

THE WORKS OF JOHN WITHERSPOON

VOLUME III

Church Writings, Moral Philosophy, and Eloquence

John Witherspoon

Annotated Edition



Ligature

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PUBLISHER'S PREFACE

John Witherspoon (1723–1794) was a Presbyterian minister, educator, signer of the Declaration of Independence, and president of the College of New Jersey. His influence reached beyond theology into moral philosophy, rhetoric, education, and American public life.

This volume follows Volume III of the revised Philadelphia edition of 1802. It contains pastoral and public addresses, church satire, moral philosophy, and lectures on eloquence. The 1802 contents assign Sermon XLIV to “The Dominion of Providence over the Passions of Men.” Volume II also contains a different Sermon XLIV. This edition preserves that duplicate number because it is a feature of the source.

Ligature collated every page against the Princeton copy and completed a second visual proof against the Harvard copy.

This is a faithful reading edition. It preserves Witherspoon's words, spelling, sentence order, paragraph order, headings, and source notes. It removes running heads, printed page numbers, signatures, and other production matter. It rejoins words divided at page and line endings. It uses modern quotation marks, apostrophes, spacing, Bible-book abbreviations, and Arabic Scripture chapter numbers.

Numbered footnotes reproduce notes from a source edition. Notes introduced by “Editor's note” identify a person, define an obsolete term, or supply needed historical context. They do not recast Witherspoon's doctrine.

The historical conversations identify the main disputes behind the works. The annotated source guide identifies books, writers, and movements named or clearly implied in the volume. The Scripture Index identifies explicit Bible references and their pages in this edition.

—The Editors
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A PASTORAL LETTER FROM THE SYNOD OF NEW-YORK AND PHILADELPHIA



To the Congregations under their Care; to be read from the Pulpits on Thursday, June 29, 1775, being the Day of the general Fast.

Very dear brethren,

The Synod of New-York and Philadelphia, being met at a time when public affairs wear so threatening an aspect, and when (unless God in his sovereign Providence speedily prevent it) all the horrors of a civil war throughout this great continent are to be apprehended, were of opinion, that they could not discharge their duty to the numerous congregations under their care, without addressing them at this important crisis. As the firm belief, and habitual recollection of the power and presence of the living God, ought at all times to possess the minds of real Christians, so in seasons of public calamity, when the Lord is known by the judgment which he executeth, it would be an ignorance or indifference highly criminal, not to look up to him with reverence, to implore his mercy by humble and fervent prayer, and, if possible, to prevent his vengeance by unfeigned repentance.

We do therefore, brethren, beseech you in the most earnest manner, to look beyond the immediate authors either of your sufferings or fears, and to acknowledge the holiness and justice of the Almighty, in the present visitation. "He is righteous in all his ways, and holy in all his works.—Affliction springeth not out of the dust.—He doth not afflict willingly, nor grieve the children of men;" and therefore, it becomes every person, family, city, and province, to humble themselves before his throne, to confess their sins, by which they have provoked his indignation, and intreat him to pour out upon all ranks a spirit of repentance and of prayer. Fly also for forgiveness to the atoning blood of the great Redeemer, "the blood of sprinkling which speaketh better things than that of Abel." Remember and confess, not only your sins in general, but those prevalent national offences which may be justly considered as the procuring causes of public judgments; particularly profaneness and contempt of God, his name, Sabbaths, and sanctuary;—pride, luxury, uncleanness, and neglect of family religion and government, with the deplorable ignorance and security which certainly ought

to be imputed to this as their principal cause. All these are, among us, highly aggravated by the inestimable privileges, which we have hitherto enjoyed without interruption since the first settlement of this country. If in the present day of distress we expect that God will hear our supplications, and interpose for our protection or deliverance, let us remember what he himself requires of us is, that our prayers should be attended with a sincere purpose, and thorough endeavor after personal and family reformation: "If thou prepare thine heart, and stretch out thy hand towards him; if iniquity be in thine hand, put it far away, and let not wickedness dwell in thy tabernacles," Job 11:13, 14.

