

Thanksgiving 2020: Following Washington's Advice for Thanksgiving

Our Thanksgiving celebration tradition began in Plymouth Colony in 1621 after a successful harvest. For three days, the Pilgrims feasted and enjoyed games and recreation with the Native Americans who had helped them survive in the New World.

The history of our country is filled with examples of various groups who paused to give thanks to God for his blessings. The Spaniards and the French, who arrived on the American continent in the 1500s, observed times of thanksgiving. Thanksgiving services were routine in the Virginia colonies in the early 1600s. History records various thanksgiving feasts throughout the 1600s-1700s.

The first national Thanksgiving was celebrated on December 18, 1777, and the Continental Congress issued National Thanksgiving Day proclamations each year between 1778 and 1784.¹ Virtually every president since Abraham Lincoln has issued a Thanksgiving proclamation.

So we have a long and stable tradition in the US of observing times of thanksgiving and prayer.

Today I want to do something a little different than what I typically do for a Thanksgiving message. I want to consider the remarks from George Washington's Thanksgiving proclamation made in October of 1789. The first sentence of his proclamation says, in part:

[I]t 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...

Washington's assertion is fully biblical, and we would do well to follow his advice and pattern.

Following Washington's Thanksgiving proclamation, as we approach Thanksgiving Day, we should make efforts to...

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Thanksgiving_Proclamation

- I. Acknowledge the providence of Almighty God.²
- A. Providence is God's divine intervention in the affairs of men. God's providence guides and directs human events. God rules over the earth, and his decrees will unfailingly come to pass.
- Job 12:23–24 He makes nations great, and destroys them; He enlarges nations, and guides them. He takes away the understanding of the chiefs of the people of the earth, and makes them wander in a pathless wilderness.*
- B. Providence works through normal processes, not through miraculous means. God providentially, not miraculously, through normal processes, brings about his predetermined will. Sometimes God's providences are quite remarkable and unusual, as we'll see.
- C. Those who established our nation spoke about God's providence frequently. Note several examples:
1. The Declaration of Independence refers to our "firm Reliance on the Protection of divine Providence."
 2. At the Constitutional Convention of 1787, Ben Franklin said, "If it had not been for the justice of our cause, and the consequent interposition of Providence, in which we had faith, we [would] have been ruined." He also referred to "The frequent instances of a superintending Providence in our favour."
 3. John Witherspoon was a Presbyterian pastor and a signer of the Declaration of Independence. In a 1776 political sermon, [*The Dominion of Providence over the Passions of Men*], he spoke of Providence as many colonists generally understood it, as a wise and directing presence in their lives.

² All of these quotes from "Divine Providence in the Declaration." <https://thefounding.net/americas-founding-with-a-firm-reliance-on-the-protection-of-divine-providence/>

He said, “[God] overrules all his creatures and all their actions. ... It is the duty of every good man to place the most unlimited confidence in divine wisdom, and to believe that those measures of providence that are most unintelligible to him, are yet planned with the same skill and directed to the same great purposes as others.”

That is a very profound idea that we should apply in our lives.

4. The Second Continental Congress of 1775-1781 proclaimed national days of public fasting and prayer to beseech God's favor during the war and proclaimed days of public praise and thanksgiving to God for His blessings.

In their first day of “public humiliation, fasting, and prayer” in 1775, they acknowledged that “the great Governor of the World, by his supreme and universal Providence, not only conducts the course of nature ..., but frequently influences the minds of men to serve the wise and gracious purposes of his providential government.” It is therefore “our indispensable duty devoutly to acknowledge his superintending providence ..., to revere and adore his immutable justice as well as to implore his merciful interposition for our deliverance.”

5. In a 1781 Proclamation, the Second Continental Congress said this: “Through the whole of the [revolution], ... the influence of divine Providence may be clearly perceived in many signal instances.”
6. James Madison, the architect of the Constitution, affirmed his belief that the success of the Constitution was due to God's assistance. He writes in *Federalist Paper 37*,

It is impossible for the man of pious reflection not to perceive in [our success] a finger of that Almighty hand which has been so frequently and signally extended to our relief in the critical stages of the revolution.

7. Thomas Jefferson, in an 1815 letter, acknowledged the powerful hand of divine Providence, writing: "We are not in a world ungoverned by the laws and the power of a superior agent. Our efforts are in His hand, and directed by it; and He will give them their effect in his own time."

BTW, if you've heard that Thomas Jefferson was a deist or a pagan, that is simply not true. I have seen evidence to suggest that Jefferson was a genuine believer. In his younger years, he was a bit of a skeptic; but in his later years, he clearly demonstrated a biblical worldview and considered himself to be a Christian. He said and did many things that demonstrated his commitment to the Bible, the church, and to Christian doctrine. Don't write off Jefferson as an unbeliever or a deist.

8. We can find virtually countless references to divine providence in the prayers, speeches, and writings of the founding fathers, all of which demonstrate their belief in the God of the Bible.
9. All of these expressions of trust in the providence of God are directly based on what the Bible says about God's control of world events.

