

## **Editor's Note**

Because so much confusion abounds today concerning the historic voyage of the Mayflower and the planting of that colony of Pilgrims at Plymouth, I have endeavored to present a concise historical account of those events from the journal of one who was actually there. Many opinions flourish in this modern era, even the re-writing of history intended to impugn the character of our fathers, but what you will read here will be like a newspaper clipping from the winter of 1620, as I will be quoting the actual testimony of eye witnesses whose writings have survived the centuries, in their own words.

## **Introduction**

My hope in the deliverance of this message is to call to our memories the great acts of God in the founding of the Plymouth Colony of New England, that our hearts might be turned to thanksgiving, and our hopes renewed, as we witness the trials and tribulations endured by those brave Pilgrim families who helped to lay the foundation of our nation.

Before we look at our history let us first open our Bibles to the book of Judges, chapter 2, beginning with verse 6:

*"And when Joshua had let the people go, the children of Israel went every man unto his inheritance to possess the land. And the people served the LORD all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders that outlived Joshua, who had seen all the great works of the LORD, that he did for Israel. And Joshua the son of Nun, the servant of the LORD, died, being an hundred and ten years old. And they buried him in the border of his inheritance in Timnathheres, in the mount of Ephraim, on the north side of the hill Gaash. And also all that generation were gathered unto their fathers: and there arose another generation after them, which knew not the LORD, nor yet the works which he had done for Israel. And the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD, and served Baalim: And they forsook the LORD God of their fathers, which brought them out of the land of Egypt, and followed other gods, of the gods of the people that were round about them, and bowed themselves unto them, and provoked the LORD to anger. And they forsook the LORD, and served Baal and Ashtaroth. And the anger of the LORD was hot against Israel, and he delivered them into the hands of spoilers that spoiled them, and he sold them into the hands of their enemies round about, so that they could not any longer stand before their enemies. Whithersoever they went out, the hand of the LORD was against them for evil, as the LORD had said,*

*and as the LORD had sworn unto them: and they were greatly distressed.”*

### **The Influence of Our Pilgrim Fathers**

The generation of our Pilgrim Fathers was gathered unto their fathers long before the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and the influence of those brave families, those self-sacrificing families, would permeate the lives and thinking, and ideals and philosophies of generations to come.

At the founding of our Constitutional Republic 150 years later, we find the influence of the Pilgrim Fathers continues strong.

No doubt these leaders of the Continental Congress had cut their teeth on the stories of that historic voyage of the Mayflower to the New World, and the settlement at Plymouth.

Just listen to these words the legislators of the Continental Congress penned in 1777 recommending that a day be set apart for solemn thanksgiving and praise to God:

“To adore the superintending providence of Almighty God; to acknowledge with gratitude their obligation to Him for benefits received...that with one heart and one voice...[to] express the grateful feelings of their hearts, and consecrate themselves to the service of their divine benefactor...[to make] penitent confession of their manifold sins, whereby they had forfeited every favor, and their humble and earnest supplication that it may please God, through the merits of Jesus Christ, mercifully to forgive and blot [our sins] out of remembrance.<sup>1</sup>”

These are the words of men who understood where they had come from, and Whose hand it was that had guided their nation. That Thanksgiving Day Proclamation of 1777 ended by asking God's favor on the newly formed government in hopes that the Lord might quote, *“prosper the means of religion for the promotion and enlargement of that kingdom which consisteth in righteousness, peace and joy in the*

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<sup>1</sup> “Proclamation – Thanksgiving Day – 1777,” WallBuilders, accessed November 26, 2014, <http://www.wallbuilders.com/libissuesarticles.asp?id=3847>.

*Holy Ghost.*<sup>2</sup>

### **How Could We Forget?**

One hundred fifty some odd years had passed since their Pilgrim Fathers had landed at Plymouth Rock, but notice how much the wording of the representatives of the Continental Congress' Thanksgiving Day Proclamation agrees with those words of the Pilgrims penned in the Mayflower compact.

That document begins, "In the Name of God, Amen." It ends with the signatures of 41 men. And in between it states their purpose: "for the Glory of God and advancement of the Christian Faith."<sup>3</sup>

But, my friends, as it was in the days after Moses, and in the generation after Joshua and his generation had passed away, so it happened in America.

As we read earlier from the book of Judges:

*"There arose another generation after them, which knew not the LORD, nor yet the works which he had done for Israel."*

They forgot. We forgot. Somewhere down the line we forgot.

The prophet, Jeremiah, lamenting in chapter 2, and verse 32 of the book by his name, and speaking under inspiration of the Holy Spirit the very heart of God cries:

*"My people have forgotten me days without number."*

But how could we forget?

How could we forget the manifold ways in which the Lord of heaven and earth guided *this* nation into existence?

