

XXI. Contending and Defending the Faith in Biblical Perspective  
*Contending and Contenders—Defending and Defenders*  
“The Origin and Importance of Thanksgiving as a National Holiday”  
I Thessalonians 5:16-18  
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November 23, 2014 – Evening Sermon

Let’s take a few moments in God’s Word. Let’s set the stage to show we don’t do this out of an abstract moment for this comes to us in a very unique moment and that is the unique origin of our National Holiday of Thanksgiving. In that this is the only holiday that I know is uniquely Christian and National in its origin. While Christmas and Easter are holidays that are clearly Christian, they are not national. It is the celebration of the birth of Christ and the death, resurrection and ascension of Christ. All the great works of Christ predate this nation but out of this nation and the way that God formed it in His providence, those who settled it initially at many different times had seasons of thanksgiving.

Yet there is a thread that kind of gets started at a certain moment. You can go all the way back to the 1500s and find evidences of those who came to this land where they gave thanks during periods of time in various places but the point where this became a focal point of being built into the fabric of this nation came in 1621 with the influence of Christianity. It happened around those pilgrim forbearers that landed here, those non-conformist Calvinists, Congregationalists, Presbyterians and Baptists who were sent out of England and other places of Europe because they wouldn’t bow to a state church. So they came to this land and settled it. These forbearers even before they got off that Mayflower Ship, did the Mayflower Compact looking to the Lord to do something here that even a nation might be a city set on a hill.

They were looking for the success of the Gospel of Christ. They immediately met with much adversity for over half of their number died that first year. They were starving but God’s special providences through friendly Native Americans and others did take place. They were sustained. When they arrived in December 13<sup>th</sup> through the 16<sup>th</sup> in 1621 they declared a festival of thanksgiving. It took place over a period of three days. They actually sent some men out with guns and said “don’t come back without some birds.” They brought back birds, cooked them and invited those who had befriended them and began to give thanks to the Lord. They spent three days giving thanks to God and giving praise to Him for what He had done in their life.

Now being a Calvinist and not wanting to invoke anything was not allowable in the Word of God. You wouldn’t do this on Sunday but it would be appropriate to do it on other days. The Lord’s Day is holy unto the Lord but it would be appropriate to set aside some seasons of thanksgiving which they did. This continued on and off for a number of years and then in 1789 there was a very significant moment when George Washington was to be elected as President.

In 1789 Washington issued a proclamation of thanksgiving building off of that first festival of thanksgiving and calling for a day of thanksgiving in the colonies. I thought you might be interested to hear just what he said as we take these few moments together. This is what was in his proclamation.

*Issued by President George Washington, at the request of Congress, on October 3, 1789*

*By the President of the United States of America, a Proclamation.*

*Whereas it is the duty of all nations to acknowledge the providence of Almighty God, to obey His will, to be grateful for His benefits, and humbly to implore His protection and favor; and—Whereas both Houses of Congress have, by their joint committee, requested me “to recommend to the people of the United States a day of public thanksgiving and prayer, to be observed by acknowledging with grateful hearts the many and signal favors of Almighty God, especially by affording them an opportunity peaceably to establish a form of government for their safety and happiness:”*

*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; for the signal and manifold mercies and the favor, able interpositions of His providence in the course and conclusion of the late war (of independence); for the great degree of tranquility, union, and plenty which we have since enjoyed; for the peaceable and rational manner in which we have been enabled to establish constitutions of government in the states for our safety and happiness, and particularly the national one now lately instituted; (It is interesting to me that when he gives thanks for the constitutions of the state he then moves to the Constitution of the United States and he says there is one thing that is signal about it for it secures the following.) for the civil and religious liberty with which we are blessed, and the means we have of acquiring and diffusing useful knowledge to one another; and, in general, for all the great and various favors which He has been pleased to confer upon us.*

*And also that we may then unite in most humbly offering our prayers and supplications to the great Lord and Ruler of Nations, and beseech Him to pardon our national and other transgressions; to enable us all, whether in public or private stations, to perform our several and relative duties properly and punctually; to render our National Government a blessing to all the people by constantly being a Government of wise, just, and constitutional laws, discreetly and faithfully executed and obeyed; to protect and guide all sovereigns and nations (especially such as have shown kindness to us), and to bless them with good governments, peace, and concord; to promote the knowledge and practice of true religion and virtue, and the increase of science among them and us; and, generally, to grant unto all mankind such a degree of temporal prosperity as He alone knows to be best.*

