Johnson, "...made Christians of unrivalled determination and courage. Had the mission been allowed to proceed under the right conditions, the Japanese would have changed the face of world religion. As it was, they became the victims of one of the most ruthless and prolonged persecutions in the long, bloody story of confessional cruelty. From 1614-43 up to 5,000 Japanese Christians were judicially murdered, nearly always in public. The exact total is not known...The most appalling tortures were inflicted on those, usually Japanese, who refused to recant. Some died of starvation [in jail]. Others were tortured to death."¹

Also, at about this same time, in 1607, nonreligious people with no purpose but profit founded Jamestown on the Chesapeake Bay in Virginia. The result was social, moral, and political chaos. By 1610 only 60 of the first 500 colonists were left alive.

In 1619 a slaving ship sold 20-30 Africans to the Jamestown colonists as *indentured servants*.

The next year, as the Japanese were ruthlessly exterminating Christianity, and Jamestown was floundering, 42 Saints and 60 "Strangers" set sail from Plymouth England. Unbeknownst to them, they would birth a new nation that would change the course of world history. It would also do more to spread the gospel than any other nation in history.

While the Jamestown colony was struggling, the Pilgrims were landing in New England. As God was opening a door for the gospel in North America, He was closing the door in Japan.

¹ Paul Johnson, *A History of Christianity*, (New York: Atheneum, 1985) pg 420

II. Six Facts About the Pilgrim Story

A. IT WAS A LOST STORY

If you had lived in 1840 you would have never heard of the Mayflower or the Pilgrims. Until William Bradford's Journals were recovered in 1856 the story had been completely lost to history. Bradford (1590-1657) was the first governor of Plymouth, MA. and one of those who sailed on the Mayflower.

His journals, bound in leather, and written in longhand, were the only record of the Mayflower's voyage, its survivors, and the only history of the early decades after their landing at Plymouth, MA. Passed down to his descendants for 100 years, Bradford's journals ended up at the Old South Church in Boston. After the American Revolution, the British took Bradford's Journal back to England where it languished in the archives of a musty library until 1856. At that time it was discovered and in 1897 returned to the governor of Massachusetts. Shortly thereafter, the Journal was published, and the story of the Mayflower and her Pilgrim passengers was restored to American history.

The story had been lost for 200 years.

Not knowing about the Mayflower in Oct. 1864 Abraham Lincoln made the fourth Thursday in November *"a day of Thanksgiving and praise to almighty God, the beneficent Creator and Ruler of the Universe."*

Lincoln asked Americans to "humble themselves in the dust...and offer up penitent and fervent prayers..." to God for the healing of the nation.

B. THE PILGRIMS WERE NOT PURITANS

The 45 odd Christians on the Mayflower were "Pilgrims." It is important to distinguish between Puritans and Pilgrims.

The Pilgrims were a small group of "separatists" that, because of persecution, fled from England to Holland in about 1602. At their peak they numbered about 300. After 18 impoverished years in Holland a small group of the Pilgrims left for the New World on the Mayflower in September 1620. They were going to the New World to establish a beachhead that the other Pilgrims would eventually follow. Because of the horrendous death rate the first year, that never happened.

The Pilgrims were called "Separatists" because they had separated from the church of England. Under Queen Elizabeth and King James, the sovereigns at that time, separation from the State Church was punishable by death. That is why the

Pilgrims fled to the New World. They would rather live in what they called, “the howling wilderness” of the New World than join the church of England.

By contrast, the Puritans were a large renewal movement in the church of England. They probably comprised one third of England’s population. They did not separate from the State Church. Rather, they attempted to reform the Anglican church from within.

Theologically, there was little difference between Pilgrims and Puritans.

Puritanism began about 1570 and ended about 1690.

C. THEIR DEPARTURE WAS A FIASCO

The Passengers on the Mayflower were a diverse group. The Christians were outnumbered. There were 102 total passengers. 42 were Saints (the Pilgrims), and 60 were what the saints called “Strangers” (Baptized Anglicans, soldiers of fortune, mercenaries, or adventurers). In addition, there were 25-30 Crew Members who bitterly persecuted the Saints.

They intended to leave England in early Spring, plant crops, and harvest the first year. However, due to administrative obstructions, they didn’t sail until early August 1620.

The timing was bad. It was late in the year. They would now arrive just as winter was setting in. They departed in two vessels, the *Speedwell* and the *Mayflower*. Twice they returned to England for repairs to the *Speedwell*. Eventually the *Speedwell* stayed home, transferring its passengers to the *Mayflower*.

