



The

DOMINION

of

PROVIDENCE

Divine Sovereignty and Civil Liberty

John Witherspoon
(1723-1794)

The Dominion of Providence

Divine Sovereignty and Civil Liberty

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The Dominion of Providence

Divine Sovereignty and Civil Liberty

*Surely the wrath of man shall praise
thee: the remainder of wrath shalt
thou restrain.—Psalm 76:10*

Introduction

The greatest evidence that faith is at work is the soul's firm belief that God is everywhere. The believer constantly watches for the works of God's providence. Indeed, this is why the Scripture says a Christian "walks with God" and endures "as seeing him who is invisible" (Gen 5:24; Heb 11:27).

God's Word presents a full and complete doctrine of God's providence. Providence reaches not only to things we consider as important, but also to what we would consider very insignificant, below our notice. "Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing?" says our Lord, "and one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father" (Mat 10:29). Indeed, "the very hairs of your head are all numbered" (v. 30). God's providence extends to beneficial things; it directs

and assists the servants of the living God. But it goes beyond to things that seem harmful or destructive. It includes people who are rebellious and disobedient. God overrules all His creatures and all their actions. Thus we are told that fire, hail, snow, vapor, and stormy wind fulfil His word in the course of nature (Psa 148:8). Men's most unreasonable and disorderly passions, outside of their control, are yet perfectly controlled by Jehovah's dominion. Men's passions fulfil His commission, they obey His orders, they are limited and restrained by His authority, and they work together with everything else to glorify Him.

We especially need to pay attention to this because we are usually unclear on the distinction between the law of God and His purpose. We tend to think that since the sinner's purpose is contrary to God's law, his outrageous behavior is able to defeat God's purpose. But absolutely not! Our text plainly states the truth: "Surely the wrath of man shall praise thee; the remainder of wrath shalt thou restrain."

This psalm was evidently composed as a song of praise for great victory, a remarkable deliverance from threatening danger. The author was one of the later prophets, and the occasion probably the unsuccessful attack on Jerusalem by the army of Sennacherib king of Assyria, in the days of Hezekiah. His generals and servants boasted with great insolence against the city of the living God (Isaiah

36). But God was pleased to destroy Jerusalem's enemies; He stepped in personally to deliver His people. Therefore the psalmist says in the fifth and sixth verses of this psalm, "The stouthearted are spoiled, they have slept their sleep: and none of the men of might have found their hands. At thy rebuke, O God of Jacob, both the chariot and horse are cast into a deep sleep." After a few more similar remarks, he draws the conclusion, "Surely the wrath of man shall praise thee: the remainder of wrath shalt thou restrain." We could paraphrase it like this: The fury and injustice of oppressors will bring a tribute of praise to You; the effect of Your righteous providence will be clearly seen; the support You will give to Your own people will be gloriously illustrated; You will set bounds which the boldest offenders cannot pass.

I know the historical occasion of this psalm may seem in some ways unsuited to our country's present circumstances.¹ The psalm was composed after victory was already won, whereas we are just now putting on our weapons and entering an important contest. We cannot foresee its length, and it would be presumption to try to predict the outcome. But the truth about God's moral government is the same. It never changes. Since the

¹ **our country's present circumstances** – the events leading up to America's Declaration of Independence and the Revolutionary War.

outcome of Sennacherib's invasion led the prophet to acknowledge God's government, our duty calls us to apply it to ourselves as well. I have chosen to focus on this vital subject on this day of solemn humiliation² because I believe it will help us form a clear and definite view of what we should pray and labor for most. I also hope it will help us form a clear view of what we should hope and trust in, in our present situation.

The truth, then, stated in this text is that *all the evil passions of men, whether they harm innocent individuals or serve as God's arrows of public judgment, will be to the praise of God in the end*. Or, to apply it more specifically to the American colonies and this plague of war, *the ambitions of mistaken rulers, the cruelty of corrupt civil servants, and even the inhumanity of brutal soldiers, however dreadful, will finally promote the glory of God, and while the storm continues, He will show His mercy and kindness by prescribing bounds to their rage and fury*.

By God's help, I will break down this subject as follows:

I. How the wrath of man praises God in particular ways.

² **solemn humiliation** – day of prayer and fasting; this sermon was preached on a General Fast day, set apart by the Continental Congress for humble supplication before God as war loomed on the horizon.

II. How we can apply these principles now for your instruction and comfort.

III. How we can do our duty appropriately in this crisis.

1. How the Wrath of Man Praises God

First, I will point out specific ways the wrath of man praises God. I will only mention some instances, because it would be impossible for me to mention all the instances. God's counsels are deep, impossible for us to penetrate. It is the duty of every good man to put his unlimited confidence in God's wisdom, and to believe that when providence appears unintelligible to him, it is planned with the same skill and directed to the same great purposes as when he can explain the reasons for it most clearly. But when God's Word and our experience enable us to explain the wisdom, justice, or mercy of God's providence, it is one of the most delightful and profitable exercises of a serious mind.

a. It Illustrates God's True Verdict about Man's Sin.

