

“Those Whom the Lord Loves He Disciplines” — God Disciplines His Child, America

An example from America’s early history of God’s judgment on His people for the purpose of bringing forth Godly fruit.

Stephen McDowell

The external blessings or curses visited by God upon a nation are directly proportional to the moral character of that nation and its obedience to the Word of God. Not only did the Old Testament prophets believe and proclaim this truth, but the founders of America also believed it, building our nation on this very precept.

The Bible teaches (see for example Deut. 28, Lev. 26) that the blessings of God will come upon us, not only individually but also corporately as a nation, as we obey the commandments of God.

The blessings of God, brought on by the obedience of the early settlers to God and His word, were evident in the birth of America. Freedom and prosperity were part of the manifestation of these blessings. However, the Bible also reveals that disobedience to God’s Word will bring curses upon our land. During periods of national disobedience, when the American people have slipped farther away from God and from living morally, these curses have come upon our nation.

Deuteronomy 28 shows these judgments involve areas of civil government, economics, agriculture, military strategy, personal health, foreign policy, religious worship, and family relations — everything dealing with the prosperity and happiness of a society.

The book of Amos teaches that God’s standard of judgment for covenant nations is different than for non-covenant nations. God declares in Amos chapter one and two that the actions of the nations that surrounded Israel that precipitated His judgment involved the mistreatment of human beings, all of whom are created in His image. The standard to which He held His covenant people was much higher — for Judah, “they rejected the law of the Lord and have not kept His statutes” (Amos 2:4).

As a Christian nation — that is, one founded upon Biblical principles by those who covenanted with God and sought to obey His will — America will be held to a higher standard. The actions of our nation that precipitate God’s judgment will be different than those of other nations. We have known more of His truth and blessing, and will be dealt with accordingly.

However, the Bible also teaches that God’s judgment on His people reveals God’s love for them — “those whom the Lord loves He disciplines” (Heb. 12:6). He brings His judgment upon His people in order to draw them to Him and bring forth godly fruit and a furtherance of His purposes in history. Isaiah 28:23-29 pictures God’s judgment on His covenant people as a faithful farmer who plows his field to prepare it to receive good seed with the intent of bringing forth good fruit. The judgment of God upon America in the past brought forth godly fruit. We must pray and work to see that His judgments

today are for the purpose of turning the nation to Him, and setting America back upon her historical destiny to be a light to the nations and spread His liberty throughout the world.

The early settlers of America believed God had ordained their colonization of America and that He was blessing their endeavors, but they also recognized that disobedience to Him would result in God removing His hand from them. Puritan leader John Winthrop recognized that the blessings of God being upon them were essential for their growth and prosperity as a people. He wrote in "A Modell of Christian Charity": "For wee must Consider that wee shall be as a Citty upon a hill. The eies of all people are upon Us, soe that if wee shall deale falsely with our god in this worke wee have undertaken, and soe cause him to withdrawe his present help from us, wee shall be made a story and a by-word through the world."¹

By the time the Pilgrims arrived in America in 1620, they had already experienced innumerable blessings from God which continued in the years that followed. A few examples revealing the blessings of God upon them were: 1) The providential preparation of the site where the Pilgrims settled by the mysterious extermination of the fierce Patuxet Indian tribe a few years earlier; 2) "The God-send," Squanto, coming among the Pilgrims their first year, taking them under his care, teaching them how to survive in the new world, and helping to secure a peace treaty with the surrounding Indian tribes; 3) The establishment of an individual free-enterprise system which eliminated lack among them.²

As the Puritans began to arrive in great numbers around 1630, the blessings of God were coming upon them and overtaking them as well. All of New England was prospering — civil and religious liberty was progressing; education was advancing with the establishment of Harvard College and various local schools, and beginning in the mid-1600's, secondary education began to be available to everyone; and economically a gradually increasing prosperity was coming upon the land.

However, as the second and third generation of New Englanders arose, many of them did not possess the same zeal for God as their parents. Lack of their love for God can be seen in such actions as the Half-Way Covenant.

A group of New England ministers met in 1662 to decide what to do about fewer people being baptized so as to join the church. Their compromising solution permitted parents who had been baptized in church, but who no longer professed their faith, to have their children baptized.³ People losing their love for God can also be seen in a law enacted in Massachusetts on May 3, 1675, requiring the locking of church doors during service. This law was a result of too many people leaving before the long sermon was completed.⁴

As New England began to disobey God's commands, His grace was removed, and instead of blessings, curses began to come upon the land. Droughts, floods, plagues of locusts and caterpillars, smallpox epidemics, and many other things were experienced throughout New England.

