

Historical Documents Packet for the National Day of Prayer

Notes: This packet provides information that students can use to complete their essays. However, this information is meant to be a starting point and should not be the sum total of a student's research. Historical spelling and punctuation may be retained in some quotations. These may appear to be errors, but instead reflect the spelling and style used at the time.

First Prayer in the Continental Congress, 1774

O Lord our Heavenly Father, high and mighty King of kings, and Lord of lords, who dost from thy throne behold all the dwellers on earth and reignest with power supreme and uncontrolled over all the Kingdoms, Empires and Governments; look down in mercy, we beseech Thee, on these our American States, who have fled to Thee from the rod of the oppressor and thrown themselves on Thy gracious protection, desiring to be henceforth dependent only on Thee. To Thee have they appealed for the righteousness of their cause; to Thee do they now look up for that countenance and support, which Thou alone canst give. Take them, therefore, Heavenly Father, under Thy nurturing care; give them wisdom in Council and valor in the field; defeat the malicious designs of our cruel adversaries; convince them of the unrighteousness of their Cause and if they persist in their sanguinary purposes, of own unerring justice, sounding in their hearts, constrain them to drop the weapons of war from their unnerved hands in the day of battle!

Be Thou present, O God of wisdom, and direct the councils of this honorable assembly; enable them to settle things on the best and surest foundation. That the scene of blood may be speedily closed; that order, harmony and peace may be effectually restored, and truth and justice, religion and piety, prevail and flourish amongst the people. Preserve the health of their bodies and vigor of their minds; shower down on them and the millions they here represent, such temporal blessings as Thou seest expedient for them in this world and crown them with everlasting glory in the world to come. All this we ask in the name and through the merits of Jesus Christ, Thy Son and our Savior.

Amen.¹

Reverend Jacob Duché
Rector of Christ Church of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
September 7, 1774, 9 o'clock a.m.

First National Proclamation of Thanksgiving

Second Continental Congress, November 1, 1777

Note: The original spelling has not been retained, as it would be confusing for readers to see the letter "f" take the place of the letter "s" in many instances. However, the original style is retained in this version, showing what was capitalized or italicized, for example. The version available on the link provided in the notes does not show the original style.

FORASMUCH as It is the indispensable duty of all men to adore the superintending providence of Almighty God; to acknowledge with gratitude their obligation to HIM for benefits received, and to implore such farther blessings as they stand in need of: And it having pleased him in his abundant mercy, not only to continue to us the innumerable bounties of his common Providence; but also to smile upon us in the prosecution of a just and necessary war, for the Defense and Establishment of our unalienable rights and liberties; *Particularly* in that he hath been pleased, in so great a measure, to prosper the means used for the Support of our Troops, and to crown our Arms with most *signal* success:

It is therefore recommended to the legislative or executive Powers of these United States to set apart THURSDAY, the eighteenth Day of *December* next, for SOLEMN THANKSGIVING and PRAISE: That at one time and with one voice, the good people may express the grateful feelings of their hearts, and consecrate themselves to the service of their DIVINE BENEFACTOR; and that, together with their sincere acknowledgments and offerings, they may join the penitent confession of their manifold sins, whereby they had forfeited every favor; and their humble and earnest supplication that it may please God through the Merits of Jesus Christ, *mercifully* to forgive and *blot* them out of remembrance; That it may please Him graciously to afford his blessing on the Governments of these States respectively, and prosper the PUBLIC COUNCIL of the whole: To inspire our commanders, both by land and sea, and all under them, with that wisdom and fortitude which may render them fit instruments, under the providence of Almighty God, to secure for these United States, the greatest of all human blessings, INDEPENDENCE and PEACE: That it may please him, to prosper the trade and manufactures of the people, and the labor of the husbandman, that our land may yield its increase: To take schools and seminaries of education, so necessary for cultivating the principles of true liberty, virtue and piety, under his *nurturing* hand; and to prosper the means of religion, for the promotion and enlargement of that kingdom, which consisteth "IN RIGHTEOUSNESS, PEACE AND JOY IN THE HOLY GHOST."

And it is further recommended, That servile labor, and such recreation, as, though at other times innocent, may be unbecoming the purpose of this appointment, be omitted on so solemn an occasion.²

By order of CONGRESS

HENRY LAURENS, President

One Hundredth Congress of the United States

SECOND SESSION

Begun and held at the City of Washington on Monday, the twenty-fifth day of January,
One thousand nine hundred and eighty-eight.

An Act

To provide for setting aside the first Thursday in May as the date on which the
National Day of Prayer is celebrated.

