

Thanksgiving  
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Be totally thankful to the Lord!

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Genesis 8:20-22

My God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Here in America we have a special day, established by the U.S. government, set aside as a special day of thanksgiving. And this is good and right. Today I pray God will teach us to totally thank him. (By that I mean with complete dedication.) He teaches us to do this as when we know what he did in the past... when we know what he is doing for us right now... and when we trust what he will do for us in the future.

How did Thanksgiving Day come about? Many nations in the world do not have a national day of Thanksgiving... why do we? Briefly tracing back the history... it may surprise you that Thanksgiving did not become a matter of federal law until the end of 1941. It was then that the fourth Thursday of November was formally set aside by law as Thanksgiving Day. But the history is much richer than just this.

Already in 1863, in the middle of the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln declared that the final Thursday in November would be a national Thanksgiving Day. After recounting God's mercy and gifts even in the midst of Civil War tearing apart the country, Lincoln declared:

*I do therefore invite my fellow citizens... to set apart and observe the last Thursday of November, as a day of Thanksgiving and Praise to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the Heavens. And I recommend to them that while offering up the ascriptions justly due to Him for such singular deliverances and blessings, they do also, with humble penitence for our national perverseness and disobedience, commend to his tender care all those who have become widows, orphans, mourners or sufferers in the lamentable civil strife in which we are unavoidably engaged, and fervently implore the interposition of the Almighty Hand to heal the wounds of the nation and to restore it as soon as may be consistent with the Divine purposes to the full enjoyment of peace, harmony, tranquility and Union.*

Abraham Lincoln's successors followed his example and annually declared the final Thursday of November a Day of Thanksgiving until it became formal law in 1941.

But truth be told, Lincoln can't get all credit for starting Thanksgiving in 1863 either. Already in October of 1789, our first president, George Washington, created the first national day of Thanksgiving when he assigned Thursday, November 26<sup>th</sup> of that year "*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.*"

Keep going back further and we see Thanksgiving pre-dates this declaration of our first president. During the American Revolutionary War, the Continental Congress issued the First National Proclamation of Thanksgiving 12 years before Washington in 1777. I find the wording of this proclamation very interesting. I am quite confident a similar proclamation would not be made by our government today. In view of God's blessings, they wrote:

*It is therefore recommended to the legislative or executive Powers of these UNITED STATES to set apart THURSDAY, the eighteenth Day of December next, for SOLEMN*

*THANKSGIVING and PRAISE: That at one Time and with one Voice, the good People may express the grateful Feelings of their Hearts, and consecrate themselves to the Service of their Divine Benefactor; and that, together with their sincere Acknowledgments and Offerings, they may join the penitent Confession of their manifold Sins, whereby they had forfeited every Favor; and their humble and earnest Supplication that it may please GOD through the Merits of JESUS CHRIST, mercifully to forgive and blot them out of Remembrance.*

So are we at the origins of Thanksgiving now? Not yet. Most ascribe the first thanksgiving to the pilgrims at Plymouth. It was harvest time in the year 1621. The pilgrims were English Protestants, Christians who had come to America for religious freedom and the opportunity to form a new society. There were many obstacles in the way of the success of their endeavor. They were on a new continent, in unfamiliar territory, with a different climate and without all the foundations of a civilized nation they had taken for granted at home. But the situation was do or die. There was no turning back.

They arrived in the winter... a particularly severe one. Of the 102 emigrants that arrived from England, nearly half did not survive to celebrate that first Thanksgiving 10 months later. The fact that any of them survived was in part because of the hospitality and aid of the local Indian tribe, the Wampanoag. After that first harsh winter, the Indians taught them how to plant indigenous crops and survive off the land.

And so here the pilgrims were now, white Christian men from England, gathered with pagan Native American men, alive and thankful, marking their first successful harvest with a feast. This is the familiar story we see in Thanksgiving pageants and Peanuts cartoons today. This is often called the first Thanksgiving.

And yet, it wasn't. This time I'm really going to turn the clock back. We could certainly make many stops along the timeline as we journey back, marking times when people set aside a special day of thanks to God. But we don't have time. So we're jumping all the way back to the time of Noah. The date of the flood is unknown to us. But a ball park best guess would be somewhere between 3000 and 2,300 BC.

There was a global flood that completely devastated the planet and all life on it. Only Noah, his family and all the animals with him on the ark were spared. They spent nearly a year on that ark. I think we sometimes get this picture of a quiet, peaceful ark with all these animals and Noah smiling as he throws them some feed. I suspect that picture is entirely wrong. Think of the worst storm you've ever been... and this must have been far worse. Imagine how terrifying it must have been on this ship for such a long time on waters that must have been tossing and rolling. Imagine being woken up in the middle of a night by a rogue wave that sends the ark lurching. Imagine the noise and chaos as all the animals together let out sound of fear. Did the ark need patches and repairs during that year? Did they spend time bailing water? I don't know, but it seems reasonable. Meanwhile, when there were occasional quiet spells, they're left to contemplate how the entire world as they knew it was wiped out and gone. They didn't know how long they would be on the ark. They didn't know what life would be like after things dried up... or where they would even live.

But finally, the earth dried. The ark came to rest. Noah, his family and all the animal could finally exit the ark to start a new life. They had been spared. God has preserved their lives.

They were thankful.

