

Day 5 - Morning Study

Read: Psalm 76:4-12

Many of us have only heard of a few of the signers of the Declaration of Independence, like Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, and John Hancock. There was one unique signer, John Witherspoon, a Presbyterian minister and president of the College of New Jersey (now Princeton University) in 1768. He was the only active clergyman and college president to sign the Declaration of Independence.

On May 17, 1776, he delivered his sermon “The Dominion of Providence over the Passions of Men” at Princeton. His sermon helped pave the way for the signing of the Declaration of Independence just a few weeks later.

In yesterday’s discussion, we examined some of the principles from the sermon by Jonathan Mayhew. According to Mayhew, a ruler “unkings himself” when he sets himself above the law and operates outside the boundaries established by the constitution. This is not something we should take lightly, and it is not something we should decide just because we don’t like the current ruler. Romans 13 is clear that the ruler is to promote good. It is not a “good” based on our standards, but God’s standards,

John Witherspoon helped the founders understand the balance between rebellion and righteous resistance. He thought that God is in control even when bad things happen. Everything will work to God’s glory. Our problem is that we don’t always see things the way God sees them. I know there are times I question God, saying, “I wouldn’t have done it that way!” or “God, that’s not fair or right!” I have to remind myself that I only have a limited view, while God sees the grand picture. Think about our founders; they risked everything against one of the greatest empires in all of history. Their faith was much greater than ours today. We need to turn inward and relight our own flame of faith so we can be a light to the world and a “city on a hill” again.

Here is a brief synopsis of the sermon.

In this influential 1776 sermon, John Witherspoon explores the theological concept of divine providence, arguing that God sovereignly overrules the chaotic and often violent passions of men to achieve His own righteous purposes. By examining historical and biblical examples, Witherspoon illustrates how human cruelty and systemic oppression—the “wrath of man”—ultimately serve to expose human depravity, lead individuals to spiritual repentance, and demonstrate God’s power through the restraint of evil. He specifically applies these principles to the American Revolution, characterizing the struggle for independence as a just cause for both civil and religious liberty that rests under the protection of the Almighty. Finally, the text serves as a moral exhortation, urging citizens to combine their pursuit of political freedom with personal godliness, industry, and sobriety, asserting that the success of a nation is inextricably linked to its public virtue and reliance on God.

We will begin the lesson today by looking at how we are not in control, but God is. Even when bad things happen. We will then move to how God uses bad things for His good, and why Paul tells us to endure suffering. Jesus endured the ultimate suffering for our sake. And in the end, we need to truly follow Jesus Christ in every aspect of our lives, even politically. But it starts by getting our hearts right.

Group Study

Why does the world feel out of control?

Because we live in a fallen world. Meaning the whole world is in rebellion against God because of Adam.

Why do bad people seem to win sometimes?

Sometimes the easy path may look like a win, but in the end, God is just, and there are consequences for doing bad. God sees all.

Where is God when things go wrong?

He is right there. He sees everything, but he lets us have free will to do either good or bad. The story of Job is a great example of why bad things happened to Job. It was a battle between Satan and God over Job and whether Job would still choose God when bad things happened to him.

Read: Psalm 76:1-12

Look at verse 10, what do you think is meant by “Surely the wrath of man shall praise you; the remnant of wrath you will put on like a belt.”?

Even the wrath of man is used by God for his purpose. Think of Jesus on the cross. Not only did he suffer at the hands of the Romans, but he also took on the wrath of God for our sake. A great example of man’s wrath and evil being used for our good and God’s purpose.

John Witherspoon used this as his basis for his sermon, “The Dominion of Providence over the Passions of Men.” He contended that men may be free, but God is ultimately in control, and even the worst actions of men are under God’s authority.

Read: Romans 8:28

What do all things work together for?

All things work together for good.

Does this include bad things?

He did say all things.

Read: Genesis 50:15-21

What did Joseph say about his brothers’ evil actions?

What they meant for evil, God used for good.

Read: Psalm 23:1-6

How can this Psalm of David be a comfort to us today?

Even when we walk through difficult times, God is there to comfort and help us. God is stronger than any evil, and if we are followers of Jesus Christ, we no longer need to fear death.

Read: Luke 23:32-38

What did Jesus ask His Father while He was being crucified?

To forgive them. While being crucified, Jesus asked his Father to forgive them.

How do you act in the face of evil? Do you get angry and curse others?
I have a hard time forgiving the driver in front of me for driving too slowly.

How should you act?
We all need to be more like Jesus and be forgiving.

Read: Acts 2:22-24

Even though Jesus was crucified and died, what did God do?
God raised him up. Death was not able to hold him.

The suffering of Jesus became the greatest triumph of all time.

Read: Romans 5:3-5

Why did Paul tell the first Christians to endure suffering?
Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope. It builds us. It makes us stronger in Christ.

Is it hard to believe God is in control when things go wrong? Why?
Discussion question. You may need to share your thoughts to get them to respond.

What feels “out of control” in your life right now?
They don’t need to respond to this. But this is a great time to remind them that we are to share each other’s burdens.

Read: James 4:1-4

In verse 1, what is at war within you?
Our passions. We love ourselves more than we love others. We need to flip this to love others more than we love ourselves.

In verse 3, why don’t we receive when we ask for things?
We ask for things that we want. We seek to make ourselves happy and not truly seek God in our prayers. *Dangerous Prayers* by Craig Groeschel is a great start to change your prayer life. I try to go back to this book every couple of years.

In his sermon, John Witherspoon shows that the wrath of man praises God because it illustrates human depravity, it brings sinners to repentance, and God ultimately uses it to defeat wicked designs. He used this sermon to inspire the American Revolution. He spoke of the Justice of the Cause, Gratitude for Divine Favor, and the Need for Prudence and Unity. Witherspoon concludes with urgent, practical directives for the colonists in this time of crisis. They were to Seek Personal Salvation, Promote Public Morality, and Practice Industry and Frugality.

We need to look inward.

Read: Jeremiah 17:9-10

What is the condition of our hearts?

Our hearts are deceitful and desperately wicked.

Read: Romans 6:23

For the wages of sin are what?

Death. If we rely on our own works, we can't make it to heaven.

And what is God's gift?

His **free** gift is eternal life through Jesus Christ.

Read: Matthew 5:14-16

How will you let your light shine?

Discussion question. Think of ways we can do a better job of being a city on a hill. When we bring all of our teaching together this week, we can be that city on a hill. We all have to do our part.

Let's be a city on a hill, Lord light our torch and let it burn brightly.