

# America's Forgotten Thanksgiving Classroom — Part 4

## Why Thanksgiving Was Never Meant to Be Merely a Holiday—But a Way of Remembering God, Liberty, And Our Blessings

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## Opening The Door: America Is Measuring What It Lacks

Something striking happened only four days before this edition of *America's Forgotten Classroom*. On September 29, 2026, [The Conference Board](#), an independent, nonpartisan, nonprofit research organization with more than 2,000 member companies, including a majority of the Fortune 500, reported that its **U.S. Consumer Confidence Index had fallen to 81.9—down 6.7 points from August and marking a third consecutive monthly decline**. The reading was the lowest since 2014, as Americans expressed heightened concern about their financial well-being, inflation, energy prices, employment conditions, and the broader economic outlook. (Current Economic Research: The Conference Board, “[State of the Economy for September 2026: Consumer Confidence Takes a Tumble](#),” September 29, 2026)

Those concerns are not imaginary. Families continue to feel financial pressure in grocery aisles, at gasoline pumps, through utility bills, mortgages, insurance premiums, medical expenses, retirement accounts, and paychecks. Biblical gratitude does not require pretending that such burdens do not exist, nor does Scripture ask believers to deny suffering, lament, disappointment, or fear.

The deeper question is what happens when legitimate concern becomes the dominant lens through which we begin to interpret everything else—when what is difficult, uncertain, or missing becomes easier to see than what is still good, stable, inherited, and undeserved. **What happens to a people when they become increasingly skilled at cataloging what is wrong but gradually lose the habit of remembering what is good—and from whom those good things ultimately come?**

When we habitually measure what we lack rather than what we have, legitimate concern can become habitual dissatisfaction; dissatisfaction can harden into expectation; and expectation can eventually become entitlement. **Discontent is not born merely from having problems; it grows when the mind becomes trained to notice deprivation more readily than provision, grievance more readily than grace, and what is absent more readily than what has already been given.** A generation can inherit constitutional liberty, religious freedom, medical advances, extraordinary technology, educational opportunity, family inheritances, churches, Bibles, and freedoms purchased at enormous cost while slowly ceasing to recognize those things as gifts.

The Bible diagnosed this danger thousands of years ago. Moses warned Israel that prosperity itself could become spiritually dangerous when people ate until satisfied, built comfortable homes, multiplied possessions, and eventually imagined, **“My power and the strength of my hand made me this wealth.”** His prescribed antidote was memory: **“But you are to remember the LORD your God.”** Biblical gratitude was therefore never merely a pleasant emotional reaction to favorable circumstances. It was a discipline of seeing reality correctly. ([Deuteronomy 8:10–18](#))

That brings us to an extraordinary anniversary. On **October 3, 1789—237 years ago today—President George Washington issued a proclamation calling the people of the new United States to stop, remember what they had received, acknowledge the providence of Almighty God, confess their failures, pray for wise government, and deliberately give thanks.** Washington did not leave the recipient of that thanksgiving vague. (Primary Source: George Washington, “[Thanksgiving Proclamation](#),” October 3, 1789, National Archives transcription via DocsTeach)

That is where this classroom begins. Before Thanksgiving became a fixed holiday, a familiar meal, a shopping season, or a cultural tradition, it was repeatedly used as a discipline of national memory—an invitation to stop long enough to ask what had been received, what had been survived, what obligations followed, and whether prosperity itself might become dangerous when its Source was forgotten. The investigations that follow trace that habit of remembrance from Plymouth to the Revolution, from Washington to Lincoln, and ultimately back to the modern family table.



## Before We Enter Classroom 4: A Timely New Senate Resolution—And The First Three Lessons You May Have Missed

The timing of this CrossFireUSA series could scarcely be more appropriate. **Just this week, U.S. Senators Tommy Tuberville of Alabama and Darline Graham of South Carolina (the sister of the late Sen. Lindsey Graham, who died in July 2026, and who was subsequently appointed to fill his Senate seat) introduced a resolution designating September 27–October 3, 2026, as “Religious Education Week.”** They were joined by nearly thirty Senate cosponsors. The resolution seeks to highlight the importance of religious education in America, while Senator Tuberville specifically challenged what he called the “myth” that America’s Founders intended to remove God from the public square. Whatever ultimately becomes of the resolution, its introduction makes the historical questions we have been examining in *America’s Forgotten Classroom* remarkably timely. ([U.S. Senator Tommy Tuberville, “Tuberville, Graham Introduce Resolution Honoring Religious Education,” September 28, 2026](#))

*America’s Forgotten Classroom* is intentionally cumulative. Each investigation has built upon the one before it because America’s older understanding of education, liberty, conscience, virtue, religion, and self-government cannot adequately be reconstructed from isolated quotations or disconnected historical moments.

**If you missed one or more of the first three classrooms, I strongly encourage you to set aside some time to read them.** They are not introductory installments that become obsolete



when the next edition appears. Together they contain critical information that can help you, your children, and your grandchildren understand what education once sought to form, why the Founding generation believed character mattered to liberty, and why religious freedom meant protection of conscience rather than governmental ownership of it.

### **Classroom 1 — Why America Must Go Back To School To Go Forward Into The Future**

Part 1 established the controlling premise of the series: **education is not merely information; education is formation.** America's older classroom sought to form readers and thinkers, certainly, but also citizens, consciences, families, moral judgment, responsibility, and souls. At its best, the schoolhouse operated alongside the home, church, Scripture, community, and civic memory rather than assuming responsible free citizens would somehow emerge automatically.

Part 1 consequently asked a question larger than test scores: what kind of person is education producing? A student can become more technically capable without becoming more just, wiser, more self-controlled, or more truthful. The concern was not opposition to knowledge but recognition that intellectual development and moral formation are not identical tasks.

### **Classroom 2 — Washington's Future Warning To America: Religion, Morality, And The Myth Of Secular Virtue**

Part 2 carried the investigation into George Washington's Farewell Address of September 19, 1796. Washington described religion and morality as “**indispensable supports**” of political prosperity and warned Americans against assuming that refined education alone could preserve national morality once the deeper religious foundations of conscience were weakened.

That classroom therefore asked what governs a citizen when the parent, teacher, employer, police officer, judge, neighbor, or president is no longer watching. Washington's argument reached beneath constitutions and laws into human character. A free society necessarily gives citizens substantial liberty, and liberty places enormous weight upon the ability of citizens to govern themselves internally.

### **Classroom 3 — America's Forgotten First Amendment: Religious Liberty Is Not Secular Censorship**

Part 3 then asked how a society that considered religion important to moral formation could protect religion without placing religious belief under governmental control. The investigation followed that question through Article VI, Virginia's religious-liberty struggles, Madison's *Memorial and Remonstrance*, the First Congress, the Religion Clauses, and subsequent constitutional development.

The historical distinction was crucial. Governmental non-establishment was not synonymous with the removal of religion from American life. The constitutional project sought to restrain governmental control of conscience while protecting religious exercise. Classroom 1 therefore



examined formation, Classroom 2 examined the moral foundation of self-government, and Classroom 3 examined the liberty within which conviction could develop.

Classroom 4 now asks what a formed and freely exercised conscience should learn to do with blessing.

Washington's answer was gratitude.



## Investigation 1 — The Forgotten Date: Why October 3, 1789 Matters

Most Americans understandably associate Thanksgiving with late November. So why are we entering America's Forgotten Thanksgiving Classroom on **October 3**?

October 3 was not the date of the Thanksgiving observance itself. It was the date on which **George Washington issued the proclamation.**

On September 28, 1789, shortly before recess, the First Federal Congress approved a resolution requesting that the president recommend a national day of public thanksgiving and prayer. Congress specifically wanted Americans to acknowledge the favors of Almighty God, particularly the opportunity peacefully to establish the new constitutional government. Five days later, on **October 3**, Washington issued his proclamation and designated **Thursday, November 26, 1789**, for the observance. The National Archives identifies this as the first Thanksgiving

celebrated nationally under the new Constitution. (Primary Historical Record: National Archives, [“Congress Establishes Thanksgiving.”](#))

There was not yet a federal statute permanently fixing Thanksgiving to a particular Thursday in November. Colonial governments, states, presidents, and Congresses had historically designated particular days of thanksgiving, fasting, humiliation, or prayer in response to particular circumstances, so dates varied considerably. The annual national late-November pattern developed gradually rather than appearing fully formed in 1789. (Historical Analysis: Dr. John T. Woolley, [“Evolution of the Thanksgiving Proclamation,”](#) American Presidency Project.)

October 3 carries another extraordinary significance. Exactly **seventy-four years later, on October 3, 1863**, Abraham Lincoln issued the proclamation that helped establish the continuing annual national Thanksgiving tradition during the Civil War. Washington and Lincoln governed America under radically different circumstances, yet on the same calendar date they both summoned the nation to remember blessings under Providence. (Primary Source: Abraham Lincoln, [Thanksgiving Proclamation](#), October 3, 1863.)

And the religious significance attached to October 3 did not end with Washington and Lincoln. More than a century later, **President Jimmy Carter designated Wednesday, October 3, 1979, as the National Day of Prayer.** Acting under the 1952 congressional law requiring the president annually to designate such a day, Carter called Americans to “recommit ourselves to God” and to pray for wisdom, justice, peace, liberty, and the well-being of future generations. It would be an overstatement to suggest that Carter deliberately selected October 3 because of Washington’s and Lincoln’s Thanksgiving proclamations; I have found no evidence establishing that connection. Nevertheless, the historical convergence is striking. October 3, 1789, brought Washington’s summons to national thanksgiving and prayer; October 3, 1863, brought Lincoln’s Thanksgiving proclamation amid the Civil War; and October 3, 1979, was itself observed nationally as a Day of Prayer. Across nearly two centuries, the same date became associated at three different moments with presidents publicly calling Americans to gratitude, prayer, dependence upon God, and reflection upon the nation’s blessings and responsibilities. (Primary Source: President Jimmy Carter, [“Proclamation 4690—National Day of Prayer, 1979,”](#) September 19, 1979; National Day of Prayer observed October 3, 1979.)

That **threefold historical convergence** makes October 3 an especially fitting date for this classroom. It is not merely the anniversary of Washington putting his signature to America’s first national Thanksgiving proclamation under the Constitution. It is a date that, on three remarkable occasions in American history, became connected with national thanksgiving, prayer, Providence, and acknowledgment of dependence upon God.

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## Investigation 2 — Before Washington: Thanksgiving Was Already Part of America’s Religious Memory

Washington did not invent the American vocabulary of providence, prayer, repentance, fasting, and thanksgiving in 1789. Those categories had existed in British North America for generations and reflected a wider Protestant religious culture in which public events were frequently interpreted through biblical categories.

**Dr. Thomas S. Kidd, Ph.D. (University of Notre Dame), Research Professor of Church History at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and author of *God of Liberty: A Religious History of the American Revolution***, has devoted much of his scholarship to the religious world of colonial and Revolutionary America. His work is useful here because it reminds modern readers that religion cannot responsibly be treated as an ornamental feature pasted onto early American culture; it supplied categories through which many colonists understood liberty, suffering, Providence, revival, war, and public duty. (Scholar Profile: Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, [Dr. Thomas S. Kidd biography](#).)

Dr. Kidd’s broader argument reinforces this point. In *God of Liberty*, he identifies several ideas that repeatedly shaped Revolutionary-era public religion, including the conviction that **God or Providence acts in and through nations**, that human sinfulness threatens political life, that virtue is necessary to sustain a republic, and that religious liberty should be protected. In other words, providential language was not an isolated flourish that suddenly appeared in Washington’s 1789 proclamation; it belonged to a much older interpretive framework through which many Americans understood both blessing and crisis. As one summary of Kidd’s research puts it, Americans of the Revolutionary era commonly understood “**God/Providence**” as



moving “in and through nations,” even while differing sharply over doctrine and denominational allegiance. (Scholarly Analysis: Dr. Thomas S. Kidd, [God of Liberty: A Religious History of the American Revolution](#), Basic Books, 2010, book overview.)