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives
of the United States of America in Congress assembled,
That the joint resolution entitled “Joint Resolution to
Provide for setting aside an appropriate day as a National
Day of Prayer,” approved April 17, 1952 (Public Law
82-324; 66 Stat. 64), is amended by striking
“a suitable day each year, other than a Sunday”, and
inserting in lieu thereof “the first Thursday in May in each year”.³

Jim Wright
Speaker of the House of Representatives

John C. Stennis
President of the Senate Pro Tempore

APPROVED
May 5, 1988
President Ronald Reagan

FROM THE WHITE HOUSE:
NATIONAL DAY OF PRAYER, 2002

Historic Example of a Proclamation

President Lincoln's Proclamation For A Day Of National Humiliation, Fasting And Prayer - 1863

By His Excellency, Abraham Lincoln, President of the U.S.A.

WHEREAS, The Senate of the United States; devoutly recognizing the Supreme authority and just government of Almighty God in all the affairs of men and nations, has, by a resolution, requested the President to designate and set apart a day for National prayer and humiliation.

And, whereas, it is the duty of nations, as well as of men, to owe their dependence upon the overruling power of God, to confess their sins and transgressions, in humble sorrow, yet with assured hope that genuine repentance will lead to mercy and pardon, and to recognize the sublime truth announced in the Holy Scriptures and proven by all history, that those nations only are blessed whose God is the Lord.

And, inasmuch as we know that by His Divine law, nations, like individuals, are subjected to punishments and chastisements in this world, may we not justly fear that the awful calamity of civil war, which now desolates the land, may be but a punishment inflicted upon us for our presumptuous sins, to the needful end of our national reformation as a whole people?

We have been the recipients of the choicest bounties of Heaven. We have been preserved these many years in peace and prosperity. We have grown in numbers, wealth, and power as no other nation has ever grown.

But, we have forgotten God. We have forgotten the gracious hand which preserved us in peace, and multiplied and enriched and strengthened us; and we have vainly imagined, in the deceitfulness of our hearts, that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own. Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace, too proud to pray to the God that made us!

It behooves us, then, to humble ourselves before the offended Power, to confess our national sins, and to pray for clemency and forgiveness.

Now, therefore, in compliance with the request, and fully concurring in the views of the Senate, I do, by this my proclamation, designate and set apart Thursday, the 30th day of April, 1863, as a day of National Humiliation, Fasting and Prayer. And I do hereby request all the people to abstain on that day from their ordinary secular pursuits, and to unite, at their several places of public worship and their respective homes, in keeping the day holy to the Lord, and devoted to the humble discharge of the religious duties proper to that solemn occasion.

All this being done, in sincerity and truth, let us then rest humbly in the hope, authorized by the Divine teachings, that the united cry of the Nation will be heard on high, and answered with blessing, no less the pardon of our national sins, and restoration of our now divided and suffering country to its former happy condition of unity and peace.

In witness whereof, I have hereunto set my hand, and caused the Seal of the United States to be affixed.

Done at the city of Washington the 30th day of March, in the year of our Lord 1863.⁴

Abraham Lincoln,
President of the U.S.A.

William H. Seward, Secretary of State

Modern Example of a Proclamation

National Day of Prayer Proclamation

By the President of the United States of America

Since our Nation's founding, Americans have turned to prayer for inspiration, strength and guidance. In times of trial, we ask God for wisdom, courage, direction and comfort. We offer thanks for the countless blessings God has provided. And we thank God for sanctifying every human life by creating each of us in His image. As we observe this National Day of Prayer, we call upon the Almighty to continue to bless America and her people.

Especially since September 11, millions of Americans have been led to prayer. They have prayed for comfort in a time of grief, for understanding in a time of anger and for protection in a time of uncertainty. We have all seen God's great faithfulness to our country. America's enemies sought to weaken and destroy us through acts of terror. None of us would ever wish on anyone what happened on September 11th. Yet tragedy and sorrow none of us would choose have brought forth wisdom, courage and generosity. In the face of terrorist attacks, prayer provided Americans with hope and strength for the journey ahead.

God has blessed our Nation beyond measure. We give thanks for our families and loved ones, for the abundance of our land and the fruits of labor, for our inalienable rights and liberties and for a great Nation that leads the world in efforts to preserve those rights and liberties. We give thanks for all those across the world who have joined with America in the fight against terrorism. We give thanks for the men and women of our military, who are fighting to defend our Nation and the future of civilization.

We continue to remember those who are suffering and face hardships. We pray for peace throughout the world.

On this National Day of Prayer, I encourage Americans to remember the words of St. Paul: "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God." The Congress, by Public Law 100-307, as amended, has called on our citizens to reaffirm the role of prayer in our society and to honor the religious diversity our freedom permits by recognizing annually a "National Day of Prayer."

NOW, THEREFORE, I, GEORGE W. BUSH, President of the United States of America, by virtue of the authority vested in me by the Constitution and laws of the United States, do hereby proclaim May 2, 2002, as a National Day of Prayer. I ask Americans to pray for God's protection, to express gratitude for our blessings and to seek moral and spiritual renewal. I urge all our citizens to join in observing this day with appropriate programs, ceremonies and activities.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, I have hereunto set my hand this twenty-sixth day of April, in the year of our Lord two thousand two, and of the Independence of the United States of America the two hundred and twenty-sixth.⁵

GEORGE W. BUSH

Quotes by American Leaders on the Importance of Prayer

Note: From colonial times, Americans have valued communication with God. Communicating with God is known as "prayer." The evidence is clear that the Founding Fathers and Presidents throughout U.S. history have had a reverence for God and respect for the power of prayer. These are just a few examples pulled from the pages of history.