To the Pilgrim’s dismay, the final departure actually occurred on Sept 6, 1620.

D. THEY SPENT 65 MISERABLE DAYS AT SEA

The crossing from Plymouth England to Massachusetts took nine weeks.

They travelled at a walking speed—2 miles per hour, or about 50 miles per day.

As we have mentioned, there were 102 passengers crammed into the hold. The *Mayflower* was only 90ft by 26 ft. There was barely room to stand up in the hold. As we have seen 60 of the 102 were formal Christians at best. Imagine the suffering and stress.

The Pilgrims rejoiced in the sovereignty of God. The Strangers grumbled.

Most were sea-sick.

There was no ventilation,
No toilets,
No privacy,
No lighting,
No showers,
Inadequate clothing,
No way to wash clothes.
The boat leaked continually.
No bathing for 2.5 months.
Lice and Fleas.

The stench in the hold must have been incredible.

The babies cried continually.

Then there was the boredom: There was nothing to do. The monotony must have been grinding.

Three of the women were pregnant. One gave birth at sea. She named her child, Oceanus.

The other two gave birth shortly after arrival.

Their food consisted of dried vegetables, dried biscuits (Hard Tack). A few weeks into the voyage worms began to appear in the dried biscuits.

A small amount of daily beef jerky,

For drink they had beer, rum and very bad water.

Add to this the terror of winter gales on the North Atlantic. Very few of the passengers had ever been to sea.

In addition, they had no idea where they were going, or what exactly would greet them when they got there.

The crew made matters worse. They were unbelievers. Some mocked and persecuted the 42 Pilgrims mercilessly. Here is how George Willison sums it up from Bradford's diary.

“Cursing [the 42 Pilgrims] dayly with grievous execrations.’ One of their worst tormentors, a huge brawny seaman, used to taunt the weak and sick by saying that he expected to bury half of them at sea and ‘make merry with what they had.’ When they reproached him, no matter how gently, ‘he would curse and swear most bitterly.’ But retribution was swift in coming. Stricken himself one morning, this ‘proud & very profane younge man’ was dead by afternoon and his body was the first to go over the side, to the great astonishment of his wicked cronies, said Bradford,...for they saw that it was ‘ye just hand of God upon him.’”²

E. THEY ARRIVED AT THE WORST POSSIBLE TIME

Their original destination was the mouth of the Hudson River, what is now New York. However, an Atlantic storm blew them off course. They arrived 200 miles North at Massachusetts Bay.

They found themselves at the edge of Cape Cod on Massachusetts Bay. It was mid-November. Bradford records that the sleet was blowing horizontally.

A few of the men spent the next weeks exploring Massachusetts Bay in nasty weather. They were looking for a place to settle and build a village. They were looking for a locations with fresh running water and a secure harbor.

Meanwhile the 102 Saints and Strangers remained on the Mayflower. While they waited there was dissension and infighting. To procure order, one of the Pilgrims, William Brewster, prepared a Civil Covenant. Today we call it “the Mayflower compact.” It was the first attempt at self-government in North America. All of the signers assumed the importance of the Bible and the validity of the morality contained in its pages. The “Mayflower Compact” expressed their desire to be ruled by law. Like the Puritans, they wanted to be ruled by laws not kings. It was not a declaration of separation of church and State. That would come later. They assumed the unity of church and state.

Paul Johnson: What was remarkable about this particular contract was that it was not between a servant and a master, or a people and a king, but between a group of like-minded individuals and each other, with God as a witness and symbolic co-signatory. It was as though this small community, in going to America together, pledged themselves to create

² George F. Willison, *Saints and Strangers*, (New YorikTime Books, 1945) pg 144

a different kind of collective personality, living a new life across the Atlantic.³

After a month of exploration, the Pilgrims decided to settle at a small bay with a freshwater spring. They named it Plymouth after their English departure point.

While exploring the area they found the remains of a native American village. Later they learned that the Patuxet Tribe had been wiped out by Smallpox the year before their landing.

The result was an empty Massacussets Bay.

It also meant a weak Indian Tribe predisposed to be friendly with the Europeans.