How could we forget that it was God that protected our forefathers,

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> "Text of Mayflower Compact," Pilgrim Hall Museum, accessed November 26, 2014, [http://www.pilgrimhallmuseum.org/mayflower\\_compact\\_text.htm](http://www.pilgrimhallmuseum.org/mayflower_compact_text.htm).

and prospered their cause and nation above every nation on earth?

How could we forget that 102 people boarded that ship; men, women, and children, and that a year later less than half of them would still be alive?

### **Reasons For Leaving**

Who were these people and what is it that drove them to leave England and later Holland for the New World?

To find out we need look no further than the eyewitness account of William Bradford in his journal, "Of Plymouth Plantation."

By the way, the original manuscript I will be quoting from was lost along with the first hand historical documentation it contained. It was lost for over 100 years, according to Richard Weaver, until a Pilgrim enthusiast traced the book, written by Bradford's own hand, to a grocer's scrap pile somewhere in Nova Scotia, Canada.

Since the book's discovery and subsequent republishing, it has been kept in a vault in a museum in Massachusetts.

The following are the actual words of William Bradford:

"As is well known, ever since the breaking out of the light of the gospel in England, which was the first country to be thus enlightened after the gross darkness of popery had overspread the Christian world, Satan has maintained various wars against the Saints, from time to time, in different ways,—sometimes by bloody death and cruel torment, at other times by imprisonment, banishment, and other wrongs,—as if loth that his kingdom should be overcome, the truth prevail, and the Church of God revert to their ancient purity, and recover their primitive order, liberty, and beauty. But when he could not stifle by these means the main truths of the gospel, which began to take rooting in many places, watered by the blood of martyrs and blessed from heaven with a gracious increase, he reverted to his ancient stratagems, used of old against the first Christians.<sup>4</sup>"

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<sup>4</sup> William Bradford, *Bradford's History of the Plymouth Settlement* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Comp., 1920), 1.

Bradford then speaks of “errors, heresies, and discord,<sup>5</sup>” and how those seeking to purify the Church of England, that is, all who dissented and who sought reform, were labeled mockingly, “Puritans.”

Bradford speaks of the deplorable state of the visible church in England in the early 1600's:

*“Religion has been disgraced, the godly grieved, afflicted, persecuted, and many exiled, while others have lost their lives in prisons...on the other hand, sin has been countenanced, ignorance, profanity, and atheism have increased...Religion itself is a byword, a mocking stock, and a matter of reproach; so that in England at this day the man or woman who begins to profess religion and to serve God, must resolve within himself to sustain mocks and injuries as though he lived among the enemies of Religion.”<sup>6</sup>*

In 1609, Bradford, and a group of Puritans left England for Holland, where they hoped to find more tolerance for a Biblically ordered worship and service of God, and a fitter place to raise children in the fear of the Lord.

You may have heard growing up that the Pilgrims separated from the Church of England because they believed in freedom of religion, which today is translated: freedom to worship any supposed god in any way.

This, of course, is not even remotely true of the Pilgrim Fathers. They desired not freedom of religion, in the sense that they felt that all men should be permitted to worship any supposed deity in any way they chose, but that all men might have the freedom to worship the one true God in that manner in which He commands to be worshiped in the Bible.

In Holland these Puritans, now Separatists, first lived in Amsterdam, and after a year moved to Leiden, where they remained for 12 years.

It was in Leiden that this Pilgrim separatist congregation began to grow as they were joined by families fleeing the encroaching and

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 2

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 5.

forced Episcopalianism of England.

It was also in Leiden that the followers of a man named Arminius began to molest the Reformed churches of Holland. A virtually unknown fact of history related to this is that the Pilgrim's pastor, John Robinson, had been debating the followers of Arminius for years, and was so effective in his argumentation from the Scriptures that he was asked by the University to come and debate Arminius' chief disciple, Episcopius, one on one.

Robinson initially declined in humility, saying that he was not a native of the Netherlands, and thus, might offend more worthy and capable ministers who were born on Dutch soil.

But when the professors and pastors of Leiden pleaded with him for his service to Christ's church, saying that the truth might suffer if he did not enter the debate publicly, he immediately accepted; and they say, he argued so well from the Scriptures that he put the Arminians' best to a public shame.

But there was something else going on in Holland that was troubling to the Pilgrim congregation at Leiden and that was the fear of their children being influenced by the worldliness of the youth of that culture.

Add to this that the flames of war were now being fanned between Holland and Spain, and the distinct possibility existed that the entire nation might be forced into Catholicism in the event of a Spanish victory.

There seemed to be no easy solution to their dilemma. Stay in Holland or risk their lives to cross the ocean and attempt to plant a colony in America.

