

“Salvation Belongeth Unto the Lord”
A SERMON

Delivered at a Public Thanksgiving after Peace c. 1782

by *JOHN WITHERSPOON* (see article below)

Psalm 3:8

(Edited for length and delivered by James S. Lowry at morning worship at the Oakland Avenue Presbyterian Church of Rock Hill on Sunday, July 2, 2006)

We are met together to keep a day of solemn Thanksgiving to God for the goodness of His providence to the United States of America in the course of a war which has now lasted seven years. On such an occasion, my proper business as a minister of the Gospel, is to engage every pious hearer to adore the providence of God in general, to offer praise for his mercies and to encourage you to make wise and just improvement in the execution of public affairs.

Many who now hear me know that it has never been my practice to mix politics with the ordinary service of the sanctuary on the Sabbath (except for earnest prayer for those in public office). But on days of this kind it becomes part of a minister’s duty to direct the attention of the hearers to events of a public nature.

For this purpose I have chosen the words of the Psalmist which have been read earlier. The Psalm was written by David before his war with Absalom was wholly finished, but when it appeared that David would be victorious (read Verse 8 of Psalm 3).

With the help of Almighty god, I shall make three (3) points based upon this passage:

- I. I shall explain what the Psalmist meant by the phrase “Salvation Belongeth Unto The Lord.”
- II. I shall point out what the United States of America owes to divine providence in the course of the present war, and
- III. I shall tell you the practical application of the before mentioned truths for your instruction and direction.

First, then, let us turn to the inspired notion given by God to the Psalmist that *Salvation Belongeth Unto The Lord*. The Psalmist is not opposed to the use or application of human power. The Psalmist is opposed to an excessive or undue

reliance on human means. The Psalmist implies that success in any endeavor is to be ultimately attributed to God. Whether it is a large undertaking or a small, whether success is probable or improbable, glory at success belongs to God. Confidence before and boasting after the event are inappropriate. Such is true with the present war soon, to appear, to be over.

The Psalmist knew that God is all powerful. The word SALVATION when it is applied in scripture to earthly danger generally signified a great and distinguished deliverance. When, therefore, a person or people are threatened with evils of a most dreadful kind: when they are engaged in a conflict very unequal; when they are driven to extremity and have no resource left as means of defense: then, **if the cause in which they are engaged is righteous and just**, they may cry to God for relief and say in the end ... “there is nothing too hard for the Lord.”

But power and wisdom alone give an imperfect view of God. God is also merciful as the Psalmist knew well. Because God is merciful he hears the cries of the oppressed and sends deliverance to His people.

With that basic truth in mind, SALVATION DOES BELONG TO GOD, let us then turn to the second notion which I have proposed to lay before you. Namely, I shall point out what the United States owes to divine providence in the present war.

Three (3) points need here be made: First, shall be called to your attention the signal successes we have experienced in the war; then shall be pointed out all the difficulties we faced which made success unlikely and finally we shall see how, in the course of the war, our enemy became its own enemy to our advantage. In all of these we cannot but see the providence of God.

1. First, to list all our successes would take too much time. They are well known. I shall mention but a few to remind you of the ones you know, perhaps better than I. For example, who cannot remember how from the outset our army was virtually without supplies. We had willing spirit but unarmed hands. Unlike our enemy, we had no storehouse of ammunition. We were unready for war. But this difficulty was got over by many providential supplies.

- A. And it is well know that by all human appearance, this nation, at the outset of war, had no naval strength. It is not logical that our private merchant

vessels in the early days should be able to go against so formidable a navy with marked success. It is even less logical, by human standards, that even in the course of war we could develop a naval force stronger than one could expect to be developed even under ideal peaceful circumstances.

B. And let us take notice under this branch of the subject that our most signal successes have generally been when we had the weakest hopes and greatest fears. Remember the surprise at Trenton and the subsequent victory at Princeton. And let us not forget how we opened the eyes of all Europe when Brandywine and Germantown were lost and Philadelphia was in the hands of the British and congress of the United States were obliged to flee. Were not all of these recaptured? And, we must not omit to observe that this victory over British regulars was obtained not by a large well equipped army, by an army composed of militia suddenly collected and free men who turned out as volunteers.

C. Who but God would have raised up such formidable allies in Europe? Who but God could have raised up such a capable leader (here must be presumed George Washington). **And, thanks be for the providence of God which showed us the black treachery of Benedict Arnold before it was too late.**

2. All of these show us the finger of God made all the more evident in light of the unusual difficulties we faced. We worked against impossible odds:

A. We were separate colonies with separate and different ideas. We overcame our differences and agreed upon what is important in spite of local prejudices.

B. As has been mentioned, we had no army and no provision for war. We had no structure or discipline or chain of command. But we trusted each other enough to develop these in short order.

C. And, we had no money. The currency we had at the beginning, had no value. Many people lost fortunes when ammunitions were bought and sold with worthless cash but the sacrifices were gladly made.

3. And perhaps the greatest difficulty of all was the confusion of operating under stress without local government. To change forms of government during time of peace is difficult. To change forms of government while defending one's

home is near impossible. But new governments from local to national were formed in a spirit of trust and the whole was completed in little more than a year with as much quietness and composure as a private person would move his family and furniture from one house to another. It was the hand of God leading. And who but God could have so confounded our enemy? Their ignorance and error have been our best assets. They thought we would soon give in to the strains of war. They thought only a handful of leaders favored independence and the masses would not follow. They thought by being barbarous they could frighten us. They thought by destroying our places of worship (except Episcopal) we would loose faith. But all of these, and more, served only to encourage us in the rightness of our cause.