First, the wrath of man praises God as it illustrates God's truth by clearly pointing out the corruption of man's nature. The truth of depravity is foundational to the doctrine of redemption. A clear conviction of the sinfulness of our nature and state

is necessary to true religion. Without this conviction there can be neither repentance in the sinner nor humility in the believer. Without this, all that Scripture says about God's wisdom and mercy in providing a Savior is pointless. Our Savior says rightly, "They that are whole have no need of the physician, but they that are sick: I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (Mar 2:17). Those who do not sense that they are sinners will defy every exhortation to repentance and despise every offer of mercy.

But where can we get a more sobering view of our corrupt nature than in the wrath of man—oppressive, cruel, and bloody? Sadly, depraved wrath is plain enough in peaceful times. Some might say that man's nature is not corrupt, but I see it everywhere. I feel it every day. The disorders in society and most of the unhappiness we experience arise from envy, malice, covetousness, and other lusts of man. If we were really what we ought to be in every way, we would not need to go any further for heaven, for heaven would be on earth!

But war and violence paint human nature in even more awful colors, where the lust of domination becomes so violent and universal. It is shocking that men are so rarely satisfied with their own possessions, or even with the benefit that comes from working for each other. Men see the quiet happiness of others as a barrier to their own. The great law of nature is not enough for them: "Dust

thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return” (Gen 3:19), so they set out to furiously destroy each other. It is shocking to think of the havoc men have made of each other in every age since the first murder of Abel by his brother Cain. What fills the pages of history, but wars of princes and empires? What vast armies has lawless ambition brought into the battlefield, only to deliver them as a prey to the destructive sword?

Just consider the circumstances; they are overwhelming. A mother endures the pain of childbirth for her son, labors hard to rear him for many years; but, in the prime of life, in the vigor of health, and bloom of beauty, he is cut down suddenly by the dreadful weapons of death. “Every battle of the warrior is with confused noise, and garments rolled in blood” (Isa 9:5). But the horror goes beyond the field of slaughter. Most soldiers have relatives; most who fall have loved ones who mourn. In every battle, what is the impact on the families of those who die? They can see their bodies for only a day. The cries of the fatally wounded are soon silent. But many days will not end the parent’s mourning for a beloved son—that son who was the joy and support of old age. Many days will not end the mourning of the widow and helpless child for that father taken away at the prime of life.

If this is true of all wars, what can we say about the dreadful scene of civil war? How awful it is that those who share the same blood, same language, and

same religion should yet butcher one another with unrelenting rage, and glory in doing so! How awful that men should destroy the fields of their fellow citizens—the same fields from which they themselves have often eaten—and set on fire the same houses in which they enjoyed hospitable shelter before!

These things could overwhelm us with fear and sorrow. Most will respond with indignation and a spirit of revenge. At the very least, these things will stir up some to prepare for self-defense. And I do not blame such a response. On the contrary, I call it necessary and commendable.

But my aim now, with what I have been saying, is the depravity of our nature. “From whence come wars and fightings among you? come they not hence, even from your lusts that war in your members?” (Jam 4:1). Corrupt men praise human dignity without distinguishing its created condition from its present fallen state. These showy speculations please a worldly mind. To careless youth they are much more dangerous than even the temptation to a loose and sensual life, since they are protected from it by conscience and public shame. But in contrast to these visionary reasonings of man, I appeal to all of history and the plain testimony of daily experience. These will tell us men’s practice, and from that you can judge what they are by nature, until they are made new [by God]. Honest attention to the ravages of lawless power in history and the

world today ought to humble us in the dust. It should lead us to acknowledge that Scripture gives us the right view of our lost state. It should lead us to long for the blessed influence of renewing grace³ for ourselves. It should lead us to long for the dominion of righteousness and peace when men “shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks: nation shall not lift up a sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more” (Mic 4:3).

b. It Is One of God’s Instruments for Repentance.

The wrath of man praises God as He uses it to bring sinners to repentance and to correct and sanctify His children. When God brings affliction on individuals, families, or nations, He has a purpose. Whatever the intention is of those whose hatred He employs, His purpose is to rebuke men for iniquity, to bring them to repentance, and to promote their holiness and peace.

Scripture often mentions the sanctifying benefits of affliction in general. God’s purpose in affliction is for good, and his saints find it to be so in their experience. “Now, no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of

³ **renewing grace** – regeneration, the new birth; see *Free Grace Broadcaster* 202, “The New Birth”; available from CHAPEL LIBRARY.

righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby” (Heb 12:11).

