

America Relies Upon God

Public Days of Fasting and Thanksgiving during the American Revolution

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As America has humbled herself before God and been obedient to His commandments, He has poured out His blessings upon this nation in innumerable ways. It was by God's hand and for His purposes that America came into being as the world's first Christian republic, but it was through the people who covenanted themselves with God that He was able to do His work.

Almost all the people who colonized America, though they were from different denominations and Christian persuasions, embraced the Puritan doctrine of Divine Providence, seeing God in history as "directly supervising the affairs of men, sending evil upon the city . . . for their sins, . . . or blessing his people when they turn from their evil ways."¹ Looking to the Scriptures for the source of their law, both personal and civil, they firmly believed God's blessings would come upon those who obey His commands and curses would come upon the disobedient (see Deuteronomy 28 and Leviticus 26).

This is why during times of calamity or crisis both church and civil authorities would proclaim days of fasting and prayer; and when God responded with deliverance and blessing, they would proclaim days of thanksgiving and prayer. From 1620 until the American Revolution at least 1000 such days were proclaimed by governments at all levels, and many more by various churches.² This continued during our struggle for independence, through our first century as a nation, and, in some measure, even up until today.

The First Great Awakening

Beginning in the late 1730s and continuing for about two decades, a great awakening occurred in America. This revival of Christianity set on fire the hearts of the people all over the colonies, which in turn produced a greater morality and godliness than before existed in this nation.

This was quite phenomenal for virtue had always permeated America. One example of this is attested to by historian James Truslow Adams, who said, "I have found only one case of a colonial traveler being robbed in the whole century preceding the Revolution."³

The Great Awakening had such an impact upon the colonies that in some towns almost the entire populace was converted to Christ. Benjamin Franklin wrote of this time period that "it seemed as if all the world were growing religious, so one could not walk thro' the town in an evening without hearing psalms sung in different families of every street."⁴ This revival of Christianity in the hearts of the people had "expression not merely in church attendance, but in all the activities of life."⁵

Universities such as Princeton, Rutgers, Dartmouth and Brown were founded in order to supply all the colonies with learned and influential clergy. These universities produced not only Godly clergy but Godly leaders in civil government, business, and every other aspect of life.

Providentially, this awakening occurred while our future Founding Fathers were young men. The men who won the Revolutionary War, formed our Constitutional Republic, and set our nation properly on course were thus equipped with the virtue, morality, self-government, and Biblical worldview necessary for their future stations. Even the non-Christians, as Franklin and Jefferson, were affected in this way. Franklin said he “never doubted . . . the existence of the Deity; that He made the world, and governed it by His Providence;. . . that all crime will be punished, and virtue rewarded, either here or hereafter.”⁶

The ideas upon which our nation was birthed — the right of man to life, liberty, and property— had their origin in God. As they originated in God, they were also secured due to His blessings upon this nation. He blessed not only individuals, but the entire nation. As America humbled herself before God by obedience to His Word and acknowledgment of her dependence upon Him for success in the Revolutionary War and the formation of the new nation, God not only provided wise and virtuous leaders, but also supernaturally intervened on behalf of the American army on many occasions.

From the initial conflict with Britain, the American Colonies relied upon God. George Washington’s words to his wife upon departure to take command of the Continental army, reflected the heart of the American people: “I shall rely . . . confidently on that Providence, which has heretofore preserved and been bountiful to me.”⁷

To punish Massachusetts for its action at the Boston Tea Party, England closed the Boston port on June 1, 1774. The response of the colonies revealed in Whom they looked for help. The Virginia House of Burgesses, in resolves penned by Jefferson, “set apart the first day of June as a day of fasting and prayer, to invoke the divine interposition to give to the American people one heart and one mind to oppose by all just means every injury to American rights.”⁸ On that day large congregations filled the churches. This occurred not only in Virginia but throughout the colonies.

Action followed this prayer as the colonists began to voluntarily provide aid and encouragement to Boston as that city’s commerce was cut off by the British blockade. This voluntary and universal action revealed that “beneath the diversity that characterized the colonies, there was American unity.”⁹ The American people recognized this unity came from a common Christian bond among the people of all the colonies.

