

Historical Background



Let's Show Our Gratitude (Part 1)
by Derek Prince

It's good to be with you again at the beginning of a new week.

In our American calendar, this is a special week. It's the week in which, as a nation, we celebrate Thanksgiving. Many of your personal and family arrangements for this week will center around this fact. The messages that I'll be bringing you throughout this week will also center around this theme. The title I've chosen for my talks this week is "Let's Show Our Gratitude."

In my talk today, I want to speak about the historical background of Thanksgiving. Why do we, as a nation, celebrate Thanksgiving? What is the origin of this tradition? Of course, we're all familiar with the fact that this is associated with the Pilgrims, the Pilgrim fathers, who first landed on the coast of America and who are, in some sense, the spiritual ancestors of our nation.

In order to answer these questions about the historical background of the celebration of Thanksgiving, I'm going to take the liberty to read several passages from a book of mine entitled, Shaping History Through Prayer and Fasting.

In this book I explain, amongst other things, how I first became interested in the Pilgrims. You should understand that, with my British background, when I first came to the United States I knew almost nothing about the Pilgrims. They were a complete blank in my historical education which I had received in Britain.

So, in order to explain how I first became interested in the Pilgrims, which was a decisive moment in my own life, I'm going to read a section from my book, Shaping History Through Prayer and Fasting.

> "In 1970 and 1971 the city of Plymouth, Massachusetts, celebrated the three hundred fiftieth anniversary of the landing of the Pilgrims at that point on the coast of America. A special committee was appointed by the city to organize various kinds of celebration that were appropriate to the occasion. This committee paid me the honor of inviting me to give a series of addresses in the Church of the Pilgrimage in the city of Plymouth.

During my visit to Plymouth, two members of the committee were kind enough to show me the main places of historical interest and also to introduce me to some of the original records of the period of the Pilgrims. In this way I became acquainted for the first time with [the book] the history Of Plymouth Plantation by William Bradford.

Having been educated in Britain, I do not recall ever having learned anything at school about the Pilgrims. The phrase, 'Pilgrim Fathers,' commonly used by Americans, had created in my mind a vague impression of severe old men with long white beards, probably attired in dark formal clothing similar to that associated with ministers of religion. I was surprised to discover that the majority of the Pilgrims at the time of their arrival in America were still young men and women. For example, William Bradford was thirty-one years old in 1621, when he was first appointed governor of the colony. Most of the other Pilgrims were of about the same age or younger..

As I studied Bradford's own firsthand account of the founding of Plymouth Colony and of its early struggles, I developed a strong sense of spiritual kinship with him and his fellow Pilgrims. I discovered that their whole way of life was based upon the systematic study and application of the Scriptures. With the main conclusions and convictions to which this study led them, I found myself in complete accord...

Having obtained my own degrees in the University of Cambridge [in England], and having held a fellowship at King's College, Cambridge, I was particularly interested to see how many of the Pilgrims' spiritual leaders had received their education at Cambridge. Three of those most closely associated with the Pilgrim's story were Richard Clyfton, John Robinson, and William Brewster. Clyfton was the elder of the original congregation at Scrooby, in England. Robinson was the elder of the Pilgrims' congregation at Leyden, in Holland. Brewster was the elder who actually traveled over on the Mayflower, and became the chief spiritual leader of the original colony in Plymouth. All three of these men received their education at Cambridge.

For this reason I feel that I need offer no apology for quoting from Bradford's book various passages that relate to the theme of our present study."

In particular, now, I'd like read a very brief passage in which he defines the motives which prompted the Pilgrims for their whole undertaking. Why did they take that long, arduous journey, face all those risks and hardships? Bradford outlines their motive clearly and I'll read as follows. In his fourth chapter, Bradford describes the main motive of the Pilgrims in undertaking their journey to America. This is what he says:

"Lastly (and which was not least), a great hope and inward zeal they had of laying some good foundation... for the 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."

So that was their motive: to lay a foundation for the propagating and advancing of the gospel of the kingdom of Christ.

Then I want to read a passage in which he describes their hardships when they first landed at Cape Cod and how they overcame those hardships simply by the faith they had in God and in the Scriptures.

