

# WHAT'S THANKSGIVING DAY ALL ABOUT?



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Scripture: Psalm 103:2

ONE of the greatest of the early American philosophers and for that matter one of the greatest American philosophers of all time, was Henry David Thoreau. As far as anybody has been able to ascertain, he never traveled more than fifty miles from his home at Concord, Massachusetts.

The distinguishing thing about Thoreau is that he thought his own thoughts. He did not ape anybody else's thoughts. He was an original thinker. Therefore, while unoriginal thinkers of his day have faded into oblivion with the passing of time, Thoreau's wisdom still influences the country whose thinking he helped to formulate.

One of the wise things this thinker said was that every human being ought to give thanks at least once every day for the fact that he was born. Thoreau said that you die

this himself.

Just think what you would have missed had you never been born. I've heard some people say that they wished they hadn't been born; they do not really mean it. That is only a reaction to difficulty.

So we repeat, just think what you would have missed had you never been born. For example, you would have missed the manhood and the womanhood that it takes to attend a church service on a rainy day. You would have missed feeling rain on your face. And even rain falling through the dirty atmosphere of a great city has coolness and cleanliness in it. Just think: if you had never been born, you would never have felt the crunch of snow beneath your feet on a cold winter day. Just think: if you had never been born, you would never have had your face warmed by a wood fire in an open fireplace on a winter evening.

If you had never been born, you would never have felt wisdom in yours on a moonlit night in June. And had you never been born, you would never have had a great big tough problem to struggle with, and you would never have had the thrill of coming up with a solution. Why, you would pull yourself up tall and thank the good God that He let you be born!

Of course, there is always somebody around to argue, "But how can you be thankful for life in a day and age like this? Just look at all the difficulties that beset us!"

Well, God allowed those difficulties to develop because He wanted to make men of us and that is a pretty tough job. God is the greatest positive thinker I ever heard of, to Him could make men out of some of us! But He gave us the opportunity to live. The thrill of it makes you want to say the 2nd verse of the 103rd Psalm: "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His mercies."

Psalm: "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits," the principal benefit being that you were born!

And are we not moved to give thanks for all the wonderful basic things that are constantly around us? Americans have been so surfeited with modern advantages that we have become sophisticated and have long since forgotten the romance of the simple basic blessings of this life. I have been to Japan twice and hope to go again sometime. The Japanese have always interested me. They have many remarkable customs. I once spoke through an interpreter to the Rotary Club of Kyoto. I did not know whether I was getting my thoughts over - was not too sure afterward that I had - but a man got up and thanked me for my speech, as was the custom. And he remarked that the Japanese were "the Far Eastern Yankees." But he added, "Thank God, we still have some abilities that you people, if you ever had them, have lost. We know how to contemplate and love the simple, basic things of human existence."

For example, the Japanese will at times have what they call a wood-burning party. What in the world is a wood burning party? Well, they take several different kinds of wood and burn them one after another in a brazier (which is a high-class word for a little stove). The idea is to sit around and savor the aroma of the wood. Each of the different woods is burned, someone will inform the party: "This wood came from the high mountains." "This wood has struggled with the elements; it has had to fight to live ..." And you sense it in the aroma. "This wood came from down by the seashore, where it was cleaned day by day by the spray ...". And you get the freshness of sea air in the aroma of the burning wood. A wood burning party.

Can you imagine a group of Americans sitting around smelling wood at a wood-burning party? And yet when you are outside a house on a winter night where there is a fire burning in the fireplace, the aroma of the wood in the clear night air can take you back to your childhood, to some of the deep elemental things in life.

Another Japanese custom is to have what they call a snow-viewing party. This is usually held on a night when the moon is full, by somebody who has a large picture window with a beautiful Japanese garden outside. The guests gather. There are no cocktails, there is no hubbub, no to-do, no hand-shaking. You sit and look through the picture window at the snow, at the stark, bare trees with little flicks of snow on them, at the great rocks pinnacled by snow, at the snow on the flat ground. You spend an hour, or two hours, in silence, viewing the snow and thinking and meditating. Then you rise and you go home, as the Japanese do, and you go home. That is all. But you have had an hour of quiet fellowship with sensitive, appreciative people; life is good; and you walk along thinking long thoughts about how lovely the world is.

So let us give thanks for the deep basic things of human existence and for family, friends, loved ones.