But our present subject emphasizes that the wrath of man, even man’s most oppressive violence, praises God by alarming secure consciences and convicting and humbling the obstinate sinner. This is plain in itself and in the testimony of experience. Public calamities like war are so awful that they have a powerful influence in leading men to consider the presence and power of God. It threatens them; it touches them in all their dearest relations and possessions. The prophet Isaiah says, “Yea, in the way of thy judgments, O LORD, have we waited for thee...for when thy judgments are in the earth, the inhabitants of the world will learn righteousness” (Isa 26:8-9). He considers it to be the strongest means of alarming the secure and subduing the obstinate. “LORD, when thy hand is lifted up, they will not see: but they shall see, and be ashamed for their envy at the people; yea, the fire of thine enemies shall devour them” (Isa 26:11).

It is a sign of being hopelessly beyond recovery when public judgments have no effect. Thus says the prophet Jeremiah, “O LORD, are not thine eyes upon the truth? thou hast stricken them, but they have not grieved; thou hast consumed them, but they have refused to receive correction: they have made their faces harder than a rock; they have refused to return” (Jer 5:3).

Just look at Israel's history, how strong blows brought them to submission and repentance: "When he slew them, then they sought him: and they returned and enquired early after God. And they remembered that God was their rock, and the high God their redeemer" (Psa 78:34-35).

Nations and individuals grow careless in prosperity and security. But when their earthly comforts are withdrawn, they feel desperate for something better. People must have comfort. When earthly things are pleasant and promising, too many are satisfied with them as all they need. But when created comfort proves to be vain and passing, they must look for something better. What can honor God more than a whole nation paying attention to the rod? They forgot their resting place, abused their privileges, and despised their mercies, but by suffering they are drawn back to their duty.

We will never fully explain God's various judgments, but we know for certain that if there were no sin there would be no suffering. Therefore, suffering is certainly for the correction of sin, or for testing, illustrating, and perfecting the grace and virtue of God's people. Do not suppose that those who suffer most are more guilty than others. Our Saviour knew He needed to caution us against this false conclusion. "There were present at that season some that told him of the Galilaeans, whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And Jesus answering said unto them, Suppose ye that these

Galilaeans were sinners above all the Galilaeans, because they suffered such things? I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish” (Luk 13:1-3). Often those to whom God purposes to show the greatest mercy are brought first through the trial that they may sooner enjoy the benefit of the distasteful medicine.

We can often discern the mixture of sovereignty and righteousness in God’s providences. God can do what He wants with His own, but He often displays His justice more clearly by throwing into the furnace those, who, while not visibly worse than others, have more responsibility, having been favored with more civil or sacred privileges. We can never fully judge the character of people or nations. It would be very foolish to attempt it, either to make ourselves feel more secure, or to blame the justice of God the Supreme Ruler. Let us therefore neither forget the truth nor go beyond it. “The earth, O LORD, is full of thy mercy” (Psa 119:64). He is also “known by the judgment which he executeth” (Psa 9:16). The wrath of man in its wildest rage fulfills God’s will and finally promotes the good of His elect.

c. It Is Restrained for His Glory.

The wrath of man praises God as He restrains it by His providence, and sometimes makes it plainly promote and illustrate His glory.

The Almighty Ruler’s great majesty appears when He confuses wicked men’s plans and makes them

fight against themselves. Even if it is not quite clear that the psalmist in our text had in mind the truths illustrated in the two former points, there is no doubt at all that he had his eye on this one, because he says at the end, "The remainder of wrath shalt thou restrain." Scripture abounds with examples where oppressors' purposes were either wholly disappointed or fell far short of their evil intention. In some they turned out to the honor and happiness of the people they intended to destroy. We have an example of the first of these in the history my text relates to. Another example is Esther, where the worst plans of Haman against Mordecai and the Jews turned out to his own destruction, the honor of Mordecai, and the salvation of the Jews.

From the New Testament, I will select the memorable foundation of every believer's salvation, the sufferings and death of the Son of God. The great adversary engaged all his agents and instruments with unrelenting rage. When they had defiled Christ with slander, scourged Him with shame, condemned Him in judgment, and nailed Him to the cross, they thought for sure their victory was complete. But, oh, the unsearchable wisdom of God! They were only fulfilling God's great plan for the salvation of sinners! Our blessed Redeemer by His death finished His work, overcame principalities and powers, and made a show of them openly, triumphing over them in His cross. Now you see why the apostles and those with them offered this

doxology to God: “Lord, thou art God, which hast made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all that in them is: Who by the mouth of thy servant David hast said, Why did the heathen rage, and the people imagine vain things? The kings of the earth stood up, and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord, and against his Christ. For of a truth against thy holy child Jesus, whom thou hast anointed, both Herod, and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles, and the people of Israel, were gathered together, for to do whatsoever thy hand and thy counsel determined before to be done” (Act 4:24-28).

Ever since then, Satan’s most cunning schemes have all turned out to his own confusion. Considering his malice and pride, I think his continual disappointment by God’s superior wisdom might be one great source of his torment. The cross has still been the banner for truth, under which truth has been carried through the world. Persecution has been only like a furnace for the gold, to purge its dross, to manifest its purity, and to increase its brilliance. The early Christians noticed that the blood of the martyrs was the seed of Christianity. The more their blood was shed, the more the harvest grew...