"In chapter IX [Bradford] describes the arrival of the Mayflower at Cape Cod, and the many dangers and hardships which the Pilgrims encountered. He concludes the chapter [as follows]:

What could now sustain them but the Spirit of God and His grace? May not the children of these fathers rightly say: 'Our fathers were Englishmen which came over this great ocean, and were ready to perish in this wilderness; but they cried unto the Lord, and He heard their voice and looked on their adversity.' [This is Bradford's own paraphrase of Deuteronomy 26:5, 7. He continues] 'Let them therefore praise the Lord, because He is good: and His mercies endure forever. Yea, let them which have been redeemed of the Lord, shew how He hath delivered them from the hand of the oppressor. When they wandered in the desert wilderness out of the way, and found no city to dwell in, both hungry and thirsty, their soul was overwhelmed in them. Let them confess before the Lord His lovingkindness and His wonderful

> works before the sons of men.'" [This is Bradford's own version of Psalm 107:1–5, 8.]

So, that's the background of Thanksgiving. That's the kind of men, the motives, that brought them here.

Now I'm going to continue by reading Bradford's own account, an eye-witness account of the situation which actually is the origin of Thanksgiving, the saving of the Pilgrims' harvest in the year 1623. This is what Bradford says:

> "In the summer of 1623 the Pilgrims' carefully planted crop of corn was threatened: ...by a great drought which continued from the third week in May, till about the middle of July, without any rain and with great heat for the most part, insomuch as the corn began to wither away...it began to languish sore, and some of the drier grounds were parched like withered hay... Upon which they set apart a solemn day of humiliation to seek the Lord by humble and fervent prayer... And He was pleased to give them a gracious and speedy answer, both to their own and the Indians' [amazement] ...For all the morning and the greatest part of the day, it was clear weather and very hot, and not a cloud or any sign of rain to be seen; yet toward evening it began to overcast, and shortly after to rain with such sweet and gentle showers as gave them cause of rejoicing and blessing God... [Then I comment to myself:] Normally, if rain had fallen at all in such conditions, it would have been in the form of a thunderstorm which would have beaten down the corn and destroyed the last hope of a harvest. But on this occasion, Bradford goes on to relate: 'It came without either wind or thunder or any violence, and by degrees in that abundance as that the earth was thoroughly... soaked therewith. Which did so apparently revive and quicken the decayed corn and other fruits, as was wonderful to see, and made the Indians astonished to behold. And afterwards the Lord sent them such seasonable showers, with interchange of fair warm weather, as through His blessing, caused a fruitful and liberal harvest.... For which mercy, in time convenient, they also set apart a day of thanksgiving.'"

So that is the historical background of the day of Thanksgiving which we will be celebrating, as a nation, this week.

As I come to the end of my message, I want to ask you to ponder on three things: the kind of men that the Pilgrims were; the motives that they had; and then, bear particularly in mind throughout this week as you hear the word "Thanksgiving" in so many ways, that Thanksgiving commemorates a miracle in answer to prayer.

Now, I'd like to close by praying for you and me this Thanksgiving week:

Our God and the God of our nation, we want to thank you for Your faithfulness. Your faithfulness to the Pilgrims, Your faithfulness to us this day. We are alive, we enjoy prosperity, abundance and many other blessings because of Your faithfulness. And at this time and in this week, we want to acknowledge Your faithfulness and give You thanks in the name of our Savior, Jesus. Amen.

Radio Program

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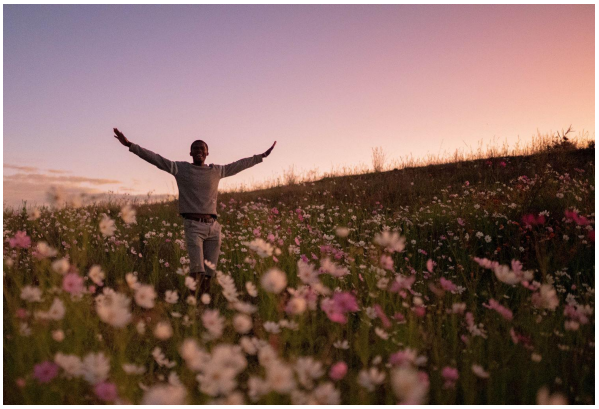

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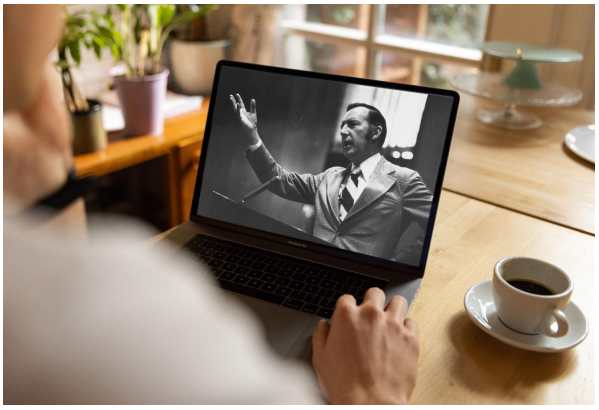

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