“A National Day of Thanksgiving”
*I Thessalonians 5:16-18*

16 Rejoice always, 17 pray without ceasing, 18 give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

It may surprise some folks to know Thanksgiving Day was not created by the Church. It is a national holiday, created by the government, of all things! It’s not even exclusively Christian. People of all religions are called upon to give thanks on Thanksgiving Day. It’s somewhat of a miracle that the Federal Government shuts down to give God thanks!

The history of how this day was established tells us a lot. Three hundred and ninety-eight years ago, well over 100 years after America was discovered by Europeans, in September of 1620 a group of English merchants financed a voyage to America for 102 men, women and children.

- They sailed for 65 days (*just over two months*) on the Mayflower. A third of that group, 34 of them, were Puritans, or separatists from the Church of England. (*So, they were disgruntled Episcopalians!* ) The rest of the group were hired to protect the interest of the investors.

- Their original destination was Virginia, but because of an error in navigation, they ended up in New England. They dropped anchor on November 21, 1620 in what is now Provincetown Harbor, Massachusetts, which is just inside the hook of Cape Cod. It was there that they drew up the *Mayflower Compact* to govern themselves. They made several attempts to sail south for Virginia but were forced by a blinding snowstorm to take refuge on December 21, 1620 at Plymouth. Their first winter was devastating and they lost 49 of the original 102 who made the trip.

- In the spring of 1621, two Indians by the name of Samoset and Squanto befriended the 53 remaining settlers and taught them how to survive in the wild. The fall of that year, they had a bountiful harvest and *Governor William Bradford* declared a celebration. They invited 90 native American friends for a
three-day festival, what we now call the first Thanksgiving Day. So our nation, from the beginning, has been diverse in race, creed, cultural and educational differences. Native Americans and Europeans instituted the first Thanksgiving Day! That’s diverse.

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Here’s what I didn’t know. The settlers did not repeat their celebration of Thanksgiving the following year. It would be two years later in 1623, after a severe draught, when a long steady rain finally came that Governor Bradford proclaimed another day of Thanksgiving with their Native American friends.

It would be 156 years later that all thirteen colonies would join for the first time in a Thanksgiving Day in celebration of our victory over the British. The year was 1777. That was a one-time affair.

Eleven years later in 1789, President George Washington proclaimed a national day of Thanksgiving in celebration of the completion of the Constitution of the United States. He wrote,

Now therefore, I do recommend and assign Thursday, the 26th 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 previous to their becoming a nation…; - and, in general, for all the great and various favors which He hath been pleased to infer upon us.

(George Washington, 1789 Thanksgiving Proclamation, The Salem Mercury (Mass.) 1789 Volume 111, No. 158 front page)

There were those, including Thomas Jefferson, who felt an annual holiday set aside for Thanksgiving was not necessary.

That didn’t suit Sarah Hale. Ms. Hale, was a magazine editor who went on a 17-year campaign of writing editorials and letters to governors and presidents in order to establish Thanksgiving Day as a national holiday. (She was also the author of the nursery rhyme, “Mary Had a Little Lamb,” but apparently Ms. Hale was anything but a “little lamb!”) She prevailed.

It was four months after the victory at Gettysburg in 1863 when President Abraham Lincoln proclaimed the last Thursday in November as a national day of Thanksgiving in response to the end of the Civil War. He wrote,
I do therefore invite my fellow citizens in every part of the United States, and also those who are at sea and those who are sojourning in foreign lands, to set apart and observe the last Thursday of November next, as a day of Thanksgiving and Praise to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the Heavens. (www.classicallibrary.org/lincoln/thanksgiving.htm)

The date was eventually set as the fourth Thursday of November. Every president since Lincoln has honored the day as a national holiday.

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So, the American Thanksgiving Day has evolved over the past 398 years. Fifty-three survivors from the Mayflower, along with 90 of their Native American friends gave thanks for their survival after a devastating winter. Other Thanksgiving Days were celebrated because of…

- gratitude for rain
- victories over the British
- the establishment of the Constitution of the United States
- and for the end of the Civil War.

From strictly a historical perspective, the American Thanksgiving originated as a national response of gratitude after times of trial and tribulation. It was a time to remember the providence of God, who sustains us as a nation through difficult and painful times. That’s how it started.

From a biblical perspective, the same is true. Gratitude is not always restricted to abundance. Paul writes to the Thessalonians;

…give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. (I Thess. 5:18)

Thanksgiving does come for times of abundance, but it also comes because of the many ways in which we have been sustained in times of suffering and sacrifice. Sometimes for the abundance. Some times for God’s providence in times of pain and suffering. “Give thanks in ALL circumstances…”

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So, in the spirit of our forefathers and mothers we will gather as a nation around tables of thanksgiving this Thursday to celebrate a great American holiday. We will give thanks for our country and its freedoms. We will offer prayers for God’s peace
among all nations. We will give thanks for our many blessings, but also our gratitude for the many ways God has sustained us in our times of deepest need.

I imagine that was what Paul had in mind when he wrote;

…give thanks in **ALL** circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. (I Thess. 5:18).

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Congregation; Amen.