

## **The True Story of Thanksgiving**

### **An Amazing Story of God's Special Care & Strengthening of People who came through Extreme Loss & Change**

to live out a foundational chapter in the establishment of our nation,  
the United States of America, as we know it.

**Also a story of God's Care for Foreigners and Native Americans,**  
a truly good chapter that continues to provide inspiration for today.<sup>1</sup>

### **Introduction**

- What is behind the day called Thanksgiving that we celebrate in the U.S. with a great feast?
- Many nations and people groups celebrate harvest festivals, so what makes this one unique?
- It did not start with a feast, but a small group of people who experienced and grew in great faith and endurance. Above all, it's a story of God – His very specific care and strengthening of people who went through enormous change and loss – both people from England and Native Americans.
- I have done much reading over the years and the more I learn the details of this true story, the more my admiration for the Pilgrims who lived it grows. Also, my trust grows in my Lord Jesus, the Good Shepherd who provided for and encouraged them through hugely challenging times.

### **Setting**

- The story begins in England in 1607 in the little town of Scrooby in Nottinghamshire, England. It was the reign of James I of England.

---

<sup>1</sup> The m4a audio of Erica teaching this contains much more detail. (to listen to it visit: [Parakaleo.org/recordings](http://Parakaleo.org/recordings))

## **Thanksgiving Story** (Erica Lawry's Notes)

- England had been through the English Renaissance of Henry VIII and Elizabeth I, the rich times of Shakespeare and many others. England had also been through years of fierce religious controversy.
- It was a time in history when religion for the entire nation was decided by the ruler, not the individuals and imposed from the top down. Henry VIII removed England from the Catholic sphere and established the protestant Church of England (Anglican). The Anglican Church was very similar to Roman Catholicism with church hierarchy of bishops, archbishops and ceremonies, but not under the Pope.
- “Bloody Mary,” the next monarch on the English throne re-established Catholicism as the state religion and killed many Protestants.
- She was followed by Elizabeth I, an English Protestant from the Church of England, who led a strong repression of Catholics, since the Pope had ordered Catholics to oppose and get rid of Elizabeth and revive English Catholicism.
- The next monarch, James I, a Protestant, was in no mood for any deviation.
- In 1559, the Act of Uniformity was established, making it illegal not to attend the Church of England. Individuals were fined for every Sunday and holiday that they did not attend service. Furthermore, several preachers of the Bible outside of the church were imprisoned and sometimes executed.
- Into this chaos, copies of the Bible in English began to become available.
- For centuries, the Bible had been locked up in the church in monasteries and read in Latin in the Mass, but few normal people had access to the Bible themselves. Even many priests didn't know the Bible and few could translate its Latin text. William Tyndale who became known as the father of the English Bible, having seen the ignorance of the local clergy firsthand. To one cleric he is reported to have declared “If God spare my life, ere many years pass I will cause a boy that drives the plough shall

## **Thanksgiving Story** (Erica Lawry's Notes)

know more of the Scriptures than you do!" This task became his life's work. Oxford trained, he translated the New Testament and part of the Old Testament into English from the original Greek and Hebrew. (cf. Eerdmans Handbook to the History of Christianity, 1977, p.370)

- The English translation of the Bible that became the fulfillment of Tyndale's vision was the Geneva Bible, popularly called the "Breeches Bible" because it rendered Genesis 3:7, "they made themselves breeches" It was a good translation from the original Hebrew and Greek into English by exiled English scholars like John Knox. Geneva Bibles began to be available throughout England. They became very popular among everyday people. At last they could read the Scriptures in their own language! As Tyndale said "Euangelio (that we call the gospel) is a Greek word signifying good, mery, glad and joyful tidings, that make a mannes hert glad and makes hym syng, dance and leape for joye." So many in England found it to be so!

## Character List

Now at last we come to our particular story, and first to get to know the central players:

- William Brewster – Postmaster, Steward of the Manor of the town of Scrooby of Nottinghamshire, England, administrator of law and justice, who collected rents of tenants of the wide domains of the Archbishop of York. He had attended Cambridge University, and been in the service of Queen Elizabeth, and accompanying her ambassador on an important secret mission to the Low Countries. He had seen the great world, moved with great ones of his day but he was neither proud nor vain. He was respected by his neighbors for his wisdom and godliness, and if a neighbor was sick or in trouble and needed the help of a friend they could find it in the hands of the postmaster of Scrooby.