The Synod cannot help thinking that this is a proper time for pressing all of every rank, seriously to consider the things that belong to their eternal peace. Hostilities, long feared, have now taken place,—the sword has been drawn in one province,—and the whole continent, with hardly any exception, seem determined to defend their rights by force of arms. If, at the same time, the British ministry shall continue to enforce their claims by violence, a lasting and bloody contest must be expected: Surely then it becomes those who have taken up arms, and profess a willingness to hazard their lives in the cause of liberty, to be prepared for death, which to many must be the certain, and to every one is a possible or probable event.

We have long seen with concern, the circumstances which occasioned, and the gradual increase of this unhappy difference. As ministers of the gospel of peace, we have ardently wished that it could, and often hoped that it would have been more early accommodated. It is well known to you (otherwise it would be imprudent indeed thus publicly to profess) that we have not been instrumental in inflaming the minds of the people, or urging them to acts of violence and disorder:—Perhaps no instance can be given on so interesting a subject, in which political sentiments have been so long and so fully kept from the pulpit, and even malice itself has not charged us with laboring from the press; but things are now come to such a state, that as we do not wish to conceal our opinions as men and citizens, so the relation we stand in to you seemed to make the present improvement of it to your spiritual benefit an indispensable duty. Suffer us then to lay hold of your present temper of mind, and to exhort, especially the young and vigorous, by assuring them, that there is no soldier so undaunted as the pious man, no army so formidable as those who are superior to the fear of death. There is nothing more awful to think of, than that those whose trade is war should be despisers of the name of the Lord of hosts, and that they should expose

themselves to the imminent danger, of being immediately sent from cursing and cruelty on earth, to the blaspheming rage and despairing horror of the infernal pit. Let therefore every one, who from generosity of spirit, or benevolence of heart, offers himself as a champion in his country's cause, be persuaded to reverence the name, and walk in the fear of the Prince of the kings of the earth, and then he may, with the most unshaken firmness, expect the issue either in victory or death.

Let it not be forgotten, that though for the wise ends of his Providence, it may please God, for a season, to suffer his people to lie under unmerited oppression, yet in general we may expect, that those who fear and serve him in sincerity and truth, will be favored with his countenance and strength. It is both the character and the privilege of the children of God, that they "call upon him in the day of trouble," and he, who keepeth covenant and truth forever, has said, that "his ears are always open to their cry." We need not mention to you in how many instances the event in battles, and success in war, have turned upon circumstances which were inconsiderable in themselves, as well as out of the power of human prudence to foresee or direct, because we suppose you firmly believe, that after all the counsels of men, and the most probable and promising means, the Lord will do "that which seemeth him good;" nor hath his promise ever failed of its full accomplishment: "The Lord is with you while ye be with him, and if ye seek him, he will be found of you; but if ye forsake him, he will forsake you," 2 Chron. 15:2.

After this exhortation, which we thought ourselves called upon to give you at this time, on your great interest, "the one thing needful," we shall take the liberty to offer a few advices to the societies under our charge, as to their public and general conduct; and,

First, In carrying on this important struggle, let every opportunity be taken to express your attachment and respect to our sovereign king George, and to the revolution principles, by which his august family was seated on the British throne. We recommend, indeed, not only allegiance to him from duty and principle, as the first magistrate of the empire, but esteem and reverence for the person of the prince, who has merited well of his subjects on many accounts, and who has probably been misled into the late and present measures by those about him; neither have we any doubt, that they themselves have been in a great degree deceived by false information from interested persons residing in America. It gives us the greatest pleasure to say, from our own certain knowledge of all belonging to our communion, and from the best means of information, of the far greatest part of all denominations in this country, that the present opposition

to the measures of administration does not in the least arise from disaffection to the king, or a desire of separation from the parent state. We are happy in being able with truth to affirm, that no part of America would either have approved or permitted such insults as have been offered to the Sovereign in Great-Britain. We exhort you, therefore, to continue in the same disposition, and not to suffer oppression or injury itself easily to provoke you to any thing which may seem to betray contrary sentiments: let it ever appear, that you only desire the preservation and security of those rights which belong to you as freemen and Britons, and that reconciliation upon these terms is your most ardent desire.

