

## **HARD THANKS?**

Thanks-giving 2021 was every bit as hard as 2020 for many people. You? Perhaps we need some perspective. Let's think a bit about the background of our Thanks-giving holiday. You know it was the Pilgrims at Plymouth in 1621, giving thanks to God for His providence, and sharing their blessings with Indian neighbors. But just what did they have to be thankful for?

Let's pick up their story after the formation of the Church of England in 1534. Some true believers wanted to move further away from the institutionalized forms of churchianity, which they saw as preventing pure worship and evangelization. The Puritans worked for reform from within, while the non-conformist separatists, the Pilgrims, wanted freedom from traditional hierarchy. The bishops in power exercised it with passion against these dissenters.

**PERSECUTIONS** - William Bradford, governor of Plymouth Plantation, recalled those difficult times: "what wars and oppositions...Satan hath raised, maintained and continued against the saints, believers who were striving to yield their whole lives to Christ...sometimes by bloody death and cruel torments, otherwise imprisonments, banishments and other hard usages...as being loathe that [Satan's] kingdom should go down, the truth prevail, and the churches of God revert to their ancient purity and recover their primitive order, liberty and beauty."

Peter Marshall's book "The Light And the Glory" traces their personal devotion to Christ and the price they paid: "Separatists were hounded, bullied, forced to pay assessments to the Church of England, clapped into prison on trumped-up charges, and driven underground." They were spied upon, and for their personal safety had to meet in small groups in private homes.

**RELIGIOUS ASYLUM** - Several English separatists found refuge in Leyden, Holland. But after a dozen years as poverty-stricken immigrants, in 1619 they determined to find a better home. There was no going back to England because of a 1618 decree that all those not willing to conform to ecclesiastical authority had to leave. Their manual labor in Holland was debilitating for old and young alike. Their children were "being drawn away by the lures of the world." And the Pilgrims still held "a great hope and inward zeal" of carrying the light of the Gospel to remote regions.

They were tempted to emigrate to Guiana, South America, but were wary of the Spaniards who had already eliminated the French Huguenots. The Pilgrims applied to go to Virginia, and indentured themselves. They sold their possessions, and made preparations. But of their 600-member congregation, arrangements could be made for only a third to travel.

**AGONIZING VOYAGE** - After a false start in July they had to compromise with their financial backer's revised demands. After further setbacks and unforeseen expenses, including loss of the Speedwell ship and more of their number, 102 Pilgrims crammed on the Mayflower in August 1620. They were rapidly depleting their food stores, and were unmercifully harassed by the sailors. The violent storms of the seas kept everyone sick, afraid, and praying.

Halfway across the sea a huge crossbeam snapped and the main mast was in peril. Scrambling to locate a great iron screw from William Brewster's printing press, they fixed the beam. Sailors and separatists alike praised God for His deliverance. Then they were blown off course.

**UNLIKELY HARBOR** - Bound for Virginia, when the storms lifted and they sighted land, they were a hundred miles north. Treacherous seas and winds prevented attempts to go south. God had brought them to the only unoccupied stretch of land on the east coast. They formed a charter of self-government and went ashore. They soon found the only group of Indians friendly to foreign immigrants. But only 47 of the Pilgrim's number survived the first New England winter.

They barely subsisted that first year. God's miraculous provision of Samoset and Squanto helped them produce crops and trade with Indians. Their first harvest was plentiful, and Bradford set a day of Thanksgiving. Ninety Indians joined them, and it became a three-day celebration.

**GIVE THANKS** - The Pilgrims still faced untold hardship and deprivation. Through it all they determined to trust God and remain faithful to the Savior, as His emissaries in this new land. We owe to them an immense debt of gratitude. One of the best responses is to carry on as they did: Enduring hardship for the cause of Christ, living in dependence upon Almighty God, and in obedience to His written Word of truth and grace. Let us too, live out our thanks to the Lord! □