Meanwhile the situation in New Plymouth was bleak. William Bradford, who eventually became governor of Plymouth Plantation, lost his wife, Dorothy. Apparently, she committed suicide. Historians are not surprised. Ten years later, “at her first sight of New England,” records George Willison,

“Anne Hutchinson, that stout hearted rebel, declared that her heart and spirit all but failed her, and that she would have fled in panic back to England had she not believed that God was about to destroy [England] for its sins and iniquities...To picture the forlorn lot or share the soul-searing experience of the pioneer women who first came to our shores is impossible for even the liveliest imagination.”⁴

On Christmas day, Dec 25, 1620, the 42 Pilgrims and the 60 adventurers debarked from the Mayflower and began to construct a village of small huts in which to ride out the winter.

The structures were crude. They had dirt floors, hanging cloth for doors, no windows. No chimneys to remove the fireplace smoke. Soon the settlers, weakened by the long voyage, bad food, serious malnutrition, no sanitation, and exposure to the cold, began to get sick and die.

What killed them? Scurvy, tuberculosis, and other pulmonary disease caused most of the deaths. The entries in Bradford’s journal tell the story.

³ Johnson, Paul. A History of the American People (p. 29). HarperCollins e-books. Kindle Edition.

⁴ Ibid, Willison, pg 167

“December 24th dies Solomon Martin, the sixth and last who dies this month. Jan 29th, dies Rose, the wife of Captain Standish. This month eight of our number die. Feb 21. Die Mr. William White, Mr. William Mullins, with two more; and the 25th dies Mary, the wife of Mr. Isaac Allerton. This month seventeen of our number die. March 24. Dies Elizabeth, the wife of Mr. Edward Winslow. This month thirteen of our number die. And in three months past dies halfe our company...of a hundred persons, scarce fifty remain [alive], the living [so weak that they are] scarce able to bury the dead.”⁵

At one point only five or six were healthy enough to care for the sick and dying.

Grave Site

“When the worst was over,” notes Willison, “only three married couples remained unbroken [by death]. Mortality ran highest among the wives, only five of eighteen surviving. More than half the heads of households perished...Parents in general and mothers in particular sacrificed themselves for their children. Only one family escaped without a loss.”⁶

As Spring arrived their circumstances began to improve. By the end of March the dying ended. One day a Native American, Squanto, surprised them by walking into their village speaking English. The Pilgrims offered him rum and beer.

Squanto’s story is remarkable. Ten years earlier Squanto had been kidnapped by the British. His British captors sold him as a slave to a Spanish monastery.

The monks then sold Squanto to a wealthy English merchant, who returned him to North America exactly 6 months before the arrival of the Mayflower. Squanto was indispensable to the Pilgrims. The Pilgrims were merchants by trade. They did not know how to farm. Squanto, and the Indian women, also showed them how to hunt, fish, and grow corn. He also served as a translator to the Native American tribes in the area.

Slowly health and strength returned to the fifty survivors. By that fall they had established a small village, sturdied their houses for the coming winter, made friends with the Native Americans, and collected a harvest for the coming winter.

The Indian corn had grown well, but the English wheat, barley and peas that they brought with them had failed miserably. Nevertheless, they had adequate food for the coming winter. Their common dangers and troubles had forged the Saints and

⁵ Ibid, Willison, pg. 179

⁶ Ibid, Willison, pg 179

Strangers into a unified band. Many of the “strangers” had become stout Christians. Most of the widows and widowers had found comfort in new marriages.

In October 1621 the Pilgrims called for a three-day feast. Contrary to tradition, Bradford’s journal does not mention Turkey or pumpkin pie.

90 hungry Indian braves joined them. The fifty Pilgrims panicked. Where will we get food for this large group? But the Native Americans brought five deer that they had recently shot. There was food for all. They feasted not for one day, but for three, and the Christians amongst them gave hearty thanks for God’s care and goodness.

F. THEIR SUFFERING WAS FRUITFUL

They weren’t out of the woods until the fourth year. In the meantime, they suffered the constant fear of starvation. Ten years passed. They prospered. The little village of Plymouth slowly grew to about 300 souls. Their success encouraged others.

In 1626 another small group of English separatists settled at Cape Anne.

In 1628 another group settled Salem, Massachusetts.

By 1630, the Puritans in England were experiencing intense persecution. Word was out that some hearty souls had actually established a viable settlement on the edge of the “howling wilderness” in Massachusetts Bay.

Although their population was still under 300, the Pilgrims had succeeded where everyone else had failed. In contrast to Jamestown, they succeeded because they were religiously motivated. They also came in families. When someone died they joined a family. The glory of God was their primary motive. They were God-fearing, and God blessed their efforts.

