**GEORGE WASHINGTON’S PRAYER AT VALLEY FORGE**



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**(1) Reverend Mason L. Weems Account** In the winter of 1777-78, while Washington, with the American army, was encamped at Valley Forge, amidst all the perplexities and troubles and sufferings, the Commander-in-chief sought for direction and comfort from God. He was frequently observed to visit a secluded grove. One day a Tory Quaker by the name of Isaac Potts “had occasion to pass through the woods near headquarters. Treading in his way along the venerable grove, suddenly he heard the sound of a human voice, which, as he advanced, increased in his ear; and at length became like the voice of one speaking much in earnest. As he approached the spot with a cautious step, whom should he behold, in a dark natural bower of ancient oaks, but the Commander-in-chief of the American armies on his knees at prayer! Motionless with surprise, Friend Potts continued on the place till the general, having ended his devotions, arose, and, with a countenance of angelic serenity, retired to headquarters.

Friend Potts then went home, and on entering his parlor called out to his wife, “Sarah! my dear Sarah! All’s well! all’s well! George Washington will yet prevail!”

“What’s the matter, Isaac?’^ replied she; “thee seems moved.”

“Well, if I seem moved, ’tis no more than what I really am. I have this day seen what I never expected. Thee knows that I always thought that the sword and the gospel were utterly inconsistent; and that no man could be a soldier and a Christian at the same time. But George Washington has this day convinced me of my mistake.”

He then related what he had seen, and concluded with this prophetical remark! “If George Washington be not a man of God, I am greatly deceived — and still more shall I be deceived, if God do not, through him, work out a great salvation for America.”

**(2) Benson J. Lossing’s Account:**Isaac Potts, at whose house Washington was quartered, relates that one day, while the Americans were encamped at Valley Forge, he strolled up the creek, when, not far from his den, he heard a solemn voice. He walked quietly in the direction of it, and saw Washington’s horse tied to a sapling. In a thicket near by was the beloved chief upon his knees in prayer, his cheeks suffused with tears. Like Moses at the bush, Isaac felt the he was upon holy ground, and withdrew unobserved. He was much agitated, and, on entering the room where his wife was, he burst into tears. On her inquiring the cause, he informed her of what he had seen, and added, “If there is anyone on this earth whom the Lord will listen to, it is George Washington; and I feel a presentiment that under such a commander there can be no doubt of our eventually establishing our independence, and that God in his providence has willed it so.”

**(3) Testimony of Devault Beaver:**Extract of a letter from a Baptist minister to the editor of the (Boston) Christian Watchman, dated Baltimore, January I3, 1832:

“The meetinghouse (which is built of stone) belonging to the church just alluded to is in sight of the spot on which the American army, under the command of General Washington, was encamped during a most severe winter. This, you know, was then called*‘Valley Forge’*It is affecting to hear the old people narrate the sufferings of the army, when the soldiers were frequently tracked by the blood from the sore and bare feet, lacerated by the rough and frozen roads over which they were obliged to pass.

“You will recollect that a most interesting incident, in relation to the life of the great American commander-in-chief, has been related as follows: That while stationed here with the army he was frequently observed to visit a secluded grove. This excited the curiosity of a Mr. Potts, of the denomination of *‘Friends’* who watched his movements at one of these seasons of retirement, till he perceived that he was on his *knees* and engaged in *prayer*. Mr. Potts then returned, and said to his family, *‘Our cause is lost’* (he was with the Tories), assigning his reasons for this opinion. There is a man by the name of Devault Beaver, now living on this spot (and is eighty years of age), who says he has this statement from Mr. Potts and his family.

“I had before heard this interesting anecdote in the life of our venerated Washington, but had some misgivings about it, all of which are now fully removed.”

**(4) Testimony of Doctor Snowden:**The following note was written to the Rev. T. W. J. Wylie, D.D., pastor of the First Reformed Presbyterian Church, of Philadelphia, February 28, 1862:

My Dear Sir — Referring to your request, I have to say that I cannot lay my hands at present upon my father’s papers. I recollect that among his manuscript “Reminiscences,” was a statement of his interview with Mr. Potts, a Friend, near Valley Forge, who pointed out to him the spot where he saw General Washington at prayer in the winter of 1777. This event induced Friend Potts to become a Whig; and he told his wife Betty, that the cause of America was a good cause, and would prevail, and that they must now support it. Mr. Weems, in his “Life of Washington,” mentions this incident a little differently; but my father had it from Mr. Potts personally, and the statement herein made may therefore be relied on as accurate. I am, with great regard,

Yours truly,
James Ross Snowden.

