

The Pilgrim's Thanksgiving Story

The foundations of this great country we call America (the United States of America) was built on the character and resolve of Protestant Christianity. Indeed, one group of Protestant Christians known as Separatists and today known as Pilgrims developed the core moral and political principles of our country. They paid for these principles with hardship, deprivation, ridicule, abuse, anonymity, and often with life itself. This is their story and ours in this Thanksgiving season – excerpted from chapter 5 of the book, The Light and the Glory by Peter Marshall and Dave Manuel. I have added a few comments in *italics*.

In previous chapters you can read of the Separatists' attempt to create a body of Christ free from government intervention and able to worship in spirit and in truth. They attempted this first in England without success. Next they went to Holland where again they were thwarted by government. They finally concluded they would not be able to achieve their goal without going to a new world. This journey began more than 125 years after Christopher Columbus had first landed in America.

From Chapter 5 of The Light and the Glory.

Descending into the gloomy interior of the Mayflower II, the replica of the Pilgrims' ship, we were shocked at the closeness of the quarters. One hundred and two Pilgrims had been crammed into a space about equal to that of a volleyball court. Compound that misery by the lack of light and fresh air (all hatches had to be battened down because of the stormy weather). Add to it a diet of dried pork, dried peas, and dried fish, and the stench of an ever-fouler bilge, and multiply it all by sixty-six days at sea. ...

As we emerged topside, Peter shook his head. "You know, they accepted all that without complaining. It was part of what they were willing to endure to follow God's will." He paused. "Like the exile in Holland and their indenture in the New World. ..." (p106).

When they left England they had consumed a good portion of their on-board supplies before departure. William Bradford, who became the governor of the Plymouth colony, wrote this about the peril of their sea voyage.

"Like Gideon's army," Bradford wrote, "this small number was divided, as if the Lord, by this work of His Providence, thought these few were still too many for the great work He had to do." There were some surprises among their number, like Robert Cushman, 'whose heart and courage was gone from them before, as it seems, though his body was with them till now he departed.' Bradford then quoted from a letter written in Dartmouth by Cushman to a friend:

"For besides the eminent dangers of this voyage, which are no less than deadly. ...Our victuals will be half eaten up, I think, before we go from the coast of England, and if our voyage last long, we shall not have a month's victuals when come [to] the country." (Indeed, by the time they left Plymouth, they were already consuming the precious reserves that were meant to sustain them in the New World.) "Friend," concluded Cushman, "if ever we make a plantation, God

works a miracle." Though he may have spoken from despair, it was the truth. God had so intended. (p116).

The heat and the pressure began soon after they got underway: 102 Pilgrims huddled in the lantern-lit darkness of the low-ceilinged, 'tween-decks; women and small children allowed to have the captain's cabin {Jones had generously offered to bunk with his petty officers); no hatches open because of continuous storms; all nonessential personnel required to stay below decks; the constant crying of small children; no chance to cook any meals.

It added up to seven weeks of the hell of an ill-lighted, rolling, pitching, stinking inferno, the kind that brings up sins that had lain buried for years-anger, self-pity, bitterness, vindictiveness, jealousy, despair. All these surfaced sins had to be faced, confessed, and given up to the Lord for His cleansing. No matter how ill they felt, or how grim the daily situation, they continued to seek God together, praying through despair and into peace and thanksgiving.

The weary Pilgrims were forced to endure yet another ordeal - harassment from the sailors. Several of the crew had taken to mocking them unmercifully, and their self-appointed leader had taken such a dislike to the Pilgrims that he would gloat at their seasickness and delight in telling them how much he looked forward to sewing them in shrouds and feeding them to the fish. For surely some of them would soon be dying-death was a familiar shipmate among landlubbers on these long voyages-and these were the puniest assortment of "psalm singing puke-stockings" he had ever seen.

But just at the peak of his tormenting, this same crewman suddenly took gravely ill of an unknown fever and died within a single day! No one else caught this mysterious disease, and his was the first shrouded body to go over side. Thereafter, there was no more mocking from the crew. (p117).

At last, on November 9, the cry "Land Ho!" rang out from the crow's nest. These were the words they had waited so long to hear! Without waiting for the Captain's permission, they rushed up to the main deck, where they caught their first glimpse of a long, sandy stretch of coastline, covered with dune grass and scrub pine. One of the pilots identified it as a place the fishermen called Cape Cod. Despite the seemingly endless storm, they had been blown fewer than a hundred miles off their course-north, as it turned out. It would take them only a day or two to round the Cape and three or four more to reach the mouth of the Hudson. And so they started south.