In 1630 the Great Migration began. According to Paul Johnson, “It was the greatest outward exodus, at that date, in English history.”⁷

The first convoy brought 1,000 Puritans. They settled 20 miles North in Boston Harbor. Over the next ten years between 10-20,000 migrated to New England. At the time of the American Revolution, 140 years later, 75% of the Colonists could trace their heritage to these early Puritan immigrants.

Today, over 10 million Americans are directly descended from one of the Pilgrim family members.

⁷ Johnson, Paul. A History of the American People (p. 29). HarperCollins e-books. Kindle Edition.

III. Four Lessons from the Pilgrim Story

A. TRUST IN THE PROVIDENCE OF GOD:

Providence is the doctrine “that the world and our lives are not ruled by chance or by fate but by God.”⁸ God is sovereign over history. He opens doors and He closes them. This means that, ultimately, he is also sovereign over the success of the gospel.

For reasons known only to God he allowed the Door of opportunity for the Japanese church to be closed.

But he opened a door for the Pilgrims, and because of their success, a vast Puritan migration followed ten years later.

Here are some examples of God’s providence at work in this story: 1) The sudden death of the tormenting sailor 2) God’s preparation of Squanto to aid the Pilgrims. 3) The death of the Patuxet tribe in the very bay in which the Pilgrims eventually landed. 4) The survival of Fifty that first Winter when all should have died.

Faith in God’s providence is important to us. It produces contentment:

Romans 8:28 "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose."

B. REJOICE IN SUFFERING

God often lets his favorites suffer. It can be a sign of his blessing. Christianity is not a free pass to an easy life. Rather, it is about becoming more than conquerors despite troubles. Here are some of the benefits that the Pilgrims fathers gained through suffering.

1. Suffering focuses us on eternal things.

"For this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal" (2 Corinthians 4:17-18).

2. Suffering exposes who we really are. It either makes us thankful and joyful or bitter and pessimistic. Here is how Peter Marshall describes Bradford’s Prayer at the first Thanksgiving.

⁸ Evangelical Dictionary of Theology, Edited by Elwell, pg. 891 (Grand Rapids, Baker, 1984)

“They had so much for which to thank God: for providing all their needs, even when their faith had not been up to believing that He would do so; for the lives of the departed and for taking them home to be with him; for their friendship with the Indians—so extraordinary when settlers to the South of them had experienced the opposite; for all His remarkable providences in bringing them to this place and sustaining them.”⁹

3. Suffering sensitizes us to God’s voice:

C.S. Lewis: “God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains. It is his megaphone to arouse a deaf world.”

4. Suffering produces perseverance and godliness.

“Count it all joy my brothers when you meet trials of various kinds. For you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness, and let steadfastness have its effect that you may be perfect and complete lacking in nothing” (Jam 1:4ff).

5. Suffering enhances our future glory when embraced with thanksgiving.

(Ro 5:3-5) "More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us."

C. GOD EXPRESSES HIS POWER THROUGH WEAKNESS

In 1620 no one noticed the sailing of the Mayflower. No one paid any attention to the little village clinging to the edge of Massachusetts Bay. Seventy-five years later this story was completely lost to posterity. The Pilgrims and Strangers had no idea that they were playing a major part in world history.

How their lives bent and shaped the flow of world history is only appreciated with the passing of centuries.

So it is with our lives. What are you and I faithfully giving our lives to that neither you nor anyone else knows will have an unanticipated long-term affect?

D. NEVER TAKE RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR GRANTED

⁹ Peter Marshall and David Manuel, *The Light and the Glory*, (Old Tappan: Revell, 1977) pg 135-36

Our religious freedoms are precious. They are fast eroding. I fear that we will not appreciate them until it's too late. Be thankful. Look at the price the Pilgrims were willing to pay for privilege of worshipping in their own church.

Because of the severe winter weather, the Mayflower wintered with the Pilgrims at Plymouth. When it finally left for England on April 21, the captain begged the survivors to return with him. He was convinced that they would not last another winter. However, to a man the survivors refused. Why? Such was their passion for freedom of conscience that they would rather live on the edge of the "howling wilderness" with slim chances of survival than return to England.¹⁰

Do we appreciate our freedoms this way today?

God wants us to respond with Thanksgiving. We and our entire culture deserve what the Japanese church received. The only reason we haven't received it is mercy and unmerited grace. The Pilgrims teach us to

(1 Th 5:16-18) "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you."

¹⁰ Ibid, Marshall