

Story #1:

The First Thanksgiving

*Enter into His gates with thanksgiving,
And into His courts with praise.
Be thankful to Him, and bless His name.
For the Lord is good;
His mercy is everlasting,
And His truth endures to all generations. (Psalm 100:4-5)*

We have much to be thankful for this Thanksgiving. America's foundations began with the Pilgrims, who were seeking to propagate the Christian faith in the New World. They also wanted a land where religious liberty would be secure. Three of their pastors, John Penry, Henry Barrow, and John Greenwood were executed by hanging at St. Thomas-a-Watering in Central London on May 29, 1593. They were found guilty of authoring books dealing with the local church's obligation to oversee their own congregations. These were very difficult times for the people of God in the Western countries. After two hundred years of heavy religious persecution, these humble persons were looking for respite and freedom from a heavy and oppressive tyranny. The Holy Roman Empire, the French government, the English government, and the other tyrannies had been so very oppressive against those holding strongly to the biblical faith for a great many years.

Thanks be to God, freedom would have another chance in the world! After experiencing numerous arrests and intolerable harassment at the hands of the British authorities, the first group of Pilgrims chose to flee England. Led by Captain John Smythe, the little group arrived in Holland in 1606. It was the land of William the Silent, a haven of liberty won in a titanic struggle having taken place several decades earlier.

John Robinson's group experienced a great deal more difficulty leaving England. They made three separate attempts, finally arriving on the free shores of Holland in 1608. It was only a temporary refuge, however. Over the next ten years, it became increasingly clear that these Pilgrims could not assimilate into the Dutch culture and economy. For more economic opportunity and the freedom to advance "the gospel of the kingdom of Christ in [the] remote parts of the world," the little group decided they would venture on to the new world as a covenanted body.

Their ventures would not be without risk and severe hardship, and they knew that their religious liberties would not be easily won. Governor William Bradford challenged his people to endure much hardship in this journey of faith, reminding them, "For, though many desired to enjoy the ordinances of God in their purity, and the liberty of the gospel, yet, alas, they preferred to submit to bondage, with danger to their conscience, rather than endure these privations." Despite the fact that many had coveted the liberties the Pilgrims sought, few had the courage to apply themselves to the venture.

On September 6, 1620, a merchant ship called the *Mayflower* sailed for America, bearing the precious cargo of 101 Pilgrims bound for Virginia. Although their initial charter gave them access to Virginia, the ocean currents drove them into Massachusetts Bay in November of the same year. Their pastor, John Robinson was unable to join the first voyage, but we find the motives for the Pilgrim's courageous actions clearly recorded in his writings:

Now as the people of God in old time were called out of Babylon civil, the place of their bodily bondage, and were to come to Jerusalem, and there to build the Lord's temple. . . so are the people of God now to go out of Babylon spiritual to Jerusalem. . . They shook off this yoke of antichristian bondage, and as ye Lord's free people, joined themselves by a covenant of the Lord into a church estate, in ye fellowship of ye Gospel, to walk in all His ways, made known or to be made known unto them, according to their best endeavors, whatsoever it should cost them, the Lord assisting them.

The Pilgrims arrived on the shores of Massachusetts in November of 1620. The first winter was tough. William Bradford recorded that about half of the Pilgrims perished due to starvation and sickness. On certain days, as many as three persons among this fledgling band would die. According to Bradford's account, there were at times only six or seven healthy persons "who, to their great commendation be it spoken, spared no pains night or day, but with great toil and at the risk of their own health, fetched wood, made fires, prepared food for the sick, made their beds, washed their infected clothes, dressed and undressed them; in a word did all the homely and necessary services for them."

By the next year however, God had provided His blessings in crops and assistance from the local natives. In the fall of 1621, the Separatists gathered for a time of thanksgiving, inviting the natives to join them in the celebration. This historic gathering came to be known by Americans as the "first Thanksgiving." The exact date of the celebration is not known, but it probably occurred in late September or early October. William asked Squanto to bring Sachem Massasoit (the tribe's leader) and his other companions to join them for the feast. William's fellow Pilgrim Edward Winslow described the first thanksgiving as a time of feasting and celebration similar to English harvest festivals complete with food, ale, and games.