But there are fierce shoals and riptides off Monomoy Point at the "elbow" of the Cape. And mixed with the headwinds they now faced, the going became progressively more treacherous. Finally Captain Jones said that he would have to head back out to sea and wait a day before proceeding further south. But now Brewster, Carver, Winslow, and Bradford, and several others, began to wonder if God really did want them to go to the Hudson. Perhaps He had blown them here because He intended them to remain in this place. At length, after much prayer and further discussion, they instructed Captain Jones to turn about and make for the northern tip of the Cape (Provincetown). This he did, and on November 11, 1620 they dropped anchor in the natural harbor on the inside of the Cape.

But now a new question arose: if they were to settle here, they would no longer be under the jurisdiction of the Virginia Company. And since they obviously had no patent from the New England Company, they would be under...no one. At this thought, rebellion began to stir in the hearts of some of the strangers, and the Pilgrim leadership realized that they had to act quickly and decisively, to forestall the very real possibility of mutiny.

Their solution was pragmatic, realistic, and expedient. And it took into consideration the basic sinfulness of human nature, with which they had become all too familiar, during the past seven weeks. They drafted a compact, very much along the lines of their first covenant back in Scrooby, which **embodied the same principles of equality and government by the consent of the governed which would become the cornerstones of American Democracy.**

(Actually, this concept of equality could be traced directly back to the ancient Hebrew tradition of all men being equal in the sight of God.) While the Pilgrims had no idea how significant this document was to be, it marked the first time in recorded history that free and equal men had voluntarily covenanted together to create their own new civil government.

<The Mayflower Compact>

In the name of God, amen. We whose names are under-written, the loyal subjects of our dread Sovereign Lord King James by the Grace of God of Great Britain, France, Ireland, King, Defender of the Faith, etc. Having undertaken, for the glory of God and advancement of the Christian Faith and honor of our King and country, a voyage to plant the first colony in the northern parts of Virginia, do by these presents solemnly and mutually in the presence of God and one of another, covenant and combine ourselves together into a civil body politic, for our better ordering and preservation and furtherance of the ends aforesaid, and by virtue hereof to enact, constitute and frame such just and equal laws, ordinances, acts, constitutions and offices from time to time, as shall be thought most meet and convenient for the general good of the colony.

Unto which we promise all due submission and obedience. In witness whereof we have hereunder subscribed our names at Cape Cod, the 11th of November, in the year of the reign of our Sovereign King James of England. ..Anno Domini 1620.

Such ringing affirmations as: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal ..." would have to wait another century and a half, but here was their introduction onto American soil. (p119-120).

The Pilgrims started dying. There were six dead in December, eight in January-they were falling like casualties on a battlefield. And in a sense, that is what they were: locked in a life-or-death struggle with Satan himself. For this was the first time that the Light of Christ had landed in force on his continent, and if he did not throw them back into the sea at the beginning, there would be reinforcements. And still the death toll mounted. In February, they were dying at a rate of two a day, even three on some days.

The twenty-first of February claimed four lives. And at one period, in the whole company there were only five men well enough to care for the sick. In February there were seventeen deaths. The pitched battle between love and death went on.

When the worst was finally over, they had lost forty-seven people, nearly half their original number. Thirteen out of eighteen wives died; only three families remained unbroken. Of all the first comers the children fared the best: of seven daughters, none died; of thirteen sons, only three. And the colony which was young to begin with was even younger now. (*p126-127*).

If any one event could be singled out to mark the turning point of their fortunes, it would have been what happened on a fair Friday in the middle of March (*1621*). The weather had slowly been warming, and with the iron grip of winter beginning to loosen its hold on the earth, the first shoots of green would soon be appearing.

The men were gathered in the common house to conclude their conference on military instruction, when the cry went up, "Indian coming!" Indian coming? Surely he meant Indians coming! Disgusted, Captain Standish shook his head, even as he went to look out the window-to see a tall, well-built Indian, wearing nothing but a leather loincloth striding up their main street. He was headed straight for the common house, and the men inside hurried to the door, before he walked right in on them. He stopped and stood motionless looking at them, as though sculpted in marble. Only the March wind broke the silence.

"Welcome!" he suddenly boomed, in a deep, resonant voice. The Pilgrims were too startled to speak. At length, they replied with as much gravity as they could muster: "Welcome." Their visitor fixed them with a piercing stare. "Have you got any beer?" he asked them in flawless English. If they were surprised before, they were astounded now.