A. Upon the whole nothing appears to me more manifest than that the separation of this country from Britain, has been of God; for every step the British took to prevent, served to accelerate it, which has generally been the case when men have undertaken to go into opposition to the course of providence and to make war with the nature of things.

Which brings us to the practical application of what has been said. We look now at what we must do hence forth:

First, it is our duty to give praise to God for the present joy and promising state of public affairs. This is why we are here at the present time. Let it, then, be more than form. Let the disposition of your hearts be correspondent to the expressions of your lips. While we are alive today, remember with tenderness and sympathy the many valuable lives that have been lost in the course of the war. Give thanks for life. And I tell you as I have told many American soldiers: Seldom boast of what you have done and never of what you only mean to do. Now that we have reached this point, surely we see that "SALVATION BELONGETH TO THE LORD." Thanks be to God.

Secondly, having given thanks, let us oblige ourselves to live as becomes the gospel. Such is not only what we ought to do but it is, in fact, the only way we can survive. What good is it to be free as citizens and slaves as sinners.

Thirdly, it is our duty to give glory to God by protecting the public interest in religion. This is of utmost importance to us all from the lowest to the highest. By our excellent constitution we have religious liberty. And as religious people it is our responsibility and privilege to influence the society and its morals with the truth of the gospel. When the body of people are altogether corrupt, the government is ripe for destruction. Good laws may hold us together for a while, but soon the good laws will give way to the corruption of public opinion if that corruption is not checked by the influence of religion.

Likewise, it is our responsibility as religious people to influence people with civil authority. We ought to assure that good and honest persons are elected. In a monarchy one may praise a king if government is good or criticize the king if government is corrupt. But in a free state, where the body of the people have the supreme power if things go poorly, there will be only confusion and no one to blame but the people. **CIVIL LIBERTY CANNOT BE PRESERVED WITHOUT VIRTUE.** A monarchy may subsist for ages and be better or worse under a good or bad prince; but a republic must preserve its virtue - or loose its liberty. And if virtue and liberty are lost in a republic, they can only be regained by some form of tumultuous revolution. Let us, therefore, exercise caution in our selection of leaders -- that they be honest, capable and moral. It is our duty as Christians to so influence the civil authority.

Finally, may I venture to predict that whatsoever state among us shall continue to make piety and virtue the standard of public honor, will enjoy the greatest inward peace, the national happiness, and in every outward conflict will discover the greatest constitutional strength.

John Witherspoon (1723-1794)
*To fall by Witherspoon – O name the curse
Of sound religion, and disgrace of verse
Member of Congress, we must hail him next.
“Come otr of Babylon,” was now his text...
Whilst to myself I’ve hummed, in dismal tune,
I’d rather be a dog than Witherspoon.*

So wrote Jonathon O’Dell, an Anglican priest who fled to the British lines and supported the Tories by writing derogatory ditties about prominent American patriots.

In Celebration of Independence Day, this morning’s sermon is a sermon preached by The Rev. Dr. John Witherspoon, the only minister to sign the Declaration of Independence. The sermon was preached near the end of the Revolutionary War when it appeared that victory was at hand. Indeed, the occasion was a service of thanksgiving for victory.

Witherspoon was born in Yester (near Edinburgh), Scotland, to the family of the Rev. James Witherspoon and his wife Anne, a descendent of John Knox. By the age of four, young Witherspoon could read from the Bible. By the age of sixteen, he had completed his Master of Arts degree at the University of Edinburgh. By the age of twenty he had a divinity degree. His ability in theology soon earned him a name as a noted author and the leader of the Calvinist Party in the Scottish General Assembly.

At the height of his fame in Scotland he was approached by Samuel Davies and Gilbert Tennent (two other future signers of the Declaration of Independence as well) to be the President of Princeton, a weak school that needed a strong leader. Upon becoming president, Witherspoon introduce the study of history, oratory, French, and philosophy together with the Scottish system of lectures.

Witherspoon did not make it his usual practice to preach on controversial political issues. In that regard, today’s sermon is atypical. His reservation about preaching on such subjects, however, did not hinder him from writing essays, arguments, and opinions in his private life. John Adams called Witherspoon “as high a son of liberty as any man in America.” At the age of fifty three, Witherspoon signed the Declaration of Independence. At the time, he had been in America only seven years.

Like most of those who signed the Declaration of Independence, Witherspoon suffered greatly during the Revolutionary War. He lost a son, the majority portion of the school in which he had taken so much pride was destroyed, and his personal library was burned in total. Despite all the losses, Witherspoon continued to serve in Congress until 1782.

Witherspoon was a powerful speaker and preacher. A contemporary remarked, “his eloquence made one’s blood shiver along the arteries.” His reputation as preacher and political leader won him such confidence that he was elected by the common consent to be the moderator of the First Presbyterian General Assembly held in the United States.

It is said Witherspoon was the father of the “common sense” philosophy that has been so dominant in shaping the character of the American people. He is also the person who coined the term “Americanism” in an article he wrote on the difference between English speech in the United States and Great Britain.

Since Dr. Witherspoon’s sermons were typically two hours long, today’s sermon has been greatly edited in length.

(edited from an article by Donald R. Olinger)