Secondly, Be careful to maintain the union which at present subsists through all the colonies; nothing can be more manifest, than that the success of every measure depends on its being inviolably preserved, and therefore, we hope, that you will leave nothing undone which can promote that end. In particular as the Continental Congress, now sitting at Philadelphia, consist of delegates chosen in the most free and unbiassed manner, by the body of the people, let them not only be treated with respect, and encouraged in their difficult service—not only let your prayers be offered up to God for his direction in their proceedings—but adhere firmly to their resolutions; and let it be seen that they are able to bring out the whole strength of this vast country to carry them into execution. We would also advise for the same purpose, that a spirit of candor, charity and mutual esteem be preserved, and promoted towards those of different religious denominations. Persons of probity and principle of every profession, should be united together as servants of the same master, and the experience of our happy concord hitherto in a state of liberty should engage all to unite in support of the common interest; for there is no example in history, in which civil liberty was destroyed, and the rights of conscience preserved entire.

Thirdly, We do earnestly exhort and beseech the societies under our care to be strict and vigilant in their private government, and to watch over the morals of their several members. It is with the utmost pleasure we remind you, that the last Continental Congress determined to discourage luxury in living, public diversions, and gaming of all kinds, which have so fatal an influence on the morals of the people. If it is undeniable, that universal profligacy makes a nation ripe for divine judgments, and is the natural mean of bringing them to ruin, reformation of manners is of the utmost necessity in our present distress. At the same time, as it has been observed by many eminent writers, that the censorial power, which had for its object the manners of the public in the ancient free

states, was absolutely necessary to their continuance, we cannot help being of opinion, that the only thing which we have now to supply the place of this is the religious discipline of the several sects with respect to their own members; so that the denomination or profession which shall take the most effectual care of the instruction of its members, and maintain its discipline in the fullest vigor, will do the most essential service to the whole body. For the very same reason the greatest service which magistrates or persons in authority can do with respect to the religion or morals of the people, is to defend and secure the rights of conscience in the most equal and impartial manner.

Fourthly, We cannot but recommend, and urge in the warmest manner, a regard to order and the public peace; and as in many places, during the confusions that prevail, legal proceedings have become difficult, it is hoped, that all persons will conscientiously pay their just debts, and to the utmost of their power serve one another, so that the evils inseparable from a civil war may not be augmented by wantonness and irregularity.

Fifthly, We think it of importance at this time, to recommend to all of every rank, but especially to those who may be called to action, a spirit of humanity and mercy. "Every battle of the warrior is with confused noise, and garments rolled in blood." It is impossible to appeal to the sword without being exposed to many scenes of cruelty and slaughter; but it is often observed, that civil wars are carried on with a rancor and spirit of revenge much greater than those between independent states. The injuries received or supposed in civil wars wound more deeply than those of foreign enemies; it is therefore the more necessary to guard against this abuse, and recommend that meekness and gentleness of spirit, which is the noblest attendant on true valor. That man will fight most bravely, who never fights till it is necessary, and who ceases to fight as soon as the necessity is over.

Lastly, We would recommend to all the societies under our care, not to content themselves with attending devoutly on general fast, but to continue habitually in the exercise of prayer, and to have frequent occasional voluntary meetings for solemn intercession with God on the important trial. Those who are immediately exposed to danger need your sympathy; and we learn from the Scriptures, that fervency and importunity are the very characters of that prayer of "the righteous man which availeth much."

We conclude with our earnest prayer, that the God of heaven may bless you in your temporal and spiritual concerns, and that the present unnatural dispute may be speedily terminated by an equitable and lasting settlement on constitutional principles.

