

Don't Stop Giving Thanks Now

In the autumn of 1621, the Pilgrims celebrated the colonies' first successful harvest. This marked the start of the long-standing tradition of Thanksgiving. Ironically, although the Pilgrims celebrated days of giving thanks as part of their Christian faith, they were days of prayer and fasting—not feasting. Still, this was the day to give thanks to God for the first successful harvest and partake in some of those first fruits. I'm sure the Pilgrims looked on this as a time to not only share the harvest with the Wampanoag Indian nation, but possibly to also start sharing the grace of salvation.

The Pilgrims of this era took very seriously their responsibility to put God first. As Christians, they believed deeply in their calling to be salt and light to the world. This first feast was an opportunity to praise God and remember that the blessings they enjoyed came from the God they worshipped.

During the midst of one of the darkest times in American history—the Civil War—President Abraham Lincoln reminded his fellow Americans that “we have been recipients of the choicest bounties of heaven” and that we were born in a land of freedom—a nation founded as “one nation under God” by those founding fathers who served the one true God of the Bible. Lincoln reminded the American people that this was both a tremendous privilege and a great responsibility.

We, of course, are blessed not to have experienced days quite as dark as the Civil War.

But from the first Thanksgiving in 1621 to the adoption of our Constitution, on through the Civil War, world wars and continued battles for freedom to this day and days yet to come, we can be thankful—thankful that from our nation's

beginning and through all these tragedies of war we have been called to pray that God might show His mercy and intervene with this grace toward America. And He has!

I often write about the tragedies of our political disunity and the tragedy of evil in the American people, as well as the shame of Americans not standing to honor the flag that gives us great pride and joy. Inherent in such an act is the lack of recognition that we live in the greatest country on the face of this Earth. I also talk and write about the lack of recognition that we were created by one God, in His image, and that regardless of the color of our skin or social standing, in our society we all bleed the same red.

We all have ancestors who came to this country looking for opportunity, a chance for prosperity, and to practice their religion freely in a land established upon our God-given freedoms. Just as many Americans over the last 241 years have been able to pray freely, to persevere through harsh times and to participate in the process of our republic, we can ask—as generations before us have asked—for God to heal our nation.

This season, beyond Thanksgiving Day, I reflect on the gift God has given us, this gift called America, as well as on the great gift of our freedoms, the gift that we share in being made in the image of God, the strengthened will to protect our shores, and to be a part of a nation that wants to open our doors to those who desire to assimilate into the greatest country on Earth. Today we are thankful for faith, family and the freedoms that God has given us.

Thankfully, there is a living God in heaven and there will be justice for all one day. In our differences, we find strength. In our diversities, we can find unity. And in our unity, we can grow strong and enjoy our first fruits, whether that is abundance or little.

I am also thankful for a 44-year-old Virginian by the name of

Richard Henry Lee, who stood before his colleagues at the Second Continental Congress in May of 1776 in Philadelphia. Lee called for passage of a resolution declaring their separation from British rule. This declaration stated that the American colonies would no longer be subject to King George III and his oppressive acts of taxation and intimidation.

I am certain that God inspired Lee and that few in that room realized their actions would soon change the course of world history. Soon, another man rose up from Virginia by the name of Thomas Jefferson and drafted the Declaration of Independence. After much debate on July 4, 1776, these brave patriots adopted the declaration to form a new nation that was to be known as the United States of America. It would be a nation dedicated to a new—some would say very radical—proposition that all men were created equal and endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, such as life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

These were not just words, just as these were not random men. They were brave enough to move forward with such a declaration. This was an event in history that today, more than ever, we need to recognize. Not only should we recognize these truths and our founders' words, but the Creator whom we honor on Thanksgiving. This is a time to rejoice in our diversity and to be thankful for our common values. We should remember that by the grace of God, and the strength of mighty men and women, flawed human beings crafted a way of life and a country that would be impossible were it not for the hand of God on our nation.

In a speech on Martin Luther King Day in January of 1985, President Ronald Reagan hearkened to the God the civil rights leader served when Reagan said, "May He continue to hold us close as we fill the world with our sound—sound in unity, affection and love—one people under God, dedicated to the dream of freedom that He has placed in the human heart, called upon now to pass that dream on to a waiting and hopeful

world.”

Even though the holiday has passed, I hope this season we will be proud of the nation we live in, thankful for the gift of God, and stand in recognition and conviction of this. I hope you will pray for our leaders in the spirit of the ancient prophet, Ezra: “Then I proclaimed a fast ... that we might humble ourselves before our God” (Ezra 8:21a). {eo}

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