



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

GEORGE WASHINGTON'S FAVORITE BIBLE VERSE

SERMON BY REV. STEVEN GRANT ■ MARCH 4, 2018

What was George Washington's favorite Bible verse? I will tell you in just a few minutes. It was not the Revelation passage that is our Scripture reading for today. Hear now John's testimony in Revelation 7:9-17.

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands,¹⁰ and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!"¹¹ And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God,¹² saying, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen."

¹³Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?"

¹⁴I said to him, "Sir, you know." And he said to me, "These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

¹⁵"Therefore they are before the throne of God,
and serve him day and night in his temple;
and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his
presence.

¹⁶They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore;
The sun shall not strike them,
nor any scorching heat.

¹⁷For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd,
and he will guide them to springs of living water,
and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

What a wonderful picture of what we can look forward to when we are in the presence of Almighty God.

Along with the many accomplishments of the Father of our Country, one of the most significant was that of a precedent-setter because how does one go about being President of a Republic? We must realize that nobody had ever done this before. There was no model for Washington to follow. Everything that Washington did as president, he had to do for the first time. It had never been done before! How does one build a Cabinet? How does the president relate to the Congress and the Supreme Court? How does one relate to foreign governments and to state governments? Does the president stay in the capital all the time and simply run the office, or does he travel throughout the states and be among the people? How much public access should there be to the president? What is he to be called? How is he to take the oath of office? These and so many other things that are required for the office, Washington had to figure out how to do for the first time, from the smallest minutia of running the office to the most significant aspects of the job.

I submit to you that much of what we have been as a nation, and much of what we now have become as a nation, is the result of Washington’s vision and leadership. Most important of all was the vision that he cast of what America could be and what America should be.

America is her people: it is us! It is not the government in Washington; it is not the many public buildings that we identify within our country; it is not the Constitution itself. Just as it is with the church, it is the people! A person could point to the magnificent edifice, this marvelous facility in which to do our ministry, and say, “That is First Presbyterian Church!” But, in fact, First Presbyterian Church is us; it is the people. We are the ones who make up the church, just as America is her people!

This new entity, this United States of America, what sort of people were we going to be? I submit to you that most of Washington's public service was working toward the vision that he had for America; what he felt was worth working for, worth sacrificing for, and indeed what would be worth dying for. All that, of course, was within the context of an 18th-century worldview and 18th-century sensibilities and limitations. The implications of his vision were much more far-reaching than perhaps even he realized; perhaps not. Just because certain things were not possible in his own day did not necessarily mean that he did not visualize them. What he envisioned was very much in tune with the desires that he had for himself.

It is important to remember that Washington did not aspire to be a famous Revolutionary War general; he did not aspire to be a two-term president. In fact, what Washington really desired for himself was to live at Mount Vernon, share his life with his precious wife Martha, and be a farmer. That is what he wanted, but this teaches us that the great example of George Washington, the lesson of the life of the Father of our Country, was his recognition that the cause of liberty was greater than himself. There was something of much greater importance to him than his own life. As a result, he accepted the call to be the head of the Revolutionary Army despite his own doubts about his ability. In fact, when Congress gave him his commission he told them that he did not know if he were up to the task. When the war was over, he resigned his commission, which was unheard of until that time. All through history, both in Europe and Asia, when a victorious general won the war and became the conqueror, he became the king! He became the emperor! That was the historical model! Yet, when the war was over, Washington resigned his commission to go back to Mount Vernon to be a farmer with his dear wife. When King George III heard this, he said that if what he had heard was true, then truly Washington was the greatest of men. Washington said that he did not fight a revolution against King George III to become King George I!

He was called into uniform once again to put down an insurrection. Then, he accepted the presidency of the Constitutional Congress, whose leaders wanted to put together a new government but knew they could not do so without Washington's leadership. Following that, he accepted two terms as president of the new country. He was the only president in our history to have been twice elected unanimously. It was only for the last three years of his life that he would go back to Mount Vernon to be with Martha and to be a farmer. Despite the accolades, and despite the title of Father of his Country, what really lifts him up in our hearts is his selfless dedication for the good of the nation as he understood it.

