

Thanksgiving Sunday Sermon
In Everything Give Thanks
Dr. Paul Jehle

I Scripture Text – 1st Thessalonians 5:18

A. The Thessalonian Church

1. In Paul's time, Thessalonica was the capitol of the Roman province of Macedonia
2. A prominent seaport and thus a strategic place to begin a church
3. Paul ministers to the Jewish population in Acts 17:10; reasoning in the synagogue
4. Jews initially rejected the message, but the Gentile population were converted from idolatry
5. The church was planted, and the date of this epistle is probably around 51 AD.
6. Doctrinal foundations of what it means to live in Christ is dominant in both epistles

B. The context of 1st Thessalonians 5:18

1. The Book speaks of our hope in Christ, but now and at His coming
2. Paul personally reflects on his time with the Thessalonians, encouraging them (chps 1-3)
3. He is filled with joy when receiving the good report from Timothy of their strong faith
4. He then gives them instruction to grow strong in light of the dark times in which they live
5. Specifically, in light of what they face, "*but let us, who are of the day, be sober..*" (5:8)
6. He then gives specific instructions to
 - a. Honor those who labor among you
 - b. Guard the harmony of the believers
 - c. Warn, comfort, and support those who need it
 - d. Do good, even in the face of evil – rejoice, pray, and...
 - e. *In everything give thanks*

II The doctrine of Gratefulness - *in everything give thanks*

A. We don't thank God *for* everything that happens – but in the *midst* of everything that happens

1. Romans 8:28 – God will work all things out for good – but all things that happen are not good
2. Philippians 4:6-7 – avoid anxiety by praying *with thanksgiving*, making requests known to God

B. Cultivating thanksgiving – “peace of God, which passes understanding” shall keep you (Phil. 4:7)

1. See the providential hand of God – the “God of peace is with you” (Phil. 4:9)

Noah Webster's 1828 Dictionary defines words Biblically – consider his definition of providence:

“the care and superintendence which God exercises over his creatures”

2. Cultivate contentment – Philippians 4:11 – at peace, regardless of outward circumstances

III Consider the Pilgrims and their 1621 Thanksgiving Feast

A. It probably took place in October of 1621 (we do not know the exact date)

1. The Pilgrims followed the Jewish calendar and were familiar with the Feast of Tabernacles
2. This Jewish feast was named the “thanksgiving feast” – gratefulness for what God provided
3. It was a harvest festival – a three day feast thanking God for the small harvest they had

B. Consider some of the difficult things the Pilgrims' experienced prior to their 1621 feast

1. William Bradford, the historian, second and most famous Governor, wrote after their attempted escape in 1607 from the wrath of King James who wanted to “harry them out of the land”, yet wouldn't let them leave, blocking all the ports:

"I may not omit the fruit that came hereby, for by these so public troubles, in so many eminent places, their cause became famous, and occasioned many to look into the same; and their godly carriage and Christian behavior was such, as left a deep impression in the minds of many. And though some few

*shrunk at these first conflicts, and sharp beginnings (as it was no marvel), yet many more came on with fresh courage, and greatly animated others."*¹

Note: Imagine giving thanks to God for publishing the cause of Christ at your expense! Would you or I be so grateful in the midst of being betrayed, put in jail, and separated from our spouses and children? But that's not all. The Pilgrims thanked God the next year, in 1608, when they attempted to flee England again. The men had to watch their wives and children taken by the authorities while they watched from the boat. The captain, fearing for his life, sailed for Holland, experiencing a terrible storm for 14 days.

2. What was the attitude of the Pilgrims in their continued attempt to flee England and reach Holland?

*"But these things did not dismay them (though they did sometimes trouble them) for their desires were set on the ways of God, and to enjoy His ordinances, but they rested on His providence, and knew whom they had believed."*²

3. Their philosophy was simple yet Biblical.

- a. Nothing happened to them that God did not allow, *even* tragedy.
- b. An attitude of gratitude, knowing they deserved nothing, kept them faithful to God
- c. Through the trials (an agreement to settle in the new world, loss of the *Speedwell*, difficult voyage, first winter where half their company died, the Pilgrims kept their Biblical view of giving thanks.
- d. The Pilgrims gave God thanks because *He* was good, not because *everything that happened to them was good!*

*"What could now sustain them but the Spirit of God and His grace? May not, and ought 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, etc. Let them therefore praise the Lord, because He is good; and His mercies endure forever.'"*³

C. The Pilgrim Thanksgiving of 1621

1. The Pilgrims called a day of thanksgiving patterned after the Feast of tabernacles, mixing the joy of God's provisions with the sorrow of their hardships. This was unique, and to top it off, it was conducted in harmony with 90 native people from the Wamponoag tribe as well! The Wampanoag gave thanks to their Creator long before the Pilgrims arrived, but the Pilgrim thanksgiving combined two cultures with the pattern of feasting rooted in the Old Testament.