At the Reformation, when Christianity began to revive, the greatest contribution to its progress came from the violence of its persecutors. The persecutors’ cruelty and the sufferers’ patience encouraged many to consider the cause they held to

so strongly. In addition, persecution drove them from city to city, where they exposed the pope's errors in every part of the world. Some of the persecuted in Germany were the first to bring the light of the Reformation into Britain.

God's providence shines brightest when small circumstances, even the weather, defeat the most formidable armies and frustrate the most organized operations. About two hundred years ago, Spain's monarchy was at its height, and it determined to crush the Reformation. They sent the powerful Spanish Armada against Britain, giving it the proud and profane name, "the Invincible Armada." But it pleased God to disable it by storms, so that only a small part of the Armada returned home, before any British force opposed it.

We have a remarkable instance of the influence of small circumstances in providence in English history. The two most remarkable people in the civil wars had earnestly desired to withdraw themselves from the contentions of the times. These men were Mr. John Hampden and Oliver Cromwell. They had actually taken their passage in a ship for New England, when by an arbitrary order of the council they were compelled to remain at home. The consequence of this was that one of them was the soul of the republican opposition to monarchical usurpation during the civil wars, and the other in the course of that contest, was the great instrument in bringing the tyrant to the block.

I will give one more example from history: it was the violent persecution of faithful Christians by their Protestant brethren that drove large numbers of them to a distant part of the world where gospel light was unknown. They made many settlements in New England, and as they carried the knowledge of Christ to such a dark place, they maintained as great a degree of purity, faith, and carefulness as can be found in any Protestant church in the world. Do you see how the wrath of man here praises God? See how the accuser of the brethren stirred up their enemies but then is caught in his own craftiness, and his kingdom is threatened by the same means he tried to establish it with.

2. Instruction and Comfort

Now let me apply these principles for your instruction and comfort and then give appropriate exhortations to do your duty in this crisis.

a. Sincere Concern for Salvation

First, I want to press every hearer: Be sincerely concerned for your soul's salvation. Certain times call for more alertness to God's truth, and for the conscience to be more open to conviction. I have already said a season of public judgment is one of those times. And just from the unusually large crowd gathered here today, we know there is more curiosity and attention among us. You can see your

own sinfulness in plain colors when the oppressor threatens, you see men putting on uniforms, and you see them everywhere collecting weapons of death. I do not blame your passionate preparation to defend your earthly rights. But please, I beseech you, remember the truly infinite importance of your souls' salvation!

Is it significant whether you and your children will be rich or poor, free or bound? Yes. Does it matter whether this beautiful country will increase in fruitfulness from year to year, being cultivated by active industry, and possessed by independent freemen, or the scanty produce of neglected fields will be eaten up by hungry tax collectors, while timid owners tremble at the tax gatherers' approach? Yes, it matters. But is it any less important, my brethren, whether you will be the heirs of glory or the heirs of hell? Is your condition on earth for a few short years really so significant? And does your condition through endless ages matter less? Have you assembled together to eagerly hear what will be said about your public affairs and to join in asking God to bless the plans of the united colonies, and can you be *unconcerned* what shall become of you *forever*? All the monuments of human greatness will be burned to ashes, for "the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up" (2Pe 3:10).

My beloved hearers, as God has committed to me the ministry of reconciliation, I beseech you most earnestly: seek the things that belong to your peace,

before they are hid from your eyes (Luk 19:42). We do not know when and how everyone here today will die. Then the seal will be set on each one's character and condition. The only One Who knows does not reveal it. The present is the best and safest time, since it is completely uncertain whether you will have any other time. Those who will first fall in battle will not receive many more warnings. There are a few hardened sinners who despise eternity itself and defy their Maker, but most delay their convictions to a more convenient time. Many have been taken unprepared and are eternally lost. Let me then earnestly press the apostle's exhortation: "We then, as workers together with him, beseech you also, that ye receive not the grace of God in vain. (For he saith, I have heard thee in a time accepted, and in the day of salvation have I succoured thee: behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation)" (2Co 6:1-2).

Allow me to beg you, or rather to warn you, not to be satisfied with only "a form of godliness...denying the power thereof" (2Ti 3:5). There can be no true godliness until God shows you your lost state by nature and practice, and until you sincerely accept Christ Jesus as He is offered in the gospel. Unhappy are they who either despise His mercy or are ashamed of His cross! Believe it, "Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved" (Act 4:12). Unless you

are united to Him by a living faith, not the resentment of a proud earthly king, but the sword of God's justice hangs over you! The fulness of divine vengeance will quickly overtake you. I am saying this not only to the heathen, the reckless sinner, or the degraded pleasure-seeker, but to every careless and secure sinner. I am warning all those who might be decent and orderly but who live for themselves and have their part and portion in this life! I mean all who are yet in their natural condition, for, "except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (Joh 3:3)! Fear of man can make you hide your profanity. Prudence and experience can make you hate drunkenness and excess. As you advance in life, one sin may replace another and hold its place, but only the sovereign grace of God can produce the saving change of heart and disposition. Only the sovereign grace of God can make you fit for His very presence.