## **Thanksgiving Story** (Erica Lawry's Notes)

- Will Bradford – left as an orphan and long ill himself, experienced firsthand the care and friendship of the steward of the manor. William Brewster helped him with his studies and gave him an English Geneva Bible. Bradford spent many happy hours studying it with Brewster during his long recovery

### The Story

- William Brewster invited a Mr. Clifton to teach the Bible every Sunday at the Manor at Scrooby, and people would walk from as far as 10 miles to hear him. His messages awoke them to understand the Bible. They came away happy and comforted. They began to read and study their own Bibles and seek to practice its teaching in their daily lives. Brewster explained that in this simple way the first Christian churches began in ancient times.
- They called themselves “Separatists” because they wanted to separate from the official Church of England, not wanting bishops, archbishops, nor elaborate ceremonies, but passionately desiring to meet together just to pray, worship, read and study the Scriptures. They wanted to encourage one another to trust The Lord to live the Bible’s teachings in their daily lives.
- (The “Puritans” wanted to remain in The Church of England, but purify it of the massive corruption within it that came through its power and wealth.)

Think about living this story as if you were one of them:

- Under James I, all the people in England were ordered to join the Church of England. Nonconformists were persecuted (arrested, imprisoned, and some were hanged). The king’s spies were everywhere.
- Finally, the Separatists decided they must leave England and flee to Holland for religious freedom. They did it in secret, for it was illegal to

## **Thanksgiving Story** (Erica Lawry's Notes)

leave England or take out goods or money without permission, which they knew they would never get.

- They had to flee like criminals. They sold their land. Then put the women, children on a barge to float down a river and meet the men who hiked 50 miles overland to meet them, over 50 persons in all, and board a Dutch ship to sail to the Netherlands, a land where freedom of religion was practiced. They settled in the town of Leyden where they then lived for 12 years (1608-1620). Brewster taught in the university, and the others, having been mostly farmers previously learned crafts that they could ply as trades.
- But again the King's spies were hounding the Separatists. England was very powerful in Holland as she was its protector. Holland's 12 year peace treaty with Spain was drawing to a close, so war was coming soon.
- Also there was a real danger developed of the whole English colony becoming slowly absorbed into the Dutch culture and language. As their children were growing up in that environment they were speaking Dutch, playing Dutch games and dances, marrying Dutch. So the Separatists began to talk about establishing a colony in the New World.
- There was much debate and earnest prayer within the colony and between husbands and wives as they were hearing exaggerated stories of "savages" skinning and boiling people alive in addition to the reality of the enormous hardships and risks of a sea voyage to an "uncivilized" land.
- In spite of many fears of the wilderness many voted to go to the New World. Once again they sold everything they owned and contracted with a company of merchants in London who promised to provide them with ships and supplies in return for 7 years of hard work. Each week the Pilgrims would have to work 4 days a week for the merchants, leaving 2 days to work for themselves and 1 day of rest and worship for the Lord. Any time a ship arrived they would send it back to England filled with fish,

## **Thanksgiving Story** (Erica Lawry's Notes)

furs, and other produce. At the end of the 7 years the Pilgrims were to divide the land and the profits equally with the merchants.

## **Thanksgiving Story** (Erica Lawry's Notes)

### Between two worlds

- *The Pilgrims were torn between two worlds. Imagine yourself as one of these people making these decisions, living these experiences! Would you have decided to go?*
- They arrived from Holland in Southampton England on a ship named the Speedwell, but when a number of others joined them there they needed to engage a second ship called the Mayflower (90 feet long = on a football field from the goal line to the 30 yard line).
- When they were about to embark from Southampton, the merchants tried to impose a new contract on the colonists effectively forcing slavery by making them work for the company 6 days a week. The colonists refused and had to sell more of their supplies including all of their butter.
- When they finally set sail on these 2 ships all the delays meant that it would be stormy on the ocean and winter by the time they arrived in New World, but the colonists could not afford to wait until spring. The Speedwell soon began taking on water and proved “unseaworthy” (though in reality it had probably been sabotaged by the captain and the sailors who were afraid and unwilling to make the trip). So both ships turned back, and they had to consolidate all the passengers from both ships on the tiny Mayflower and set out again.
- It took 66 days starting in September and arriving in November of 1620. The leaders of the Pilgrims were William Brewster, William Bradford and John Carver. Of the 102 passengers, 39 were children and only 9 of the adults were over 40 years of age. They lived primarily on the gun deck which they sometimes called the ‘tween deck, a space of about 1400 square feet about 1/3 of which was taken up by hatches and various apparatus and was only 5-1/2 feet from floor to ceiling. The shipboard routine included feeding of over 100 passengers 3 times every day. Each morning and evening the Pilgrims knelt together and fervently prayed