In response to the charity that flowed into the city, the Boston Gazette of July 11, 1774, responded by writing, “my persecuted brethren of this metropolis, you may rest assured that the guardian God of New England, who holds the hearts of his people in his hands, has influenced your distant brethren to this benevolence.”¹⁰

A few months later, in September of 1774, the first Continental Congress assembled in Philadelphia. The first act of the first session of the Congress was to pass a resolution calling for the opening of Congress the next day with prayer by Rev. Duché. The next morning Rev. Duché did pray and read from the thirty-fifth Psalm, as Washington, Henry, Lee, Jay and others knelt and joined with him in prayer. John Adams wrote about this scene in a letter to his wife: “I never saw a greater Effect upon an audience. It seemed as if Heaven had ordained that Psalm to be read on that Morning. . . . It has had an excellent Effect upon every Body here.”¹¹

God's involvement in the founding of America is again seen on April 19, 1775. This day marked the battle of Lexington, of which Rev. Jonas Clark proclaimed: "From this day will be dated the liberty of the world."¹² It was his parishioners who shed the first blood of the Revolution, and it was on his church lawn that it occurred.

God made certain that on this day His people had proper support, for on April 19, the entire colony of Connecticut was fasting and praying. On March 22, when the Governor of Connecticut, Jonathan Trumbull, proclaimed April 19 as a "Day of publick Fasting and Prayer," he probably did not realize the significance of that date; but the One who rules heaven and earth and directs the course of history undoubtedly knew and was able to direct the humble hearts of the colonists to pray.

In part, Trumbull's proclamation asked, "that God would graciously pour out His Holy Spirit on us, to bring us to a thorough Repentance and effectual Reformation, that our Iniquities may not be our Ruin; that He would restore, preserve and secure the Liberties of this, and all the other British American Colonies, and make this Land a mountain of Holiness and habitation of Righteousness forever."¹³

Connecticut was not the only colony to lay the foundations of the War for Independence in prayer, for on April 15, 1775, Massachusetts officially proclaimed May 11 to be set apart as a "Day of Public Humiliation, Fasting and Prayer" — a day where all their confidence was to be "reposed only on that God who rules in the Armies of Heaven, and without whose Blessing the best human Counsels are but foolishness — and all created Power Vanity."¹⁴

America continued to humble herself before God and show her reliance upon Him throughout the war. Frequent days of prayer and fasting were observed, not only by individuals and local churches, but also by the Continental Army, and all the newly united States of America. Immediately after the Continental Congress approved the Declaration of Independence, they appointed chaplains to Congress as well as ordering chaplains to be provided for the army. These chaplains were paid with public funds.

As God's people and the nation humbled themselves and prayed, He moved mightily on their behalf. He gave wisdom to America to know when and how to respond to the injustices of Britain. He worked Christian character into the American people, her leaders, and her army so they could endure many hardships and not give up their fight for liberty, even in seemingly hopeless situations. He also controlled the weather and arranged events to assure eventual victory for the new nation.

One such miraculous event occurred during the summer of 1776. During the Battle of Long Island, Washington and his troops had been pushed back to the East River and surrounded by the much larger British army. Washington decided to retreat across the wide East River, even though it appeared doomed to fail. If it did fail, this probably would have marked the end of the war. Yet the God in Whom Washington and the nation trusted came to their aid. He caused a storm to arise which protected the American army from the enemy, then stopped it so as to allow the Americans to escape. He also miraculously brought in a fog to cover the retreat. In addition, He directed a servant, sent to warn the British, to those soldiers who would not understand him— German-speaking mercenaries.

Thanks to God, 9000 men with all their supplies had miraculously retreated to New York. Here we see, as American General Greene said, “the best effected retreat I ever read or heard of.” This event was so astonishing that many (including General Washington) attributed the safe retreat of the American army to the hand of God.¹⁵

On October 17, 1777, British General Burgoyne was defeated by Colonial forces at Saratoga. Earlier, General Howe was supposed to have marched north to join Burgoyne’s 11,000 men at Saratoga. However, in his haste to leave London for a holiday, Lord North forgot to sign the dispatch to General Howe. The dispatch was pigeon-holed and not found until years later in the archives of the British army. This inadvertence, plus the fact that contrary winds kept British reinforcements delayed at sea for three months, totally altered the outcome at Saratoga in favor of America.¹⁶

In response to the victory, the Continental Congress proclaimed a day of thanksgiving and praise to God. In part, they stated, “Forasmuch as it is the indispensable duty of all men to adore the superintending providence of Almighty God, . . . and it having pleased Him in His abundant mercy not only to continue to us the innumerable bounties of His common providence, but also to smile upon us in the prosecution of a just and necessary war for the defence and establishment of our inalienable rights and liberties, particularly in that He hath been pleased . . . to crown our arms with most signal success: it is therefore recommended . . . to set apart Thursday, the 18th day of December, for solemn thanksgiving and praise.” They recommended for everyone to confess their sins and humbly ask God, “through the merits of Jesus Christ, mercifully to forgive and blot them out of remembrance” and thus He then would be able to pour out His blessings upon every aspect of the nation.¹⁷

This is the official resolution of our Congress during the Revolutionary War! No wonder the blessings of God flowed upon this nation. Similar resolutions were also issued by the Commander of the American army, George Washington.