"Beer?" one of them managed. The Indian nodded. The Pilgrims looked at one another, then turned back to him. "Our beer is gone. Would you like. ..some brandy?" Again the Indian nodded. They brought him some brandy, and a biscuit with butter and cheese, and then some pudding and a piece of roast duck. To their continuing amazement, he ate with evident relish everything set before him. Where had he developed such an appetite for English food? How, in fact, had he come to speak English? For that matter, who was he, and what was he doing here?

His name was Samoset. Apparently Samoset's sole motivation was a love of travel, and he had learned his English from various fishing captains who had put in to the Maine shore over the years.

Now they asked the crucial question: What could he tell them of the Indians hereabouts? And the story he told gave everyone of them cause to thank God in their hearts. This area had always been the territory of the Patuxets, a large, hostile tribe who had barbarously murdered every white man who had landed on their shores. But four years prior to the Pilgrims' arrival, a mysterious plague had broken out among them, killing every man, woman, and child. (*p128-9*).

So complete was the devastation that the neighboring tribes had shunned the area ever since, convinced that some great supernatural spirit had destroyed the Patuxets. Hence the cleared land

on which they had settled literally belonged to no one! Their nearest neighbors, said Samoset, were the Wampanoags, some fifty miles to the southwest. These Indians numbered about sixty warriors. Massasoit, their sachem (or chief), had such wisdom that he also ruled over several other small tribes in the general area. And it was with Massasoit that Samoset had spent most of the past eight months.

The second Indian *<they met>* was Squanto, and he was to be, according to Bradford, "**a special instrument sent of God for their good, beyond their expectation.**" The extraordinary chain of "coincidences" in this man's life is in its own way no less extraordinary than the saga of Joseph 's being sold into slavery in Egypt. Indeed, in ensuing months, there was not a doubt in any of their hearts that Squanto, whose Indian name was Tisquantum, was a Godsend.

His story really began in 1605, when Squanto and four other Indians were taken captive by Captain George Weymouth, who was exploring the New England coast at the behest of Sir Ferdinando Gorges. The Indians were taken to England, where they were taught English, so that Gorges could question them as to tribes populated New England, and where the most favorable places to establish colonies would be.

Squanto spent the next nine years in England, where he met Captain John Smith, recently of Virginia, who promised to take him back to his people on Cape Cod, as soon as he himself could get a command bound for there. Actually, he did not have too long to wait. On Smith's 1614 voyage of mapping and exploring, Squanto was returned to the Patuxets, at the place Smith named New Plymouth.

Sailing with Smith's expedition on another ship was Captain Thomas Hunt, whom Smith ordered to stay behind to dry their catch of fish and trade it for beaver skins before coming home. But Hunt had another, more profitable cargo in mind. As soon as Smith departed, he slipped back down the coast to Plymouth, where he lured twenty Patuxets aboard, including Squanto, apparently to barter, and promptly clapped them in irons. He proceeded down to the Cape, where he scooped up seven unsuspecting Nausets. All of these he took to Milaga, a notorious slave-trading port on the coast of Spain, where he got 20 pounds for each of them (fourteen hundred dollars a head). No wonder the slave trade was such a temptation!

Most of them were shipped off to North Africa, but a few were bought and rescued by local friars, who introduced them to the Christian faith. Thus did God begin Squanto's preparation for the role he would play at Plymouth.

But Squanto was too enterprising to stay long in a monastery. He attached himself to an Englishman bound for London, and there met and joined the household of a wealthy merchant, where he lived until he embarked for New England with Captain Dermer in 1619. It was on this same trip that Dermer had picked up Samoset at Monhegan, one of the more important fishing stations in Maine, and dropped them both off at Plymouth. At which time Dermer wrote to a friend (presumably on the New England Council): "I will first begin with that place from whence Squanto, or Tisquantum, was taken away, which on Captain Smith's map is called Plymouth, and I would that Plymouth [England] had the like commodities. I would that the first plantation

might be here seated.”

When Squanto stepped ashore six months before the Pilgrims arrived, he received the most tragic blow of his life: not a man, woman, or child of his tribe was left alive! Nothing but skulls and bones and ruined dwellings remained.

Squanto wandered aimlessly through the lands he had played in as a child, the woods where he had learned to hunt, the place where he had looked forward to settling, once his career with the English was finished. Now there was nothing. In despair he wandered into Massasoit's camp, because he had nowhere else to go. And that chief, understanding his circumstances, took pity on him.

