

# The Origins of Thanksgiving Day

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## Thanksgiving Day in American History

Most Americans are familiar with the Pilgrim's Thanksgiving Feast of October 1621 in Plimouth Colony, Massachusetts. Fifty surviving Pilgrims, together with 90 Wampanoag Indians, had a three-day harvest festival of wild turkey, duck, geese, venison, lobsters, clams, bass, corn, vegetables, and dried fruits. This was not a religious event, except for giving thanks for the food. But few know that it was not the first thanksgiving feast in the New World. Some of the places that claim to be the location of the first Thanksgiving service include:

*Texas Panhandle, May 23, 1541:* Spanish explorer Francisco Vasquez de Coronado and his men held a service of thanksgiving after finding food, water, and pasture.

*Jacksonville, Florida, June 30, 1564:* 600 Huguenot colonists celebrated their new settlement, singing “a psalm of Thanksgiving unto God.”

*Maine, August 9, 1607:* English settlers led by Captain George Popham joined Abnaki Indians along the Kennebec River for a harvest feast and prayer meeting.

*Jamestown, Virginia, June 10, 1610:* During the harsh winter of 1609-10, called “the starving time” by John Smith, 60 surviving colonists (out of the original 500) held a service of thanksgiving after help finally arrived from England. A settler wrote, “the tenth of June (being Sunday) his Lordship [Thomas De la Warr] came with all his Fleet, went ashore in the afternoon, heard a Sermon, read his Commission, and entered into consultation for the good of the Colony.”

*Plimouth Colony, June 1623:* The colonists held a day of Thanksgiving and prayer because of plenty of rain for their crops, and for the arrival of a supply ship. *This service was probably the inspiration for Thanksgiving Day because it was both a religious as well as a social celebration.*

*Massachusetts Bay colony, July 8, 1630:* Governor John Winthrop and the settlers observed a day of prayer and thanksgiving. Winthrop wanted this Puritan settlement to be a model Christian “City upon a Hill” that obeys God's voice.

Since the 1541 thanksgiving service in Texas was held by Catholics, the first Protestant thanksgiving service was the 1564 service in Jacksonville, Florida held by French Reformers called the Huguenots. But what started as a promising start for these Reformers fleeing persecution by French Catholics ended tragically. Their settlement was overrun by Spanish troops and many settlers were captured. When 245 of the faithful French refused to retract their Reformed faith, the Spanish put them all to the sword. Many of the French Protestants who survived went back to France, only to suffer again at the hands of the French Catholics in the 1572 St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre of 5,000-10,000 of their brethren, a more horrendous sequel to the 1565 massacre in Florida.

But it was only on October 3, 1863 that President Lincoln declared the last Thursday of November as an annual nationwide celebration of thanksgiving. The day was changed later to the 3rd Thursday by President Franklin Roosevelt.

## Thanksgiving in the Bible

However, all these Thanksgiving services and feasts were predated by thanksgiving offerings and feasts in the Bible. As early as after Adam and Eve bore Cain and Abel, we read of a couple of thanksgiving offerings. Cain, who was a farmer, brought an offering from *“the fruit of the ground”* (Gen 4:3-4). Abel, who was a keeper of sheep, brought a *“firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions”*. Christians are familiar with the tragic result – Cain murdering Abel – but these offerings are tokens of their consecration and thanksgiving. But God disapproved of Cain's offering, because it was insufficient and because his heart was not right with God. Other examples of ingratitude is Israel after the exodus when the people grumbled again and again against Moses and against God, instead of thanking God for delivering them from slavery, for water in the desert, and food that literally fell from heaven.

In the laws of Moses, thank offerings to God are included in the temple offerings and sacrifices. They express thankfulness to the Lord for forgiveness, salvation, for good harvest, and for God's love (Lev 7:11-16). We read of thanksgiving often in the Psalms. *“Oh give thanks to the LORD”* is a common refrain (Psa 106:1; 118:1; 136:1). But why do we give thanks to God? The psalms often specify reasons, typically God's love, *“for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever!”* (Psa 136) Also gratitude for his creation, provision, salvation, and deliverance from enemies. The Psalms often exhort worshipers to give thanks to God: *“I will magnify him with thanksgiving”* (69:30); *“Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving”* (95:2); *“Enter his gates with thanksgiving”* (100:4); and *“Sing to the Lord with thanksgiving”* (147:7).

