
HISTORY CHRONICLES

The Dominion of Providence: Voicies that shaped America

“surely the wrath of man shall praise thee..
Psalm 76:10 (KJV)

**A Historical Reflection for America’s
250th Anniversary
By ET Dempsey**

Before America became a nation, a spiritual awakening swept through the colonies. Known as the Great Awakening, this movement called people to repentance, faith in Jesus Christ, and a renewed commitment to the Word of God.

The revival crossed denominational, social, and cultural boundaries, influencing colonists from New England to the southern colonies. Many believe that before the colonies were united in their pursuit of liberty, they were first challenged to examine their hearts before God. Out of this spiritual awakening emerged voices such as Samson Occom and John Witherspoon, whose ministries helped shape the character and convictions of a generation.

Throughout Scripture, God reveals Himself not only through people but also through places. Those places became more than locations on a map; they became settings where God's providence unfolded in remarkable ways.



The Spiritual Foundations of America

From Eden to Sinai, from Jerusalem to Bethlehem, the Lord works within history to accomplish His purposes. As I reflect on America's founding, I am reminded that God also worked through places that would later become significant in our nation's history.



Before there was a Declaration of Independence, before there was a Constitution, there were faithful men and women proclaiming God's Word in Connecticut, New Jersey, and New York.

The Great Awakening and a Native American Voice

Before the Declaration of Independence and before the thunder of the Revolutionary War, God was already at work in the American colonies through a spiritual awakening. The Great Awakening stirred hearts to repentance, renewed interest in Scripture, and called people to a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

One of the remarkable voices of this movement was Samson Occom (1723–1792), a Mohegan Native American from Connecticut. Converted during the Great Awakening, Occom became one of the first Native Americans ordained in the Presbyterian ministry in 1759. He later traveled to England, where his preaching attracted large audiences and support for Christian education among Native Americans.

As the tensions between the colonies and Great Britain continued to grow, voices such as Occom's were already proclaiming a greater message than politics the call to repentance, faith, and eternal life through Christ alone.

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"For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." (KJV)[ii]

Occom became known as a preacher, hymn writer, and one of the first published Native American authors. On September 2, 1771, he preached one of his most memorable sermons customary in colonial America and were intended to call both the condemned and those gathered to repentance.[i]

The message that defined Occom's ministry was found in Romans 6:23:

"For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." (KJV)[ii]

A Native American Voice

Occom never softened the reality of sin, yet he consistently pointed people toward the hope of salvation through Jesus Christ. His ministry reminds us that the gospel was taking root in America long before independence was declared. The spiritual foundations being laid during the Great Awakening helped shape the character of a people who would soon face the challenges of revolution and nation-building.



The final invitation

One of Samson Occom's most remembered sermons was delivered on September 2, 1771 before the execution of Moses Paul, a fellow Mohegan convicted of murder. Standing before a crowd gathered to witness a man's final hours, Occom did not focus on politics, culture, or social status. Instead, he preached the Gospel.

Preaching from Romans 6:23, Occom reminded his listeners:

"For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord."

A Greater Freedom

He declared:

"But heaven and happiness is a free gift; it comes by favor... this life is given in and through our Lord Jesus Christ."[iii]

Then, turning directly to the condemned man, he pleaded:

"O fly, fly, to the blood of the Lamb of God for the pardon of all your aggravated sins."[iv]

These words reveal the heart of Samson Occom's ministry. Before America secured political liberty, faithful ministers were proclaiming a greater freedom the forgiveness of sins and eternal life through Jesus Christ.



The Great Awakening prepared hearts before it prepared a nation. While Samson Occom proclaimed the Gospel in Connecticut, another Presbyterian minister was being prepared in New Jersey to speak about God's providence over the destiny of nations.

In 1768, God brought a Scottish Presbyterian minister named John Witherspoon to the College of New Jersey, where he became its president. Today the institution is known as Princeton University, but in the eighteenth century it served as one of the leading Presbyterian colleges in America.[v] The college was struggling both financially and academically.



God Governs Nations

Through Witherspoon's leadership, it became a place where ministers, statesmen, judges, and future leaders were formed. What appeared to be a small Presbyterian college in New Jersey became one of the places where God prepared the leadership of a nation that had not yet been born.

As America approached independence in 1776, Presbyterian minister John Witherspoon challenged believers to view the events of their day through the lens of God's providence. He reminded the colonies that faith was not merely a private conviction but a confidence that God remained present and active in the affairs of men and nations.

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"There is not a greater evidence either of the reality or the power of religion than a firm belief in God's universal presence and ... the influence and operation of His providence."