But Squanto merely existed, having lost all reason for living. That is, this was his condition until Samoset brought news of a small colony of peaceful English families who were so hard pressed to stay alive, let alone plant a colony at Patuxet. They would surely die of starvation, since they had little food and nothing to plant but English wheat and barley. A light seemed to come back to Squanto's eye, and he accompanied Samoset, when the latter came to Plymouth as Massasoit's interpreter. (p130-132).

Out of the meeting <*between Massasoit and the Pilgrims*> came a peace treaty of mutual aid and assistance which would last for forty years and would be a model for many that would be made thereafter. Massasoit was a remarkable example of God's providential care for His Pilgrims. He was probably the only other chief on the northeast coast of America who (like Powhatan to the south) would have welcomed the white man as a friend. And the Pilgrims took great pains not to abuse his acceptance of them. On the contrary, the record of their relations with him and his people is a strong testimony to the love of Christ that was in them .

When Massasoit and his entourage finally left, Squanto stayed. He had found his reason for living. Squanto showed the Pilgrims how to plant corn the Indian way, hoeing six-foot squares in toward the center, putting down four or five kernels, and then fertilizing the corn with fish. At that, the Pilgrims just shook their heads; in four months they had caught exactly one cod. No matter, said Squanto cheerfully; in four days the creeks would be overflowing with fish.

The Pilgrims cast a baleful eye on their amazing friend, who seemed to have adopted them. But Squanto ignored them and instructed the young men in how to make the weirs they would need to catch the fish. Obediently the men did as he told them, and four days later the creeks for miles around were clogged with alewives making their spring run. The Pilgrims did not catch them; they harvested them!

So now the corn was planted. Pointing spokelike to the center of each mound were three fishes, their heads almost touching. Now, said Squanto, they would have to guard against wolves. Seeing the familiar bewildered look on his charges' faces, he added that the wolves would attempt to steal the fish. The Pilgrims would have to guard it for two weeks, until it had a chance to decompose. And so they did, and that summer, twenty full acres of corn began to flourish.

Squanto helped in a thousand similar ways, teaching them how to stalk deer, plant pumpkins among the corn, refine maple syrup from maple trees, discern which herbs were good to eat and good for medicine, and find the best berries. But after the corn, there was one other specific thing he did which was of inestimable importance to their survival. What little fishing they had done was a failure, and any plan for them to fish commercially was a certain fiasco.

So Squanto introduced them to the pelt of the beaver, which was then in plentiful supply in northern New England, and in great demand throughout Europe. And not only did he get them started, but he guided them in the trading, making sure they got their full money's worth in top-quality pelts. This would prove to be their economic deliverance, just as corn would be their physical deliverance. (p133).

In April of 1621, the Mayflower set sail to return to England. The Pilgrims would be alone in the new world with no immediate means of return to England.

That summer of 1621 was beautiful. Much work went into the building of new dwellings, and ten men were sent north up the coast in the sailing shallop to conduct trade with the Indians. Squanto once again acted as their guide and interpreter. It was a successful trip, and that fall's harvest provided more than enough corn to see them through their second winter.

The Pilgrims were brimming over with gratitude, not only to Squanto and the Wampanoags who had been so friendly, but to their God. In Him they had trusted, and He had honored their obedience beyond their dreams. So, Governor Bradford declared a day of public Thanksgiving, to be held in October <1621>. Massasoit was invited, and unexpectedly arrived a day early with ninety Indians! Counting their numbers, the Pilgrims had to pray hard to keep from giving in to despair. To feed such a crowd would cut deeply into the food supply that was supposed to get them through the winter.

But if they had learned one thing through their travails, it was to trust God implicitly. As it turned out, the Indians were not arriving empty-handed. Massasoit had commanded his braves to hunt for the occasion, and they arrived with no less than five dressed deer, and more than a dozen fat wild turkeys! And they helped with the preparations, teaching the Pilgrim women how to make hoecakes and a tasty pudding out of cornmeal and maple syrup. Finally, they showed them an Indian delicacy: how to roast corn kernels in an earthen pot until they popped, fluffy and white-popcorn! The Thanksgiving celebration lasted for four days.

In November 1621, a full year after their arrival, the first ship from home dropped anchor in the harbor. On board were 35 more colonists. In the air of celebration that followed, no one stopped to think that these newcomers had brought not one bit of equipment with them-no food, no clothing, no tools, no bedding. In the cold light of the following morning, a sobering appraisal by Bradford, Brewster, and Winslow was taken, and a grim decision was reached: they would all have to go on half-rations through the winter to ensure enough food to see them into the summer season, when fish and game would be plentiful. (p136-137).