In America the Pilgrims could worship God as He commands to be worshiped in Scripture. In America they could take the Gospel to the heathens and advance the Kingdom of Christ to a people yet in the darkness of paganism. In America they would be free of the threat of the corruption of their children by the prevailing youth culture of Holland.

The decision was made and immediately preparations were begun.

Bradford writes, "their ends were good and honourable, their calling lawful and urgent; and therefore they might expect the blessing of God in their proceeding. Yea, though they should lose our lives in this action, yet might they have comfort in the same and their endeavours would be honorable."<sup>7</sup> And so on August 5<sup>th</sup>, 1620 they set out.

Their pastor, John Robinson writes:

"We are knit together as a body, in a most strict, and sacred bond and covenant of the Lord; of the violation thereof we make great conscience, and by virtue whereof we do hold ourselves straitly tied, to all care of each other's good...it is not with us, as with other men, whom small things can discourage, or small discontments, cause to wish themselves at home again."<sup>8</sup>

The trials, however, that these Pilgrims were about to endure were anything but small. One of the ships, the *Speedwell*, began to leak and had to return to port for repair. Unable to be repaired, the passengers of both ships were forced to pile into the *Mayflower*, thus overloading it with bodies, luggage, and supplies.

## **The Journey to the New World**

After the voyage was finally commenced sickness plagued the crew and passengers continually. Storms and general bad weather prevailed as the delay in departure caused them to embark in what were now wintry conditions.

During the voyage, a baby, *Oceanus*, was born to Stephen and Eisabeth Hopkins, many believe the infant died before they reached land. At one point a main support for the mast broke threatening the survival of every person on board.

## **Arrival**

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<sup>7</sup> William Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation* (Knopf, 1952), 27.

<sup>8</sup> William Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation* (Courier Dover Publications, 2012), 64.

When the day finally came that land was in view, they had been on the ocean for 66 days.

Having been thrown of course by the storms, they were now just off the coast of Cape Cod.

It was here that the Mayflower Compact was made as a temporary instrument of government intended to guarantee law and order until a charter could be obtained from King James of England, as their existing patent was now for a different jurisdiction.

Finally they docked, and they called the place Plymouth, after the port in England where they had initially embarked.

What was behind them was an England with a state church they deemed unpurifiable from Roman Catholic influences; a Holland they feared would fall to Spain, and a youth culture they were sure would corrupt the morals of their children.

Behind them was 3000 miles of rough storms that demanded many necessary supplies to be thrown overboard. Ahead of them was the winter of 1620.

As they stepped onto land, they bowed and gave thanks to God for His manifold mercies and tender care. Most of us have seen the painting portraying Pilgrim families kneeling on the beaches at Plymouth Rock, a father's hands raised to heaven. Makeshift shelters were quickly thrown together as the snow was beginning to fly.

William Bradford's wife, Dorothy, died within a few days of their landing. Francis Eaton held his baby in one arm, as his wife, Sarah, died in the other. Legend has it that when the rations were divided, leaving enough seed for a planting should any of them see spring, the daily quota was 5 kernels of corn.

Five kernels of corn a day for the men, who were working daily outside chopping wood, building huts, hunting for game, and defending the colony from Indians.

Five kernels of corn a day for the women, who were tending to the children and the sick, and trying to make a home on a dirt floor. Five kernels a day for the children, who were just trying to survive the cold, sickness and fever. Thomas Tinker, his wife, and their young son died shortly thereafter. It seemed that every morning brought news of yet more sickness and death.

Mr. and Mrs. John Tillie died in January, John and Alice Rigdale as well. Captain Myles Standish survived, but his wife died in February. The list of those who died in the first general sickness goes on and on: John Crackston, Thomas Rogers, John Turner along with his two sons; William Mullins, his wife and their son, Joseph, all died the first winter, leaving a daughter, Priscilla, orphaned.

Bradford recounts that at times there were only six or seven sound persons to fetch wood, make fires, prepare food, wash infected clothing and bedding and dress and undress the sick... yet "all this they did willingly and cheerfully<sup>9</sup>."

On the ship, the sickness struck the sailors as well. Many of the sailors deserted the sick among them saying, "If they died, let them die,<sup>10</sup>" that is, until they witnessed the Pilgrims helping their dying shipmates.

One sailor would later confess, "you [Pilgrims]...show your love like Christians indeed one to another but we let one another lie, and die like dogs.<sup>11</sup>" Because of their example many of the sailors came under conviction and began to help their shipmates from that time forward.

When the sickness finally ended they found that there were more dead than alive. More were there who were buried in the church yard than those now sitting in the makeshift pews.