When Benedict Arnold’s treason was providentially discovered in September of 1780, both Congress and Washington acknowledged it was by the Hand of God. Congress declared December 7, 1780, a day of Thanksgiving in which the nation could give thanks to God for His “watchful providence” over them. In a letter to John Laurens, Washington wrote, “In no instance since the commencement of the War has the interposition of Providence appeared more conspicuous than in the rescue of the Post and Garrison of West Point from Arnold’s villainous perfidy.”¹⁸ In Washington’s official address to the Army announcing Arnold’s treason, he stated, “The providential train of circumstances which led to it [his discovery of Arnold’s treason] affords the most convincing proof that the liberties of America are the object of Divine protection.”¹⁹

This Divine protection of the liberties of America was seen over and over again during the Revolution — at Trenton and the crossing of the Delaware; during the winter at Valley Forge; in France becoming America’s ally; during the miraculous retreat of the Americans from Cowpens; and at the Battle of Yorktown.²⁰

Throughout all these events America consistently gave thanks to Almighty God, humbled herself before Him, and sought to obey Him in all spheres of life. This released the blessings and grace of God upon this nation which enabled America to be victorious in her struggle for

freedom. Some years later, God's grace provided wisdom to establish the United States Constitution, and in so doing provide a Christian form of government through which the Christian spirit of this nation would effectively flow.

For America to continue to be a citadel of liberty and prosperity, we must continually humble ourselves before Him who gave birth to this nation and acknowledge with George Washington in his first inaugural speech of April 30, 1789, that "no people can be bound to acknowledge and adore the Invisible Hand which conducts the affairs of men more than the people of the United States. Every step by which they have advanced to the character of an independent nation seems to have been distinguished, by some token of providential agency."²¹

In 1787, a committee of all the states of the United States of America, gratefully looking back over all the preceding years, set apart October 19, 1787, "as a day of public prayer and thanksgiving" to their "all-bountiful Creator" who had conducted them "through the perils and dangers of the war" and established them as a free nation, and gave "them a name and a place among the princes and nations of the earth." In that official proclamation they wrote that the "benign interposition of Divine Providence hath, on many occasions been most miraculously and abundantly manifested; and the citizens of the United States have the greatest reason to return their most hearty and sincere praises and thanksgiving to the God of their deliverance, whose name be praised."²²

God is the One who laid the foundation for America and the One Who assured her birth and growth as a nation. Apart from His continued influence, we cannot expect our nation to be maintained.

End Notes

1. W. DeLoss Love, Jr., *The Fast and Thanksgiving Days of New England* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1895), 41.

2. See Love, pp. 464–514 for a list.

3. James Truslow Adams, *A History of American Life, Vol. III, Provincial Society, 1690-1763* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1927), 161.

4. *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, compiled and edited by John Bigelow (New York: Walter J. Black, Inc., 1932), 217.

5. Adams, p. 284.

6. *The Autobiography of Franklin*, p. 182.

7. William J. Johnson, *George Washington the Christian* (Milford, MI: Mott Media, 1976, reprint), 69.

8. *The Christian History of the Constitution*, Verna M. Hall, compiler (San Francisco: Foundation for American Christian Education, 1980), 336.

9. *Ibid.*, pp. 338-339.

10. *Ibid.*

11. *The Book of Abigail and John, Selected Letters of the Adams Family, 1762-1784* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975), 76.

12. *They Preached Liberty*, Franklin P. Cole, editor (Indianapolis: Liberty Press), 39.

13. Copy of proclamation in *The Christian History of the American Revolution, Consider and Ponder*, Verna M. Hall, compiler (San Francisco: Foundation for American Christian Education, 1976), 495.

14. *The Christian History of the Constitution*, p. Id.

15. See Mark A. Beliles and Stephen K. McDowell, *America's Providential History* (Charlottesville: Providence Foundation, 1991), 158-161.

16. *America, Great Crises in Our History Told by Its Makers, A Library of Original Sources, Vol. III*, Issued by Americanization Department, Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States, Chicago, 1925, p. 211.

17. B. F. Morris, *Christian Life and Character of the Civil Institutions of the United States* (Philadelphia: George W. Childs, 1864), 531.

18. Beliles and McDowell, 163-164.

19. *America*, p. 285.

20. See Beliles and McDowell, *America's Providential History*, Chapter 11.

21. *A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents*, James D. Richardson (Washington: Bureau of National Literature and Art, 1910), vol. 1.

22. B.F. Morris, 542-543.