That worldview also shaped the way communities responded publicly to crisis and blessing. In colonial New England, civil authorities could appoint **days of fasting and humiliation** during war, drought, epidemic, political danger, or other calamity, while periods of perceived deliverance could prompt public days of thanksgiving. Historian **Dr. Peter van Rooden of the University of Amsterdam** has described these fast and thanksgiving observances as major communal rituals in which political communities gathered in churches and interpreted their circumstances before God. They were therefore more than private devotional exercises; they helped communities understand suffering, blessing, repentance, and social responsibility within a shared moral framework. (Dr. Peter van Rooden, [“Public Orders into Moral Communities: Eighteenth-Century Fast and Thanksgiving Day Sermons in the Dutch Republic and New England”](#), *Studies in Church History*, Cambridge University Press.)

This helps explain why later Revolutionary proclamations sound so natural rather than novel. The **Library of Congress** notes that during the Revolutionary era, Congress repeatedly proclaimed national days of thanksgiving as well as days of “**humiliation, fasting, and prayer**,” drawing upon a covenantal religious tradition in which public prosperity and adversity were interpreted in relation to divine Providence and moral accountability. That continuity matters: by the time Washington issued his proclamation in 1789, Americans had already inherited generations of language connecting public events with prayer, repentance, thanksgiving, and dependence upon God. Washington was therefore not creating a new religious vocabulary for the Republic; he was speaking within an established American tradition that long predated the Constitution. (Historical Background: Library of Congress, [“Religion and the Congress of the Confederation”](#).)

The Plymouth story illustrates that older worldview vividly. On September 6, 1620, according to the Old Style calendar then used in England, the *Mayflower* began the Atlantic crossing carrying approximately 102 passengers toward an uncertain life in North America. The voyage lasted roughly sixty-six days and involved cramped quarters, prolonged confinement, storms, inadequate sanitation, sickness, monotonous provisions, and very little personal space.

Arrival did not end their suffering. Disease and malnutrition swept through the struggling settlement during the first winter, killing roughly half of the passengers. The settlers' survival also depended substantially upon Indigenous assistance and knowledge. The popular image of contented Pilgrims sitting comfortably around America's first Thanksgiving table therefore obscures the staggering losses that immediately preceded the harvest.

That historical setting is precisely why their gratitude deserves attention.

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## Investigation 3 — The Pilgrims Were Thankful After Graves, Not Because Life Had Been Easy

The autumn gathering of **1621** is popularly remembered as the “First Thanksgiving,” but historical precision makes the story more interesting rather than less.

The only surviving eyewitness description was written by **Edward Winslow (1595–1655), Mayflower passenger, later governor of Plymouth Colony, diplomat, and early chronicler of the settlement.** Winslow described a three-day harvest celebration in which approximately ninety Pokanoket Wampanoag men associated with Ousamequin—commonly known to the English as Massasoit—joined the English settlers. The Wampanoag participants contributed five deer to the gathering. (Primary Source: Edward Winslow, 1621 letter published in *Mourt's Relation*, reproduced by Plimoth Patuxet Museums, [1621 eyewitness account](#).)

Plimoth Patuxet Museums appropriately notes that Winslow did not call the gathering the “First Thanksgiving.” The event was principally a harvest celebration rather than the formal Puritan religious observance that the word *thanksgiving* often carried in their own religious vocabulary. The familiar label was applied retrospectively much later. (Historical Background: Plimoth Patuxet Museums, [Thanksgiving history](#).)

What Winslow actually wrote is more useful to this investigation. After describing the harvest, hunting, guests, and food, he explained that although circumstances were not always so plentiful, “**by the goodness of God**” the settlement had been brought sufficiently far from want that they wished their friends in England could participate in their abundance. (Primary Source: Edward Winslow, [Mourt's Relation](#), 1621, Plimoth Patuxet transcription.)

**Dr. Susan Hardman Moore, Ph.D., Professor Emerita of Early Modern Religion at the University of Edinburgh and author of *Pilgrims: New World Settlers and the Call of Home***, has emphasized that the religious world of the Plymouth settlers cannot be separated from the way they interpreted ordinary events. Their understanding of Providence shaped how they viewed migration, survival, harvest, suffering, and deliverance; gratitude was therefore not simply a pleasant response to abundance but part of a larger theological habit of interpreting life beneath God's sovereignty. Plimoth Patuxet's own historical curriculum makes the same point even more directly, observing that it is **“impossible to understand the outpouring of gratitude”** surrounding the 1621 harvest without understanding the faith that permeated the settlers' lives. That helps explain why Winslow's seemingly simple phrase **“by the goodness of God”** carries such historical weight: it was not an ornamental religious expression added to an otherwise secular account, but language arising naturally from the worldview through which these settlers interpreted both deprivation and provision. (Scholarly Background: Dr. Susan Hardman Moore, Professor of Early Modern Religion and author of *Pilgrims: New World Settlers and the Call of Home*, [Yale University Press](#), [“The Evolution of Thanksgiving”](#); Historical Interpretation: Plimoth Patuxet Museums, [“Giving Thanks in Song—Psalm 100”](#).)

Another Pilgrim historian reaches the same conclusion from the language of the primary sources themselves. **Dr. Jeremy Dupertuis Bangs, Ph.D. (1946–2023), historian of the Pilgrims and former director of the Leiden American Pilgrim Museum**, argued that Edward Winslow's words would have carried an unmistakably providential meaning to seventeenth-century readers. Bangs concluded that Winslow's account implies that the colonists were giving thanks to God not merely for food, but **“for their preservation and for the plenty that gave hope for the future.”** That distinction matters. The harvest represented more than a successful agricultural season; to people who had only recently watched nearly half their company die, its abundance was evidence that their fragile settlement had survived long enough to possess a future at all. (Scholarly Analysis: Dr. Jeremy Dupertuis Bangs, [“1621: A Historian Looks Anew at Thanksgiving”](#), Society of Mayflower Descendants in the State of Pennsylvania.)

The historical context gives those words their force. The survivors remembered the Atlantic crossing, sickness, hunger, and graves. Many had lost husbands, wives, parents, children, siblings, or companions who had boarded the *Mayflower* with them only months earlier. Yet Winslow could interpret what remained through the category of God's goodness.

The point becomes even clearer when we remember how little time separated the harvest from the catastrophe of the first winter. These were not distant ancestral losses remembered generations later; they were fresh absences around the settlement itself. Empty places in families, recent graves, weakened survivors, and uncertainty about the future formed the immediate background to Winslow's words. Gratitude in that setting was not forgetfulness of suffering but a deliberate recognition that suffering had not exhausted the whole meaning of their experience.

Their gratitude therefore did not depend upon the absence of grief. Biblical gratitude does not require Christians to call pain pleasant, deny tragedy, or pretend that unanswered questions do not hurt. Christian faith instead places suffering within a larger frame in which God has not abandoned His people.





## Investigation 4 — William Bradford Explains Why They Called Themselves “Pilgrims”

**William Bradford (1590–1657), Mayflower passenger, longtime governor of Plymouth Colony, and author of *Of Plymouth Plantation* gives us an even deeper window into the worldview the settlers carried with them.**

Before their departure from Holland, Bradford described an emotional worship service during which the congregation prayed fervently and wept over the separation that lay ahead. He later remembered that those leaving Leiden knew they were “**pilgrims**,” lifted their eyes toward heaven as their dearest country, and quieted their spirits. His imagery closely parallels Hebrews 11:13–16, where believers confess themselves strangers and pilgrims seeking a better, heavenly country. (Primary Source: William Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*; biblical parallel: Hebrews 11:13–16.)

That biblical language matters because the settlers' theological identity was not invented after Plymouth eventually survived. They understood themselves as pilgrims before the Atlantic voyage began. Their deepest measure of God's faithfulness therefore could not be reduced to whether every crop succeeded, every child survived, every prayer received the desired answer, or every human plan ended comfortably.

That does not minimize tragedy. It explains how suffering and gratitude could coexist without contradiction. Christian Providence does not mean everything experienced is pleasant; it means

that the believer's life remains within the knowledge and sovereignty of God even when the immediate outcome is painful or unfinished.

In that sense, Plymouth helps us understand why thanksgiving historically meant more than celebrating favorable circumstances.

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## Investigation 5 — The Thanksgiving Of 1623 Is Even More Revealing

The Plymouth event that may fit the colony's own religious meaning of *thanksgiving* even better occurred two years after the famous harvest gathering.

During **1623**, severe drought threatened Plymouth's crops. Edward Winslow later described the colonists' discouragement as their agricultural prospects deteriorated. Civil authorities therefore appointed a formal “**day of humiliation and prayer**,” setting aside ordinary work while the community sought God's mercy. (Primary Source: Edward Winslow, *Good Newes from New England*, reproduced by Plimoth Patuxet Museums, [“A Day of Thanksgiving, Summer 1623”](#).)

Winslow reported that sustained, gentle rain followed at a time when the endangered crops desperately needed it. The colonists interpreted the change as divine mercy and appointed another solemn day, this time to return “**glory, honor, and praise**” with thanksgiving to God. Plimoth Patuxet explains that such days were not necessarily fixed annual holidays: a day of humiliation and fasting might be appointed in calamity, while a day of thanksgiving might be



proclaimed after perceived deliverance. (Historical Background: Plimoth Patuxet Museums, [“A Day of Thanksgiving, Summer 1623”](#).)

This older rhythm of prayer, repentance, Providence, and thanksgiving helps explain later American proclamations. Difficult circumstances invited moral examination and petition; perceived mercy invited gratitude. Thanksgiving was therefore not originally dependent upon a permanent national calendar or particular foods. It was a religious response to remembered Providence.

Nearly 170 years later, Washington would employ remarkably similar categories.



## Investigation 6 — Revolutionary America Gave Thanks Before Independence Was Secure

Washington's 1789 proclamation was the first national Thanksgiving under the new Constitution, but it was not the first Thanksgiving proclamation connected with an American national governing body.

On **November 1, 1777**, while the Revolutionary War remained unsettled, the Continental Congress recommended that **Thursday, December 18**, be observed as a day of thanksgiving and praise. The surviving broadside begins by declaring it the duty of human beings to adore the “**superintending Providence of Almighty God**” and acknowledge with gratitude their obligations for benefits received. The proclamation thanked God for recent military successes



and asked continued divine favor during what it characterized as a struggle to defend American rights and liberties. (Primary Source: [Continental Congress Thanksgiving Proclamation](#), November 1, 1777, Library of Congress, 1777 Thanksgiving broadside.)

The timing is significant. The proclamation followed the American victory at Saratoga, but independence was far from guaranteed. Britain remained a formidable military power, the war would continue for years, and no one in November 1777 could look backward upon the Revolution as an accomplished success. (Primary Document: Library of Congress broadside, [Continental Congress Thanksgiving Proclamation](#).)

The proclamation is even more striking when read against the military reality of late 1777. Saratoga had produced a major American victory, but British forces still occupied Philadelphia, Washington's army would soon enter the brutal winter encampment at Valley Forge, and the outcome of the war remained deeply uncertain. In other words, Congress was not giving thanks from the safety of a completed revolution. It was acknowledging a particular mercy while still facing enormous danger, deprivation, and political instability. That distinction reinforces the larger pattern of this classroom: thanksgiving in early America was often an act of remembering providential help **before** the full story had been resolved, not merely a celebration after every threat had disappeared.