Passion of Men

John Witherspoon, sermon "The Dominion of Providence over the Passions of Men," preached May 17, 1776, Princeton, New Jersey.[vi]

"There is not a greater evidence either of the reality or the power of religion than a firm belief in God's universal presence and ... 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."[vii]

Even amid the uncertainties of war, Witherspoon believed that God's purposes would prevail:



An Invincible Faith

"To apply it more particularly to the present state of the American colonies and the plague of war the ambition of mistaken princes, the cunning and cruelty of oppressive and corrupt ministers, and even the inhumanity of brutal soldiers, however dreadful, shall finally promote the glory of God; and in the meantime, while the storm continues, His mercy and kindness shall appear in prescribing bounds to their rage and fury."[viii]

As he concluded his sermon, Witherspoon called the people to steadfast faith and principled action:

"I beseech you to make a wise improvement of the present threatening aspect of public affairs, and to remember that your duty to God, to your country, to your families, and to yourselves is the same. True religion is nothing else but an inward temper and outward conduct suited to your state and circumstances in providence at any time. In times of difficulty and trial, it is in the man of piety and inward principles that we may expect to find the uncorrupted patriot, the useful citizen, and the invincible soldier. God grant that in America, true religion and civil liberty may be inseparable..."[ix]

A Nation Veiled in Fog

Only a few months after Witherspoon preached "The Dominion of Providence over the Passions of Men," many believed they witnessed that providence unfold before their own eyes.

The Fog of War: Providence in the Midst of Uncertainty

By late August 1776, the American cause appeared all but lost. General George Washington and his army were trapped in Brooklyn by superior British forces. Facing possible destruction, Washington ordered a nighttime evacuation across the East River. The operation required extraordinary coordination as soldiers, horses, artillery, and supplies were quietly ferried to safety under the cover of darkness.

As dawn approached, many American soldiers remained exposed and vulnerable. Then something unexpected happened. A dense fog rose from the river and settled over the battlefield. One eyewitness later recalled:

"At this time a very dense fog began to rise off the river, and it seemed to settle in a peculiar manner over both encampments. I recollect this peculiar providential occurrence perfectly well... so very dense was the atmosphere that I could scarcely discern a man at six yards distance....

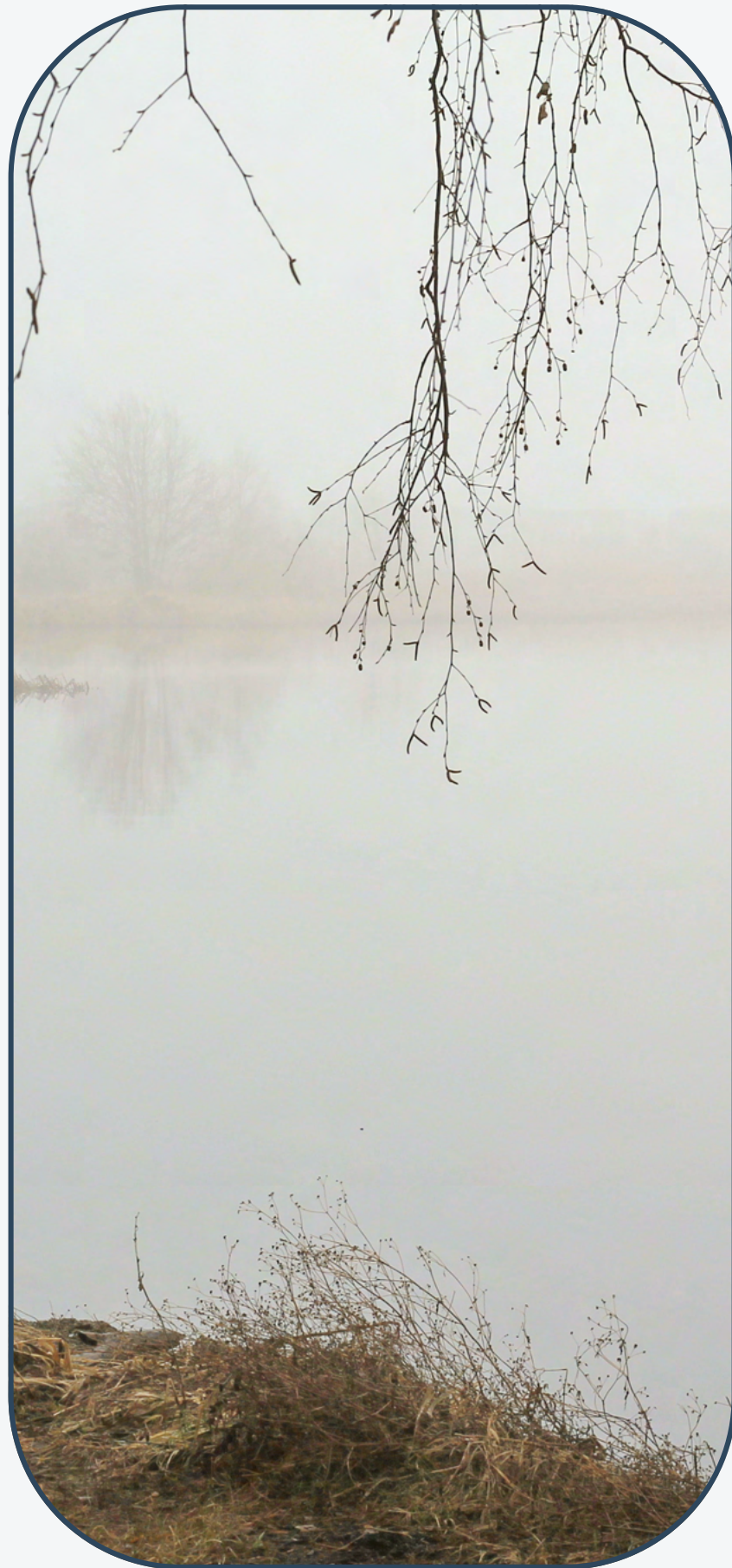
In the history of warfare, I do not recollect a more fortunate retreat. After all, the providential appearance of the fog saved a part of our army from being captured."[x]