ON A recent day I was in New Jersey on the way home to New York City, when I saw a long Erie Railroad train going out. I was inspired by this. For another person the same sight might have had quite different associations. Without meaning to cast any aspersions on the Erie Railroad, let me tell you of a joke I heard one night as friends were asking riddles. Someone asked, "Do you know that the Erie Railroad is mentioned in the Bible?" I said no, this was a piece of biblical information I had never caught



up with. The person said, "It is where the Bible refers to all creeping things!" punched me in the chest and said that they were glad to have me there. The next morning I got up early and went

But as I saw that Erie train going out the other night away. I was reminded of an incident of many years ago. It was Now I can't do that any more, for my mother and father a wild, stormy, tumultuous, wintry night. The Erie Rail have both gone on to heaven. I cannot sit in front of a fire road train from upstate was leaving Meadville. I was sitting with them any more. If you can, you ought to be thankful ting in the club car talking with a gentleman with whom I had just struck up a conversation. He asked, "Where that God has given us along the way, the simple basic are you headed tonight?" things of love. For my part, I am thankful I can still re

"I am getting off at Hornell," I replied. "My mother member my mother and father and those nights that I had and father live over at Canisteo, three miles away, and with them. And I am also thankful that I can think of am going to spend the night with them." the glorious days I will have with them when I, in my

The man sat silent for a long time. Then he said, "I turn, cross over the river by and by. wonder how thankful you are for the fact that you can spend a night with your mother and father. I can't do that. AMERICANS Thanksgiving Day should also think of My mother and father are gone from this world. So," he the great human beings who made up our heritage. When said, "you ought to be thankful, my friend, that you can't get to thinking of the meaning of this day in the midst spend the night- particularly," he continued, "a snowy of all the complexities of modern society I find myself night like this - with your mother and your father." giving more and more thought to the kind of people who

At Hornell, which is in the snow belt of upstate New built this country. This is basic. This is fundamental. The York, there were great gusts of snow and the snow lay Pilgrim Fathers have been greatly maligned by a lot of deep in the fields. But the roads had been cleared, for sophisticated ultra-ultra boys who could not have worked they know how to handle heavy snow up there. I drove on the same league with them. There were only 102 persons over to Canisteo and - I can see it yet - my parents' on the Mayflower. The little ship was not much bigger house, on a hill, a white house with white pillars. Every than Marble Collegiate Church. Somebody once computed window was ablaze with light because one of their sons it and concluded that by squeezing a bit you could even was coming home. get the Mayflower inside this church. But 102 people got

I sat down with them in front of a great big open fire. on that little boat and crossed the Atlantic Ocean. We drank cider and ate doughnuts and talked until one Have you been on the Atlantic Ocean? A couple of times o'clock in the morning. By that time the snow had ceased I crossed on the old Queen Mary. But there were nights on falling and the moon was shining on the snow. It lay three the Queen Mary when I would have given anything to get or four inches deep on the ground. My mother came into off the thing! It was tossed around by the mighty Atlantic my room and kissed me goodnight. My father came in and as though it were an egg shell. You can imagine what

would happen to a little ship like the Mayflower. For far, a great many more - suppose I said, "Friends, Mayflower the crossing took many days, too. It was not leave this country. We must go off to a faraway shooting across the Atlantic in four days like on country three thousand miles here. Nobody lives modern liner. Not at all. there, except that I understand there are savages in the woods. I understand you have to scrape for a living. But

Then when the Pilgrim Fathers got to Massachusetts it was November - and Massachusetts in November is not all fun. There were no hotels on Cape Cod to take them in, either, and provide each of them with a nice room and bath. Not at all. There was nothing but an impenetrable forest, full of wild animals and strange men. And the Pilgrims were short of food. We can't be free any longer in this country - so as your minister I am going to ask you to go with me. I have a little ship. It is only about 100 feet long. It is a rough tough ship.

Before they landed they had a meeting and made an agreement. All of you who believe in freedom and all of you who believe in God, meet me outside after church and we will go aboard for this October-November trip across the Atlantic Ocean." When I got outside, would you be among a scholar among them; they were just plain, simple, those there to meet me? Don't let it worry you - I might not be there myself! But that is what the Pilgrim Fathers did. So when you start being thankful for the United States of America, be thankful for the kind of people who made so great a country.

men to rule over them and would respect their rule. Thus began American democracy, government of the people, by the people and for the people. Foreshadowed in that little document were the Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights and the Constitution of the United States. There are many pessimists today who contend that the United States is going to pieces. But, you know, I don't believe it - I really don't, because the same sturdy breed is still among us. Whenever I begin to get a little discouraged about America I go out into the Midwest or some

where downtown in New York City or down South or up into New England and I meet some good old salty character who hasn't become sophisticated at all. He is just a plain old garden-variety type of American. He knows the score, he knows what is going on. He is vocal, he will argue. Show me an American who won't argue and I'll show you a requiem American.