Massasoit and a hundred other Natives arrived, bringing five freshly-killed deer to share. The Pilgrims and Indians together enjoyed a great feast of plenty including deer, ducks, wild turkeys, corn, squash, beans, barley, and beer. By God's mercy the colony had survived through much hardship! Edward Winslow, in a letter he wrote to friends in England two months later, explained: "although it be not always so plentiful as it was at this time with us, yet by the goodness of God, we are so far from want [need] we often wish you partakers of our plenty."

Thus, the Lord provided a tremendous mercy upon this early settlement in America. It was the gracious provision of liberty and prosperity which would touch the lives of hundreds of millions of people over the succeeding 400 years. The roots of the nation are found with this humble, grateful, hard-working, faith-filled troop called the Pilgrims, and we remember them this Thanksgiving season.

Story #2: The Great Awakening

*Will You not revive us again,
That Your people may rejoice in You?
Show us Your mercy, Lord,
And grant us Your salvation. (Psalm 85:6-7)*

The years of 1740-1742 were a time of spiritual awakening in the American colonies unlike any other. These crucial years are often called “the Great Awakening.” England, Scotland, Wales, and North America were impacted greatly by this work of God through men like George Whitefield, John Wesley, and Jonathan Edwards.

In the years leading up to the Great Awakening, Pastor Jonathan Edwards witnessed a miraculous work of God in the congregation of Northampton, Massachusetts. So remarkable was the awakening in 1734 and 1735 that Edwards penned a book recounting the dramatic events titled *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God*. Edwards wrote:

There was scarcely a single person in the town, old or young, left unconcerned about the great things of the eternal world. Those who were wont to be the vainest and loosest, and those who had been disposed to think and speak lightly of vital and experimental religion, were now generally subject to great awakenings. And the work of conversion was carried on in a most astonishing manner, and increased more and more; souls did as it were come by flocks to Jesus Christ. From day to day for many months together, might be seen evident instances of sinners brought out of darkness into marvellous light, and delivered out of an horrible pit, and from the miry clay, and set upon a rock, with a new song of praise to God in their mouths.

This event in Northampton was a precursor to the spiritual stirrings that would soon dramatically transform all the English colonies. Starting in 1740, town after town in the American colonies was visited by George Whitefield and John Wesley. Whitefield’s crowds grew to 40,000 at a time in some cases. In God’s providence, Whitefield’s impact was monumental. Charles Wesley reported that in Great Britain “The whole nation is in an uproar,” and James Hervey wrote that “All London and the whole nation ring of the great things of God done by his ministry.” Similar testimonies were made regarding the spiritual impact in the colonies of America.

Today, let us give thanks to the God of mercy who brought times of refreshing to Christ’s church in America. The spiritual fruit continues throughout the generations. “This is the Lord’s doing; it is marvelous in our eyes” (Ps. 118:23).

Story #3: God's Mercy to America from 1880 to 1910

After ninety years of dabbling in witchcraft (seances in the White House), Feminism, Transcendentalism, Unitarianism, and Deism, not to mention the horrible slave trade, America emerged from the Civil War greatly humbled before God.

The Civil War came as a severe judgment upon the nation. For fifty years, the US Congress refused to issue any call for a day of humiliation and fasting. However, that repentance did finally come on March 30, 1863. The US Senate agreed to a resolution calling for a day of prayer and humiliation “to confess sins and transgressions in humble sorrow, yet with assured hope that genuine repentance will lead to mercy and pardon; and to recognize the sublime truth, announced in the Holy Scriptures and proven by all history, that those nations only are blessed whose God is the Lord.”

Indeed, God heard the prayers and responded to this show of genuine humility. The war came to an end after Gettysburg, and the tide turned.

Significant signs of a return to God across the nation appear between 1870 and 1900. A humble evangelist by the name of Dwight L. Moody returned America to a basic Gospel message in the 1870s and 1880s. President Benjamin Harrison may have been the most faithful Christian president, holding family worship each day with his wife and children in the White House. Anthony Comstock's steadfast work carried on from 1870 through 1900 kept abortion and pornography at bay for at least eighty years of American history.