**Dr. Mark David Hall, Ph.D. (University of Virginia), Professor in the Robertson School of Government at Regent University and a leading scholar of religion, political thought, and church-state relations in the American Founding**, has argued that modern interpretations often go wrong when they force the Founders into overly simple categories. His research emphasizes that Christian ideas were among the important intellectual influences shaping the Founding generation and that religion remained a legitimate part of public life rather than something understood as purely private. That larger context helps explain why the Continental Congress could speak so naturally of the “**superintending Providence of Almighty God**” while simultaneously fighting for political independence: public thanksgiving, repentance, prayer, and appeals to Providence were not foreign intrusions into Revolutionary political culture but part of the moral and religious vocabulary through which many Americans interpreted the struggle itself. (Scholarly Analysis: Dr. Mark David Hall, “[Did America Have a Christian Founding?](#),” George Fox University Digital Commons; Scholar Credentials: Regent University, [Dr. Mark David Hall faculty profile](#).)

This provides another recurring feature of the American Thanksgiving tradition. Thanksgiving was repeatedly practiced inside unfinished history rather than only after every uncertainty had disappeared. Plymouth gave thanks amid the fragility of settlement, Revolutionary Americans gave thanks while independence remained contested, and Washington would later call a new constitutional republic to gratitude while its entire system of government remained experimental.

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## Investigation 7 — Congress Asked Washington to Call The Nation to Thanksgiving

The circumstances of Washington's proclamation are especially significant when placed beside Classroom 3.

On **September 25, 1789**, the First Congress approved twelve proposed amendments and sent them to the states. Those proposals ultimately produced the ten amendments we know as the Bill of Rights. Only three days later, on **September 28**, Congress adopted the resolution asking President Washington to recommend a day of public thanksgiving and prayer. (Historical Record: National Archives, "[Congress Establishes Thanksgiving](#)," National Archives feature.)

Congress's request specifically called upon Americans to acknowledge with grateful hearts the **“many signal favors of Almighty God,”** particularly the opportunity peacefully to establish a form of government for their safety and happiness. Washington incorporated that congressional request into the proclamation itself. (Primary Source: George Washington, [Thanksgiving Proclamation](#), October 3, 1789, Mount Vernon transcription.)

That juxtaposition deserves careful notice. The same First Congress involved in constructing constitutional protections touching religion and conscience could also request a public day of thanksgiving and prayer directed toward Almighty God. Whatever subsequent constitutional doctrines would develop, those members plainly did not assume that protecting religious liberty required erasing every public acknowledgment of God from national life.

Five days later Washington responded, and the theological language he chose was remarkably specific.

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## Investigation 8 — Read The Whole Proclamation: Washington Left Little About God Vague

Modern discussions occasionally reduce Washington's religious language to an indistinct reference to “Providence.” The October 3 proclamation does not support such a thin reading. From beginning to end, Washington describes an intelligent, active, morally authoritative and benevolent God who possesses a will, grants benefits, governs history, protects people, shows mercy, hears petitions, forgives transgression, guides nations, blesses governments, promotes religion and virtue, and determines what measure of temporal prosperity is ultimately best. (Primary Source: George Washington, “[Thanksgiving Proclamation](#),” October 3, 1789, National Archives transcription via DocsTeach; Mount Vernon transcription.)

Washington begins with “**the providence of Almighty God.**” The two expressions belong together. *Almighty God* identifies the One being acknowledged, while *Providence* describes His active governance and care. Washington immediately declares that nations have duties toward Him: they are to obey His will, be grateful for His benefits, and humbly ask for His protection and favor. The God of Washington's opening sentence therefore has a will worthy of obedience, bestows benefits worthy of gratitude, and exercises protection for which human beings may pray. (Primary Source: George Washington, [Thanksgiving Proclamation](#), Mount Vernon transcription.)



Washington then repeats Congress's call to acknowledge the **“many and signal favors of Almighty God.”** This matters because the religious framing was not solely Washington's private initiative; the congressional request itself employed explicit theological language. He subsequently calls God **“that great and glorious Being”** and identifies Him as the **“beneficent Author of all the good that was, that is, or that will be.”** Washington's thanksgiving therefore has a definite recipient and a definite understanding of divine benevolence. (Primary Source: George Washington, [Thanksgiving Proclamation](#), Mount Vernon transcription.)

The proclamation next thanks God for His **“kind care and protection”** of America's inhabitants even before they became a nation. Washington then refers to God's **“signal and manifold mercies”** and the favorable interpositions of **“His Providence”** during the Revolutionary War. Providence in this document is therefore not merely a philosophical proposition about creation; Washington connects it directly with events in American history. (Primary Source: George Washington, [Thanksgiving Proclamation](#), Mount Vernon transcription.)

**Dr. Michael Novak (1933–2017)**, theologian, philosopher, former U.S. ambassador, and longtime scholar of religion and public life, together with his daughter Jana Novak, examined Washington's religious language extensively in *Washington's God: Religion, Liberty, and the Father of Our Country*. Their central argument is that Washington's repeated references to Providence should not be reduced to an impersonal Deistic force. Novak observed that Washington expected Providence to act in history, forgive sins, guide events, grant harvests, protect nations, and intervene morally—actions far closer to the God of the Bible than to the distant deity associated with strict Deism. As Novak later summarized it, Washington had a sophisticated grasp of what he called the **“Doctrine of Providence,”** and that conviction shaped the prayers and public appeals he directed both to his army and to the nation. (Scholarly Analysis: Michael Novak and Jana Novak, *Washington's God: Religion, Liberty, and the Father of Our Country*, [Michael Novak, “Washington's God”](#); see also Michael Novak, [“Who Was Washington's God?”](#).)

Washington's list continues with tranquility, union, plenty, the peaceful establishment of constitutions, the new national government, **civil and religious liberty**, and the means of acquiring and spreading useful knowledge. He gathers these together as favors God had been pleased to confer upon the people. Constitutionally protected liberty and intellectual advancement themselves therefore become occasions for gratitude rather than evidence that religion has become unnecessary. (Primary Source: George Washington, [Thanksgiving Proclamation](#), Mount Vernon transcription.)

The proclamation then moves deliberately from thanksgiving into confession. Washington addresses God as the **“great Lord and Ruler of Nations”** and asks Him to pardon **“our national and other transgressions.”** The new Republic therefore appears neither morally self-sufficient nor morally infallible. The nation could receive blessings and still commit wrongs requiring repentance. (Primary Source: George Washington, [Thanksgiving Proclamation](#), Mount Vernon transcription.)

Washington next prays that Americans in both public and private stations will properly perform their duties and that the national government will remain a blessing by maintaining **wise, just,**

**and constitutional laws** that are faithfully executed and obeyed. He asks God to protect and guide other nations, particularly those that had shown kindness to America, and to bless them with good government, peace, and concord. Divine Providence therefore does not erase human duty; it intensifies the obligation to govern and live responsibly. (Primary Source: George Washington, [Thanksgiving Proclamation](#), Mount Vernon transcription.)

Finally, Washington asks God to promote **“the knowledge and practice of true religion and virtue”** alongside the **increase of science**, and to grant humanity such temporal prosperity **“as he alone knows to be best.”** Those closing petitions are particularly important for *America's Forgotten Classroom*. Religion, virtue, intellectual advancement, and science appear in the same petition rather than as adversaries, while material prosperity remains subordinate to divine wisdom. (Primary Source: George Washington, [Thanksgiving Proclamation](#), Mount Vernon transcription.)

Read as a whole, the proclamation contains a coherent theology of gratitude. God is Almighty, providential, benevolent, merciful, morally authoritative, attentive to nations, able to forgive transgression, capable of guiding rulers, and ultimately wiser than human beings about how much prosperity is good for them.

That is considerably more substantial than ceremonial deism.



## Investigation 9 — What Did Washington Mean By “Providence”?

The word *Providence* deserves additional attention because modern readers sometimes hear it as though Washington were intentionally avoiding a personal God. His own proclamation makes that interpretation extremely difficult. Providence belongs to the Almighty God whose will is to be obeyed, whose benefits inspire gratitude, whose protection is sought, whose mercy appears within history, whose forgiveness is needed, and who is explicitly called the **Lord and Ruler of Nations**. (Primary Source: George Washington, [Thanksgiving Proclamation](#), Mount Vernon transcription.)

Washington's use of *Providence* was not confined to the 1789 proclamation or even to his presidency. As a young officer in 1755, after surviving the disastrous Battle of the Monongahela with bullets through his coat and horses shot beneath him, he wrote that **"by the all-powerful dispensations of Providence"** he had been preserved beyond ordinary expectation. In 1773, consoling his brother-in-law after the death of a daughter, he wrote that **"the ways of Providence"** were beyond full human understanding and urged "a cheerful acquiescence to the Divine Will." During the Revolution he repeatedly spoke of the **"smiles of Providence"** upon the American cause, and in later public life he continued to describe a **"superintending Providence"** as governing the events of the world and observing human conduct. Across decades, therefore, Washington used *Providence* in connection with personal preservation, bereavement, military events, national affairs, moral accountability, and divine will—making it difficult to treat the term as merely an impersonal synonym for fate. (Primary Sources: George Washington to John Augustine Washington, July 18, 1755, [Mount Vernon transcription](#); George Washington to Burwell Bassett, April 20, 1773, [Mount Vernon transcription](#); Mount Vernon, [Washington on religion and Providence](#).)

**Dr. Daniel L. Dreisbach**, D.Phil. (Oxford), J.D. (University of Virginia), professor at American University and scholar of American constitutional history, First Amendment law, church-state relations, and the religious dimensions of the Founding, is especially useful when interpreting this world. Dr. Dreisbach's scholarship has emphasized how thoroughly biblical language and concepts entered Founding-era discussions of public life, supplying vocabulary for human nature, virtue, authority, liberty, and government. (Scholar Credentials: American University, [Dr. Daniel L. Dreisbach faculty profile](#).)

Recognizing that religious vocabulary does not require pretending every Founder possessed identical theology. They plainly did not. The historical point is narrower and stronger: terms such as *Providence*, *Almighty God*, *Creator*, *religion*, *virtue*, *sin*, and *duty* belonged naturally within the political language of the era, and Washington's proclamation uses them in ways that attribute personal agency and moral authority to God.

That becomes important when we reconnect Classroom 4 with Washington's Farewell Address.

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## Investigation 10 — Classroom 2 And Classroom 4 Address The Same Problem From Different Directions

Seven years after the Thanksgiving Proclamation, Washington's Farewell Address warned that religion and morality were “**indispensable supports**” of political prosperity. As we examined in Classroom 2, Washington questioned whether morality could safely continue without its religious foundation and warned against assuming that refined education by itself would be an adequate substitute.

The Farewell Address therefore describes the problem theoretically: republican government depends upon citizens whose behavior is governed by more than external coercion. The Thanksgiving Proclamation allows us to see one practical expression of that formation. Americans were invited to remember before they forgot, acknowledge dependence rather than imagine self-sufficiency, confess wrongdoing rather than assume innocence, fulfill duties rather than merely demand benefits, and understand liberty as blessing rather than entitlement.

This gives gratitude a civic dimension without reducing it to politics. A person who views freedom entirely as something self-created may ask chiefly what liberty permits him to do. A person taught that freedom was inherited through sacrifice and received under Providence may also ask what obligations accompany that inheritance.

The issue therefore reaches directly into the classroom. If liberty requires character, and character requires formation, then teaching people how to remember blessings is part of teaching them how to receive liberty responsibly.



## Investigation 11 — Washington Put Gratitude And Repentance In The Same Document

Washington's proclamation refuses two opposite distortions of national memory. The first is the assumption that recognizing national wrongdoing requires denying every blessing, virtue, sacrifice, or achievement. The second is the assumption that gratitude for national blessings requires pretending the nation is morally innocent.

Washington does neither. The same proclamation that thanks God for independence, peace, constitutional government, civil and religious liberty, and knowledge also asks forgiveness for **“our national and other transgressions.”** The language allows Americans to acknowledge genuine blessings without declaring themselves sinless and to confess genuine wrongs without concluding that every national inheritance should therefore be despised. (Primary Source: Washington [Thanksgiving Proclamation](#), Mount Vernon transcription.)

