

John Witherspoon

1723 – 1794

Born	Gifford, East Lothian, Scotland
Education	University of Edinburgh (MA, 1739; BD, 1743)
Occupation	Presbyterian minister; President of Princeton University; member of Continental Congress
Key Sermon	The Dominion of Providence over the Passions of Men (May 17, 1776)
Legacy	Only active clergyman to sign the Declaration of Independence; trained James Madison and other founders

“Surely the wrath of man shall praise thee; the remainder of wrath shalt thou restrain.”

— Psalm 76:10 — text of Witherspoon's 1776 sermon

The Man

John Witherspoon is one of the most important men most Americans have never heard of. Born in Scotland and educated at the University of Edinburgh, he was a Presbyterian minister and theologian who became the president of Princeton University in 1768. He transformed Princeton from a small colonial college into one of the premier institutions on the continent.

The men he trained there went on to shape the republic: among his students were James Madison, the primary author of the Constitution; Aaron Burr; Philip Freneau; and dozens of future senators, governors, judges, and members of Congress. His influence on American institutions was multiplied through every man who sat in his classroom.

In 1776, Witherspoon was elected to the Continental Congress and became the only active clergyman to sign the Declaration of Independence. He understood exactly what he was signing. It was, in his words, not only ripe for independence — it would be rotten without it.

The Sermon

The Dominion of Providence over the Passions of Men was preached on May 17, 1776 — seven weeks before the signing of the Declaration. His text was Psalm 76:10: Surely the wrath of man shall praise you; the remainder of wrath you will put on like a belt.

Witherspoon's argument: even the worst actions of men — oppression, cruelty, injustice, war — are ultimately under God's sovereign control. Nothing happens outside His purpose. The fury of man does not surprise Him. It does not derail His plan. It is, in ways we cannot always see at the time, put to work in service of His larger design.

This was not fatalism. Witherspoon called the colonists to action — but he grounded that action in trust. Trust in God means acting with courage, not because victory is guaranteed, but because the cause is just and God governs the outcome. He also warned against boasting: the colonists who exulted too loudly in early victories were, in his judgment, setting themselves up for a harder fall.

The Legacy

The Revolution cost Witherspoon everything. His son David was killed at the Battle of Germantown in 1777. The Princeton campus was occupied and badly damaged by British troops. His estate was devastated. He never fully recovered financially and spent his final years in near poverty.

He signed knowing the cost and signed anyway. He did it because he believed God was sovereign, the cause was just, and no earthly king had authority that stood above the King of Heaven.

Witherspoon is the capstone of the Bible X preacher series because he brings everything together: the charge of Winthrop, the honest reckoning of Edwards, the transformed heart of Whitefield, the framework of Mayhew — all grounded in the conviction that God governs history. Even when it looks like evil is winning, He is not surprised and He has not lost control.

Why This Matters for Bible X

Day 5 is the foundation for endurance. Young men will face moments in their lives when it looks like faithfulness is losing — when the cost of standing for something real is higher than they expected, and the outcome is not what they worked for.

Witherspoon's message is the one they need to carry home from camp: God is sovereign. Even the wrath of man praises Him. Light your torch. Don't hide it. The world still needs to see it burn.