b. Great Reason to Praise God

From what I have already said, you can see we have so many reasons to praise God for His favors toward us in our public cause. It would be criminal neglect to ignore the clear intervention of Providence so far on behalf of the American colonies. Since I cannot go through every step of our history in a single sermon, I will be content with just a few remarks. How many plots have been spoiled, both of our enemies in Britain and here at home, so

unexpectedly, and at just the time that prevented their being carried out? What surprising success we have had in almost all our encounters with the British? The boasted discipline of regular and experienced soldiers has been turned into confusion and dismay before the maiden courage of freemen defending their rights and property! What a great mercy it is that we have had so few casualties on our side. Some major victories in the south have been gained with such little loss that enemies probably think they were falsely reported. The amazing advantage we gained by the evacuation of Boston, with the shameful retreat of Britain's army and navy, was without the loss of even one man. To all this we could add that our enemies' counsels have been visibly foiled. I think I can say that there is hardly any step they have taken but it has worked strongly against them and has been more in our favor than if they had taken a different course.

c. Guard Against Trusting in Man

We praise God, the supreme Disposer of all events, for working on our behalf. So let us guard against the dangerous error of trusting in or boasting in the arm of flesh. I earnestly wish that while our armies are crowned with success, we might modestly attribute it to the power of the Highest. It has given me great uneasiness to read some proud, boasting language in our newspapers, though happily I think it has been more restrained

just recently. Let us never use such language again! The holy Scriptures in general, the glorious gospel in particular, and the whole course of providence seem intended to abase the pride of man. They lay the boaster in the dust. History gives us many examples of men being shamefully defeated just after glorying over and despising their enemies.

I believe it is universally true that what promises most performs the least. The brightest flowers usually do not smell the sweetest. The fastest growing or most beautiful trees are not usually very valuable or long-lasting. Deep water moves with the least noise. Men who think most are least talkative. In war it is as true as anywhere else: every boaster is a coward.

Pardon me for insisting on what seems insignificant. But I think it is very important. I believe pride and self-confidence are a terrible insult to God's providence, and when it spreads and affects the attitude of a body of people, it is a forerunner of destruction. How does Goliath, the heavily-armed champion, express his disdain of David the boy with only a sling and stone? "And when the Philistine looked about and saw David, he disdained him: for he was but a youth, and ruddy, and of a fair countenance. And the Philistine said unto David, Am I a dog, that thou comest to me with staves? And the Philistine cursed David by his gods. And the Philistine said to David, Come to me, and I will give thy flesh unto the fowls of the air, and to the beasts

of the field” (1Sa 17:42-44). But look at David’s just and modest reply! “Then said David to the Philistine, Thou comest to me with a sword, and with a spear, and with a shield: but I come to thee in the name of the LORD of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom thou hast defied” (v. 45). About thirty years ago I was impressed by a good remark about this in a pamphlet. The writer observed that there was far too much profane pride in the names given to warships: the *Victory*, the *Valiant*, the *Thunderer*, the *Dreadnought*, the *Terrible*, the *Firebrand*, the *Furnace*, the *Lightning*, the *Infernal*, and many more of the same kind. The writer of the pamphlet considered this to be a symptom of the nation’s perverse character and manners, and not likely to obtain the blessing of the God of heaven.

d. Look for God’s Help in the War

What I have said should encourage you to put your trust in God for His assistance in the present conflict. He is the Lord of Hosts, great in might, and strong in battle. Whoever has His approval will have the best at last. I do not mean to speak prophetically, but according to the analogy of faith and the principles of God’s moral government. Some have observed that true religion and its benefits (dominion, riches, literature, and arts) have progressed gradually from east to west since the earth was settled after the Flood—and that this predicts the future glory of America. While this is

conjecture rather than certainty, you can be sure that if your cause is just, if your principles are pure, and if your conduct is prudent, you need not fear the multitude of armies that oppose you.

i. Make Sure Your Cause is Just.

If your cause is just, you may confidently look to the Lord and ask Him to support it as His own. You are all my witnesses that this is the first time I have brought a political subject into the pulpit. Now it is not only lawful but necessary, and I am glad to take the opportunity to declare my opinion without hesitation. I believe that the cause America is now fighting for is the cause of justice, of liberty, and of human nature. As far as we have proceeded, I am satisfied that the confederacy⁴ of the colonies has not been the effect of pride, resentment, or sedition, but of a deep and widespread conviction that our civil and religious liberties—and consequently in a great measure the temporal and eternal happiness of us and our posterity—depend on the outcome. From the beginning of the world, the knowledge of God and His truths have been primarily, if not entirely, confined to the parts of the earth where there was some degree of liberty and political justice. The knowledge of God and His truth is greatly hindered by the imperfections of human

⁴ **confederacy** – alliance; functional union of the thirteen colonies working together to oppose the British.

society and the unjust decisions of usurped authority. In all of history, there is not a single example of civil liberty being lost while religious liberty was still completely preserved. If therefore we give up our temporal property, we at the same time deliver the conscience into bondage.