Many psalms begin with lament, but then end in thanksgiving to the Lord. For example, after lamenting about his enemies persecuting him, David ends Psalm 7 with, *“I will give to the LORD the thanks due to his righteousness”* (7:17; see also 28:7; 35:18; 52:9; 54:6; 86:12; 79:13; 106:47).

In the New Testament, thanksgiving is given to God for food as part of prayers over meals, as when before Jesus fed the multitudes (John 6:11), or before he served the last supper (Matt 26:27). Paul also gave thanks to God for his meal before his shipwreck in Malta (Acts 27:35). He teaches us that all food come from God, and be received with thanksgiving (1 Tim 4:3-4).

Believers offer thanksgiving to God for their salvation from sin. The sinful woman who anointed Jesus with precious oil (Luke 7:40-47), and the one leper out of ten he healed showed their gratitude to Jesus for deliverance from sin and affliction (Luke 7:11-19). Christians are to offer themselves as living sacrifices to God in thanksgiving (Rom 12:1). Whatever a Christian does in word or deed, he must do it in the name of Christ with thanksgiving (Col 3:17). In his sufferings, he must be grateful to God for being a member of the unshakable kingdom of God (Heb 12:28). In stark contrast to believers, those who are ungodly and unrighteous show no gratitude to God who created them and nourishes them (Rom 1:21; 2 Tim 3:2).

Indeed, a Christian must thank God in all circumstances, and for all things (Eph 5:20; 1 Thess 5:18), even in suffering (Rom 5:3-5; Jas 1:1-4). In everything, he must, *“by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let [his] requests be made known to God”* (Php 4:6-7). Christians are taught about the four main parts of prayer with the acronym ACTS: adoration, confession of sin, thanksgiving, and supplications. So thanksgiving is a main part of prayer. How often our prayers hurriedly go into our supplications and petitions, without remembering to thank God for all that he has done for us.

Paul often begins his letters with thanksgiving to God for the faithfulness of the churches or individuals to whom he writes. And this thanksgiving to God often leads to a thanksgiving prayer. Paul gives thanks to God for their faith (Rom 1:8), for grace given to them (1 Cor 1:4-7), for their partnership in the gospel (Phil 1:3-5), and for their strength of faith in the face of persecutions (2 Thess 1:3-4).

**BELOVED FRIENDS IN CHRIST:** Make your Thanksgiving Day much more than a turkey and football day. Remember our forefathers who fled religious persecution in Europe and settled in the New World. In severe weather, starvation, disease, and even persecution, they offered thanksgiving to God for any meager harvest and provisions. Do you offer thanksgiving to God for all the peace and prosperity in this nation? Do you pray that God would also provide for others around the world who will be overjoyed by a few crumbs of bread, a little bowl of rice, or a tiny fish on their tables?

May your Thanksgiving Day be filled with a due sense of His goodness and mercies. And may your prayers be seasoned with reverence and awe.

*Bless the LORD, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name! Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits, who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, who satisfies you with good so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's. ~ Psalm 103:1-5*

**LET US PRAY:** Almighty God, Father of all mercies, we your unworthy servants do give you most humble and hearty thanks for all your goodness and lovingkindness to us and to all men. We bless you for our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life; but above all for your inestimable love in the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ, for the means of grace, and the hope of glory.

And we ask you, give us that due sense of all your mercies, that our hearts may be truly thankful, and that we show forth your praises, not only with our lips, but in our lives; by giving up ourselves to your service, and by walking before you in holiness and righteousness all our days.

Now we pray again for this week, as we go on our daily lives. We pray for good weather, snow and rain, so we may nourish our bodies. We pray that we may live our lives among families and friends as those who have been saved from sin and are holy in word, thought and deed. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom with you and the Holy Spirit be all honor and glory, world without end. Amen.