**Dr. Michael Novak (1933–2017) emphasized in *Washington’s God* that Washington’s religious outlook consistently joined Providence with moral responsibility rather than treating divine favor as an automatic endorsement of the nation.** Novak argued that Washington’s God was not simply a distant source of national success but a personal and governing Providence before whom individuals and nations alike remained accountable. That helps explain why the 1789 proclamation can move so naturally from gratitude for liberty, peace, and constitutional government to confession of **“our national and other transgressions.”** In Washington’s framework, blessing did not erase sin, and patriotism did not cancel repentance;



the same Providence who bestowed mercies also supplied the moral standard by which national conduct could be judged. (Scholarly Analysis: Michael Novak and Jana Novak, *Washington's God: Religion, Liberty, and the Father of Our Country*, [Michael Novak, "Washington's God"](#); see also ["Who Was Washington's God?"](#).)

That structure is deeply compatible with biblical historical memory. Scripture regularly remembers deliverance and rebellion, obedience and failure, judgment and mercy within the same story. Biblical memory is neither propaganda nor nihilism; it is history understood beneath moral accountability to God.

That provides a useful educational principle. Mature historical instruction does not require choosing between romanticizing previous generations and despising them. It can recognize courage, sacrifice, hypocrisy, sin, achievement, mercy, and repentance together.

Washington's Thanksgiving Classroom does exactly that.



## Investigation 12 — John Adams Continued The Language Of National Dependence

Washington was followed by **John Adams (1735–1826)**, second president of the United States, whose religious proclamations demonstrate how naturally national dependence upon God remained part of early federal rhetoric.



On March 23, 1798, Adams recommended a national day of humiliation, fasting, and prayer. He wrote that the **“safety and prosperity of nations ultimately and essentially depend on the protection and the blessing of Almighty God,”** and connected national acknowledgment of that truth with the morality and piety necessary for social happiness and free government. He also asked Americans to confess individual and national transgressions, pray for civil and religious liberty, and accompany their petitions with thanksgiving to the **“Bestower of Every Good Gift.”** (Primary Source: John Adams, [Proclamation 8](#), March 23, 1798, American Presidency Project transcription.)

That language fits closely beside Adams's political observations examined in Classroom 2. His concern was not simply how to construct a strong constitution but how to sustain a population capable of living freely beneath it. Religious conviction, moral restraint, public duty, gratitude, and repentance were therefore related questions within his understanding of republican society.

Adams did not have to turn government into a church to make that argument. The deeper proposition was that constitutional machinery cannot by itself manufacture all the character upon which constitutional government depends.



## Investigation 13 — Jefferson Shows That The Early Presidents Did Not Agree on Everything

The next president, **Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826)**, is important precisely because early American leaders were not uniform in either theology or constitutional interpretation.

Jefferson declined to follow Washington and Adams in issuing presidential proclamations for national days of fasting and thanksgiving. His surviving papers connect that reluctance with his understanding of the federal government's limited authority in religious matters. That places Jefferson at a different point from Washington and Adams regarding presidential involvement in formal religious observances. (Primary and Historical Source: Library of Congress, “Religion and the Federal Government, Part 2: The ‘Wall of Separation’,” [Library of Congress exhibition](#).)

The distinction should not be blurred, because honest history becomes stronger when genuine disagreement is preserved. The early Republic did not possess one universally accepted theory of presidential religious proclamations.

Yet Jefferson's difference also reinforces a lesson from Classroom 3. Americans could debate the constitutional limits of federal religious activity while continuing to inhabit a society in which religious conviction, churches, Scripture, Providence, and theological argument remained highly visible. The debate concerned governmental authority over religion; it did not mean religious ideas ceased to exist in public life.



## Investigation 14 — Madison Joined Religious Liberty With Voluntary Thanksgiving

**James Madison (1751–1836)**, fourth president of the United States and one of the principal architects of the Constitution and Bill of Rights, makes that distinction even more interesting.

Madison had argued powerfully in his *Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments* that religious obligation precedes civil authority and therefore lies outside government's rightful ownership. Yet during the War of 1812, and again after peace returned, Madison issued religious proclamations at congressional request.

His **March 4, 1815** proclamation recommended a day of public thanksgiving for the restoration of peace. Madison referred to Almighty God, the **“Great Disposer of Events and of the Destiny of Nations,”** divine Providence during America's early struggles, and the **“Divine Author of Every Good and Perfect Gift.”** He invited people of every religious denomination to unite voluntarily in a **“freewill offering”** of thanksgiving to their Heavenly Benefactor. (Primary Source: James Madison, [Proclamation 20](#), March 4, 1815, American Presidency Project transcription.)

Madison's choice of words is especially significant when read alongside his later explanation of how such proclamations should operate. In an 1822 letter to Edward Livingston, Madison wrote that when he issued presidential religious proclamations, he was careful to make them **“absolutely indiscriminate, and merely recommendatory,”** so that citizens who wished to participate could do so according to **“their own faith & forms.”** That clarification helps us understand the phrase **“freewill offering”** in the 1815 proclamation: Madison was not describing a government command to worship, nor was he establishing a national church or prescribing a denomination's theology. He was drawing a constitutional distinction between **coercing religious observance and publicly recommending a voluntary occasion for religious gratitude.** The same statesman who defended the independence of conscience could therefore invite Americans of every denomination to thank the “Heavenly Benefactor,” precisely because the invitation left the conscience free. (Primary Source: [James Madison to Edward Livingston, July 10, 1822](#), Library of Congress, Madison letter; see also James Madison, [Thanksgiving Proclamation, March 4, 1815](#), American Presidency Project.)

[Dr. Vincent Phillip Muñoz](#), Ph.D., Tocqueville Professor of Political Science and Concurrent Professor of Law at the University of Notre Dame, has devoted much of his scholarship to precisely this Founding-era understanding of religious liberty. In [Religious Liberty and the American Founding: Natural Rights and the Original Meanings of the First Amendment Religion Clauses](#), Dr. Muñoz argues that the Founders generally understood religious liberty as an **inalienable natural right**, placing real limits upon civil authority in matters of religion. That framework helps illuminate Madison's position: protecting conscience did not require erasing religion from public life; it required recognizing that government did not own the citizen's religious obligations. Madison could therefore defend the independence of conscience while inviting Americans voluntarily to offer thanksgiving to God. (Scholarly Analysis: Dr. Vincent Phillip Muñoz, [Religious Liberty and the American Founding](#), University of Chicago Press, 2022; Scholar Credentials: [University of Notre Dame](#).)

That language is instructive because liberty of conscience and public thanksgiving are not presented as automatic contradictions. Madison's insistence on religious liberty constrained coercion and governmental ownership of belief; his presidential proclamation nevertheless allowed voluntary religious gratitude to appear openly within national life.



This is exactly why Classroom 3 prepared the way for Classroom 4.

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## Investigation 15 — Monroe Continued The Vocabulary Of Gratitude

**James Monroe (1758–1831), fifth president of the United States**, did not create an annual presidential Thanksgiving tradition, but his public rhetoric continued the language of dependence upon God.

At the conclusion of his [Fifth Annual Message](#) on December 3, 1821, Monroe wrote that reflection upon America's blessings drew his mind toward the **“Almighty Being”** from whom they proceeded and to whom the nation's **“most grateful acknowledgments are due.”** (Primary Source: James Monroe, Fifth Annual Message, December 3, 1821, American Presidency Project transcription.)

Monroe's other presidential messages show that this vocabulary was habitual rather than accidental. In his [First Annual Message](#) of 1817, after surveying national prosperity, he wrote that Americans owed **“grateful acknowledgements to that Omnipotent Being from whom they are derived”** and should pray for the virtue and strength necessary to preserve those blessings for posterity. A year later, in his [Second Annual Message](#), Monroe called Americans grateful to **“that Providence which watches over the destiny of nations”** and urged them to offer thanks to the **“Divine Author of All Good.”** In 1820, he described the nation's prosperity as calling forth gratitude to the **“Supreme Author of All Good”** and even referred to

government as an instrument in the hands of an “All-merciful Creator.” By his final [Eighth Annual Message](#) in 1824, Monroe again declared that national blessings were owed to “Almighty God” and closed with a prayer to the “Supreme Ruler of the Universe” for their preservation. Taken together, these statements show a consistent pattern: Monroe repeatedly interpreted national prosperity, constitutional government, peace, and public well-being as gifts received under divine Providence and therefore as occasions for gratitude, prayer, moral responsibility, and stewardship.

Monroe's sentence is brief, but it belongs within the same older grammar of gratitude. Blessings were not treated as self-explanatory material conditions. They prompted the question of their Source and of the acknowledgment owed in response.

The presidential practice remained uneven, but the theological vocabulary endured.



## Investigation 16 — Sarah Josepha Hale Helped Turn Thanksgiving Into A National Annual Tradition

By the nineteenth century, Thanksgiving was widely observed in various states, particularly in New England, but there was still no permanently uniform national annual date.

One of the people most responsible for changing that was **Sarah Josepha Buell Hale (1788–1879)**, author, educator, philanthropist, and longtime editor of the immensely



**influential *Godey's Lady's Book*.** Hale spent years promoting a common national Thanksgiving and communicating with governors and presidents about the idea.

On **September 28, 1863**, she wrote President Abraham Lincoln asking that Thanksgiving become a “**National and fixed Union Festival**.” The date itself carries a remarkable historical echo: seventy-four years earlier, on September 28, 1789, Congress had requested Washington's first national Thanksgiving proclamation under the Constitution. Hale's surviving letter is preserved among Lincoln's papers at the Library of Congress. (Primary Source: [Sarah J. Hale to Abraham Lincoln](#), September 28, 1863, Library of Congress, Hale’s letter to Lincoln.)

Hale's purpose was not merely culinary or commercial. In the middle of the Civil War she believed a shared national observance could help bind a fractured people around a common act of gratitude.

Only five days after her letter, another October 3 entered American Thanksgiving history.



## Investigation 17 — Lincoln Called A Bleeding Nation To Thanksgiving

Abraham Lincoln's **October 3, 1863** proclamation provides perhaps the strongest American historical answer to the idea that thanksgiving belongs only to easy circumstances.



The United States was in the third year of the Civil War. Hundreds of thousands were already dead or wounded, families were divided, widows and orphans were multiplying, and the ultimate shape of the reunited nation was far from settled.

Yet Lincoln began by observing that some blessings had become so constant that Americans were **“prone to forget the source from which they come.”** He attributed them to the **“ever-watchful providence of Almighty God.”** Even amid civil war, Lincoln asked the country to notice what had not been destroyed and what mercies remained. (Primary Source: Abraham Lincoln, [Thanksgiving Proclamation, October 3, 1863](#), American Presidency Project transcription.)

One especially revealing feature of Lincoln’s proclamation is that he deliberately catalogued blessings that continued **during** the war: fruitful fields, productive mines, expanding population, peaceful foreign relations, and the preservation of civil order across much of the country. His point was not that the nation was flourishing without qualification, but that catastrophe had not erased every evidence of provision. Lincoln therefore trained national attention in two directions at once—toward suffering that demanded repentance and compassion, and toward mercies that remained visible even in a season of extraordinary loss. (Primary Source: Abraham Lincoln, [Thanksgiving Proclamation, October 3, 1863](#), American Presidency Project transcription.)

Lincoln also refused to separate gratitude from moral seriousness. His proclamation asked Americans to acknowledge national perverseness and disobedience, commend widows, orphans, mourners, and sufferers to God’s care, and pray for the healing of the nation. Thanksgiving in Lincoln’s hands was therefore neither denial nor triumphalism. It was gratitude practiced in the presence of grief. (Primary Source: Abraham Lincoln, [Thanksgiving Proclamation, October 3, 1863](#), American Presidency Project transcription.)