SERMON XLIV:

THE DOMINION OF PROVIDENCE
OVER THE PASSIONS OF MEN

Preached at Princeton, on the 17th of May 1776, being the General Fast appointed by the Congress through the United Colonies.

Dedicated to the Hon. John Hancock, Esq. President of the Congress of the United States of America.

To which is added, an Address to the natives of Scotland residing in America.

Ps. 76:10.

Surely the wrath of man shall praise thee; the remainder of wrath shalt thou refrain.

There is not a greater evidence either of the reality or the power of religion, than a firm belief of God's universal presence, and a constant attention to the influence and operation of his providence. It is by this means that the Christian may be said, in the emphatical scripture language, "to walk with God, and to endure as seeing him who is invisible."

The doctrine of divine providence is very full and complete in the sacred oracles. It extends not only to things which we may think of great moment, and therefore worthy of notice, but to things the most indifferent and inconsiderable: "Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing," says our Lord, "and one of them falleth not to the ground without your heavenly Father;" nay, "the very hairs of your head are all numbered." It extends not only to things beneficial and salutary, or to the direction and assistance of those who are the servants of the living God; but to things seemingly most hurtful and destructive, and to persons the most refractory and disobedient. He overrules all his creatures, and all their actions. Thus we are told, that "fire, hail, snow, vapour, and stormy wind, fulfil his word," in the course of nature; and even so the most impetuous and disorderly passions of men, that are under no restraint from themselves, are yet perfectly subject to the dominion of Jehovah. They carry his commission, they obey his orders, they are limited and restrained by his authority, and they conspire with every thing else in promoting his glory. There is the greater need to take notice of this, that

men are not generally sufficiently aware of the distinction between the law of God and his purpose; they are apt to suppose, that as the temper of the sinner is contrary to the one, so the outrages of the sinner are able to defeat the other; than which nothing can be more false. The truth is plainly asserted, and nobly expressed by the psalmist in the text, “Surely the wrath of man shall praise thee; the remainder of wrath shalt thou refrain.”

This Psalm was evidently composed as a song of praise for some signal victory obtained, which was at the same time a remarkable deliverance from threatening danger. The author was one or other of the later prophets, and the occasion probably the unsuccessful assault of Jerusalem, by the army of Sennacherib king of Assyria, in the days of Hezekiah. Great was the insolence and boasting of his generals and servants against the city of the living God, as may be seen in the thirty-sixth chapter of Isaiah. Yet it pleased God to destroy their enemies, and, by his own immediate interposition, to grant them deliverance. Therefore the Psalmist says, in the fifth and sixth verses of this psalm, “The stout-hearted are spoiled, they have slept their sleep. None of the men of might have found their hands. At thy rebuke, O God of Jacob! both the chariot and the horse are cast into a deep sleep.” After a few more remarks to the same purpose, he draws the inference, or makes the reflection in the text, “Surely the wrath of man shall praise thee; the remainder of wrath shalt thou refrain:” which may be paraphrased thus—The fury and injustice of oppressors shall bring in a tribute of praise to thee; the influence of thy righteous providence shall be clearly discerned; the countenance and support thou wilt give to thine own people shall be gloriously illustrated; thou shalt set the bounds which the boldest cannot pass.

I am sensible, my brethren, that the time and occasion of this psalm, may seem to be, in one respect ill suited to the interesting circumstances of this country at present. It was composed after the victory was obtained, whereas we are now but putting on the harness and entering upon an important contest, the length of which it is impossible to foresee, and the issue of which it will perhaps be thought presumption to foretell. But as the truth, with respect to God’s moral government, is the same and unchangeable; as the issue, in the case of Sennacherib’s invasion, did but lead the prophet to acknowledge it, our duty and interest conspire in calling upon us to improve it. And I have chosen to insist upon it on this day of solemn humiliation, as it will probably help us to a clear and explicit view of what should be the chief subject of our prayers and endeavors, as well as the great object of our hope and trust, in our present situation.