The fog remained long enough for the last American troops to escape. When the fog finally lifted, the British were astonished to discover that Washington's army had vanished. What seemed certain defeat had become a remarkable deliverance.

Historian David McCullough described their reaction as "utter astonishment."

What had appeared to be certain defeat became one of the most remarkable escapes of the Revolutionary War. [xi]

Robert Morgan observes that the "fervent prayers" of the army had been answered and concludes that America was forged by men and women who believed in fervent prayer. [xii]



Answered Prayer

Many participants believed their fervent prayers had been answered. What John Witherspoon had preached only months earlier about God's providence seemed to unfold before their eyes. The God who governs the affairs of nations had not abandoned His people in their hour of greatest need.

As we reflect on America's 250-year journey, the stories of Samson Ocom, John Witherspoon, and the Fog of War remind us of a common truth: God's providence often becomes most visible when circumstances appear most uncertain. The same Lord who called sinners to salvation through Christ, who stirred hearts during the Great Awakening and who guided a struggling nation through its earliest trials remains sovereign today.



Faithful footprints

As I read these stories, I find myself praying for the places where God once worked so powerfully. I think of Connecticut, where Samson Ocom proclaimed the Gospel.

I think of New Jersey, where John Witherspoon prepared leaders and preached God's providence.

I think of New York, where Washington's army experienced what many believed was God's deliverance through the fog.

These places remind us that the same God who guided His people through revival, revolution, and uncertainty remains sovereign today

May we never forget that the same God who governed history then continues to govern history today.

History ultimately points us not to the greatness of men, but to the faithfulness of God.



References

[i] Robert J. Morgan, 100 Bible Verses That Made America: Defining Moments That Shaped Our Enduring Foundation of Faith (Nashville, TN: W Publishing Group, 2020), p. 57.

[ii] Robert J. Morgan, 100 Bible Verses That Made America: Defining Moments That Shaped Our Enduring Foundation of Faith (Nashville, TN: W Publishing Group, 2020), p. 57.

[iii] Robert J. Morgan, 100 Bible Verses That Made America: Defining Moments That Shaped Our Enduring Foundation of Faith (Nashville, TN: W Publishing Group, 2020), p. 57.

[iv] Robert J. Morgan, 100 Bible Verses That Made America: Defining Moments That Shaped Our Enduring Foundation of Faith (Nashville, TN: W Publishing Group, 2020), p. 57.

[v] Robert J. Morgan, 100 Bible Verses That Made America: Defining Moments That Shaped Our Enduring Foundation of Faith (Nashville, TN: W Publishing Group, 2020), p. 83.

[vi] Robert J. Morgan, 100 Bible Verses That Made America: Defining Moments That Shaped Our Enduring Foundation of Faith (Nashville, TN: W Publishing Group, 2020), p. 84.

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[vii] Robert J. Morgan, 100 Bible Verses That Made America: Defining Moments That Shaped Our Enduring Foundation of Faith (Nashville, TN: W Publishing Group, 2020), p. 84.

[viii] Robert J. Morgan, 100 Bible Verses That Made America: Defining Moments That Shaped Our Enduring Foundation of Faith (Nashville, TN: W Publishing Group, 2020), p. 84.

[ix] Robert J. Morgan, 100 Bible Verses That Made America: Defining Moments That Shaped Our Enduring Foundation of Faith (Nashville, TN: W Publishing Group, 2020), p. 85.

[x] Robert J. Morgan, 100 Bible Verses That Made America: Defining Moments That Shaped Our Enduring Foundation of Faith (Nashville, TN: W Publishing Group, 2020), p. 88.

[xi] Robert J. Morgan, 100 Bible Verses That Made America: Defining Moments That Shaped Our Enduring Foundation of Faith (Nashville, TN: W Publishing Group, 2020), p. 88.

[xii] Robert J. Morgan, 100 Bible Verses That Made America: Defining Moments That Shaped Our Enduring Foundation of Faith (Nashville, TN: W Publishing Group, 2020), p. 88.

Acknowledgment

This historical reflection was
inspired by Robert J. Morgan's 100
Bible Verses That Made America.
Historical quotations and accounts
are drawn from his research and
are cited throughout this article.



Sources

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- The Holy Bible, King James Version.