



Jennie Augusta Brownscombe, *The First Thanksgiving at Plymouth* (1914)

The True Story of the First Thanksgiving

And What We Can Learn from It

By Rosalie J. Slater

THE PILGRIMS BRING THE GOSPEL TO AMERICA

We remember the Pilgrims sailed across the Ocean on the little ship named The Mayflower. The first year at Plymouth was very hard for the Pilgrims. It was very cold—there was snow and ice on the ground. The Pilgrims built houses for shelter. But first, they built a house for the Lord, a church where they could gather to worship Him and to give thanks for their safe voyage across the ocean to America. The Pilgrims came to America to “propagate and advance the Gospel” of Jesus Christ in these “remote parts of the world.” They also wanted to educate their little children in the ways of the Lord.

GOD SENDS SQUANTO TO HELP THE PILGRIMS

After that first winter, the Pilgrims had a surprise. This is how Govenor William Bradford described it in his history of the Pilgrims, *Of Pilmoth Plantation*:

But about the 16th of March, a certain Indian came boldly amongst them and spoke to them in broken English, which they could well understand but marveled at it... His name was Samoset. He told them also of another Indian whose was Squanto, a native of this place, who had been in England and could speak better English than himself.

A few days later Samoset returned with the great chief, Massasoit, and with Squanto. The Pilgrims and the Plymouth Indians made a Peace Treaty which they both kept for over fifty years.

Now that Spring had come it was time to begin to plant their crops so that they might have enough food for the winter. Squanto was a big help to the Pilgrims. He showed them how to plant corn and how to put a little fish in the ground with each grain of corn. With the little fish Squanto was providing fertilizer for the soil—he was feeding the ground with the fish to make the corn grow up big and tall. In many other ways Squanto was a big help to the Pilgrims. He was their guide when they went exploring in their little boat which they called a shallop. He was their interpreter when they wanted to trade with the other Indians because he could speak both Indian and English languages.

William Bradford, the Governor of Plymouth Plantation, from whose book we learn about the Pilgrims, wrote about Squanto, that he was “A special Instrument sent of God for their good beyond their expectation.”

A BETTER WAY TO RAISE CORN

When the first harvest was gathered the Pilgrims had enough to eat but not for long. Soon the corn crop was all eaten up. They were very hungry again. They gathered nuts and berries. They lived on fish and shell-fish, like lobsters. Sometimes they felt weak from lack of food. But the Lord gave them strength to go on. What could they do to raise more corn—enough to feed themselves, enough to feed the visitors that came to them—enough to trade with the Indians for beaver skins?

William Bradford wrote in his book, “So they began to think of how they might raise as much corn as they could, and obtain a better crop than they had done, that they might not still thus languish in misery.”

All this time they had been going to work in the same big field. This was very confusing. Some men worked only a little. Other men and women worked very hard and their children, too. The result was that many of the lazy ones let the weeds kill their corn plants. The Pilgrims who worked diligently to keep the weeds out of the corn patch grew a big corn crop. Then they had to feed not only their own families, but also the lazy ones who had been careless. This made for injustice and hard feelings.



The Pilgrims humbled themselves before the Lord and asked forgiveness for their sins. How did God answer them?

The Pilgrims talked these matters over with Governor William Bradford. They wanted him to divide up the land so that each family could have their own acres to work. In this way each one could work as hard as he wanted. Each one would be responsible for his plot of land. Some of the young boys had lost their parents the first hard winter. These were given to a family where they could help in the fields. In turn, the family would take care of the boy and feed him with their own. With this new plan there were many individual fields of corn planted. The Governor was pleased at the new attitude of diligence and industry on the part of those especially who were willing to work as hard as they could. Even the lazy ones began to work with new purpose.

THE THREAT OF A FAMINE

The corn was planted just as Squanto had taught them: each grain of corn was planted with a little fish. The families hoed and weeded. They were happy in the thought a good harvest. Soon the young corn shoots stuck their heads out of the soil and began to reach toward the sun. The fields were beautiful to see with the little green shoots.

But now came a great drought. No rain fell to give the young corn plants a needed drink. Every day the

sun became hotter and hotter. The drought started in the third week of May and continued until the middle of July. The Pilgrims saw that unless they had some rain their young corn shoots would all wither and dry up. The sun would burn them up. What should they do?

THE PILGRIMS' DAY OF PRAYER AND FASTING

Always the Pilgrims had turned to the Lord when they were in trouble or when they had problems. This time was no exception. They decided to set apart a whole day to pray to God for rain. They also fasted which means they did not eat any food all day. The Pilgrims humbled themselves before the Lord and asked forgiveness for their sins. How did God answer them? Let us look at the words of William Bradford:

All the morning, and the greatest part of the day, it was clear weather and very hot, and not a cloud or any sign of rain to be seen; yet toward evening it began to overcast, and shortly after to rain with such sweet and gentle showers as gave them cause of rejoicing and blessing God. It came without either wind or thunder or any violence, and by degrees in that abundance as that the earth was thoroughly wet and soaked therewith. Which did so apparently revive and quicken the decayed corn and other fruits, as was wonderful to see, and made the Indians astonished to behold.

One of the most remarkable results of their prayers was the “gracious and speedy answer” that the Lord

gave in sending them such gentle showers. Had the rain been hard and the drops too big, the little green shoots would have flattened out. But “as the small rain upon the tender herb” the showers fell softly and gently. This gentle rain opened the hearts of the Indians to receive the Gospel message of Salvation through Jesus Christ. It was the beginning of the evangelistic efforts of the Pilgrims. The Indians felt the Pilgrims’ God was bigger than the God they prayed to, for when they had prayed for rain it had come with storms and tempests. Instead of doing good it had layed the corn flat on the ground. But this had not happened to the Pilgrims’ corn.

THE FIRST THANKSGIVING

Bradford tells us that “afterwards the Lord sent them such seasonable showers, with interchange of fair warm weather as, through His blessing, causes a fruitful and liberal harvest, to their no small comfort and rejoicing. For which mercy, in time convenient, they also set apart a day of Thanksgiving.” The year was 1623.

Setting apart a special day of Thanksgiving in America honors the Hand of God in our History. It especially honors the Pilgrims as a Christian people whom God sent to America to bring the Gospel of Jesus Christ. On Thanksgiving Day, let us thank the Lord for what He has done for our Land and for us. 🌻

Read more about the Pilgrim story in The Christian History of the Constitution of the United States of America: Christian Self-Government by Verna M. Hall. Visit FACEBookstore.net for more information. Learn more about the Foundation for American Christian Education at FACE.net.

STUDY GUIDE

Principles From God’s Word

- God loves humility and repentance for sin (see James 4:6)
- God answers the prayers of His people (see James 5:15–16)

Pilgrim Christian Character

- Diligence and Industry in working
- Faith and Steadfastness in prayer
- Humility in asking God’s forgiveness for sin
- Thankfulness to God for answered prayer

Questions for Reflection

- Does God answer your prayers?
- What does God require of us when we pray?
- What are some of the unexpected ways that God helps us in our lives? Who are our Samosets and Squantos?