I will never rail at the king or his ministers from the pulpit, just as you have never heard me do in conversation. I will not call the British a bunch of savages. Many of their actions have probably been worse than their intentions. It is nothing new or surprising that they want unlimited rule if they could just obtain and keep it. I do not refuse to submit to their unjust claims because they are corrupt or profligate, although probably many of them are. Rather, I refuse to submit because they are men, and therefore as selfish as human nature makes them. They claim they can make laws to bind us in all cases whatsoever. But I call this claim unjust because they are separated from us, independent of us, and it benefits them to oppose us. Would anyone who could help it give up his goods, person, and family to the disposal of his neighbor when he had the liberty to choose instead the wisest and best master? Surely not. This is the real controversy between Great Britain and America. But I must also add that their distance from us is so great that wise administration of our affairs is as impossible as the claim of authority is unjust. They are necessarily ignorant of the way things really are

here. Much time must pass before errors can be corrected. Much injustice and favoritism must be expected from the clever manipulation of people involved. For these colonies to depend wholly upon the legislature of Great Britain would be like many other oppressive relationships, hurtful to the master, and ruinous to the slave.

Britain's management of the war proves it again. They have conducted their plans with such absurdity and impropriety. We feared disunity most of all, and their unnecessary cruelty has forced us into union. To let us see what we could expect from them, and what would be the fatal consequence of unlimited submission, they have insisted that they have treated us *moderately*, which filled this whole continent with resentment and horror. One of our fellow subjects showed unspeakable contempt when he said that he would not listen to America till she was at his feet. Speech like this has armed more men and inspired more deadly rage than could have been done by wasting a whole province with fire and sword. Again, we were not short on numbers, but time, and they sent over handful after handful until we were ready to oppose an army greater than they could ever send. Finally, if there was any strong place more able and willing to resist, there the British made their attack, and left the others until they were duly informed, completely incensed, and fully equipped with weapons.

These things, my brethren, are not only grounds of confidence in God, who can easily overthrow the wisdom of the wise, but they are also plain proofs that these great and growing states would never be safe and happy if their whole internal government were dependent on Great Britain. Because of their distance and ignorance of our situation they could not properly conduct their quarrel with us for one year. How then could they direct and encourage our different civil activities for years to come? Every human thing has fixed limits. If a tree's branches grow too large and heavy, they fall from the trunk. The sharpest sword will never pierce what it cannot reach. There is a certain distance from the seat of government where an attempt to rule will either produce tyranny and helpless subjection, or provoke resistance and separation.

ii. Make Sure Your Principles Are Pure.

If your principles are pure, you need not fear the armies that oppose you. I mean, your opposition to Britain must not come from rebellion against authority, lawless contempt of legal authority, or blind attachment to particular persons or parties. It must not come from selfish greed—the desire to turn public turmoil to personal profit. Rather your opposing Britain must arise from a concern for the good of your country, and the safety of yourselves and your children. I have to point out that, while there are many selfish people among us, and now

and then we see mean and self-serving interactions, yet they have been comparatively few and insignificant. In general, there has been such a great degree of concern for the public good that we have much more reason to be thankful for it than to notice the few instances of dishonesty or hatred. The universal zeal among all kinds of people and the efforts in the most distant colonies can only be ascribed to zeal for the public good. Maybe this is one of the first times in history where there has been such an overall commotion without religious differences having any part in it. Only recently have religious differences been mentioned, and that only because of the absurd, malicious, and detestable attempts of our few remaining enemies to introduce them. I must also, for the honor of this country, observe that though the old forms of government have been so long inactive—and in some colonies sufficient care was not taken to establish new governments—yet everyone knows there has been more order and public peace than men expected. From all these circumstances I recommend the principles of the friends of liberty. I do earnestly exhort you to adopt the principles I have described and to resist the influence of every other.

iii. Make Sure Your Conduct is Prudent.

Further, besides ensuring that your cause is just and that your principles are pure, add prudence in your conduct. Then there will be more reason to

hope for prosperity and success by the blessing of God. By prudence in conducting this important struggle, I am primarily thinking of union, firmness, and patience.

Everyone can see the absolute necessity of *union*. Everyone is already talking about it, so I will just caution you against common causes of division. Division comes when people of every rank refuse to comply with the orders of those they themselves have chosen to direct them. They feel like they have to judge every decision over again before they put it into action. Division comes when different classes of people introduce their little private views or let their interests interfere with public affairs. Division comes when people line up into parties, the merchant against the landholder, and the landholder against the merchant. Division comes when regional pride and jealousy arise, and you allow yourself to speak with contempt of the courage, character, manners, or even language of people from other areas. You are doing more harm to the common cause than you know. If we allow such practices to become widespread among us, it is a most dangerous sign that our ruin is approaching.