## **Thanksgiving Story** (Erica Lawry's Notes)

thankning God for His goodness and provision, frequently reading Psalm 107:23-32:

*"Those who go down to the sea in ships  
Who do business on great water;  
They have seen the works of the LORD,  
And His wonders in the deep.  
For he spoke and raised stirred up a stormy wind,  
Which lifted up the waves of the sea.  
They rose up to the heavens, they went down to the depths;  
Their soul melted away in misery.  
They reeled and staggered like a drunken man,  
And were at their wits' end.  
Then they cried out to the LORD in their trouble,  
And He brought them out of their distresses.  
He caused the storm to be still,  
So that the waves of the sea were hushed.  
Then they were glad because they were quiet;  
So He guided them to their desired haven.  
Let them give thanks to the LORD for His lovingkindness,  
And for His wonders to the sons of men!  
Let them extol Him also in the congregation of the people,  
And praise Him at the seat of the elders." [NAS]*

- o They read other scriptures of the Lord's care for His people crossing perilous seas (Red Sea, Noah, Jonah, Paul) and praised the Lord for His care passing them safely through troubled waters.
- The best and the worst companioned on the heaving decks of the little ship, the Pilgrims and the tough seamen who were hardened in sin and degraded by brutal seafaring life. They cursed and shouted foul language

## Thanksgiving Story (Erica Lawry's Notes)

in the Pilgrims' presence until women covered their ears and elders shuddered.

- One proud, profane seaman boasted he would throw half of them overboard before they got there, then shortly afterward grew sick and died. Everyone felt it was the just hand of God that had silenced him.
- Weather worsened – the boat was a tiny speck of humanity floating on mountainous waves washing over the deck, fierce winds and storms.
- All passengers were ordered below decks, but teenager John Howland thought he knew better than the captain. On deck, John was instantly swept overboard, but a dangling rope swung out with him. He managed to grab the rope and swing back on board. Everyone felt it was the hand of God that had reached out to save him.
  - *The Lord had plans for John Howland and his descendants' lives. One of John Howland's descendants is our friend, a fine cardiologist, a church elder at PBC and a member of our ministry board.*
- But the storms still raged. The main beam of the ship buckled, as if the ship's back had broken. They prayed and realized that they had brought a huge wooden screw from Leyden to raise up roof beams, so they were able to jack the beam back into place and sail on. Everyone prayed and thanked the Lord.
- During this harrowing voyage a baby boy was born and named Oceanus.
- On the other hand one of the deaths among the Pilgrims was the ship's surgeon's lad who was his assistant suddenly became sick and died.
- Christopher Jones, the shipmaster, ruled his crew with an iron hand, but he knew a man when he saw one and had learned to respect his strange passengers and their faith.

## Thanksgiving Story (Erica Lawry's Notes)

- At last – “Land Ho!” – after 67 days = 9-1/2 weeks at an average speed of 2 miles per hour (about 2/3 of an easy walking pace), not realizing they were sailing against the Gulf Stream which hadn’t been discovered yet.
- The Pilgrims had planned to land in Virginia, but instead the storms had blown them to Cape Cod, Massachusetts, where winters were freezing.
- They landed on one of the only places on the coast with no Indian tribes.
- Also, Plymouth was not near Jamestown, which was God’s gift. Jamestown was full of self-focused, quarreling opportunists and God wanted to accomplish far better with Plymouth.

## Mayflower Compact

- When the “strangers” (non-Pilgrims) on board realized that they were not about to land in Virginia where their contract with the government had committed them to establish a colony, they started announcing that they were not under the king and not under anybody else, so they could do anything they wanted. But William Brewster realized that this was a threat to the welfare of the whole colony and they needed to stay together if they were to survive. So out of that necessity he drew up the Mayflower Compact, an agreement that they would all follow the government that they set up themselves by election, and that was the beginning of democratic government in the New World. And they all put their hand to it, even the strangers. So that was a very significant point before they ever landed.