Dr. Wylie says, “We have heard the incident just related from the lips of the late Dr. N. R. Snowden, who was informed of it by the person himself.”

**(5)** **General Knox A Witness**: It may be added that besides the individual named above as having witnessed the private devotions of General Washington at Valley Forge, it is known that General Knox also was an accidental witness of the same, and was fully apprised that *prayer*was the object of the Commander’s frequent visits to the grove. This officer was especially devoted to the person of the Commander-in-chief, and had very free and familiar access to him, which may in some measure account for his particular knowledge of his habits.

That an adjacent wood should have been selected as his private oratory, while regularly encamped for the winter, may excite the inquiry of some. The cause may possibly be found in the fact that, in common with the officers and soldiers of the army, he lodged during that winter in a log hut, which, from the presence of Mrs. Washington, and perhaps other inmates, and the fewness of the apartments, did not admit of that privacy proper for such a duty.

**(6)** **Independence Born Of Prayer** “Few scenes have had so much moral grandeur in them as this. Repeated disaster and defeat had disappointed the army and the nation. Suffering, to an extreme degree, was in the camp, and thousands of brave men were without the necessities of life. The independence of the nation was in jeopardy. Attempts were made to stab the reputation of the commander, and to degrade him from office. Provision for the army was to be made, murmurs and discontents suppressed, calumny to be met, plans formed for a future campaign, the nation to be inspirited and aroused; an active enemy was in the neighborhood, flushed with recent victory, and preparing to achieve new triumphs; and in these circumstances the Father of his Country went alone and sought strength and guidance from the God of armies and light. The ear of Heaven was propitious to his prayer; and who can tell how much of the subsequent brilliant success of the American armies was in answer to the prayers of the American general at Valley Forge? To latest times it will and should be a subject of the deepest interest that the independence of our country was laid, not only in valor and patriotism and wisdom, but in prayer. The example of Washington will rebuke the warrior or the statesman who never supplicates the blessing of God on his country. It will be encouragement for him who prays for its welfare and its deliverance from danger.”

**“Example Of Christian Charity”** While encamped at Valley Forge one day a Tory who was well known in the neighborhood was captured and brought into camp. His name was Michael Wittman, and he was accused of having carried aid and information to the British in Philadelphia. He was taken to West Chester and there tried by court-martial. It was proved that he was a very dangerous man and that he had more than once attempted to do great harm to the American army. He was pronounced guilty of being a spy and sentenced to be hanged.

On the evening of the day before that set for the execution, a strange old man appeared at Valley Forge. He was a small man with long, snow-white hair falling over his shoulders. His face, although full of kindliness, was sad-looking and thoughtful; his eyes, which were bright and sharp, were upon the ground and lifted only when he was speaking. . . .

His name was announced. “Peter Miller?” said Washington. “Certainly, Show him in at once.”

“General Washington, I have come to ask a great favor of you,” he said, in his usual kindly tones.

“I shall be glad to grant you almost anything,” said Washington, “for we surely are indebted to you for many favors. Tell me what it is.”

“I hear,” said Peter, “that Michael Wittman has been found guilty of treason and that he is to be hanged at Turk’s Head to-morrow. I have come to ask you to pardon him.”

Washington started back, and a cloud came over his face. “That is impossible,” he said. “Wittman is a bad man. He has done all in his power to betray us. He has even offered to join the British and aid in destroying us. In these times we dare not be lenient with traitors; and for that reason I cannot pardon your friend.”

“Friend!” cried Peter. “Why, he is no friend of mine. He is my bitterest enemy. He has persecuted me for years. He has even beaten me and spit in my face, knowing full well that I would not strike back. Michael Wittman is no friend of mine.”

Washington was puzzled. “And still you wish me to pardon him?” he asked.

“I do,” answered Peter. “I ask it of you as a great personal favor.”