What then was this vision of America that Washington held? It was directly related to his favorite Bible verse: "...but they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree, and no one shall make them afraid, for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken" (Micah 4:4). This was his vision of what we were going to be as a people, that every man could sit under his own vine and fig tree and not be afraid anymore.

When Micah spoke these words, he was referring to the revelation that God's patience was running out because of Israel's disobedience and unfaithfulness; the people were about to receive God's judgment which would result in their exile. But as is often the case with Old Testament prophecy, it was not only a warning of what was coming; it was accompanied by words of hope for restoration; how God sometimes breaks us to rebuild us in His own image. Leading up to that passage, Micah 4 says,

It shall come to pass in the latter days
that the mountain of the house of the LORD
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and it shall be lifted up above the hills;
and peoples shall flow to it,
and many nations shall come, and say:
"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
to the house of the God of Jacob,

that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths.”
For out of Zion shall go forth the law,
and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.
³He shall judge between many peoples,
and shall decide disputes for strong nations far away;
and they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war anymore;
⁴but they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree,
and no one shall make them afraid,
for the mouth of the LORD of hosts has spoken.

His vision was one of peace, of a people who would exemplify peacefulness among themselves.

The vision that Washington had, and that Micah is sharing here, is one to which all of us can relate. We all long for that sense of peacefulness in our lives in all the many forms that word implies. It seems like a never-ending struggle for peace in our own lives and in the world. We resonate with King David when he says: “He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul” (Psalm 23:2-3). When he talks about “our shepherd,” we recognize that it is Jesus who will refresh our souls.

We long for a life with an absence of external conflict. Even recognizing that we are in a troubled world, and even when there are external conflicts around us, how do we find the internal peace that frees us from the tormented burdens of a conflicted soul? Even amidst external troubles, somehow, there can be that peace “which surpasses all understanding” (Philippians 4:7). At the very depth of who we are there can be peace; there can be calm even in the face of the storms that seem so elusive not just in our lives but in the world. On the world scene, it always seems there is someone trying to be the aggressor, the conqueror, the controller, the tyrant, the tormentor of others.

As we go through life, we try hard to achieve a level of satisfaction and fulfillment in this world. We might do this through relationships or through the acquisition of wealth. We might seek power and influence, so we can control the world around us. We look for personal affirmation, by what others say to uplift us; by our social status, by pleasures of all sorts. We are trying to somehow obtain inner peace and satisfaction, but it seems that we never quite get there, at least not consistently. It might seem that we have it for a time, but then life happens. Because of human depravity, we sabotage ourselves with our own sins and our own mistakes. We must deal with the sins of other people which intrude into our otherwise calm lives. We live in a fallen world; all that “stuff” happens and it keeps happening, and it intrudes into our plan.

What are our options? We could just try to cope. There are many self-help strategies on how to cope. We could try to get the most out of life by focusing on ourselves, by acquiring as much as we can, and by enjoying as many things as possible. We could just give up in despair; unfortunately, some do just that.

This is where our passage from Revelation is so helpful. It helps us put our life’s journey in a larger context; to put our life and all that we experience, both the wonderful things and the most difficult things, suffering as well as blessing, in a larger context. It begins to make sense. As with Washington, it enables us to commit to strive toward a vision for the future, celebrating victories when they happen and rising above temporary defeats when they happen. What drove Washington forward can also inspire us because you see, what Micah was writing about and what the apostle John was writing about in Revelation was not simply a vision, **it was a promise**. They were not writing about a **hope** that things would be as they depicted, or that someday things **might** turn out that way, or that if we worked together we could accomplish this. No, it is not what we hope might be, it is what **will be**. My friends, we know how the story ends! That is what the Book of Revelation is about!

Recently I have been teaching a class on the Book of Revelation. The idea behind that class was to take the fear out of reading it. Have you ever tried to read the Book of Revelation? I often refer to it as that “weird and wonderful” book, and I think people get the weird part. When you try to read this book, you may have no idea what John is talking about. He uses very, very colorful imagery. It is the wonderful part that I fear people miss. What we must understand when we read the Book of Revelation is that from beginning to end, from the very first word all the way to the last, what John is writing and why God gave him these visions on which to report, was so that he could give encouragement to persecuted Christians. Let me say that again, he was writing to give encouragement to persecuted Christians.