The proclamation also reveals that Lincoln understood thanksgiving as morally formative rather than merely ceremonial. By asking Americans to remember the afflicted, confess collective wrong, and seek national healing, he turned thanksgiving outward toward responsibility and reconciliation. Gratitude, in that framework, was not escape from the nation’s wounds; it was one of the disciplines by which a wounded people might learn to see clearly, repent where necessary, care for those who suffered most, and hope for restoration without pretending the cost had been small.

This is precisely the pattern we already encountered at Plymouth and in Washington. Gratitude does not require declaring circumstances ideal. It requires refusing to allow pain to become the only reality remembered.

That is a much deeper understanding of Thanksgiving than prosperity alone could produce.

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## Investigation 18 — Why Americans Celebrate Thanksgiving In Late November Today

Lincoln's proclamation helped establish the custom of observing Thanksgiving on the **last Thursday of November**, but the date remained dependent upon presidential proclamation rather than permanent statute.

That produced a famous controversy in **1939**. Because the last Thursday of November fell on November 30, retailers faced an unusually short Christmas shopping season. President Franklin D. Roosevelt moved the federal observance to the second-to-last Thursday in an effort to lengthen the shopping period. The result was widespread calendar confusion: according to the National Archives, **32 states followed Roosevelt's earlier date while 16 retained the traditional last Thursday**. (Historical Record: National Archives, "[Congress Establishes Thanksgiving](#)," National Archives Thanksgiving chronology.)

The dispute lasted longer than many Americans realize. According to the National Archives, the country effectively observed **two different Thanksgiving dates for two years**, with some states following Roosevelt's earlier date and others retaining the traditional last Thursday. The controversy was practical as well as symbolic: calendars, schools, businesses, football schedules, and family plans were all affected, while the economic benefit Roosevelt hoped to achieve remained disputed. Congress finally stepped in not merely to restore custom but to eliminate recurring national confusion. The House initially approved the **last Thursday** of November, but the Senate changed the wording to the **fourth Thursday**, a compromise that prevented the problem from recurring in years with five Thursdays. Roosevelt signed that resolution on **December 26, 1941**, establishing the federal pattern that remains in place today. (Historical

Background: National Archives, [“Congress Establishes Thanksgiving”](#); see also [“Thanksgiving: Another FDR Experiment”](#).)

Congress eventually ended the uncertainty. Legislation enacted in 1941 fixed Thanksgiving as the **fourth Thursday of November**, creating the federal calendar arrangement Americans recognize today. (Historical Record: National Archives, [“Congress Establishes Thanksgiving”](#), National Archives Thanksgiving chronology.)

That answers the question raised at the beginning of this investigation. **October 3 is the anniversary of Washington's proclamation, not the annual Thanksgiving holiday itself.** Washington designated November 26 in 1789; Lincoln revived a late-November national pattern in 1863; Congress ultimately standardized the fourth Thursday decades later.

The chronology is more complicated than the elementary-school version, but also considerably more interesting.



## Investigation 19 — A Scholar Examines How Presidential Thanksgiving Language Changed

The long presidential record allows us to ask whether the explicitly religious language of Washington and Lincoln simply disappeared as America modernized.



**Dr. John T. Woolley, Ph.D. (University of Wisconsin–Madison), Professor Emeritus of Political Science at the University of California, Santa Barbara and co-director of the American Presidency Project**, has studied presidential Thanksgiving proclamations systematically. His specialty includes the American presidency, presidential communication, public policy, and political economy. (Scholar Credentials: UC Santa Barbara Department of Political Science, [Dr. John T. Woolley biography](#).)

Dr. Woolley's analysis concludes that the earliest presidential Thanksgiving proclamations were principally calls to solemn reflection and thanksgiving to a Supreme Being. Over time, proclamations increasingly incorporated American history, Plymouth, family, liberty, democracy, human dignity, and national identity. Yet he found references to a Supreme Being to be a remarkably persistent feature of the tradition. (Scholarly Analysis: Dr. John T. Woolley, "[Evolution of the Thanksgiving Proclamation](#)," American Presidency Project, Thanksgiving proclamation study.)

Woolley's data make the evolution visible in specific presidential language. **Washington's 1789 proclamation contains eight references to a Supreme Being and essentially no references to Plymouth or the Pilgrims**, while Lincoln's 1863 proclamation likewise remains heavily God-directed, with seven such references and almost no historical mythology attached to the holiday. By the twentieth century, however, presidents increasingly blended that older religious vocabulary with references to America's story and civic ideals. **John F. Kennedy's 1961** proclamation, for example, contained five references to a Supreme Being but also ten references to American values; **Lyndon Johnson's 1964** proclamation contained four references to God alongside twelve references to national ideals and five to American history. In the more recent period the historical component grew even more pronounced: **Barack Obama's 2011** proclamation contained eleven historical references with four references to a Supreme Being, and **Donald Trump's 2017** proclamation contained twelve historical references alongside seven references to God or a Supreme Being. **Woolley's updated analysis** therefore describes a genuine shift—not from religious language to purely secular language, but from proclamations centered primarily on thanksgiving to God toward proclamations that increasingly combine God-directed gratitude with **Plymouth, national heritage, liberty, human dignity, democracy, community, and American identity**. Significantly, Woolley still found references to a Supreme Being averaging several times per proclamation across the modern period, showing that the older theological vocabulary was layered with newer civic themes rather than simply erased. (Scholarly Analysis: Dr. John T. Woolley, "[Interpreting the Thanksgiving Proclamation](#)," American Presidency Project; see also "[Evolution of the Thanksgiving Proclamation](#)".)

His findings are valuable because they prevent us from making either of two simplistic claims. Thanksgiving rhetoric has certainly changed over the centuries, but explicit references to God did not merely disappear with the Founding generation. At the same time, later proclamations increasingly layered civic and historical themes upon the older religious foundation.

Thanksgiving became broader, but its God-directed vocabulary remained remarkably durable.

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## Investigation 20 — Grover Cleveland: Gratitude Should Produce Charity

One later proclamation supplies an especially useful bridge from **Thanksgiving** to what we might call **thanks-living**.

In **1885**, President **Grover Cleveland (1837–1908)** called Americans to acknowledge Almighty God publicly for national blessings and to gather in their customary places of worship. Yet Cleveland did not allow thanksgiving to terminate in private emotion or family comfort.

After encouraging family reunion and affectionate remembrance, Cleveland urged Americans not to forget the poor. He wrote that **“truly grateful hearts are inclined to deeds of charity”** and argued that thoughtful care for those in need made thanksgiving more fitting. (Primary Source: Grover Cleveland, [Thanksgiving Proclamation, November 2, 1885](#), American Presidency Project transcription.)

**Dr. Matthew Dennis**, Professor of History at the University of Oregon and author of [Red, White, and Blue Letter Days: An American Calendar](#), has shown that American holidays are not merely dates on a calendar but recurring civic rituals through which Americans define identity, values, and social obligation. His treatment of Thanksgiving emphasizes that the holiday has continually evolved as Americans used it to express not only national memory but also ideas about family, community, religion, and responsibility. Cleveland’s 1885 proclamation fits that larger pattern especially well: by linking gratitude to concrete care for the poor, he treated Thanksgiving not simply as private devotion or national celebration, but as a moral practice whose authenticity could be measured by what grateful people actually did for others.

(Scholarly Analysis: Dr. Matthew Dennis, [Red, White, and Blue Letter Days: An American Calendar](#), Cornell University Press; Scholar Credentials: University of Oregon historian profile as summarized by the publisher.)

Cleveland's own wording makes the moral logic unusually explicit: remembering the poor would not diminish Thanksgiving but would actually **“double the pleasures of our condition”** and make the nation's praise more acceptable to God. In his formulation, generosity was not an optional appendix to gratitude; it was one of the clearest evidences that gratitude had become genuine. (Primary Source: Grover Cleveland, [Thanksgiving Proclamation, 1885](#).)

That principle deserves attention because it moves gratitude beyond sentiment. If gratitude makes no difference in how the prosperous view the poor, how families treat one another, how citizens use their abundance, or how believers serve their neighbors, then gratitude has remained incomplete.

This is where Thanksgiving begins becoming a way of living rather than merely a date on a calendar.



## Investigation 21 — Harry Truman: Blessing Creates Stewardship

President **Harry S. Truman (1884–1972)** made a related connection immediately after another enormous period of national suffering.



In his **1946 Thanksgiving Proclamation**, issued little more than a year after the end of World War II, Truman thanked Almighty God for national mercies and described Americans as **“Devoutly grateful to Divine Providence.”** He then connected gratitude directly to stewardship, urging Americans to use their resources in the service of humanity and to accept the responsibilities accompanying national strength. (Primary Source: Harry S. Truman, [Thanksgiving Proclamation, October 28, 1946](#), American Presidency Project transcription.)

Truman also called upon Americans to rededicate themselves to preserving the Constitution's **“Blessings of Liberty.”** The phrase is important because it joins two themes running throughout this series: liberty is something to be protected, but it is also something received and stewarded. (Primary Source: Harry S. Truman, [Thanksgiving Proclamation, October 28, 1946](#), American Presidency Project transcription.)

The concept is not uniquely Truman's, of course, but it illuminates the central moral transition of this classroom. Blessings create responsibilities. A freedom inherited from previous generations is not merely something to consume; it is something to protect and transmit.

That is one of the places where gratitude and self-government meet.



## Investigation 22 — What Did The Pilgrims Have Left To Be Thankful For?

Now return to Plymouth, because the comparison with modern America becomes difficult to ignore.

The Pilgrims possessed none of the conveniences modern Americans instinctively treat as ordinary. They had no antibiotics, modern hospitals, central heating, electric lighting, refrigeration, automobiles, aircraft, instant communication, modern sanitation, advanced surgery, safe obstetrics, weather satellites, supermarkets, or dependable national food-distribution networks. An infection now routinely treated could become fatal; childbirth endangered both mother and infant; and crop failure could threaten survival rather than merely raise the grocery bill.

Colonial families lived amid exceptionally high mortality. Children frequently died young, parents were lost early, and epidemics could devastate entire settlements. The historical context makes the Pilgrims' surviving expressions of gratitude more—not less—remarkable.

**Dr. John G. Turner, Ph.D.**, Professor of Religious Studies and History at George Mason University and author of [\*They Knew They Were Pilgrims: Plymouth Colony and the Contest for American Liberty\*](#), cautions that popular memory often reduces the Pilgrims to a few familiar symbols and a simplified story of suffering followed by Thanksgiving. His scholarship instead restores the instability, hardship, religious conviction, and contingency of Plymouth's actual experience. That fuller historical setting makes their expressions of gratitude more striking precisely because they emerged from a world in which survival, health, food, and family continuity could never be taken for granted. (Scholarly Analysis: Dr. John G. Turner, [\*They Knew They Were Pilgrims\*](#), Yale University Press, 2020.)

Now reverse the comparison. If Plymouth's settlers could somehow enter an ordinary American home in 2026, they would encounter forms of abundance unavailable even to monarchs of their age. Clean water appears instantly at a faucet. A thermostat warms a house through winter. Electricity turns darkness into light. Refrigeration protects food for days. Automobiles cross in an hour distances once requiring days. Family members separated by thousands of miles can see one another instantaneously, while modern medicine prevents deaths that seventeenth-century families regarded as tragically normal.

Their reaction to our access to Scripture might be equally striking. An American can own numerous printed Bibles, carry dozens of translations on a telephone, listen to Scripture while driving, search passages instantly, attend worship without governmental permission, and distribute biblical material around the world in seconds.

None of that makes contemporary suffering unreal. A grieving parent in 2026 hurts no less deeply because the family has electricity. Cancer still terrifies, broken relationships still wound, loneliness can be devastating, financial pressure is real, and death remains an enemy.

The comparison instead exposes something about human nature: **possessing more does not necessarily cause us to recognize more**. Familiarity can make extraordinary blessings nearly invisible. Gratitude therefore cannot be calculated merely by counting possessions; it depends upon what the mind has learned to notice and what the heart has learned to remember.