By *firmness and patience*, I mean resolutely holding to your duty. Prepare in advance to meet difficulties and disappointments. Earlier, I cautioned you against pride and boasting. But notice that one extreme often leads to the other. The same ones who boast when they succeed are most liable to

timid despair at every little defeat. Such people corrupt any society they are in, but they especially ruin an army. Remember that human circumstances are unstable in the usual course of providence. How often has a righteous cause been reduced to a low ebb, and yet when firmly held to, has finally become triumphant? The fact that the colonies are now in such a prosperous state could make you less able to bear unexpected misfortunes. In short, the blessing of God is only to be excepted by those who are not neglecting their own duty. I would neither have you trust in your strength nor sit with folded hands and expect that miracles should be done for your defense. In Scripture, this sin is called tempting God. To oppose it, I will exhort you as Joab exhorted the host of Israel. While he did not have a spotless character overall, in this instance he certainly spoke like a wise general and a god-fearing man. "Be of good courage, and let us play the men for our people, and for the cities of our God: and the LORD do that which seemeth him good" (2Sa 10:12).

3. Exhortations

I will now conclude with some exhortations to duty based on the truths I have mentioned. I will apply these to the present state of our country.

a. Love Your Country by Loving God and Others.

Take seriously the public interest of religion: zeal for the glory of God and the good of others. I have already exhorted sinners to repentance; here, I am pointing you to the concern every good man ought to have for the national character and manners. Every man ought to do what he can to promote public virtue and suppress impiety and vice. This is crucially important, and its nature and principles must be well understood. It is absolutely certain that overall wickedness and corruption of manners make a nation ripe for destruction. A good form of government may hold the rotten materials together for a while, but, beyond a certain point, even the best constitution will be ineffective, and slavery will follow. On the other hand, when the manners of a nation are pure, when true religion and internal principles flourish, even the most powerful enemies' attempts to oppress them are usually disappointed. You can prove this to be true by considering either the great principles of God's moral government or the effects of natural causes.

What can we conclude from this? That he is the best friend of American liberty who is most sincere and active in promoting true and undefiled religion. He is the best friend of American liberty who sets himself with the greatest firmness to suppress profanity and immorality of every kind. Whoever publicly calls himself an enemy of God, I do not

hesitate to call an enemy of his country. Never suppose, my brethren, that I am recommending angry zeal for the circumstances⁵ of religion, or that one sect should contend with another about their peculiar distinctions. I do not want you to oppose anyone's religion—but everyone's wickedness. Perhaps one of the most evident marks of a true Christian is that he feels more joined in spirit to a genuinely holy person of a different denomination than to an unfaithful member of his own. It is therefore your duty in this important time to exert yourselves, everyone in his proper sphere, to stem the tide of prevailing vice, to promote the knowledge of God, the reverence of His name and worship, and obedience to His laws.

Perhaps you will ask, What am I called to do for this purpose further, beyond my own personal duty? I answer that this personal duty itself is not a little thing when you understand how extensive it is. I believe the nature and obligation of visible religion is sadly misunderstood and little attended to.

Many are so afraid they will be called hypocrites that they banish from their talk and life every appearance of respect and submission to the living God. What spiritual weakness makes a man ashamed before his fellow sinners to profess the reverence to

⁵ **circumstances** – those aspects of Christian practice that are more external and relative as compared to the essential substance of Christianity.

almighty God that he inwardly feels? The reality is, he opens himself to the very accusation he is trying to avoid. It is more hypocritical to appear to have less religion than you really have, than to appear to have more. This false shame is more common than you would think. Even without knowing it, each of us is always contributing something to shape the character and manners of others. This spreads the benefit of the Christian's strictly holy and conscientious lifestyle beyond himself. Its happy influence reaches all that are within its reach. Also, in proportion as men are further advanced in understanding, education, age, position, office, wealth, or any other circumstance, their example will be even more influential on the one hand, or destructive on the other.

But I am not content with simply recommending that you be a silent example. Virtue's dignity is entitled to authority, and ought to claim that authority. In many cases it is a good man's duty to wage war on profaneness by open reproof and opposition. Listen to this striking command from Scripture: "Thou shalt not hate thy brother in thine heart: thou shalt in any wise rebuke thy neighbour, and not suffer sin upon him" (Lev 19:17). Most people think reproof flows from ill will or a bad temper. But the Spirit of God says that, when reproof is necessary or useful, withholding it is the effect of hatred or lack of real love. I know there are some cases where prudence would hold back, like

our Savior's caution, "Neither cast ye your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn again and rend you" (Mat 7:6). Every man must judge for himself as well as he can; but certainly we must guard against being partakers in other men's sins. We should do this either by open reproof, expressive silence, or speedy departure from their society.