There had to be so much on the to-do list. Build a home, plant crops, care for the animals they would need for food and clothing. But all of that would wait. Because there was one thing at the top of the to-do list that absolutely had to come first. Listen:

**Then Noah built an altar to the LORD and, taking some of all the clean animals and clean birds, he sacrificed burnt offerings on it. The LORD smelled the pleasing aroma and said in his heart: “Never again will I curse the ground because of man, even though every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood. And never again will I destroy all living creatures, as I have done. “As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease.”**

First things first: Noah had to build an altar and give an offering to God. He was thankful for God’s protection and blessings. He expressed his thanks by sacrificing burnt offerings. A burnt offering was one in which the entire animal was burnt on the altar. None of it was kept for personal use. It was a symbol of a person’s total dedication to God. There are precious few animals. (Although remember that there were seven of every clean animal.) But Noah sacrificed some of all those clean animals to the Lord. **Total trust. Total dedication. Total thankfulness.**

What made Noah so thankful? I would suggest to you three reasons. 1) ...knowing what God did do ...seeing what God continued to do ...and trusting what he would do.

Noah had just seen the destruction of the entire planet because of God’s anger over sin. But Noah had also seen God’s mercy in that he spared his family. God didn’t owe it to Noah to save his life. Yet he did so anyway. And as Noah built that altar he surely would have thanked God for the dry land he was standing on. God continued to protect and provide! Looking at the past and seeing the present, Noah was totally thankful to God.

APPL: Think back about the history of Thanksgiving Day that we talked about earlier. I noticed something interesting about those milestones. Every one of them was during or immediately after a tumultuous time. 1621: the pilgrims were wrapping up their first year in the New World... having lost nearly half their group. 1777 was in the midst of the American Revolution. 1789: George Washington was in the first year as first president of the United States. 1863: Lincoln calls for a Thanksgiving Day in midst of the Civil War. 1941: the world was in the midst of a second world war. During or after times of adversity and times of change, we especially recognize our dependence on God. God’s help in time of need... and his continued providence and protection moved our forefathers to time and again call for a special day of Thanksgiving.

Friends, if this day we hope to be totally thankful to God, we must remember what God has done for us and what he continues to do. Recall vividly the greatest peril from which he has rescued us. Every one of us was born into this world in a free fall toward hell. We were born in sin, and the actual sins we continue to do, separate us from the source of all that is love and good, and set us flying down a path that ends in eternal destruction. Yet God has been merciful to us. He wasn’t content to allow us to continue on the path of self-destruction. So he intervened in the most drastic way imaginable.

He sent his one and only Son into our thankless world. Yet for Jesus, every day was Thanksgiving. He never stopped feeling and expressing gratitude to the Father. Jesus was rejected by the vast majority and persecuted... even to the point of crucifixion. Jesus came to rescue us and wicked, thankless men killed him. Now here’s why we can be thankful. Christ’s

death means our life. He took our place. He died so we can live. He took God's anger so we can have God's favor. Through Christ and his work for us, God considers us forgiven, guilt removed forever, holy and fit for eternal life.

We were in eternal peril. We were hopeless to save ourselves. Eternal death was our destiny. But God intervened and saved us! When we know what we deserved and when we know what God gave us... when we look to the past at God's great salvation... we become people who are totally thankful.

Not did God already provide for us in the past with his love and protection. But he continues to do so in your life today! Look at all God does for you. The Lord has given us this day our daily bread and significantly more. As the Small Catechism reminds us, **"He has given us food and drink, clothing and shoes, house and home, land, money and goods, godly spouses and children, faithful leaders, good government, good weather, peace and order, health, a good name, good friends, faithful neighbors, and the like."** Be totally thankful to God because you see what he is doing for you now!

Finally, be totally thankful to God, knowing what he has promised to do for you in the future. God gave Noah some promises for the future... promises, by the way, which do still apply to us today: **"Never again will I curse the ground because of man, even though every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood. And never again will I destroy all living creatures, as I have done. "As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease."**

So it's not just that God forgave us in the past, but he might not in the future. Even though every inclination of our heart is evil from childhood, he promises he won't destroy us. He promises there will continue to be seasons, and that seedtime and harvest will continue.

By the way... continue for how long? **"As long as the earth endures."** This world won't last forever. So as we look to the future, not only are we thankful that God has promised that he will continue to provide for our earthly needs. But we have his promise that one day this sinful world will come to an end. And as we look through Scriptures we see God's promise that when it does end, he will take us to be with him forever. Sin will be gone for good. The trials and challenges and pain and heartache of this world will be a distant memory. We look forward to an eternal kingdom of continuous happiness where our God provides for every need forever.

Today we are totally thankful as we look forward with trust to what God has promised he *will* do.

So this evening as we prepare for our national day of Thanksgiving, prepare your hearts for total thankfulness. Take time to meditate on God's blessings and deliverance past. Especially focus in on Jesus, your total Savior, and all the spiritual and eternal blessings that are yours through him. Also think of all the things you have to be thankful for that God is providing right now. Material possessions, your church, your family, and much, much more. Also fix your eyes on the future blessings that are guaranteed through your risen Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. God loves you. God protects you and provides for you. Past, present and future. Can we respond any other way than with total thankfulness? Amen.

*"So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness." Col 2:6*