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<sup>9</sup> William Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, ed. Caleb Johnson (Xilibris, 2006), 50.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 131

Bradford recounts how that the brethren, whether sick or dying had "borne their sad afflictions with as much patience and contentedness as any...people could do."<sup>12</sup> He adds finally, "It was the Lord who upheld them,<sup>13</sup>" giving all the glory to God for the way they conducted themselves through the horrible circumstances they had just endured.

### **The Mercies of God**

In the spring of 1621 an Indian appeared on the hill outside the colony, Samoset by name. It was Samoset that introduced the Pilgrims to Squanto, whose real name was "Tisquantum."<sup>14</sup>

Bradford speaks of Tisquantem as "a special instrument [of God] for their good,<sup>15</sup>" beyond their expectation. This Squanto lived with the Pilgrims, acting as their interpreter and guide, and also teaching them to plant and where to fish.

By the fall provisions were laid up for the colony to sustain them through the winter of 1621, and the arrival of 35 new members to the colony was of great encouragement to them all.

Where there was starvation and privation 12 months earlier, now there was fresh fish, fowl, wild turkey, venison, and Indian corn in abundance. Governor John Carver, his wife, and adopted son had not survived to see it.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 134

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 39.

But those who did survive said, "let His holy name have the praise forever, to all posterity,<sup>16</sup>" and they gave thanks to God whom they acknowledged to be with them in all their ways.

## **Conclusion**

I read from Judges when we began this journey, how the people of Israel had forgotten their heritage and the mighty acts of God in preserving them and blessing them, and how a new generation arose that did not know their national history. Then I read Jeremiah's lamentation for a people that had forgotten God, even the God of their fathers.

Today in America the future appears dismal. A generation has arisen in the land that does not know its heritage. A generation has arisen in the land that has forgotten God; a generation that knows nothing of the kind Providence that guided this nation into existence and blessed our forefathers above every nation on earth.

Much of the professing Christian population of America have forgotten their rich heritage. One of the greatest lessons of that heritage which shines forth from the colony of poor Pilgrims at Plymouth is the contentment and thanksgiving they manifested during the greatest trials of their lives.

In Bradford's history of the Plymouth settlement we never hear a word of discontentment or discouragement. On the contrary, what we hear are words that picture a people who have learned humble submission to God in the gravest of circumstances, content with their present condition, be it poverty or wealth, feast or famine, sickness or health.

I think sometimes we think we have it bad, but we don't really know what hard times are all about.

I entitled this message, "The First Thanksgiving," and if you have been listening closely you probably realize that the first Thanksgiving did not

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 58.

actually take place in 1621, as the history books recount. The first Thanksgiving took place in that dreadful winter of 1620, for it was then that we witness a ragtag band of Pilgrims giving thanks to God in heaven during the most trying days of their lives.

If you are familiar with the Puritans you know that the Puritans spoke often of contentment in adversity, and quietness under affliction.

“A prisoner must not think he will get rid of his chains by pulling and tearing”, says Jeremiah Burroughs, “he may gall his flesh and rend it to the very bone, but certainly he will not be unfettered sooner.<sup>17</sup>”

Discontentment with our lot in life at any moment is similar. We do not free ourselves from adversity or affliction by clawing at our chains. “It is right that the Lord should do with His creatures what He will,” Burroughs continues, “whatever He does with me I shall seek Him as long as I live. I will be content with whatever God gives, and whether He gives or not, I will be content.”

This was the Puritan mentality. God is sovereign. No matter what happens, when can rest assure it is ordained by Him, for our good, and for His glory. We should therefore thank Him in all circumstances.

“The Devil loves to fish in troubled waters”, says Burroughs, “where he sees the spirits of men and women troubled and vexed, there the Devil comes...he says, ‘there is good fishing for me,’ when he sees men and women go up and down discontented.<sup>18</sup>”

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<sup>17</sup> Jeremiah Burroughs, *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1964), 125.

<sup>18</sup> Jeremiah Burroughs, *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1964), 126.

The mindset of our Pilgrim Fathers was one of peace, quietness, and contentment in the midst of severe tribulation.

Our fathers understood that, "It is better to be [content] with the grace of God in [the] soul than to enjoy an outward comfort."<sup>19</sup>

O that we might learn from them, and be prepared to meet the trials of this life that the Lord has ordained for us, for our good, and for His glory.

As a final note it is estimated that by 1650 the number of those who were of the original landing had increased to 160 people. Today it is estimated that 20 million Americans can trace their lineage to at least one of the Pilgrim fathers who landed at Plymouth in 1620.

I will end with a passage from Jeremiah, chapter 30 that seems to describe these Pilgrim Fathers and their families well.

*And out of them shall proceed thanksgiving and the voice of them that make merry: and I will multiply them, and they shall not be few; I will also glorify them, and they shall not be small.*<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 130.

<sup>20</sup> Jeremiah 30:19