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Who, What, When, Where, Why, How of the Christian Experience

LESSON # 10

THANKSGIVING STUDY

OBJECTIVE: The introductory class on Thanksgiving begins by engaging students in a discussion about their knowledge of Thanksgiving. The instructor then delves into the concept of holidays, providing a comprehensive definition that encompasses various types: national, religious, and universal.

The class explores different examples of each type, including Veterans' Day, Christmas, and New Year's Day. The focus then shifts to the specific holiday of Thanksgiving. Thanksgiving is singled out as a unique Christian holiday of American origin, originating from the Pilgrims who expressed gratitude for the provisions from God. The class is then presented with the history of Thanksgiving, detailing its origins with the Pilgrims in Plymouth, Massachusetts, their interactions with Native Americans, and establishing of a day of public Thanksgiving.

The narrative also highlights the efforts of Mrs. Sarah J. Hale, who played a pivotal role in making Thanksgiving a national holiday. The class explores the contemporary observance of Thanksgiving, with a focus on the Thanksgiving dinner, traditional foods like roast turkey and pumpkin pie, as well as parades and football games. The class concludes with discussion questions prompting students to reflect on the historical context and religious aspects of Thanksgiving. The instructor encourages the class to spend time reading and discussing relevant scriptures that emphasize the act of giving thanks. Overall, the introductory class provides students with an in-depth understanding of the history, significance, and traditions associated with Thanksgiving.



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ARTICLE ON THANKSGIVING

Thanksgiving Day is observed each year as a national holiday on the fourth Thursday of November (between November 22nd and 28th).

The Historical Events that Created the Holiday

Thanksgiving Day originated with the Pilgrims who settled in Plymouth, Massachusetts in the early 1600s. The Pilgrims were devout Christians who wanted to separate themselves from the established Church of England. In 1620 they emigrated to America to build their own church in a new land so that they could have freedom of worship.

Shortly after the Pilgrim colony was established in Plymouth the English settlers received help from friendly Indians. Samoset, an English-speaking chief from Maine who was visiting Massasoit, a local chief friendly to white men, built a bridge of friendship between the Pilgrims and the neighboring tribe. He also introduced them to Squanto, an Indian who would later be described by the Pilgrim leader as "a special instrument sent of God for their good, beyond their expectation." Prior to the arrival of the Pilgrims, Squanto worked with English traders as an interpreter and even visited England on two occasions. Upon returning from his second visit, he discovered that his whole tribe had died due to a plague. Living with a neighboring tribe, he "adopted" the English Pilgrims and taught them how to survive in the new land.

In April of 1621 Squanto taught the Pilgrims how to plant corn the Indian way, and by harvest time in the autumn they realized they had more than enough corn to get them through the second winter. As their leader, Governor William Bradford declared that a day of public Thanksgiving should be observed in October. The Indian chief Massasoit and ninety of his men not only came for the festivities, they hunted for much of the food: five deer and more than twelve turkeys. The Pilgrims provided the vegetables from their harvest and baked many kinds of fruit pies. Opening the celebration was a prayer by William Brewster, thanking God for providing for all their needs and for the friendship of the Indians. In addition to the meals there were contests of foot races, wrestling and shooting (gun and bow). And, in the end, this initial day of thanksgiving lasted for three days.

In April of 1623 the annual planting of corn was once again underway, but a dry spell in the month turned into a drought that lasted from the third week in May until the middle of July. Conditions were desperate, and according to a Pilgrim named Edward Winslow, they chose "to humble ourselves together before the Lord by fasting and prayer. To that



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end, a day was appointed by public authority, and set apart from all other employments." The results were immediate and phenomenal.

In the words of Winslow, But, O the mercy of our God who was as ready to hear, as we were to ask! For though in the morning, when we assembled together, the heavens were as clear and the drought as like to continue as it ever was, yet (our exercise continuing some eight or nine hours) before our departure, the weather was overcast, the clouds gathered on all sides. On the next morning distilled such soft, sweet and moderate showers of rain, continuing some fourteen days[!] and mixed with such seasonable weather, as it was hard to say whether our withered corn or drooping affections were most quickened or revived, such was the bounty and goodness of our God!

Governor Bradford phrased it this way in his account, Of Plymouth Plantation, "And He was pleased to give them a gracious and speedy answer, both to their own and the Indians' admiration that lived amongst them. . . .For which mercy, in time convenient, they also set apart a day of thanksgiving." It is possible that this second day of thanksgiving was observed on July 30, 1623.

The Historical Process that Shaped the Holiday

Long before there was a "National" holiday the various colonies in America observed a day of thanksgiving. The Massachusetts Bay Colony had their first thanksgiving day in 1630 and frequently in following years until 1680, when this observance became an annual festival. Connecticut set aside a day for giving thanks in 1639, and by 1641 it was an annual event. In the colony of New Netherlands (today, the state of New York) the Dutch observed such a day in 1644 and occasionally thereafter.