That is one of the Pilgrims' enduring lessons for the modern Thanksgiving Classroom.

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## Investigation 23 — Modern Research Suggests Gratitude Can Be Cultivated

Modern psychology has approached gratitude through methods entirely different from Scripture, theology, or colonial history, yet some of its findings illuminate the older claim that gratitude is not merely accidental.

**Dr. Robert A. Emmons, Ph.D.** (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign), Professor Emeritus of Psychology at the University of California, Davis, founding editor of *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, and a leading researcher on gratitude and human flourishing, has spent decades studying gratitude scientifically. His research sits at the intersection of positive psychology and the psychology of religion. ([Dr. Robert A. Emmons biography.](#))

In a landmark 2003 experimental study, Dr. Emmons and **Dr. Michael E. McCullough, Ph.D.**, assigned participants to record blessings, hassles, or neutral experiences and then examined a variety of emotional, behavioral, health, and interpersonal outcomes. Across three studies, the gratitude-focused groups showed higher well-being on several measures, with positive affect emerging as the most robust finding. The authors concluded that “**a conscious focus on blessings**” may have emotional and interpersonal benefits. (Peer-Reviewed Research: Robert A. Emmons and Michael E. McCullough, “[Counting Blessings Versus Burdens](#),” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 84, no. 2 [2003], PubMed abstract.)



A separate four-year longitudinal study following **566 adolescents** found that growth in gratitude predicted decreases in antisocial behavior and increases in prosocial behavior, along with later associations with family support, trust, and intentional self-regulation. The authors specifically noted educational implications. (Peer-Reviewed Research: *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, “[Gratitude’s Role in Adolescent Antisocial and Prosocial Behavior](#),” study abstract and article.)

Those studies do not establish Washington's theology, and psychology should not be asked to prove the doctrine of Providence. They do, however, reinforce one narrower proposition important to this classroom: human beings can practice patterns of attention that make gratitude more habitual rather than merely waiting for gratitude to appear spontaneously.

In other words, gratitude can be educated.



## Investigation 24 — Gratitude And Entitlement Interpret The Same World Differently

Gratitude and entitlement are not simply opposite emotions. They are competing ways of interpreting what a person receives. Entitlement begins from the premise that benefits are chiefly obligations owed to the self, while gratitude begins by recognizing that something valuable has been received from outside the self. The same circumstances can therefore be interpreted through dramatically different moral lenses.

A person formed primarily by entitlement may possess substantial benefits while remaining persistently dissatisfied because attention continually returns to what has not yet been received. Gratitude does not require surrendering legitimate rights, ignoring injustice, or pretending hardship is pleasant. It simply refuses to turn every relationship into an accounting exercise centered exclusively upon what others owe me.

That distinction matters in civic education. A constitutional republic should absolutely teach citizens their rights because people who do not understand rights cannot intelligently protect them. Yet rights taught without duties, restraint, sacrifice, stewardship, or responsibility can become detached from the character required to preserve them.

Recent generational research adds another dimension to this discussion. **Pew Research Center has repeatedly found that younger adults are more likely than older Americans to favor a larger governmental role in meeting social and economic needs.** In its 2021 survey, for example, **55 percent of adults under 30 said the federal government should be responsible for providing Americans with a college education**, compared with 43 percent of those ages 30–49, 35 percent of those 50–64, and just 21 percent of adults 65 and older. In 2022, Pew likewise found that **63 percent of adults ages 18–29 said government should do more to solve problems**, compared with roughly four-in-ten adults over 65. Those numbers do not prove that younger Americans are personally ungrateful or morally entitled; many face genuine pressures involving housing, education, wages, and family formation. But they do document a generational shift toward viewing a larger range of benefits and protections as governmental responsibilities rather than primarily individual, family, or community responsibilities. (Public Opinion Research: Pew Research Center, [“Americans See Broad Responsibilities for Government”](#); Pew Research Center, [“Values and Expectations of Government”](#).) [Pew Research Center](#)

The **Heritage Foundation** has framed the broader concern in explicitly moral terms, arguing that when benefits are increasingly understood as impersonal legal claims owed by government, the relationship between receiving and gratitude can weaken. One Heritage analysis warns that an expanding entitlement mentality can replace a culture of **“willingness and thankfulness”** with expectations centered increasingly upon rights and services owed to the individual. Its 2026 *Index of Culture and Opportunity* similarly argues that long-term dependence can weaken habits of work, responsibility, self-sufficiency, family formation, and civic participation. That is an interpretive argument rather than a neutral statistical finding, but it expresses precisely the concern raised in this investigation: a society can protect legitimate rights and maintain necessary safety nets while still asking whether its institutions are forming citizens primarily to ask **“What am I owed?”** or also **“What have I received, and what do I now owe others?”** (Conservative Policy Analysis: Heritage Foundation, [A Moral Case Against Big Government: How Government Shapes the Character, Vision, and Virtue of Citizens](#); Heritage Foundation, [2026 Index of Culture and Opportunity](#).) [The Heritage Foundation](#)

The difference becomes especially important when an entire culture begins to confuse **having a right to something with having no responsibility for what has been received**. Rights are essential protections against abuse of power, but they were never meant to eliminate gratitude, obligation, or stewardship. A child may rightly inherit property and still feel gratitude toward the parent who sacrificed to preserve it. A citizen may rightly possess freedom of speech and religion

while also recognizing that generations before him defended those liberties at enormous cost. A prosperous family may have earned much through hard work and still acknowledge that health, opportunity, social stability, inherited institutions, teachers, mentors, neighbors, and countless circumstances beyond individual control made achievement possible. Entitlement narrows vision until benefits are interpreted primarily as personal claims; gratitude widens vision by asking what was received, who sacrificed, what must now be preserved, and what responsibility follows from possession. In that sense, gratitude is not the enemy of liberty but one of the habits that can keep liberty from collapsing into mere self-interest.

Washington's proclamation held these ideas together. He thanked God for civil and religious liberty while simultaneously speaking of duties that must be performed, transgressions that must be confessed, laws that must remain wise and constitutional, and blessings for which gratitude is owed.

Freedom in that framework is both a right and an inheritance.

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## Investigation 25 — Scripture Warns That Prosperity Can Become a School of Forgetfulness

[Deuteronomy 8](#) contains one of Scripture's most penetrating discussions of prosperity because Moses does not warn Israel primarily about forgetting God while starving in the wilderness. He warns them about forgetting God **after they have eaten and become satisfied**, built good houses, multiplied possessions, and accumulated wealth.



Scripture returns to this danger repeatedly because prosperity can quietly alter the way human beings interpret dependence. [Deuteronomy 6:10–12](#) warns Israel that after entering cities they did not build, houses filled with goods they did not accumulate, wells they did not dig, and vineyards they did not plant, they must **“watch yourself, that you do not forget the LORD.”** [Deuteronomy 32:15](#) describes the same spiritual reversal even more starkly: after becoming prosperous and satisfied, Israel **“abandoned God who made him.”** The wisdom literature recognizes the danger as well. In [Proverbs 30:8–9](#), Agur prays for neither poverty nor riches because abundance may tempt him to become satisfied and ask, **“Who is the LORD?”** And [Hosea 13:6](#) summarizes the cycle with painful simplicity: **“As they had their pasture, they became satisfied, and as they became satisfied, their heart became proud; therefore they forgot Me.”** Taken together, these passages reveal a recurring biblical anthropology: material blessing can become spiritually dangerous precisely when the recipient ceases to experience it as blessing. Prosperity is safest when memory, humility, worship, and gratitude keep reminding the prosperous person that provision has a Source and that abundance creates stewardship rather than independence.

The danger is not that food, houses, wealth, or success are inherently evil. The danger is that blessing becomes familiar, familiarity produces forgetfulness, and forgetfulness produces the illusion of self-sufficiency.

That helps explain why gratitude requires deliberate cultivation. Yesterday's answered prayer can quietly become today's expectation, while yesterday's extraordinary blessing becomes tomorrow's unnoticed background. [Psalm 103:2](#) therefore commands the worshiper not to forget God's benefits, [James 1:17](#) identifies every good and perfect gift as ultimately coming from God, and [1 Thessalonians 5:18](#) commands thanksgiving even in circumstances that are not themselves pleasant.

[Romans 1:21](#) goes deeper still by including humanity's failure to honor God or give thanks within the larger rebellion of the creature against the Creator. Gratitude in the biblical worldview therefore concerns more than emotional health. It is connected to the fundamental truth that human beings are creatures rather than self-created beings and stewards rather than absolute owners.

That makes prosperity itself a test of character. Scarcity naturally reminds people of dependence because need is difficult to ignore; abundance can obscure dependence by making self-sufficiency feel plausible.

The New Testament carries this lesson even further by locating genuine contentment not primarily in the quantity of what we possess, but in the sufficiency of God Himself. Jesus warned, “Beware, and be on your guard against every form of greed; for not even when one is affluent does his life consist of his possessions” ([Luke 12:15](#)). Hebrews gives the positive counterpart: “Make sure that your character is free from the love of money, being content with what you have; for He Himself has said, ‘I WILL NEVER DESERT YOU, NOR WILL I EVER ABANDON YOU’” ([Hebrews 13:5](#)). Paul then explains the secret from personal experience. Writing from circumstances that were anything but comfortable, he declared, “I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. I know how to get along with little, and I also know

how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need. I can do all things through Him who strengthens me” ([Philippians 4:11–13](#)). Philippians 4:13, therefore, is not primarily a promise that Christians can accomplish any ambition they choose; in its context, it is Paul’s testimony that Christ supplied the strength to remain faithful and content whether he possessed much or little. When you have God, you possess a treasure circumstances cannot manufacture and circumstances cannot finally remove. **When you have God, you’ve got the gold.**

Paul makes the standard even more striking in [1 Timothy 6:6–8](#): “Godliness actually is a means of great gain when accompanied by contentment. For we have brought nothing into the world, so we cannot take anything out of it, either. If we have food and covering, with these we shall be content.” Notice how little Paul places on the list. He does not mention accumulated wealth, property ownership, retirement accounts, transportation, entertainment, or even the comforts modern Americans instinctively regard as necessities. His language reaches down to the basics of sustenance and covering and declares that godliness joined with contentment is itself “great gain.” The point is not that Christians should despise homes, possessions, or prosperity, but that none of them can be allowed to become the measuring stick of whether life is good or whether God has been good.

**Pastor and theologian John Piper makes the same point when discussing Paul’s** words in Philippians 4. Piper stresses that Christian contentment does not mean that believers cease to experience hunger, weariness, loss, or legitimate desire; rather, faith changes where the believer looks for ultimate sufficiency. Reflecting specifically on Philippians 4:11–13, he writes that if some earthly good is withheld, the believer may still be sustained by “an abundant portion of God’s help and fellowship through faith.” Paul’s secret, in other words, was not that circumstances ceased to matter, but that circumstances ceased to have the final word. Plenty could not make him spiritually self-sufficient, and want could not make him spiritually bankrupt, because Christ Himself remained the source of strength in both conditions. That distinction is crucial to the entire theology of Thanksgiving developed here: biblical contentment is not stoicism, resignation, or pretending deprivation does not hurt. It is the settled conviction that God remains enough when His gifts are abundant and when some of those gifts are temporarily withheld. The person who learns that lesson can receive prosperity without worshipping it, endure scarcity without despairing, and give thanks without requiring life first to become easy. (**Christian Theological Reflection: John Piper, [Preparing for Marriage](#), discussion of Philippians 4:11–13.**)

That helps explain something modern readers can easily miss about the **Pilgrims and many within the Founding generation**: their gratitude did not require uninterrupted comfort because their deepest category of sufficiency was not material abundance. Plymouth could bury loved ones and still speak of the “goodness of God”; Revolutionary Americans could thank Providence before independence was secure; Washington could join gratitude with repentance and dependence; and Lincoln could call a nation to thanksgiving while the country was being torn apart by civil war. Their historical circumstances and individual theologies were not identical, but the recurring Christian conviction beneath much of this tradition was profound: God Himself was the ultimate good, while food, liberty, harvest, health, peace, prosperity, and even life itself were received as gifts rather than treated as the foundation of contentment. In modern language,

when you have God, you have the gold—not because faith guarantees wealth, ease, or freedom from suffering, but because the Giver is infinitely greater than any particular gift. Christian gratitude can therefore survive both plenty and want because its deepest strength rests in Christ rather than in circumstances.