The pagan king Nebuchadnezzar put it this way (Dan 4:35): *And all the inhabitants of the earth [are] reputed as nothing: and [God] doeth according to his will in the army of heaven, and [among] the inhabitants of the earth: and none can stay his hand, or say unto him, What doest thou?*

Acts 17:26–28 *[God] has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their preappointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings, ... for in Him we live and move and have our being, ...*

App: Washington tells us that we ought to acknowledge the providence of almighty God on behalf of the nation. We ought to do the same in our own personal lives. God works providentially in our lives as individuals, as families, and as a church. God's providence is at work in our nation and around the world. We must acknowledge that he is in control and he is working out all things according to his providential plan. Thanksgiving is a good time to acknowledge God's providence, as Washington says we should.

- II. Obey His will. Washington tells us that it is the obligation of all nations to obey God's will.
- A. Could you imagine a current president asserting that all nations are obligated to obey God's will? That is a very politically incorrect statement these days. But in Washington's time, it was a very common belief. Most of our founding fathers had a strongly biblical world view that affirmed that all nations should obey God's will.
 - B. This insistence that our nation is obligated to obey God's will may have been one of the major ideas that saved our nation. In France, just a few years after this (1789), they had a revolution, but it was a godless and secular revolution in which the majority intentionally denied the will of God. That led to thousands of deaths by the guillotine, followed shortly thereafter by the rise of the dictator, Napoleon Bonaparte. One reason that kind of dictatorship did not arise in America was that Washington and others were committed to following the will of God.
 - C. We know that God set his special attention on the nation of Israel. The Bible is clear that God's relationship to Israel was unique, not the same as that to any other nation (cf. Deut 7:6-8).
 - D. However, the basic moral obligations of the 10 Commandments apply to all mankind and to every nation. God's moral will is not only for Israel or for Christians. God's moral will extends to everyone in all nations around the whole world.

Ps 9:17 The wicked shall be turned into hell, And all the nations that forget God.

Ps 33:12 Blessed [is] the nation whose God [is] the LORD; ...

Pr 14:34 *Righteousness exalteth a nation: but sin [is] a reproach to any people.*

- E. So God expects all the nations to have a basic respect for standards of moral conduct. Everyone knows right from wrong, and every nation should be doing good and opposing evil. The founders established the nation on a foundation of religion and morality.
- F. Unfortunately, America has drastically changed since Washington wrote his Thanksgiving proclamation. It seems to me that only a small remnant in our nation cares about God's moral will. Many today deny that they are obligated to obey his will. Some deny God's existence altogether, while others twist God's words to suit their own purposes.
- G. If you are a Christian, you affirm your obligation to obey God's will, and you affirm that the nation has that same obligation.

Trans: Imagine what would happen in our country if the majority of people believed that it was our obligation to obey God's will. It would be a much different place—a much better place.

This Thanksgiving, let's affirm with Washington that it is our obligation—as a nation, as families, and as individuals—to obey God's will. Let's rededicate ourselves to obedience to God's moral will.

III. Be grateful for his benefits.

- A. Of course, being grateful for the benefits God gives us is the heart and soul of the Thanksgiving holiday. That's what the holiday is all about—expressing our gratitude to God for his benefits.

Washington and the founding fathers knew that the source of all the benefits we enjoy is God, and they knew that we should express our thanksgiving to him. They were not ashamed of the idea that we should be grateful to God for what he's given us.

- B. The founding fathers experienced the providential benefits of God, particularly in the founding of the nation. If you read about the history of the Revolutionary War, you'll come across many examples of remarkable and unusual providences that happened in favor of the Americans.

C. Three examples of unusual, remarkable, “signal” providences:

1. All things being equal, George Washington should have been killed in the French and Indian War (1754-1763), long before the Revolution. At the Battle at the Monongahela, Washington and the British army were ambushed by the French. Every officer on horseback was killed except Washington. He later wrote to his brother John on July 18, 1755:

[B]y the all-powerful dispensations of Providence, I have been protected beyond all human probability or expectation; for I had four bullets through my coat, and two horses shot under me, yet escaped unhurt, although death was leveling my companions on every side of me.

2. On August 27, 1776, British General Howe had trapped Washington and his 8,000 troops on Brooklyn Heights on Long Island, and he intended to advance the next morning to destroy them. But Washington gathered every [boat] he could find and spent all night ferrying his men across the East River. In the morning there was still a large number of soldiers facing annihilation by Howe. But a heavy fog descended on the area enabling the rest of Washington's troops to escape the British trap. That too was a beneficial providence to say the least.
3. In December of 1776, with morale low and the American Army dwindling to about 2,000 men at Valley Forge, Washington decided to cross the ice-filled Delaware River and launch a surprise attack on the British in Trenton, New Jersey. The Americans attacked at sunrise on December 26 during a driving snow storm, with the wind at their backs and blowing into the faces of the mercenary Hessian troops, who had been celebrating Christmas the day before. In less than an hour, the Americans captured nearly a thousand Hessians and lost only a few men. Artillery officer, Henry Knox, wrote of the victory at Trenton: “Providence seemed to have smiled on every part of this enterprise” (*America's Providential History*, pp. 161–162).