*Given under my hand at the City of New York the third day of October in the year of our Lord 1789.*

*George Washington*

In various ways this was done periodically by subsequent presidents. It was never declared a National Holiday beyond the day it was declared for that day for that year in 1789 but it was done year after year for 74 years. Then in 1863 one of the five

documents whereby you can see the chronology of God's converting work in the life of Abraham Lincoln, he then having adopted George Washington's desire for the motto 'In God We Trust' also adopted George Washington's desire that this would become a national holiday. So Lincoln, under the influence of a woman by the name of Sarah Josepha Hale who was a magazine editor of Godey's Lady Book who would visit go visit whoever was president and ask them to take George Washington's desire and make it a national holiday, did this. Lincoln heard her and in the midst of the converting work in his own life in 1862 and 1863 he responded to it on October the 3<sup>rd</sup>, 74 years after Washington's and this is what Lincoln so proclaimed. A side note is that this was given in the middle of a war.

*Washington, D.C.  
October 3, 1863*

*By the President of the United States of America.*

*A Proclamation.*

*The year that is drawing towards its close, has been filled with the blessings of fruitful fields and healthful skies. To these bounties, which are so constantly enjoyed that we are prone to forget the source from which they come, others have been added, which are of so extraordinary a nature, that they cannot fail to penetrate and soften even the heart which is habitually insensible to the ever watchful providence of Almighty God. In the midst of a civil war of unequalled magnitude and severity, which has sometimes seemed to foreign States to invite and to provoke their aggression, peace has been preserved with all nations, order has been maintained, the laws have been respected and obeyed, and harmony has prevailed everywhere except in the theatre of military conflict; while that theatre has been greatly contracted by the advancing armies and navies of the Union. Needful diversions of wealth and of strength from the fields of peaceful industry to the national defense, have not arrested the plough, the shuttle or the ship; the axe has enlarged the borders of our settlements, and the mines, as well of iron and coal as of the precious metals, have yielded even more abundantly than heretofore. (In other words, even in the midst of this civil war came many blessings to the nation.) Population has steadily increased, notwithstanding the waste that has been made in the camp, the siege and the battle-field; and the country, rejoicing in the consciousness of augmented strength and vigor, is permitted to expect continuance of years with large increase of freedom as a nation. No human counsel hath devised nor hath any mortal hand worked out these great things. They are the gracious gifts of the Most High God, who, while dealing with us in anger for our sins, hath nevertheless remembered mercy to us. It has seemed to me fit and proper that they should be solemnly, reverently and gratefully acknowledged as with one heart and one voice by the whole American People. 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 dwells in the Heavens. And I recommend to them that while offering up the ascriptions justly due to Him for such singular deliverances and blessings, they do also,*

*with humble penitence for our national perverseness and disobedience, yet call upon Him and commend to His tender care all those who have become widows, orphans, mourners or sufferers in the lamentable civil strife in which we are unavoidably engaged, and fervently implore the interposition of the Almighty Hand to heal the wounds of the nation and to restore it as soon as may be consistent with His Divine purposes to the full enjoyment of peace, harmony, tranquility and the Union of these states.*

*In testimony whereof, I have hereunto set my hand and caused the Seal of the United States to be affixed.*

*Done at the City of Washington, this Third day of October, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three, and of the Independence of the United States the Eighty-eighth.*

*By the President: Abraham Lincoln*

*William H. Seward,  
Secretary of State*

Of course these were given and were so assigned. The national holiday still did not come about but every succeeding year for the next 74 years each president would declare the 4th Thursday of November a National Holiday of Thanksgiving before the Lord. Finally in 1941, Franklin D. Roosevelt declared that the 4<sup>th</sup> Thursday of every month of November would be a day of thanksgiving as a National Holiday and so it has been fixed since then.

I simply read this as you now take the opportunity to carry out what God has secured in His providence in our nation throughout all of these years, a day that we can give thanks as a nation and if anyone should lead a nation giving thanks it should be the people of God. Hearing the Word of our Lord through the Apostle Paul from 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*. Give thanks in all circumstances, why? This is God's will.

Have you heard the theme from Washington to Lincoln? You would have heard it from others if I had, had time to read them also but in great days of adversity they still saw the Hand of God's providence and they even saw the providence of God in the adversity so that they would give thanks in everything. They would be such a people but you can't give thanks in everything unless you have a big God, the God of Scriptures who is sovereign and causes all things to work together for God to those who love Him and to those who are called according to His purpose (Romans 8:28). Give thanks.