Let me add that, while all are responsible to some degree, certain classes are especially obliged to this duty. Magistrates, ministers, parents, heads of families, and the elderly are called to use their authority and influence for the glory of God and the good of others. Bad men clearly understand this. They are usually quick to reproach those who are serious or profess faith when they patiently ignore the profanity of people around them.

While I could say more about the duty of those in authority in general, I will specifically emphasize this to those who are in command of soldiers defending their country. The cause is sacred, and the champions for it ought to be holy. Nothing more grieves the heart of a good man than to hear the horrid sound of cursing and blasphemy from those who are going to war. It cools the fervency of his prayers. It weakens his hope that God will support the cause. I could mention many more ways such cursing concerns me: I am concerned for the glory of God and the good of the deceived sinner. He goes to war like a criminal to be executed, calling down

vengeance on his own head—as well as upon the cause committed to his care! Sometimes we have predicted the downfall of the British empire based on its corruption and wickedness. Sadly, British soldiers have distinguished themselves among European nations for being the most shockingly profane. Shall we then pretend to imitate them in this infernal award and rob them of that horrid privilege? God forbid. Let every officer in the army, whatever rank he bears, remember that military submission (while it lasts) is the most complete of any in the world, and so he has the power to greatly restrain, if not wholly to eliminate, this open wickedness.

b. Work Hard.

I exhort the rest, who are not called to battle, to apply themselves with the greatest diligence to hard work. By this means, you will be able to supply the needs of your country and also add to its strength. When habits of industry become widespread in a society, not only do they directly increase its wealth, but they prevent the introduction of many vices. Habits of industry are intimately connected with sobriety and good morals. Idleness is the mother of almost every vice. Poverty is the inseparable companion of idleness, and it tempts men to the wildest and most destructive ways. So diligence is an extremely important moral duty, absolutely necessary to the prospering of the nation, and the

sure way of obtaining the blessing of God.⁶ Just as in every other part of God's government, obedience to His will is as much a natural means as it is a meritorious cause of the advantage we desire to get by it. Diligence produces a strong and robust people. A people who are accustomed to the hard work of the field will be ready for the weariness of a military campaign. The active farmer who rises with the dawn and follows his plow will be far superior to effeminate and delicate soldiers nursed in the lap of self-indulgence—whose greatest exertion was in preparing for and attending a masquerade or midnight ball!

c. Be Frugal.

Lastly, let me urge you to be frugal⁷ in your families and every other expense, especially in our current situation. Frugality is vitally connected both to virtuous industry and to actively seeking the common good. I think self-control in food, and moderation and decency in clothing, furniture, and goods, have always been characteristic of a true

⁶ **obtaining the blessing of God** – a foundational thought in Witherspoon's logic throughout this booklet is God's moral government of people and nations. Here he is not addressing the soul's salvation, nor God's sovereign prerogative to give and take according to His own hidden purpose. Rather, he is emphasizing the biblical reality that in national affairs men reap what they sow, a truth reflected in Proverbs 14:34, "Righteousness exalteth a nation: but sin is a reproach to any people."

⁷ **frugal** – sparing or economical.

patriot. A frugal people are ready for every duty and able to meet the most formidable enemy.

The subject of this sermon has been the wrath of man praising God. Your enemies' unjust oppression keeps back from you many of the luxurious and magnificent things you were used to. But this only makes you clothe yourselves and your children with the works of your own hands. You load your tables with the healthy produce of your own soil. This is all just a fresh illustration of the same truth, and really a happy thing for you and our country.

I want every good thing to be done from the purest principles and the noblest reasons. So consider that the Christian character, particularly gospel self-denial, should extend to your whole life. In early Christianity, when adult converts wanted to be baptized, they were asked, Do you renounce the world, its shows, its pomp, and its vanities? They would answer, I do. We still preserve the form of this in our administration of baptism, where we renounce the devil, the world, and the flesh. This certainly implies not only abstaining from acts of gross sin, but living a life of humility, restraint, and moderation in all your desires. This same self-denial, so suitable for your Christian profession, is also necessary to make you really independent and to feed the source of liberal charity to others or to the public. The craving appetites of an indulgent and wasteful person make him constantly needy; he is a slave to many masters. As Solomon says, "The

borrower is servant to the lender” (Pro 22:7). But the frugal and moderate person guides his affairs with discretion. He is able to assist in public counsels by a free and unbiassed judgment, to supply the needs of his poor brethren, and sometimes, by his own goods to give important aid to a country in need.

In conclusion, I beseech you to wisely respond to the now threatening face of public affairs. Remember that your duty to God, your country, your families, and yourselves is unchanged. True religion is simply an inward attitude and outward conduct appropriate for the circumstances God’s providence puts you in at any time. In good times, peace with God and conformity to Him adds to the sweetness of created comforts while we have them. But in times of difficult trials, the godly and principled man will prove to be the authentic patriot, the useful citizen, and the invincible soldier. May God grant that in America true religion and civil liberty may be inseparable, and that the unjust attempts to destroy civil liberty may in the end tend to support and establish both religion and liberty.