The Pilgrims' decision to sail for the New World had been actively encouraged by a minister named John Robinson. Now suppose I, today, said to the congregation of Marble Collegiate Church, numbering more than 102 A friend of mine by the name of Harry Oliver lives in the desert near Palm Springs in California. He is quite

a character - used to be a famous motion picture actor, but he got sick of Hollywood and moved down into the desert. Maybe that was smart. And he got tired of people coming along and throwing beer cans along the highways through the desert. Harry Oliver organized a campaign to clear away the beer cans. It was hard going, he said, because of the idiots coming by faster than the beer cans could be cleaned up.

Now Harry loves dogs. He has all kinds of dogs, but the principal dog is one called Whiskers. One time he wanted to go down to El Centro, California, on business. He did not want to stay at any hotel where he could not have his dog with him. So he wrote to the manager of a first-class hotel in El Centro asking if he could come and bring Whiskers with him. He got a note back from the hotel man which proved that Americans are still Americans. It said: "Dear Sir, By all means bring your dog Whiskers. Dogs stand high in this hotel. I have never had to eject a dog in the middle of the night. Never has a dog got drunk and messed up my furniture or set a bed on fire or burned a hole in a rug with a cigarette. Never has a dog made whiskey rings on my furniture. I have never yet found a towel or a tray in a dog's suitcase. So bring your dog along. P.S.: You can come too, if your dog will vouch for you."

As long as we still have people like that in the United States of America - who don't take themselves too seriously, who don't go around with a sour, concerned look on their faces, but who still love this land, the good earth and the sky and the towering mountains and the rolling prairies and the great wonderful shining - we'll survive all the hazards of our current problems and finally see the day when justice is accorded to every man among

us, regardless of his race, religion or color. These things will come because Americans are what they are. They are dreamers, they are daredevils, they are adventurers - for the good. So be thankful for the basic things, including people.

In Philadelphia recently I went around to Independence Hall. Nearby was a sign saying *Time Peale Museum*.

I thought they might have a lot of old mummified Peales in this museum, so thought I would go in to see. But this shows my ignorance, because the museum contains the pictures painted by Charles Wilson Peale, one of the great portraitists of early America. Someone who traced my genealogy claims I am related to Charles Wilson Peale. But I can't see any connection, because I have no artistic ability whatsoever; can't even draw a straight line with any success.

Well, I walked around in that museum looking at portraits which Charles Wilson Peale painted of many of the founders of the United States. They had ruddy faces, all of them; crab-apple faces, as though they had been bitten by frost. They all had bright eyes. Then I got to thinking; these men all look somewhat alike. And I thought to my self, did Peale use one model and paint them all alike and give them different names? There was personality to each one of them, but there was something alike about them all.

Finally it came to me what it was. Every one of those men had a daredevil, nonchalant, dreamer look. Every one of them had something special in his eye, and it was clear to see what it was. They were going to build a free country under God and they were going to make it a sanctuary for every downtrodden human being in the world. They were willing to throw everything they had in the building



of such a country. They were not soft men. They were not sophisticated men. They were strong, powerful men with an everlasting faith in God and in the greatness of the human spirit.

You and I are the descendants of those men. So on Thanksgiving Day let us pray to God that the breed will never run out. Let us keep the faith, the faith of the American and the faith of the Christian, for America is a land that was made by people who dedicated it to God. Let us keep it there. "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits." Only a very few of those benefits have I mentioned in this sermon. Add up the rest for yourself. Happy Thanksgiving to all!

Prayer: Our Heavenly Father, we ask Thy blessing upon all Thy people. We thank Thee for the memory of our grandfathers and our great-grandfathers and our great-great-grandfathers and all those who helped lay the foundations of this land. We ask Thy blessings upon generations yet unborn who shall take this nation and shall establish the kingdom of God on earth, where justice and brotherhood and godliness shall reign forever and forever. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

#### **DO YOU HAVE A SPECIAL PRAYER NEED?**

You are invited to write in confidence about your prayer need, or the needs of others, to the Prayer Fellowship, Foundation for Christian Living, Pawling, New York 12564. Every weekday the prayer fellowship meets at 9:50 A.M. Eastern time to pray by name for those who request it.