Think about the first century. What were the brothers and sisters who came before us up against in the first century? They were constantly under great persecution from the Roman Empire: they were being harassed, they were being arrested, they were being tortured, they were being killed, they were being executed, they were being ostracized, they could not buy things, they could not make a living. They were undergoing tremendous trials and tribulations.

How easy it would have been for these people to become discouraged, to give up hope, to give up entirely! At every turn, another Christian brother or sister was arrested, a family member was executed, another person was seriously tortured by the Romans. And my friends, that did not just happen in the first century. As we speak, there are Christians in the world today who are being persecuted just like that! We came to church today and that was our free choice. We sit here very comfortably; we have coffee and chat. Do you realize that there are people in the world today who would be arrested for doing just what we are doing? For them, it is illegal, right at this very moment! The Christians in the first century were dealing with this. How easily they could have gotten discouraged and given up. God gave John these visions about which to write so he could give these early Christians encouragement, so they would

not give up! Look what John says in verses 7:9-10. "After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb..."

Try to envision how the first century Christians would have heard that; how it would have resonated when they were literally risking their lives to fulfill the "Great Commission." John tells them that their evangelistic efforts have had the desired impact; it has all been worth their efforts because they were a part of *kingdom* building. They were a part of something greater than themselves. The multitude that came out of the tribulation were in heaven and standing before Almighty God. These early Christians were given a vision of the multitude of saved people. They were able to understand why they had been doing what they were doing and going through what they had been going through. They were a part of something greater than themselves. Individuals are, of course, very important; Almighty God wants to have a personal relationship with each individual, but God is also working His purpose in the world **through** us. We, the disciples of Jesus, are His instruments to reach the world.

In church we often use the phrase, "give my life to Christ." Ask yourself whether you have given your life to Christ. What does that mean? Does that mean that you have signed up for a certain number of beliefs? Does "giving your life to Christ" mean that you believe that Jesus is your Lord and Savior, and that He went to the cross for you? That means you became a believer, which is essential. However, "give your life to Christ" means to recognize that in putting your faith in Him, you become a disciple...not just a believer, but a disciple. You are saying that your life does not belong to you anymore; it is no longer **your** life! Literally, your life belongs to Him! You gave it to Him, or rather He claimed it! You have given your life to Him and He is free to do with it as He pleases. He is free to use your life for His purpose. There are many ways in which He uses it, and at times you have no idea what He is doing, yet you submit to Him.

Think about this church for a moment. In about 50 years, who is going to be sitting here? Chances are, 50 years from now, most of us will not be here. There will be a whole different group of precious people in this church. What kind of church are we going to hand to them? What are they going to find when they first come here? What is the church that they will inherit? Not everything we do here at the church is just about us. It is about growing the kingdom, and growing this church as part of that kingdom, for the next brothers and sisters who come here to be blessed. Taking that a step further, we discover that every moment of every day everything that we do and everything that we are is potentially **kingdom** work. God is always at work in our lives, so every single moment of our life is potentially kingdom work. We may have no idea how God can use us even in the smallest of circumstances.

I remember one Sunday morning when I was the solo pastor of a beautiful little church in Omaha. I was really excited about my sermon. I was all revved up. I was going to give my all to this sermon. The choir was on fire that morning with a great anthem, and I had picked some great hymns that I knew the congregation would love to sing. The organist was really getting her prelude. I thought, "This is going to be a great service!" At the very beginning of the service, I noticed a woman who came into the sanctuary. Those of you who have been part of small churches know that if you walk into the sanctuary, you will be noticed. Right away I could tell that she was very troubled. All through the entire service, she just sat in the pew and sobbed. I thought, "This is going to be the service for her."

