

THANKSGIVING: A Historical and Contemporary Perspective

By Lenward C. Hood

Thousands of years ago, our forefathers celebrated Thanksgiving and their celebration was characterized by three key elements. The three elements were time, purpose and the proclaiming of a day of feast. The time was appointed by an authority as evidenced in the Feast of Tabernacles more than two thousand years ago. (Leviticus 23:34-44) The Feast of Tabernacles was an appointed time that the Israelites celebrated the "ingathering" of the harvest while in the wilderness.

It is essential that it be emphasized the Israelites gave thanks during the extreme difficulty of their wilderness experience. Those who traveled from the wilderness to the Promised Land accomplished the mission without murmuring or complaining. Thanksgiving for the provisions that they possessed was a condition of obtaining the promise. As I continue to focus on the history and significances of Thanksgiving, it is also essential to emphasize that during a difficult time in the earthly ministry of Jesus Christ, he gave thanks on the night that he was betrayed at "The Lord's Supper." He took the cup and gave thanks and he took the bread and gave thanks. (Luke 22:17, 19) The scripture tells us that, "in everything give thanks." (I Thessalonians 5:18) It is critical that we understand that we are not instructed to be thankful for everything; instead, we are admonished to be thankful in the midst of everything. As contemporaries, we must be inspired by our forefathers and the Lord to be thankful during perilous times and in this time of economic crisis.

The first Thanksgiving in America was celebrated at Plymouth Rock by the Pilgrims in 1621. In 1941, President Roosevelt, acting on the authority and sanction of Congress, proclaimed and decreed that the fourth Thursday of November would be a day of Thanksgiving in the United States of America. The purpose for observing and celebrating Thanksgiving was and is to acknowledge and thank God, the source of the harvest and every "good and perfect gift." The feast is a historic and contemporary part of the Thanksgiving celebration experience. It is an expression of joy wherein there is a sharing of the bounty of the harvest.

Thanksgiving is a continuous process wherein we thank God for our daily bread, our peace, our protection, our provisions and a litany of other things. We give thanks to people for acts of kindness towards us. Although we give thanks to God and His people on a consistent basis, we look forward to celebrating Thanksgiving at the appointed time each year.

The actual observation and celebration of Thanksgiving is a "mountaintop" experience wherein we begin our labor at the foot of the hill or in the valley and for

three hundred sixty four days we give and receive thanksgiving for acts of kindness that take place each day of our lives.

As we journey onward from day to day, we do so knowing that the Lord of the harvest is providing for us. As we come closer to our mountaintop experience, the appointed time of celebration, we give to the needy so that they may share in the bounty of God's harvest.

On Thanksgiving morning, we reach our spiritual mountaintop of invigoration. We are able to look across time with thanksgiving and an appreciation for the sacrifices of those who gave their last full measure of devotion so that we, of this generation, may share equally in the bountiful blessings of life and liberty under the just authority of God. The following words of the "Black Anthem", speak to the reality of the sacrificial efforts of those who prepared the way for us: "We have come over a way that tears has been watered. We have come treading a path through the blood of the slaughtered." Our thanksgiving for past sacrifices must include all men of good will of every race, religion and ethnicity who gave themselves for the cause of natural and spiritual liberation. We are also thankful that God has empowered a member of an oppressed people to be chosen to serve in the highest office in our nation and the most powerful executive office on earth. The invigorating experience energizes us causing us to have a renewed sense of hope, of accomplishment and achievement that is manifested in an attitude that causes us to say, "YES WE CAN!" We must be thankful that in spite of our weaknesses, conflicts and strife, God has given the sufficiency of his grace to us, our community and our country.

After giving thanks, we enjoy the feast with family, friends and associates. We take joy in the feast knowing without God's grace we could have been faced with a famine. We rest from our labor and then go back to the foot of the hill and labor and give thanks so that we may bring the harvest home. The journey and the process are perpetual, until the final harvest has been gathered.

As I have focused on Thanksgiving from a historical and contemporary perspective, I did so knowing that Jesus is Lord of the harvest and that He is Alpha and Omega (Revelation 1:8). Therefore, the historical was fulfilled in Him and the contemporary and future is in Him.

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