

# Bethany Baptist Church

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## Thanksgiving in America

The word “Thanksgiving” defined means “to acknowledge God’s goodness by expressing praise” or “an attitude or display of gratitude to God.” The tradition of Thanksgiving as a time to focus on God and his many blessings bestowed on mankind dates back nearly four (4) centuries in America.

Although the “Thanksgiving” type celebrations occurred at Cape Henry Virginia as early as 1607, our current Thanksgiving celebrations are in following with the celebrations of the early pilgrims.

A look back into the history of the pilgrims must begin with King Henry VIII. In 1534, a new law made King Henry VIII the leader of the church in England and gave him absolute authority. By the same law, all English people were required to be members of the Church of England (The Anglican Church). However, many objected to being members of the Anglican Church as well as being expected to worship the way the church expected them to worship.

Those who objected to the idea of being a member of the church and its form of worship became known as “dissenters.” As punishment for their refusal to accept the way of worship mandated by the Anglican Church, King Henry burned the “dissenters” at the stake or beheaded them. When King Henry’s daughter became Queen, she took his position as head of the Anglican Church. Her position was the same as King Henry’s; all citizens were required to attend Anglican services only. Those who disobeyed her were fined, imprisoned, exiled or executed.

At that time, there were two major groups of “dissenters,” the “puritans” and the “separatists.” The “puritans” were those who tried to purify the church by removing the corruption that existed and helping the church to align itself better with the plain teaching of scripture. The “separatists” (later called pilgrims) were those who decided the church could not be purified because the corruption was too deep and the persecution for trying to purify it would be too severe. Therefore, they decided to withdraw from the church. The separatists honored God, studied the Bible and tried to live godly lives. However, they wanted to be able to worship God freely their own way, apart from the Anglican Church’s method of worship. As a result, their homes were constantly watched day and night by the British authorities.

For the separatist to remain in England and cling to their position was dangerous and could cause them harm or their very lives. To avoid danger and bodily harm, a group of separatist moved to Holland in hopes of gaining their desired religious freedom and safety. In Holland, the separatist began to regret the fact that their children were being raised as Dutch rather than English citizens. Therefore, in their continuing quest for religious freedom, they decided to move to America.

On September 6, 1620, 41 separatists, other travelers, some hired help and other strangers (as they were called) began their voyage to America aboard the Mayflower. When the group of 102 men, women and children left England on their long voyage to America, Governor William Bradford named the group “pilgrims.”

Aboard the Mayflower, there were many difficulties. Among them were the crowded conditions, sickness and disagreements. Their greatest difficulty came from a terrible storm that battered the Mayflower for days, pouring waves of cold sea water across the deck. Eventually, this severe storm created a splinter in the ship's main beam. Finally, after 66 days and nights at sea, they spotted land. However, they were not where they had expected to land; the fierce winds from the storm had blown them more than hundred miles off their course.

Despite the fact that they were over a hundred miles off their course, the pilgrims believed that God had used the storm to direct them to Massachusetts instead of Virginia. After disembarking at Plymouth Rock, they had a prayer service and began building shelters to protect them from the climate. However, they were unprepared for a harsh New England winter, as a result, nearly half of them died before spring. Through prayer and the assistance of helpful Indians, the pilgrims reaped a bountiful harvest the following summer. The grateful pilgrims then declared a three day feast in December, 1621, to thank God and to celebrate with their Indian friends; America's first Thanksgiving festival. This celebration began an annual tradition in the New England colonies that slowly spread into other colonies.

The tradition of "Thanksgiving" is the oldest of all American traditions and was part of the religious convictions of our early fathers, consider the following:

**George Washington** – *“Whereas it is the duty of all nations to acknowledge the providence of Almighty God, to obey his will, to be grateful for his benefits, and humbly to implore his protection and favor...now, therefore, I do recommend and assign Thursday the twenty-sixth day of November next to be devoted by the people of these states to the service of that great and glorious being who is the beneficent author of all the good that was, that is, or that will be; that we may then all unite in rendering unto him our sincere and humble thanks for his kind care and protection of the people of this country...”*

**Thomas Jefferson** – *“That it be recommended to the several states to appoint....a day of public and solemn thanksgiving to Almighty God...to ask him that he would...pour out his Holy Spirit on all ministers of the gospel; that he would...spread the light of Christian knowledge through the remotest corners of the earth; ..and that he would establish these United States upon the basis of religion and virtue.”*

**Abraham Lincoln** – *“The year that is drawing towards its close has been filled with the blessings of fruitful years and healthful skies comes... we are prone to forget the source from which they come.... No human counsel hath devised nor hath any mortal hand worked out these great things. They are the gracious gifts of the Most High God... I do therefore invite my fellow citizens in every part of the United States... To observe and set apart the last Thursday of November next, as a day of thanksgiving and praise to our beneficent father who dwelleth in the heavens.”*

**John Hancock** – *“I...appoint...a day of public thanksgiving and praise...render God the tribute of praise for his unmerited goodness towards us...”* By giving to us *“...the Holy Scriptures which are able to enlighten and make us wise to eternal salvation...”* that he would *“...cause the benign religion of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ to be known, understood, and practiced among all the people of the earth.”*

**Continental Congress, 1777** – *“Congress recommends a day of... thanksgiving and praise so that the people may express the grateful feelings of their hearts...”* and join *“... their prayers that it may please God, through the merits of Jesus Christ, to forgive our sins and...”* to enlarge his kingdom which consists *“...in righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Ghost.”*

As we celebrate this “Thanksgiving Day,” and every Thanksgiving Day, there are three (3) areas of thanks we give to God that we must never neglect, consider the following:

- Calvary and the Lord’s Supper, which reminds us of Jesus’s vicarious death and suffering on the cross and God’s love towards us. (John 3:16; Matthew 26:26; 1 Corinthians 11:24)
- For the blessings he has provided, both spiritual and material. All that we have comes from God; only a fool thinks otherwise. (Ephesians 5:20; Psalm24:1)
- For our gift of salvation apart from human effort and also for those who have come to know Jesus as Savior and Lord, thereby escaping God’s wrath and becoming “Sons” and “Daughters” of God. (Ephesians 2:8-9; Philippians 1:3; Thessalonians 2:13)

If each man and woman had ten thousand tongues, we could never thank God enough for the many blessings he has bestowed upon us all. In all that you do this Thanksgiving, be sure to tell God thanks for the many blessings you have received and for the blessings to come.

God bless,  
Pastor D. M. Duncan