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Thanksgiving and the Christian Life

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The traditional American holiday observance of Thanksgiving is a fixture of our national experience and central to civil religion. The holiday is rooted in the earliest era of colonial America, and I certainly felt that as my wife, Mary, and I stood at Plymouth Rock this past weekend. Looking at the landing place and the remains of Plimoth Plantations, one is struck by the weight of history.



The event that originated the thanksgiving commemoration is now, unsurprisingly, the subject of frenzied historical debate. What is not up for debate is the hardships that framed the Pilgrim settlers as they tried to establish their “Godly Commonwealth” in a new land. Fully half of those who had survived the voyage on the Mayflower died over the first winter in the New Land.

And yet, the records of the Plimoth settlers indicate a recurring theme of thankfulness and gratitude to God, even in the midst of such constant pain and tragedy.

This seems out of place to some, but it is a central theme of the Christian life and the biblical worldview. The startlingly simple fact is that theism forces a hard question — is God good or evil? Once we understand the goodness of God, thankfulness becomes essential to our lives, our worship, and our worldview.

In the New Testament, few make this point so clear as the Apostle Paul. As David W. Pao demonstrates in his book, *Thanksgiving: An Examination of a Pauline Theme*, thanksgiving was a constant in Paul’s writings and theology. Paul had learned to give thanks under every conceivable circumstance — and for Paul this included physical beatings, imprisonment, rejection, subversion, and eventual martyrdom for the sake of the Gospel.

One of the most helpful aspects of Pao’s study is how he deals with ingratitude as “one of the distinguishing marks of unbelievers.” When Paul writes of humanity in revolt against God, he explains that ingratitude is a signal indicator of the rebellion. Paul explains that “they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him.” [Romans 1:21]

This is a truly helpful insight. Gratitude and thanksgiving toward God will become natural to the believer who has experienced the grace and mercy of God in Christ — almost like a conscious and heart-rooted reflex. Thus, a lack of thanksgiving toward God indicates a big problem — perhaps as big as unbelief.

That helps to put it all into the right perspective.

Happy Thanksgiving to all.

I took this photo of the Mayflower II, built as a replica of the original Mayflower in the 1950s, at Plymouth, Massachusetts, November 22, 2008.

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