"They began now to gather in the small harvest they had, and to fit up their houses and dwellings against winter, being all well recovered in health and strength and had all things in good plenty. For as some were thus employed in affairs abroad, others were exercised in fishing, about cod and bass and other fish, of which they took good store, of which every family had their portion. All the summer there was no want; and now began to come in store of fowl, as winter approached, of which this place did abound when they came first (but afterward decreased by degrees). And besides waterfowl there was great store of wild turkeys, of which they took many, besides venison, etc. Besides they had about a peck a meal a week to a person, or now since harvest, Indian corn to that proportion. Which made

¹Bradford, William, *Of Plimoth Plantation*, edited by Caleb Johnson, 2006, page 46.

²*Ibid.*, page 42.

³*Ibid.*, pages 112-113.

many afterwards write so largely of their plenty here to their friends in England, which were not feigned but true reports."⁴

2. Though Bradford's account identifies their gratitude for their good harvest after a most difficult winter, it belonged to Edward Winslow, in a letter to England, published in what is now known as *Mourt's Relation*, to give us the details of this event.

"Our harvest being gotten in, our governor sent four men on fowling, that so we might, after a special manner, rejoice together after we had gathered the fruit of our labors.

They four in one day killed as much fowl as, with a little help beside, served the company almost a week. At which time, amongst other recreations, we exercised our arms, many of the Indians coming amongst us, and among the rest their greatest king, Massasoit, with some ninety men, whom for three days we entertained and feasted; and they went out and killed five deer, which they brought to the plantation, and bestowed on our governor, and upon the captain and others.

And 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, that we often wish you partakers of our plenty."⁵

3. Note that we do not know the original date of this event, though most suppose it to be in late October, which would correspond to the time of the Feast of Tabernacles. They feasted and celebrated for three days, thanking God for the provisions God gave them, enjoying it with the Native peoples.

4. They had competitive games, though they would have no idea how Football would be mixed in with Thanksgiving almost four hundred years later in modern America!

5. All dishes were wooden, and children served the adults.

6. There were only four adult Pilgrim women alive, cooking for 140 guests!

7. They ate cod, sea bass, and fowl (ducks, geese and swan).

8. Wild turkeys were consumed, but turkeys in 1621 could run 25 mph and were hard to catch!

9. There is even an unproven legend that popcorn was first introduced by one of the Natives!

10. Recreations included bow and arrow contests, military drills, foot races and wrestling.

D. Henry Morton Dexter recorded an anonymous poem about the First Thanksgiving worth noting:

*"We had gathered in our harvests, and stored the yellow grain,
For God had sent the sunshine, and sent the plenteous rain;
Our barley-land and corn-land had yielded up their store,
and the fear and dread of famine, oppressed our homes no more.*

*As the chosen tribes of Israel, in the far years of old,
when the summer fruits were garnered, and before the winter's cold,
Kept their festal week with gladness, with songs and choral lays,
so we kept our first Thanksgiving in the hazy autumn days."*⁶

⁴ Bradford, William, *Of Plimoth Plantation*, Caleb Johnson editor, pages 143-144.

⁵ *Mourt's Relation*, Jordan Fiore, editor, Plymouth Rock Foundation, 1985, page 72.

⁶ Dexter, H.M., editor, *Songs of te Pilgrims*, 1887, page 105.

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A. We don't thank God *for* everything, but *in everything*

B. God's Providence (care and orchestration of events)

C. Cultivating a grateful heart – contentment

III Consider the Pilgrims and their 1621 Harvest Thanksgiving

A. Persecuted in England for their faith

B. Almost everything went wrong

C. Yet, they remained faithful to thank God!

D. Let us remember their Feast of Thanksgiving in 1621!

a. What made this feast unique?

b. How long did it last?

c. What did they eat?

d. How should we commemorate this as families?

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