The Thanksgiving Classroom must therefore teach not only how to endure hardship faithfully, but how to survive prosperity without forgetting God.

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## Investigation 26 — The Dinner Table May Be One Of America's Most Important Classrooms

The education of gratitude cannot be delegated exclusively to presidents, schools, historians, psychologists, or churches. Much of it occurs around ordinary family tables, where one generation tells another what happened before the youngest people in the room were born.

Family stories teach children that history did not begin with them. Grandparents can describe periods when money was scarce, families moved across states or oceans, wars separated loved ones, sickness changed plans, businesses failed and were rebuilt, prayers were answered, prayers were answered differently than expected, and ordinary people persevered through circumstances once thought impossible.

**Dr. Robyn Fivush, Ph.D.**, Samuel Candler Dobbs Professor Emerita of Psychology at Emory University and longtime director of Emory's Family Narratives Lab, **has** spent decades studying



how family storytelling shapes identity and resilience. Her research finds that when children know stories about how parents and grandparents endured difficulty, they gain a stronger sense that their own lives belong to a larger continuing story. As Dr. Fivush has explained, **“When we don’t know what to do, we look for stories about how people have coped in the past.”** Family history therefore does more than entertain; it can give younger generations models of perseverance, meaning, belonging, and hope. (Scholarly Background: Emory University, [“How Family Stories Help Children Weather Hard Times”](#); see also [Emory’s discussion of holiday family storytelling](#).)

The family table also teaches by repetition and example in ways formal instruction often cannot. Children notice who is thanked, who is remembered, whether food is treated as ordinary or received as provision, whether older relatives are listened to or ignored, whether sacrifices are acknowledged, whether prayer is hurried or sincere, and whether abundance produces generosity toward people outside the family. In that sense, gratitude is absorbed through household culture before it is ever defined in a textbook. A child who repeatedly hears parents thank God, honor grandparents, speak respectfully about those who helped them, include lonely neighbors, remember absent family members, and share with people in need is learning a moral grammar of gratitude through ordinary practices. The lesson is not simply **“say thank you”**; it is that life is interconnected, blessings usually arrive through many hands, and receiving well includes remembering, honoring, sharing, and eventually becoming the kind of person through whom someone else may one day receive a blessing.

That memory changes the meaning of inheritance. A child who learns that a grandmother worked two jobs to keep a family together may understand present comfort differently. A grandchild who learns that an ancestor served in war, crossed an ocean, cared for an aging parent, built a business, survived the Depression, stayed faithful during loss, or sacrificed educational opportunities so later generations could have them begins to see that present life rests upon countless acts he did not personally perform.

Truthful family memory should not become mythology. Some family histories contain addiction, abandonment, broken marriages, bitterness, abuse, failure, and tragedy. Those realities should not be sanitized simply to create an inspirational story. Yet even painful histories can become educational when younger generations understand the consequences of wrong choices, the possibility of forgiveness, the cost of rebuilding, and the mercies that sustained later generations.

That research also helps explain why even imperfect family stories matter. Children do not need a genealogy populated only by heroes; they need an honest narrative showing that families sometimes suffer, fail, repent, forgive, rebuild, and continue. Thanksgiving can therefore become more than a meal or annual ritual—it can become an intentional moment when grandparents and parents hand younger generations the memories that help them understand not only **where they came from, but what kind of people they may yet become.**

Thanksgiving therefore provides families with an unusual opportunity. Instead of merely asking everyone to name one pleasant event from the year, a family can tell the larger story of what has been inherited, endured, learned, forgiven, preserved, and received.

That is how gratitude becomes generational memory.

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## Investigation 27 — From Thanksgiving to Thanks-Living

This is where the word **THANKS-LIVING** belongs—not as the title of the historical investigation, but as its practical consequence.

Thanksgiving is an observance, while gratitude is a disposition. A person can enjoy an elaborate Thanksgiving meal and remain profoundly ungrateful. One Thursday can pass while envy, selfishness, discontent, and entitlement remain untouched.

The historical proclamations themselves occasionally recognized this problem. Grover Cleveland connected grateful hearts with charity toward the poor, while Harry Truman connected gratitude with stewardship and responsibility. Their language suggests that thanksgiving should affect what recipients do with their blessings rather than ending when the prayer before dinner is finished. (Primary Sources: Grover Cleveland, [Thanksgiving Proclamation, November 2, 1885](#), American Presidency Project; Harry S. Truman, [Thanksgiving Proclamation, October 28, 1946](#), American Presidency Project.)

In the New Testament, gratitude repeatedly produces movement rather than remaining a private feeling. The person who recognizes grace becomes more willing to forgive because he remembers how much he has been forgiven, more generous because he understands possessions as entrusted rather than absolute, more patient because life is received rather than controlled, and more ready to serve because blessing is no longer interpreted as merely personal consumption. In

that sense, **thanks-living is gratitude translated into character**. It is the daily conversion of received mercy into mercy shown, received provision into generosity, received freedom into responsibility, and received love into love extended to others.

Christian gratitude goes further still. Its purpose is not merely to enjoy the psychological benefits of feeling thankful. It is to recognize the Giver, receive His gifts humbly, and allow gratitude toward Him to reshape the way those gifts are used.

That means gratitude should touch marriage, parenting, money, hospitality, generosity, worship, citizenship, friendship, service, and the treatment of people who cannot repay us. A thankful person who has received much should become increasingly conscious that much has also been entrusted.

That is where Thanksgiving becomes **thanks-living**.

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## Investigation 28 — Nearly Four Centuries Reveal A Consistent Pattern

When these episodes are placed together, the history becomes remarkably coherent without requiring us to pretend every generation or leader thought identically.

The Plymouth settlers could speak about the goodness of God after a year marked by extraordinary death and hardship. In 1623, drought produced a day of humiliation and prayer,



followed by thanksgiving after rain. During the Revolution, Congress called Americans to thanksgiving while independence remained uncertain. In 1789, Washington asked a newly constituted republic to thank Almighty God for Providence, liberty, government, knowledge, peace, and national mercies. (Primary and Historical Sources: Plimoth Patuxet Museums, [1621 eyewitness account](#); National Archives, [Congress Establishes Thanksgiving](#).)

In 1798, Adams connected national prosperity and free government with divine blessing and moral character. Madison's 1815 proclamation combined religious liberty with voluntary thanksgiving to a Heavenly Benefactor. Monroe attributed national blessings to the Almighty Being from whom they proceeded. (Primary Sources: John Adams, [1798 Proclamation](#); James Madison, [1815 Thanksgiving Proclamation](#); James Monroe, [Fifth Annual Message](#).)

Lincoln called Americans to thanksgiving in the middle of Civil War, while later presidents such as Cleveland and Truman emphasized charity and stewardship as appropriate responses to blessing. Dr. John Woolley's study of presidential proclamations shows that although the themes evolved, reference to a Supreme Being remained a recurring characteristic of the tradition. (Scholarly Analysis: Dr. John T. Woolley, "[Evolution of the Thanksgiving Proclamation](#)," American Presidency Project.)

Across these episodes, thanksgiving also functioned as a way of resisting the idea that history is merely a sequence of impersonal events. Drought, military victory, political stability, peace, constitutional liberty, harvest, recovery, and prosperity were repeatedly interpreted as occasions for moral reflection rather than as circumstances to be consumed without examination. The recurring questions were not only **What happened?** but **What does this require of us? Whom should we thank? What duties follow from what we have received?** That habit of interpretation gave thanksgiving an educative role: it taught communities to connect blessing with responsibility, memory with humility, and prosperity with stewardship. In that sense, the continuity across four centuries lies not simply in repeated references to God, but in the conviction that receiving good things should shape the character of the recipient.

What is striking across these centuries is not uniformity of language, denomination, or political philosophy, but the repeated assumption that gratitude belongs within public moral memory. Different generations emphasized different blessings and responsibilities, yet again and again thanksgiving was tied to remembrance: of deliverance, dependence, sacrifice, mercy, duty, and the limits of human control. The vocabulary changed, but the habit of interpreting national life through gratitude proved remarkably durable.

Modern psychology approaches the subject from a different direction, yet its research likewise suggests that deliberately attending to blessings can shape human behavior and well-being. (Peer-Reviewed Research: Robert A. Emmons and Michael E. McCullough, "[Counting Blessings Versus Burdens](#)," PubMed.)

The historical circumstances are radically different, but one lesson repeatedly emerges: gratitude is deepest when human beings deliberately remember blessings inside an unfinished and imperfect world.



## Investigation 29 — What Would The Pilgrims Think We Lack Today?

If the surviving Plymouth settlers could walk through the United States in 2026, their first astonishment might concern not what Americans lack but what ordinary Americans possess.

They would encounter forms of transportation, medicine, communication, food preservation, sanitation, education, religious liberty, printed information, and household comfort beyond the imagination of their generation. They might reasonably assume that such extraordinary abundance would create an extraordinarily grateful population.

**Dr. Jeremy Dupertuis Bangs, Ph.D. (Leiden University), one of the leading modern historians of the Pilgrims and author of *Strangers and Pilgrims, Travellers and Sojourners*,** has emphasized that the Pilgrims’ understanding of thanksgiving grew from a religious culture in which survival and provision were interpreted consciously as gifts from God rather than as automatic features of life. Writing about the 1621 harvest, Bangs argues that Edward Winslow’s language would have communicated to his contemporaries that the colonists were giving thanks to God **“for their preservation and for the plenty that gave hope for the future.”** That phrase helps expose the distance between Plymouth and modern abundance: preservation itself was visible enough to be noticed, and sufficient food after scarcity could still provoke conscious gratitude. A society in which food, warmth, medicine, transportation, information, and Scripture are available with extraordinary regularity therefore faces a different spiritual danger—not the inability to receive blessings, but the possibility of receiving so many

so routinely that they become almost invisible. (Scholarly Analysis: Dr. Jeremy Dupertuis Bangs, [“1621: A Historian Looks Anew at Thanksgiving”](#); Biographical Background: University of Chicago Magazine, [“Going Dutch”](#).)

Yet human nature does not work so simply. The more frequently a blessing is experienced, the easier it becomes to cease noticing it. A hot shower is almost invisible to someone who has taken one every morning for sixty years, even though most human beings who ever lived would have regarded effortless hot running water as astonishing. A Bible lying unopened on a shelf may appear ordinary in a society where Scripture is freely available, while generations of Christians elsewhere and in other eras made enormous sacrifices simply to possess or read one.

The comparison becomes even more arresting when we consider not the wealthiest Americans, but people living comparatively modest lives. A Plymouth family that had survived the winter of 1620–1621 might regard as astonishing things that many Americans scarcely notice: a roof that does not leak, glass windows, a mattress raised from the floor, indoor plumbing, clean water available by turning a handle, artificial light after sunset, dependable heat in winter, refrigeration that keeps food from spoiling, grocery stores containing produce from around the world, weather forecasts days in advance, antibiotics for infections that once killed, anesthesia for surgery, emergency rooms, eyeglasses, vaccinations, telephones capable of reaching family across a continent, motor vehicles that cover in an hour distances they might have walked for days, and public libraries containing more books than many seventeenth-century communities could have imagined. Even an American household facing genuine financial limitations may still possess access to technologies, sanitation, medical knowledge, transportation, communication, and information that would have appeared almost miraculous to people who watched friends and family die from exposure, infection, childbirth, malnutrition, and diseases they could neither diagnose nor treat. None of this means that poverty is pleasant, that inequality is irrelevant, or that material hardship should be dismissed. It means that historical comparison can recalibrate perception. The Pilgrims might look at people we describe as having “very little” and still be astonished by how much protection from cold, darkness, disease, distance, spoilage, isolation, and ignorance modern civilization has placed within ordinary reach. Their question to us might therefore be uncomfortable but valuable: if conveniences they could scarcely have imagined have become so normal that we barely notice them, how many blessings must become invisible before abundance itself begins to feel like deprivation?