In 1646 swarms of caterpillars swept over much of New England, destroying innumerable crops. John Winthrop, John Eliot, and Edward Johnson were only a few of those who recorded this devastation, and they believed it was the chastisement of God for the people's disobedience to Him. The caterpillars

devoured all types of trees and crops, and in some places they cleared fields as if they had been harvested and stripped trees so that it looked as if it were winter. They were so thick upon some roads that “the cartwheels in their passage were painted green with running over the great swarms of them.”⁵

Though God was beginning to bring judgment upon New England in general, He still honored individuals’ obedience to Him. Cotton Mather records that when the devouring caterpillars were just entering on certain “very pious and praying husbandmen’s” fields, they “poured out their fervent prayers unto the God of heaven for their deliverance; immediately hereupon flocks of birds have arriv’d that have devoured the devourers, and preserv’d those particular fields, when others have been horribly wasted.”⁶

Through this plague, enough people were awakened to ward off complete devastation, as many churches held days of humiliation. John Eliot recorded in the Roxbury Church records: “Much prayer there was made to God about it, with fasting in diverse places; and the Lord heard, and on a sudden took them all away again in all parts of the country, to the wonderment of all men. It was of the Lord, for it was done suddenly.”⁷

This turn toward God was only temporary, and as the New Englanders went their own way, curses became more prevalent. Droughts and floods began to occur in a way never seen in the past. Yet again, God still protected those who walked after Him. Mather wrote, “When any droughts or floods have threatened the ruin of our harvests, these and those congregations mostly concerned, have pray’d with fasting on those occasions; and God hath wondrously deliver’d them, with a distinction from others that have not so call’d upon him.”⁸

These deliverances by God of His people were not only observed by many colonists, but also by many Indians, who, Mather recorded, cried out that “the Englishman’s God was a great and a good God!”⁹

Even during this time of the Colonists’ backsliding, America still reflected more godliness than any other nation; but God holds us accountable for the knowledge we have (and judges Christian and non-Christian nations differently). God had revealed more to the settlers of America, and so judgment was coming accordingly.

In 1675 a War broke out in New England that shocked many into returning to God, and crying out to Him for protection and grace. King Philip, Wampanoag Indian chief, led an uprising of Indians from many tribes against the colonists. In the summer of 1675, King Philip and his followers utterly destroyed many New England towns, often butchering the inhabitants and leaving dismembered corpses of men, women and children strewn throughout the village streets. By the end of summer, 1676, Philip had been killed and the Indians defeated, yet not without great devastation. Of the ninety towns in Massachusetts and Plymouth Colony, twelve had been utterly destroyed, and 40 others attacked and partially destroyed. Over 1,000 men had been killed and at least that many women and children. While this may not seem like a great number, proportionally more people were killed in this war than in any other in which America has fought. The war debt of Plymouth Colony was estimated to exceed the total worth of personal property in the colony.¹⁰

Many Colonial ministers, most notably Increase Mather and his son Cotton, preached that this destruction was a result of the Colonists' forgetting God and being more concerned for their prosperity than for doing God's will. In fact, the people who had moved to the frontier, and hence away from the church, desiring more land and wealth, were the hardest hit by the Indian attacks.

During the months of fighting, many people were stirred by the cries of their ministers, as well as the cries of the casualties, to gather together and implore the protection of God Almighty. While it took this catastrophic event to arouse the majority of people to seek God (which moved God to protect New England from what possibly could have been complete destruction by the Indians), some were already relying upon Him. Where they were doing this, God was watching over them.

One such town was Concord. The Indians had considered attacking Concord, but chose the town of Sudbury instead. They did this because they feared the influence that Concord's minister had with the "Great Spirit." A history of the town of Sudbury quotes an old Indian chronicle as follows: "We no prosper if we burn Concord," said they. "The Great Spirit love that people. He tell us not to go there. They have a great man there. He great pray."¹¹

Another incident revealing the protection of God occurred in the town of Hadley. When Indians attacked Hadley on September 1, 1675, the inhabitants were all in church fasting and praying. Upon hearing the yells of the Indians, the men grabbed their guns and rushed out to meet the foe. John Fiske relates what happened:

but seeing the village green swarming on every side with the horrid savages, for a moment their courage gave way and a panic was imminent; when all at once a stranger of reverend aspect and stately form, with white beard flowing on his bosom, appeared among them and took command with an air of authority which none could gainsay. He bade them charge on the screeching rabble, and after a short sharp skirmish the tawny foe was put to flight. When the pursuers came together again, after the excitement of the rout, their deliverer was not to be found. In their wonder, as they knew not whence he came or whither he had gone, many were heard to say that an angel had been sent from heaven for their deliverance.¹²

While this deliverer was thought by some to be the regicide William Goffe, the townspeople nonetheless saw it as God's providential care.