During the Revolutionary War against England in the 1770s the American Continental Congress appointed at least one day of thanksgiving each year (except for 1777) and encouraged the governors in the different states to observe it in their region. George Washington, the first President of the United States, issued a proclamation that the entire nation set aside November 26, 1789 as a day for prayer and for giving thanks to God. In 1795 Washington appointed another day of thanksgiving, and twenty years later President James Madison did the same thing at the conclusion of the War of 1812 with England.

But the establishment of a national religious holiday of giving thanks to God on one special day each year was largely the result of the efforts of one lady: Mrs. Sarah J. Hale. From 1827 when she was editor of the Ladies' Magazine in Boston, she argued for a national day of thanksgiving. When her magazine consolidated with Godey's Lady's Book, her opportunities for influence increased since this grew to a circulation of 150,000, the largest periodical in America. Writing personal letters to the governors of every state and to the President, she persuaded many of the governors to set aside the last Thursday in November for Thanksgiving. Her efforts for a national holiday finally paid



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off when she persuaded President Abraham Lincoln, in the midst of the Civil War, to establish such a day. In her final editorial (September 1863) she wrote these words:

Then he said unto them, Go your way and eat the fat and drink the sweet and send persons unto them for whom nothing is prepared; for this day is holy unto the Lord; neither be ye sorry, for the joy of the Lord is your strength. – Nehemiah 8:10

Thus commanded the inspired Leader of the Jews when they kept the "Feast of Weeks"; in a time of national darkness and sore troubles shall we not recognize that the goodness of God never faileth, and that to our Father in heaven we should always bring the Thanksgiving offering at the ingathering of the harvest?

Wise lawgivers and great patriots have acknowledged the salutary effect of appointed times for national reunions which combine religious sentiment with domestic and social enjoyment; thus feelings of benevolence are awakened and gratitude to the giver of all the blessing is seen to be the great duty of life. Owing to the different economy of different churches among Protestant denominations, except the Christian Sabbath, all our religious commemorations are partial and local.

Can we not then, following the appointment of Jehovah in the "Feast of Weeks," or Harvest Festival, establish our yearly Thanksgiving as a permanent American National Festival which shall be celebrated on the last Thursday in November in every State of the Union? Indeed, it has been nearly accomplished. For the last twelve or fourteen years the States have made approaches to this unity. In 1859 thirty States held their Thanksgiving Festival on the same day - the last Thursday in November.

The Contemporary Observance of the Holiday

In America the heart of the Thanksgiving holiday is the Thanksgiving dinner. This is observed not only in almost every home but also by the President at the White House in Washington. In keeping with the association with the Pilgrims and their thankfulness at harvest time the favorite meat is roast turkey, the favorite fruit is cranberries, and the favorite dessert is pumpkin pie. An ancient harvest symbol, the cornucopia or horn of plenty, has also become associated with this holiday. For some people the emphasis on giving thanks to God for blessings experienced during the year is central to the holiday, but for many the healthy emphasis on family reunion overshadows or replaces the focus on God and His blessing. Thanksgiving has also become a day for parades and football games that some attend in person but most watch on television

(V) DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

A) Explain what you knew about the reasons the Pilgrims came to America.

B) What did you think about what Abraham Lincoln said about Thanksgiving?



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C) Were you aware that in the past God had been such an open part of Thanksgiving and that thanks to God was the purpose of the day?

D) What did you think about the paragraph by Lincoln where he spoke of God judging us for our national sins yet still being gracious to us?

(VI) SPEND SOME TIME GIVING THANKS OR READING A FEW OF THESE SCRIPTURES WHICH TALK ABOUT GIVING THANKS

Psalm 30:12

that my heart may sing to you and not be silent.
O Lord my God, I will give you thanks forever.

Psalm 35:18

I will give you thanks in the great assembly;
among throngs of people I will praise you.

Psalm 75:1

For the director of music. To the tune of "Do Not Destroy." A psalm of Asaph. A song.

We give thanks to you, O God,
we give thanks, for your Name is near;
men tell of your wonderful deeds.

Psalm 79:13

Then we your people, the sheep of your pasture,
will praise you forever;
from generation to generation
we will recount your praise.

Psalm 105:1



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**Give thanks to the Lord, call on his name;
make known among the nations what he has done.**

Psalm 106:1

Praise the Lord.

**Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;
his love endures forever.**

Psalm 106:47

**Save us, O Lord our God,
and gather us from the nations,
that we may give thanks to your holy name
and glory in your praise.**

Psalm 107:1

**Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;
his love endures forever.**

Psalm 118:1

**Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;
his love endures forever.**

Psalm 118:29

**Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;
his love endures forever.**