D. There are many more examples of the smiling face of God's providence benefitting our founding fathers as they established the nation. Washington and the other founders were not ashamed to see these providences as the blessing of God on their endeavors.

App: All of us have experienced God's "smile" on our lives. We acknowledge the benefits and blessings he sends to us. We sing "Count Your Blessings." Most of us can count a lot of blessings.

This has been a very difficult year in many ways, yet God has been good to us. We affirm God's good providential hand on our lives.

And even if God's providences have been hard, we trust that all things are working out for good for those who love God (Rom 8:28). So we can still be thankful even in difficult times.

We enjoy many benefits, and for these we should be thankful.

IV. Humbly implore His protection and favor.

Ps 20:7 Some [trust] in chariots, and some in horses: but we will remember the name of the LORD our God.

Ps 127:1 Except the LORD build the house, they labour in vain that build it: except the LORD keep the city, the watchman waketh [but] in vain.

A. The founding fathers worked hard to make sure that the nation was worthy of divine aid. They recognized that God would help them only if they maintained their loyalty to him and to his will. Many of the founding fathers were sincere in their Christian faith and life.

B. John Adams famously argued that the US constitution was made only for a religious and moral people; it was wholly inadequate for any other kind of people. The constitution reflects a biblical worldview because those who wrote it believed in the God of the Bible.

C. Washington and the founding fathers believed in prayer. Even Benjamin Franklin, who was not an orthodox believer, recommended that the delegates to the constitutional convention begin their sessions with prayer. He said:

I have lived, Sir, a long time and the longer I live, the more convincing proofs I see of this truth -- that God governs in the affairs of men. And if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without his notice, is it probable that an empire can rise without his aid? We have been assured, Sir, in the sacred writings that "except the Lord build [the house,] they labor in vain that build it." I firmly believe this; and I also believe that without his concurring aid we shall succeed in this political building no better than the Builders of Babel: ... I therefore beg leave to move -- that henceforth prayers imploring the assistance of Heaven, and its blessings on our deliberations, be held in this Assembly every morning before we proceed to business, ...

- D. God is not obligated to hear the prayers of a wicked, ungodly, immoral nation (cf. Isa 59:1-2). When the leaders of the nation pursue policies that are directly contradictory to biblical morality, then we have no right to appeal to God for his protection and favor.
- E. God removed his hand of blessing from his chosen people—Israel. God repeatedly warned Israel what would happen to them if they turned away from him. And that's exactly what they did. God in turn allowed other nations to dominate and persecute Israel. God allowed the nation of Israel to be destroyed. And if he did that for his own chosen people, he'll do the same for us.
- F. There's a statement from the early 1800s that has become quite famous: "America is great because America is good. If America ever ceases to be good, she will cease to be great."

Has America ceased to be good? America as a nation still does much good. But much evidence shows us that America is very bad. Probably about half of the nation rejects traditional, biblical values in favor of a self-centered, "do your own thing" approach. Because people no longer have biblical values, they are turning to godless systems like socialism and communism.

- G. If we continue in that direction, fewer will humbly implore God's protection and favor, and there will be fewer reasons for God to protect us or show us favor. Short of a national, thorough-going, heaven-sent revival, I believe America is headed for the same kind of godless, secular, paganistic socialism that is so evident now in Europe.
- H. God may remove his blessing from us as a nation, but not necessarily on us as individuals, families, and churches. If we are living obediently and striving to do God's will, then we have the privilege of humbly imploring God to protect us and to show us favor.
- I. In any case, as we consider how God has blessed us, protected us, and shown us favor, we should be thankful. God may no longer be interested in protecting and blessing our nation, but we hope and trust that he will be interested in blessing and favoring us individually, as families, and as a church. Thanksgiving is an appropriate occasion to spend extra time thanking God for his blessings and imploring him to protect and favor us.

I wonder what George Washington would think of our country today? Wouldn't it be wonderful if we still had national leaders like him? What would it be like to have national leaders who encourage our people to recognize God's providence, to obey God's will, to be thankful for his benefits, and humbly to implore his protection and favor? Perhaps we still have a few elected leaders who would agree with Washington, but not many. It seems that we have fewer and fewer leaders or citizens who care about such things. Many of our so-called leaders today urge us to reject biblical values and to deny the providence of God. What a shame.

No matter what direction the country goes, we can still follow Washington's advice. As we approach Thanksgiving, let's do exactly that. We must affirm that God is providentially working in the world today. We humbly acknowledge his rule over human events. We must obey his will, express our thanks for his benefits, and beg for his protection and favor. Let's follow Washington's advice this Thanksgiving season.