When the service was over, and I went to the back to greet people as they left, here came the lady and she was smiling. I said, "Ma'am, I'm delighted that you came to worship with us today. I'm glad to see that you're smiling because I was concerned about you. I could see that when you came in you were upset." She said, "Well I have to confess pastor, that I didn't hear a thing during the service." She went on, "I was sitting next to that lady, Shirley." I knew exactly about whom she was talking, little Shirley Bird. Shirley was well into

her 80's with a heart full of the Lord. She was the sweetest, quietest lady. This lady continued, "At end of the service Shirley talked to me for a few minutes and she prayed with me. And you know what? I know it's all going to be okay!"

Shirley did not come to church that morning expecting to see this woman. She had no idea; she may not even have known what impact she made with the few words and the prayer that she offered. But this lifts up the fact that whether we are at work or in the middle of some recreation we are enjoying, whether we are having a casual encounter with someone in the grocery store or are in our car; at our most difficult moment, maybe especially at our most difficult moments, God and use those times for His purpose, and you may have no idea!

Even if you are lying in a hospital bed, God can use you. You may wonder how you can serve if you are the one in need, but perhaps in the way you speak to the nurse, to other patients, or to someone else, they will see the power of God in your life. You have no idea the seeds that God might be planting in the most unpredictable moments of your life.

Revelation 7:13-14 continues:

Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?" ¹⁴I said to him, "Sir, you know." And he said to me, "These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

The only way that these people could come out of the tribulation was by coming to faith, which means somebody had to go to them to teach them the faith. And again, what these first Christians were hearing was that they were a part of something much greater than themselves! Their humble efforts in sharing the gospel and being disciples of Jesus had this result! This is the vision! This is what God is going to accomplish through us! From our blessings to our sufferings, God uses **all** for His purpose, not only for us but in the world.

Do you know the primary obstacle to this? It is what we might call “the kingdom of self.” Speaking for myself, my kingdom of self looks like this: “I, Steven, am going to build a little mini-kingdom, and in my “kingdom of self,” I am sovereign, and I decide what happens, when it happens, how it happens, who is going to be involved, and the result. I will do everything I can to build this little “kingdom of self.”

Do you know what the problem is with that? Other people do not cooperate! They will not do things the way I want them done! Do you know why? Because they are busy building their little “kingdom of self,” and when their kingdom collides with my kingdom, we have problems! That raises a real question: To what do we ultimately commit our lives?

Remember that vine and fig tree? Jesus Christ is that vine and fig tree. Are we sitting under Him? Do we commit our lives to Him in whatever sphere of influence, in whatever walk of life, in whatever group of friends and acquaintances, in whatever circumstance we find ourselves? Do we commit every moment of our life in recognizing that we are disciples of Jesus? We are His instruments; God may be using any given moment to build His kingdom. It depends on whether you see yourself primarily as a citizen of this world, or as a citizen of the Kingdom of God, which you are. As wonderful as the things of this world are, or at least how they seem, how do they compare to this?

“Therefore they are before the throne of God,
and serve him day and night in his temple;
and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his
presence.

¹⁶ They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore;
he sun shall not strike them,
nor any scorching heat.

¹⁷ For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd,
and he will guide them to springs of living water,
and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

Revelation 7:15-17

That is the place where there is no death, no crying, no pain! Jesus promises in John 14 that He will come Himself and take us to be where He is. Just recently, Billy Graham passed away. I would like to think that as Jesus took Billy by the hand and walked him into heaven, the great multitude that came to faith because God used Billy Graham as His instrument were there to greet Billy.

Another day is coming when it will be my turn. The crowd will not be as big as Billy's, but that is okay. When the Lord Jesus takes me by the hand and walks me into heaven, I will be welcomed into the joy of the Lord. Does your heart earnestly desire for others to experience heaven as much as you desire it for yourself? Is there someone who is close to you who makes your heart melt when you think of their being able to see and enjoy heaven? That is seeing our lives as part of a bigger picture, a bigger purpose.

Washington had a vision for America, but there is an even greater promise of God's kingdom that it will be fully established when the Lord returns. I pray that the promise we read in Micah and in John's Book of Revelation will be the basis for the purpose and vision of your own life, no matter how small the circumstance, no matter how much it is a blessing or how much it is a travail. We say with all conviction, "God bless America." May we say with even greater fervor, as it says in Revelation 7:12, "Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen." ■