This does not mean modern Americans have no legitimate reasons for concern. Economic hardship, illness, bereavement, loneliness, family breakdown, addiction, war, and fear remain real even within an affluent technological society. Comparing centuries should never become a method of telling hurting people their suffering does not count.

The more useful question concerns **attention**. Have we become so familiar with our inheritances that we no longer consciously perceive them? If people who possessed comparatively little could consciously recognize God's goodness amid loss, what prevents people who possess enormously more from recognizing His goodness amid their own unfinished circumstances?

That is ultimately a question of formation.





## Investigation 30 — What The Conference Board Cannot Measure

We can now return to the economic report with which this classroom began.

The Conference Board can measure consumer confidence, financial expectations, employment perceptions, purchasing intentions, and concerns about inflation or interest rates. Those are useful measures because they reveal something real about how Americans experience the economy. In September 2026, those measures showed substantial anxiety. (Current Economic Research: The Conference Board, “[State of the Economy for September 2026: Consumer Confidence Takes a Tumble](#),” Conference Board report.)

Yet no Consumer Confidence Index can tell us whether grandparents are teaching grandchildren what previous generations sacrificed. It cannot measure whether children understand religious liberty as an inheritance, whether families remember answered prayers and recovered failures, or whether citizens interpret prosperity primarily as entitlement or stewardship.

Modern societies can quantify gross domestic product, incomes, life expectancy, educational attainment, consumer prices, productivity, medical outcomes, and thousands of other variables. Those measurements reveal much about material conditions, but they cannot by themselves tell us whether abundance has produced wisdom, whether liberty has produced responsibility, or whether prosperity has produced gratitude.

**Dr. Robert D. Putnam, Peter and Isabel Malkin Professor of Public Policy Emeritus at Harvard Kennedy School and author of [Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community](#)**, has spent decades studying what economists and political scientists call **social capital**—the networks, trust, reciprocity, and habits of cooperation that allow communities to function well. Putnam’s research is useful here because it demonstrates that some of the most important resources a nation possesses do not appear on a balance sheet. Communities may enjoy rising income, advanced technology, and material abundance while simultaneously losing the relationships and habits that teach people to trust one another, sacrifice for neighbors, participate in civic life, and work toward common purposes. Harvard summarizes Putnam’s central insight simply: the “glue” holding communities together comes from social ties formed in families, churches, voluntary associations, neighborhoods, and other shared institutions. Those qualities are real and measurable only imperfectly, yet they profoundly influence whether prosperity becomes merely consumption or is converted into stronger families, communities, and civic responsibility. (Scholarly Analysis: Dr. Robert D. Putnam, [Harvard Kennedy School profile and research on social capital](#); Historical and Scholarly Background: Harvard Gazette, [“Robert Putnam Wants Us To Stop Bowling Alone”](#).)

A society can therefore become increasingly sophisticated at measuring **conditions** while remaining comparatively weak at measuring **orientation**—what people love, trust, remember, worship, sacrifice for, and believe they owe to others. Two families with identical incomes may experience the same material circumstances very differently if one interprets life primarily through comparison and scarcity while the other interprets it through gratitude, responsibility, and belonging. The same can be true of nations. Economic indicators can tell us whether people feel secure about jobs, prices, and purchasing power, but they cannot tell us whether prosperity has enlarged generosity, whether hardship has deepened character, whether freedom has produced stewardship, or whether citizens still possess a shared moral language capable of turning blessing into obligation. Those questions belong to a different category of national health—one that cannot be captured adequately by confidence indexes, income tables, or quarterly reports.

Washington's October 3 proclamation addressed precisely those deeper questions. Peace, liberty, government, knowledge, and prosperity were not self-explanatory conditions. They were blessings to be remembered, responsibilities to be discharged, and occasions for thanksgiving before Almighty God.

That is why gratitude belongs in *America's Forgotten Classroom*. It is not primarily an economic measurement; it is a matter of how people are formed.

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## SO WHAT? What Should The Thanksgiving Classroom Teach Us And Our Children?

The cumulative historical lesson is that **gratitude requires memory**. Children cannot appreciate an inheritance they have never been taught to recognize, and nations cannot intelligently value institutions whose history, cost, purpose, and fragility have disappeared from public understanding. Teaching gratitude therefore requires teaching history—not an artificially sanitized history, but a truthful one capable of recognizing sacrifice, courage, failure, sin, blessing, repentance, Providence, and responsibility together.

Gratitude also requires **humility** because thanksgiving acknowledges that the recipient is not the sole author of everything good in his life. None of us chose to be born, created the family into which we entered, invented the language we first spoke, built the roads we first traveled, wrote the Constitution whose liberties we inherited, or personally created the civilization surrounding us. Much of life arrives as inheritance before it becomes achievement.

That humility also changes the way gratitude is taught. Instead of asking children only what they accomplished, the Thanksgiving Classroom asks them to notice what they received before they were capable of earning anything: care, language, protection, opportunity, instruction, sacrifice, and a place within a story already underway. Gratitude grows when achievement is understood within that larger inheritance rather than treated as though every success were self-created.

**Dr. Jeffrey J. Froh, Psy.D.**, Professor of Psychology at Hofstra University and co-author of *Making Grateful Kids*, has spent years studying how gratitude develops in children rather than assuming it appears automatically with age. His research emphasizes that grateful children



learn to look beyond themselves—to recognize that benefits often come through the intentions, sacrifices, time, and generosity of other people. Froh has put the educational challenge plainly: **“If we actually valued becoming grateful, it would happen.”** His point is that families routinely practice the things they consider important—academics, sports, music, achievement—yet often expect gratitude to emerge without comparable instruction, modeling, repetition, or reflection. Research by Froh and his colleagues has found that gratitude in young people is associated with stronger social bonds, greater life satisfaction, generosity, and a greater motivation to contribute to others. That makes gratitude far more than etiquette. Teaching a child to ask **Who helped me? What did it cost them? What have I received that I did not create for myself? How should I respond?** trains attention away from self-sufficiency and toward relationship, humility, reciprocity, and responsibility. In the context of this Thanksgiving Classroom, that is precisely the kind of formation historical memory can provide: children learn not merely to possess an inheritance, but to recognize the people, sacrifices, institutions, and ultimately the God from whom so much of that inheritance came. (Scholarly Background: Dr. Jeffrey J. Froh, [“Seven Ways to Foster Gratitude in Kids”](#), Greater Good Science Center, UC Berkeley; see also Dr. Froh’s [research publications on gratitude and youth](#).)

For the Christian, that recognition extends further. Human existence itself is received from God, and every secondary blessing exists beneath His Providence. This conviction does not eliminate human agency. Farmers still plant, parents still labor, physicians still heal, lawmakers still govern, soldiers still defend, teachers still teach, and families still make sacrifices. The theological claim is that those human acts occur within a world whose ultimate Source and Sustainer is not ourselves.

The Thanksgiving Classroom should therefore teach that rights and responsibilities belong together. Civil and religious liberty deserve vigorous protection, but inherited freedom also creates an obligation to preserve that freedom for those who follow us. Washington's proclamation joined liberty with duty, constitutional government, repentance, religion, virtue, and knowledge rather than allowing freedom to become detached from moral responsibility.

The history also teaches that hardship does not cancel gratitude. Plymouth, the Revolution, Washington's uncertain constitutional republic, and Lincoln's Civil War America all demonstrate that thanksgiving can coexist with grief, deprivation, anxiety, conflict, and unfinished history. Biblical thanksgiving reaches deeper still because its ultimate foundation is the character of God rather than the temporary pleasantness of circumstances.

Finally, the Thanksgiving Classroom must answer the question much modern gratitude language leaves unanswered: **to whom is thanksgiving ultimately directed?** Washington's proclamation repeatedly identifies the recipient as Almighty God—the great and glorious Being, the beneficent Author of good, and the Lord and Ruler of Nations whose Providence protects, whose mercy forgives, whose will deserves obedience, and whose wisdom determines what degree of earthly prosperity is ultimately best. (Primary Source: George Washington, [Thanksgiving Proclamation](#), October 3, 1789, Mount Vernon transcription.)

That theological language is not decoration around Washington's proclamation. It is the structure holding the document together.



## The Firepoint: A Nation That Forgets How To Thank God Will Eventually Forget How To Recognize His Gifts

As America celebrates its 250th anniversary, the nation possesses blessings previous generations could scarcely have imagined. Americans enjoy constitutional liberties preserved through enormous sacrifice, remarkable freedom to worship and speak, unprecedented access to knowledge, medical advances that prevent deaths previous generations considered unavoidable, technological abilities that collapse distance and time, and material conveniences that would have appeared extraordinary to Bradford, Winslow, Washington, or Lincoln.

Yet abundance carries a danger that scarcity does not. The more familiar a blessing becomes, the easier it becomes to stop experiencing it as a blessing. What once produced wonder becomes ordinary; what becomes ordinary becomes expected; and what becomes expected can eventually be treated as something automatically owed. At that point gratitude begins to disappear because the recipient no longer consciously recognizes either a gift or a giver.

That is the danger Moses described in Deuteronomy 8, and it is the danger Washington's October 3 proclamation sought to counter in a national context. Washington asked Americans to remember divine care before the nation existed, mercies experienced during war, tranquility afterward, civil and religious liberty, constitutional government, useful knowledge, and material prosperity. At the same time, he asked Americans to remember their transgressions, their duties, their need for wise and just government, and their accountability to the **“great Lord and Ruler**

**of Nations.”** (Primary Source: George Washington, [Thanksgiving Proclamation](#), October 3, 1789, Mount Vernon transcription.)

Two hundred thirty-seven years later, *America's Forgotten Thanksgiving Classroom* asks whether we are teaching those habits of memory to another generation. It is not enough to tell children what they have a right to possess if we never explain what they have been blessed to receive. It is not enough to teach them how to acquire more if we never teach them to recognize what is already good. It is not enough to teach them to defend freedom if we fail to teach them that freedom also requires character, stewardship, sacrifice, and responsibility.

The older Thanksgiving tradition offers a richer way of seeing life. It allows us to tell the truth about suffering while still remembering mercy, to acknowledge national failures while remaining capable of recognizing national blessings, to enjoy prosperity without imagining ourselves self-created, and to receive liberty with sufficient gratitude that we are willing to preserve it for those who come after us.

That is what Washington was teaching on **October 3, 1789**. It is what Plymouth's settlers were learning through circumstances most modern Americans would never willingly choose, and it is what Lincoln summoned a divided and bleeding nation to remember on **October 3, 1863**. Their circumstances differed dramatically, but all three moments challenge the assumption that gratitude begins only after life has become easy. (Primary and Historical Sources: Plimoth Patuxet Museums, [1621 eyewitness account](#); Abraham Lincoln, [Thanksgiving Proclamation, October 3, 1863](#), American Presidency Project.)

The final lesson of *America's Forgotten Thanksgiving Classroom* is therefore not simply that Americans should say “thank you” more frequently. It is that gratitude requires us to learn how to see—to recognize life, liberty, provision, family, history, opportunity, redemption, and every good gift as something received under the Providence of God, and then to allow that recognition to shape the way we live.

That is **THANKS-LIVING**.

And that is why America's forgotten Thanksgiving classroom still matters.