The awakening within the majority of people's hearts proved only temporary, and other events of curses were to come upon New England. Boston was ravaged by great fires in 1676 and 1679. In 1685 all the New England colonies lost their representative assemblies, as James II came to power in England and attempted to bring New England completely under his control. Even when William and Mary replaced James in 1688 through England's Glorious Revolution, the New England colonies only received back part of their original rights. Massachusetts was to have a royally appointed governor up until the War for Independence.¹³

These calamities coming upon the land were seen as a spiritual problem, and things were getting so bad that in 1679 a "Reforming Synod" was called to meet in Boston to address "the necessity of

reformation.” The Synod described in detail some of the evils being done that “have provoked the Lord to bring his judgments on New England.” A few of these were: 1) professing Christians failing to live up to their profession; 2) neglect of the church and its ordinances; 3) profanity and irreverence; 4) decline in family devotions and discipline; 5) “inordinate affection to the world”; 6) hardhearted continuing in sin; 7) intemperance and drunkenness.¹⁴

From this Synod, ministers went forth throughout New England calling for repentance and reform. But they were not the only ones who recognized “that God hath a controversy with His New England People.” In 1681 the General Court of Massachusetts proclaimed a Day of Fasting and Prayer, seeking to avert the judgments of God and acknowledging His blessings were necessary not only for their public peace, health, and liberties, but also for their successful harvest.¹⁵

Even though many were sounding the Biblical warnings of Deuteronomy 28, New England fell into a “time of extraordinary dullness in religion” that would not be aroused until the First Great Awakening 50 to 60 years later.

Today we must recognize as our Forefathers of the past that the blessings and curses upon America are not a result of chance happenings, but come upon this land due to our obedience or lack of obedience to God. America’s destiny is not guaranteed like the nation of Israel. God chose Israel, but America chose God. His covenant blessings and favor are sure only as we keep choosing Him. Therefore, let us truly humble ourselves before Him, seeking the face of God in Jesus Christ, intent upon being obedient to Him, so that He may protect and heal this nation and open the floodgates of Heaven, pouring down blessings we cannot contain, enabling us to fulfill His purposes and establish His Kingdom. PP

End Notes

1. Old South Leaflets, No. 207, “A Modell of Christian Charity” by John Winthrop, 1630, p. 20.
2. See Mark A. Beliles and Stephen K. McDowell, *America’s Providential History*, Providence Foundation, Charlottesville, Vir., 1989, Chapter 6.
3. *Eerdman’s Handbook to Christianity in America*, William B. Eerdman’s Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1983, pp. 41-42.
4. *The Encyclopedia of American Facts and Dates*, edited by Gorton Carruth and Associates, Sixth Edition, Thomas Y. Cromwell Company, New York, 1972, p. 29.

5. Peter Marshall and David Manuel, *The Light and the Glory*, Fleming H. Revell Company, Old Tappan, New Jersey, 1977, pp. 217-218.
6. Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana; or the Ecclesiastical History of New England*, Vol. II, Russell and Russell, New York, reproduced from the Edition of 1852 and published in 1967, p. 355.
7. *Remarkable Providences, 1600-1760*, edited by John Demos, George Braziller, New York, 1972, p. 376.
8. Mather, p. 355.
9. *Ibid.*
10. John Fiske, *The Beginnings of New England*, Houghton, Mifflin and Company, Boston and New York, 1898, p. 269.
11. Marshall and Manuel, p. 228.
12. Fiske, pp. 244-245.
13. *Eerdman's Handbook to Christianity in America*, p. 43.
14. Edwin Scott Gaustad, *A Religious History of America*, Harper and Row, New York, 1974, p. 60.
15. *American Broadsides*, sixty facsimiles dated 1680 to 1800 reproduced from originals in the American Antiquarian Society, selected and introduced by Georgia B. Bumgardner, Imprint Society, Barre, Massachusetts, 1971.