## Extreme hardship and loss

- The first winter they endured starvation (5 kernels of corn/day per person), also disease (probably pneumonia and scurvy) and death.

## **Thanksgiving Story (Erica Lawry's Notes)**

- Half of the Pilgrims and half of the sailors died. They would be buried secretly at night for fear that the natives might realize how few were left.
- The Pilgrims cared for the sick sailors who derided and tormented them, even their fiery little military captain Miles Standish whose own wife died.
- The Mayflower Compact was the important first step toward democracy in the New World. All the males agreed to obey the elected leaders in the new colony.

## **Squanto's Story**

- Spring (March) – in the midst of Plymouth meeting of Pilgrim leaders an Indian brave coolly walked into their midst and greeted them in English, “Welcome English. I am Samoset.” He had learned English from English fisherman and fur traders who had been coming to the New England coast for years. Samoset stayed overnight and returned several days later with a friend, Squanto.
- Squanto, a brave from the Patuxet tribe, had been captured by an English sea captain and sold as a slave in England. During 9 years of slavery he learned English, then his owners took compassion and sent him back home. Tricked by the same Captain Hunt, Squanto was not released but sold in Spain to Catholic monks, where Squanto became a genuine Christian.
- Again, the monks took compassion and paid for Squanto’s ship passage back to England and then back to the New World. At last, at last he was walking into his own village only to find them all dead – probably from smallpox brought unknowingly by the English. Such loss and grief!!
- Squanto was adopted by the neighboring Wampanoag tribe and thus was in place to welcome the Pilgrims, moreover to a now unoccupied space.
- He later realized it was God who had taken him, as God had taken the Pilgrims, through much change and loss. Squanto was strengthened in

## **Thanksgiving Story** (Erica Lawry's Notes)

trust and in experience of God encouraging and helping him. God had spared him from death through the plague. The Pilgrims now realized that God had long been preparing Squanto was in place to welcome and help his fellow Christians who would need his help when they arrived. The Pilgrims were Squanto's new family and Squanto stayed with them for the rest of his life.

- The Pilgrims were city dwellers – not prepared to survive in the wilderness. Squanto enabled them to learn how to live in new land, where the best fishing grounds and clam beds were, how to plant fat herring in each corn hill, and how to make snares and traps where the deer herd grazed and fat turkeys fed.
- Squanto also served as an interpreter and enabled a treaty between Chief Massasoit of the neighboring Wampanoag tribe and the Pilgrims that was fair to both sides. It was an agreement to come to each other's aid if either was attacked and to turn over any who stole or hurt to the other for justice. Both sides honored and maintained this treaty for over 50 years.
- *This was one really good chapter in European/Native American relations!*

### Persistent faith pays off

- In April, the Mayflower returned to England. The Captain had offered a free passage to anyone who wished to go back to England, but all of the Pilgrims stayed and watched the ship disappear over the horizon.
- In the fall, the Harvest was bounteous beyond the most hope-filled dreams – everything was overflowing! The Pilgrims invited their new friends and neighbors, thinking Massasoit would come with maybe 5 others. Instead, he came with 90 braves! They saw the Pilgrims' distress, went hunting and brought in 5 deer and some turkeys.

## **Thanksgiving Story** (Erica Lawry's Notes)

- They celebrated this first Thanksgiving for 3 whole days (the natives wouldn't leave until all the food was gone!) They feasted, played games, and gave thanks to God.

Just the beginning of opportunities to trust the Lord

- But the challenge was far from over. At one point a brave in warpaint walked in and threw down a rattlesnake skin full of arrows. The Narragansett tribe was on the warpath. The Pilgrims prayed over it and decided to send it back filled with gunpowder. No tribe would receive it. The threat of the colonists' power to kill from a distance was too formidable. This crisis was now over.
- The winter that followed was even worse. Three more ships of people came from Europe, but they brought no food, no supplies, only reprimands from the merchants because the Pilgrims had sent no goods back in the ships – and once again the colonists had nothing to send back to the merchants.
- In 1623 they celebrated Thanksgiving again.
- Later different colonies/states celebrated it at different times.
- In 1864 Lincoln established the last Thursday of November as the national time to give thanks to God.
- This was recently revised to the 4<sup>th</sup> Thursday of November (anywhere from the 22<sup>nd</sup> of November as in 2018 to the 28<sup>th</sup> as in 2019).