Two of the nation's godliest presidents came at this time. However, both were assassinated while in office. President James Garfield was the only preacher/pastor to be elected president. But he was shot and killed on September 19, 1881. President William McKinley was the paradigm of humility in his care for his invalid wife at his home, while acting as Governor of Ohio, while running for president from his front porch, and as acting president of the United States. After he was shot by an anarchist on September 6, 1901, McKinley's last words offered forgiveness to the assassin: “Let no one hurt him. May God forgive him.” McKinley's preference for a sermon was “the simple Gospel— Christ and Him crucified.” A softening of heart towards America's ill treatment of the native tribes came about slowly during this period.

God's blessings were poured out upon the nation during these years. America became the largest missionary sponsoring nation in the world. By 1895, the nation had become the most productive and prosperous nation on earth with the highest annual Gross Domestic Product. American innovators made huge advances in manufacturing and useful technology unlike any other nation. These included the mass-produced automobile (Ford), the incandescent lightbulb (Edison), the telephone (Alexander Graham Bell), domestic refrigerators (Fred Wolfe), and the airplane (Wright Brothers). All of these advancements in technology were a huge blessing to Americans and the whole world.

God was good to America over these years. Yet, the country still returned to pride, imperialism, government-instituted racism and eugenics, big government socialism, and the promotion of evolution in seminaries at the turn of the 20th century. Let us still thank God for His mercies, despite our tendency to pride and ingratitude.

Story #4: The Spiritual Revivals of 1967-1992

Following World War II, America became an increasingly secular nation—morally, economically, socially, and sexually bankrupted. Prayer and the fear of God were removed from the schools by Supreme Court mandate. In 1973, the same court legalized the purposeful cessation of life in the womb—sentencing 80 million babies to death. Almost every school and university taught a materialistic worldview, evolutionary origins, and anti-Christian ethics. The family almost entirely disintegrated between 1960 and 2019. The economy was laden with unprecedented debt, as the overall debt to GDP ratio increased from 120% to 350% between 1960 and 2011.

However, in the midst of the decline taking place at every level of society, God had mercy upon the nation. He sent an evangelical revival to the America. It was a spiritual awakening which resulted in the formation of Christian home education, pro-life ministries, biblical worldview ministries, creation ministries, a larger evangelical church population, a fervor for evangelism, prison ministries, family ministries, biblical counseling ministries, and an increased interest in missions. Those calling themselves evangelicals rose from 17% in 1972 to 29% in 1992 (tapering down to 23% currently). This explosion of all sorts of ministries, especially the development of apologetics and worldview-oriented ministries opposing worldly ideologies was unprecedented in the history of the country. Christian families were discovering that the secular world simply could not provide an adequate Christian education for their children. The faith enabling Christians to stand strong and firm in a secular age empowered some segments of the church. These spiritual blessings came like a whirlwind from the heavens.

Let us not forget the great preachers like Leonard Ravenhill and D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, and musicians like Keith Green who had such a passion for revival during those years. The gospel became relevant, powerful, and active on the streets of the nation's cities again. David Wilkerson took the gospel to gangs on the streets of New York City. For the next 60 years, Jesus's name was proclaimed, and salvation would come to millions of drug addicts through his ministries. Truly, the awakening was a work of God upon the nation, preserving America and offering opportunity for national repentance.

The college discipleship ministries played a key role in all of this. A return to serious discipleship for young people resulted in the family discipleship ministries of the 1990s and 2000s. Generations and Christian Home Educators of Colorado would never have developed had it not been for the pioneers working in Campus Crusade, the Navigators, and Inter-Varsity in the 1960s and 1970s. Men like Francis Schaeffer and Cornelius Van Til were carving out a distinctively Christian worldview, equipping Christians to resist the ideas that were destroyed western civilization. This preserved Christian families from being robbed by “philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ” (Col. 2:8).

Today, let us thank the Lord for what He did to preserve the nation, Christian churches, and Christian families! Though the nation has been assailed by principalities and powers that would have destroyed faith, family, and freedom time and time again, God is continually showering us with His mercies, and bringing redemption to His people.