

# What Think You of Thanksgiving?

JOHN B. STOHLTON

Several years ago a close friend wrote a provocative little book that she entitled *What Think You of Christmas?* With all due credit to my friend, I'd like to pose the question to you: "What think you of Thanksgiving?"

Is Thanksgiving celebrated in your home as a significant religious holiday, or is it a day filled with food, football, and plans to begin really serious Christmas shopping?

It is symptomatic of our time that Thanksgiving has lost much of its spiritual flavor. The same pagan attitudes and pressures that have led many to substitute Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny for our Savior at Christmas and Easter celebrations have had a profound effect on our Thanksgiving observances. Many of our observances have become celebrations of consumption rather than spiritual feasts of love, gratitude, and sharing. Somehow we have lost the custom of sharing the blessings of God's providence with those who are in need.

It hasn't always been so. The first community Thanksgiving was celebrated by our Pilgrim forefathers at Plymouth in the fall of 1621. Theirs was a celebration of gratitude to a Heavenly Father who had sent a bounteous harvest to that beleaguered little colony. Almost half of Plymouth's original 101 settlers had died during the severe winter of 1620–21.

Those who survived that first winter struggled to understand the vagaries of farming in the new land. Most of the Plymouth Pilgrims had been merchants and artisans in England, and they were woefully unprepared to live off the land. They had little seed and had to depend upon corn kernels and other unfamiliar seed left behind by the Indians. Yet their very lives depended upon reaping a harvest sufficient to see them through another winter. As the bounteous harvest was gathered in the storehouses in the fall of 1621, a grateful and relieved Governor Bradford proclaimed a three-day period of fasting and celebration. That celebration was at least partially borrowed from the admonition found in Leviticus that provides: "When ye have gathered in the fruit of the land, ye shall keep a feast unto the Lord . . . and ye shall rejoice before the Lord, your God" (Leviticus 23:39–40).

That first feast and many subsequent celebrations of Thanksgiving focused upon man's relationship with his Heavenly Father. Our forefathers understood well their dependence

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on God. George Washington, in his proclamation establishing the 1789 Thanksgiving celebration, said in part,

*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. . . 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. [The Writings of George Washington from the Original Main Source, 1745–1799, vol. 30 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1939), pp. 427–28]*

King Benjamin clearly taught the sacred origin of Thanksgiving when he proclaimed unto his people:

*O how you ought to thank your heavenly King!*

*I say unto you, my brethren, that if you should render all the thanks and praise which your whole soul has power to possess, to that God who has created you, and has kept and preserved you, and has caused that ye should rejoice, and has granted that ye should live in peace one with another. . . . I say, if ye should serve him with all your whole souls yet ye would be unprofitable servants. [Mosiah 2:19–21]*

Regrettably, with prosperity came false and foolish notions. People who once rendered thankful praise to their God soon came to praise their own industry and intellect. Reverend Adam Reid, in celebrating Thanksgiving in 1840, prophetically observed:

*And yet it is difficult to tell how long this revered custom [of Thanksgiving] shall be permitted to prevail; for in spite of all that is said about the march of intellect and the enlightenment of the age, the temper of the times is rash and revolutionary. There is a spirit of infidel independence and reckless radicalism widely at work, which spurns*

*at every sacred restraint. [Principles of National Prosperity: A Discourse Delivered at Salisbury, Conn., on the Day of the Annual Thanksgiving, Nov. 19th, 1840, (Hartford: Elihu Geer, 1841), pp. 6–7]*

Even the most cursory reading of the Book of Mormon should give all of us reason to pause and consider. The circumstances and attitudes described by Reverend Reid were repeated time after time as succeeding generations became prosperous and inevitably estranged from their God. The significance of Thanksgiving goes far beyond the legal holiday. Thanksgiving is the essence of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The proper observance of the holiday places us in proper relationship with our Heavenly Father. It acknowledges our dependence upon him and our responsibility for one another.

I would hope that as we make plans for our Thanksgiving celebration we would contemplate the great blessings we enjoy. As we contemplate our blessings, thought should be given as to how we can share a portion of our material blessings with those who have so little—for it is through sharing with our brothers and sisters that we most eloquently express our thanksgiving to our Heavenly Father.

Our task today is to reconnect to the sacred principles of the past—to proclaim with joyful hearts and voices that we are the literal children of God, that the gospel of Jesus Christ has been restored to the earth, that through the atonement of Jesus Christ we can enjoy eternal life, that we are led by a mighty prophet of God, that we live in a blessed land of promise, that we share together as brothers and sisters the blessings and vicissitudes of mortal life.

May we as a people proclaim these truths with thankful voices and hearts, I pray, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.