Thus, they did enter their own starving time that winter of 1621-22 (with all the extra people to feed and shelter), and were ultimately reduced to a daily ration of **five kernels of corn apiece**.

(Five kernels of corn - it is almost inconceivable how life could be supported on this.) But as always, they had a choice: either to give in to bitterness and despair or to go deeper into Christ. They chose Christ. And in contrast to what happened at Jamestown, not one of them died of starvation.

It was April of 1623, time to get the year's corn planted. But as the Pilgrims went into the fields to till the ground and put in the seed, there was a listlessness about them that was more than just weakness from months of inadequate rations. They were well aware that they needed at least twice as great a yield as the first harvest and they did not want a repeat of the half-hearted effort of the second summer (when they had been too busy building houses and planting gardens to give the common cornfields the attention they needed). So the principal men of the colony decided that there would be an additional planting. But for this second planting individual lots would be parceled out, with the understanding that the corn grown on these lots would be for the planters' own private use. Suddenly, new life seemed to infuse the Pilgrims.

Some time after the second planting, it became apparent that the dry spell which had begun between the two plantings was turning into a drought. Week followed week (it would continue for twelve weeks in all), and not even the oldest Indians could remember anything like it.

Edward Winslow described the drought, and what followed:

There scarce fell any rain, so that the stalk of that [planting which] was first set, began to send forth the ear before it came to half growth, and that which was later, not like to yield any at all, both blade and stalk hanging the head and changing the color in such manner as we judged it utterly dead. Our beans also ran not up according to their wonted manner, but stood at a stay, many being parched away, as though they had been scorched before the fire. Now were our hopes overthrown, and we discouraged, our joy turned into mourning. ..because God, which hitherto had been our only shield and supporter, now seemed in His anger to arm Himself against us. And who can withstand the fierceness of His wrath?

These and the like considerations moved not only every good man privately to enter into examination with his own estate between God and his conscience, and so to humiliation before Him, but also to humble ourselves together before the Lord by fasting and prayer. To that end, a day was appointed by public authority, and set apart from all other employments.

Whatever may have brought on the drought, the sincere and deep repentance of each and every Pilgrim had a phenomenal effect. Winslow continues:

But, O the mercy of our God, who was as ready to hear, as we were to ask! For though in the morning, when we assembled together, the heavens were as clear and the drought as like to continue as it ever was, yet (our exercise continuing some eight or nine hours) before our departure, the weather was overcast, the clouds gathered on all sides. On the next morning distilled such soft, sweet and moderate showers of rain continuing some fourteen days[!] and mixed with such seasonable weather, as it was hard to say whether our withered corn or drooping affections were most quickened or revived, such was the bounty and goodness of our God!

The yield that year was so abundant that the Pilgrims ended up with a surplus of corn, which they were able to use in trading that winter with northern Indians, who had not had a good

growing season. A second Day of Thanksgiving was planned, and this year there was even more reason to celebrate: their beloved Governor was to marry one Alice Southworth. Massasoit was again the guest of honor, and this time he brought his principal wife, three other sachems, and 120 braves! Fortunately he again brought venison and turkey, as well.

The occasion was described by one of the Adventurers <*financial backers of the colony*>, Emmanuel Altham, in a letter to his brother:

After our arrival in New England, we found all our plantation in good health, and neither man, woman or child sick. ..in this plantation is about twenty houses, four or five of which are very pleasant, and the rest (as time will serve) shall be made better. ..the fishing that is in this country, indeed it is beyond belief. ..in one hour we got 100 cod. ...

And now to say somewhat of the great cheer we had at the Governor's marriage. We had about twelve tasty venisons, besides others, pieces of roasted venison and other such good cheer in such quantities that I wish you some of our share. For here we have the best grapes that ever you saw, and the biggest, and divers sorts of plums and nuts. ..six goats, about fifty hogs and pigs, also divers hens. ..A better country was never seen nor heard of, for here are a multitude of God's blessing.

What Altham neglected to mention was the first course that was served: **on an empty plate in front of each person were five kernels of corn** ...lest anyone should forget.

These Pilgrims were a mere handful of Light-bearers, on the edge of a vast and dark continent. But the Light of Jesus Christ was penetrating further into the heart of America. William Bradford would write with remarkable discernment, "**As one small candle may light a thousand, so the light kindled here has shown unto many, yea in some sort to our whole nation. ...We have noted these things so that you might see their worth and not negligently lose what your fathers have obtained with so much hardship.**"