“Tell me,” said Washington, with hesitating voice, “why is it that you thus ask the pardon of your worst enemy?”

“I ask it because Jesus did as much for me,” was the old man’s brief answer.

Washington turned away and went into another room. Soon he returned with a paper on which was written the pardon of Michael Wittman.

“My dear friend,” he said, as he placed it in the old man’s hands, “I thank you for this example of Christian charity.”

**Acknowledges Receipt Of Sermon:** On March 13, 1778, he writes from Valley Forge to the Reverend Israel Evans, acknowledging the receipt of his sermon, as follows:

Your favor of the 17th ultimo, enclosing the Discourse which you delivered on the 18th of December, the day set apart for a general thanksgiving, never came to my hands till yesterday. I have read this performance with equal attention and pleasure; and at the same time that I admire and feel the force of your reasoning which you have displayed through the whole, it is more especially incumbent upon me to thank you for the honorable but partial mention you have made of my character, and to assure you that it will ever be the first wish of my heart to aid your pious endeavors to inculcate a due sense of the dependence we ought to place in the all-wise and powerful Being, on whom alone our success depends.

**Fasting:**An order issued at Headquarters, Valley Forge, April 12, 1778, includes the following directions for a day of fasting and prayer:

The Honorable the Congress having thought proper to recommend to the United States of America to set apart Wednesday, the 22nd inst., to be observed as a day of Pasting, Humiliation and Prayer, that at one time, and with one voice, the righteous dispensations of Providence may be acknowledged, and His goodness and mercy towards our arms supplicated and implored:

The General directs that the day shall be most religiously observed in the Army; that no work shall be done thereon, and that the several chaplains do prepare discourses suitable to the occasion.

**Christian Above Patriot:** The following order was issued at Headquarters, Valley Forge, May 2, 1778:

The Commander-in-chief directs that Divine service be performed every Sunday at 11 o’clock, in each Brigade which has a Chaplain. Those Brigades which have none will attend the places of worship nearest to them.—It is expected that officers of all ranks will, by their attendance, set an example for their men. While we are duly performing the duty of good soldiers we certainly ought not to be inattentive to the higher duties of religion. To the distinguished character of a Patriot it should be our highest glory to add the more distinguished character of a Christian.

The signal instances of Providential goodness which we have experienced, and which have almost crowned our arms with complete success, demand from us, in a peculiar manner, the warmest returns of gratitude and piety to the Supreme Author of all Good!”

**Thanksgiving Ordered:**An order issued at Valley Forge, May 5,1778, begins as follows:

It having pleased the Almighty Ruler of the Universe propitiously to defend the cause of the United American States, and finally by raising us up a powerful friend among the Princes of the earth, to establish our Liberty and Independence upon a lasting foundation; it becomes us to set apart a day for gratefully acknowledging the Divine Goodness, and celebrating the event, which we owe to His benign interposition. The several brigades are to be assembled at nine o’clock to-morrow morning, when their Chaplains will communicate the intelligence contained in the Postscript of the Gazette of 2nd inst., and offer up a thanksgiving, and deliver a discourse suitable to the occasion.

“Washington, with his lady, and suite, Lord Stirling and his lady, with other general officers and ladies, attended the religious services of the Jersey brigade, when the Rev. Mr. Hunter delivered a discourse.”

**Recognizes Protection Of Providence:** In a letter to Landon Carter, written from Valley Forge, May 30, 1778 he says:

“My friends, therefore, may believe me sincere in my professions of attachment to them, whilst Providence has a just claim to my humble and grateful thanks for its protection and direction of me through the many difficult and intricate scenes which this contest has produced; and for its constant interposition in our behalf, when the clouds were heaviest and seemed ready to burst upon us.

To paint the distresses and perilous situation of this army in the course of last winter, for want of clothes, provisions, and almost every other necessary essential to the well-being, I may say existence, of an army, would require more time and an abler pen than mine; nor, since our prospects have so miraculously brightened, shall I attempt it, or even bear it in remembrance, further than as a memento of what is due to the great Author of all the care and good that have been extended in relieving us in difficulties and distresses.”

**SOURCE: GEORGE WASHINGTON THE CHRISTIAN BY WILLIAM JACKSON JOHNSTONE (1919)**