John Hancock, President of the Provincial Congress of Massachusetts, selection from "A Day of Public Humiliation, Fasting and Prayer," April 15, 1775

RESOLVED, That it be, and hereby is recommended to the good People of this colony of all Denominations, that THURSDAY the Eleventh Day of May next be set apart as a Day of Public Humiliation, Fasting and Prayer . . . to confess the sins . . . to implore the Forgiveness of all our Transgression . . . and a blessing on the Husbandry, Manufactures, and other lawful Employments of this People; and especially that the union of the American Colonies in Defence of their Rights (for hitherto we desire to thank Almighty GOD) may be preserved and confirmed....⁶

Benjamin Franklin, selection from speech, Constitutional Convention, June 28, 1787

In the beginning of the contest with Britain, when we were sensible of danger, we had daily prayers in this room for the divine protection. Our prayers, sir, were heard; and they were graciously answered. All of us who were engaged in the struggle must have observed frequent instances of a superintending Providence in our favor.

To that kind Providence we owe this happy opportunity of consulting in peace on the means of establishing our future national felicity. And have we now forgotten that powerful Friend? Or do we imagine we no longer need His assistance?

I have lived, sir, a long time; and the longer I live, the more convincing proofs I see of this truth, that God governs in the affairs of men. And, if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without His notice, is it probably that an entire empire can rise without His aid?

We have been assured, sir, in the Sacred Writings, that 'except the Lord build the house, they labor in vain that build it.' I firmly believe this; and I also believe that, without His concurring aid, we shall succeed in this political building no better than the builders of Babel; we shall be divided by our little, partial, local interests; our projects will be confounded, and we ourselves shall become a reproach and a byword down to future ages.

And, what is worse, mankind may hereafter, from this unfortunate instance, despair of establishing government by human wisdom, and leave it to chance, war, and conquest.

I therefore beg leave to move, that henceforth, prayers, imploring the assistance of heaven, and its blessing on our deliberation, be held in this assembly every morning before we proceed to business; and that one or more of the clergy of this city be requested to officiate in that service.⁷

General George Washington's orders to troops at Valley Forge, May 2, 1778

While we are zealously performing the duties of good citizens and soldiers, we certainly ought not to be inattentive to the higher duties of religion.

To the distinguished character of Patriot, it should be our highest Glory to laud the more distinguished Character of Christian.

The signal instances of providential goodness which we have experienced and which have now almost crowned our labors with complete success demand from us in a peculiar manner the warmest returns of gratitude and piety to the Supreme Author of all good.⁸

General George Washington's Circular Letter of Farewell, June 1783

Note: The conclusion of the lengthy letter was the following prayer. The original historical spelling and punctuation have been retained.

I now make it my earnest prayer that God would have you, and the State over which you preside, in his holy protection that he would incline the hearts of the Citizens to cultivate a spirit of subordination & obedience to Government, to entertain a brotherly affection and love for one another, for their fellow Citizens of the United States at large and particularly for their brethren who have served in the field—and finally that he would most graciously be pleas'd to dispose us all to do Justice, to love mercy and to demean ourselves, with that Charity, humility & pacific temper of mind which were the Characteristicks of the Divine Author of our blessed Religion & without an humble imitation of whose example in these things we can never hope to be a happy Nation.⁹

President George Washington's Blessing at the end of his Letter to the Jewish Congregation of Savannah, Georgia, 1790

May the same wonder-working Deity who long since delivering the Hebrews from their Egyptian Oppressors planted them in the promised land—whose Providential Agency has lately been conspicuous in establishing these United States as an independent nation—still continue to water them with the dews of Heaven and to make the inhabitants of every denomination participate in the temporal and spiritual blessings of that people whose God is Jehovah.¹⁰

President George Washington, selection from "Thanksgiving Proclamation," 1789

Whereas it is the duty of all Nations to acknowledge the providence of Almighty God, to obey his will, to be grateful for his benefits, and humbly to implore his protection and favor—and whereas both Houses of Congress have by their joint Committee requested me "to recommend to the People of the United States a day of public thanksgiving and prayer to be observed by acknowledging with grateful hearts the many signal favors of Almighty God especially by affording them an opportunity peaceably to establish a form of government for their safety and happiness."

Now therefore I do recommend and assign Thursday the 26th day of November next to be devoted by the People of these States to the service of that great and glorious Being, who is the beneficent Author of all the good that was, that is, or that will be—That we may then all unite in rendering unto him our sincere and humble thanks—for his kind care and protection of the People of this Country previous to their becoming a Nation—for the signal and manifold mercies, and the favorable interpositions of his Providence which we experienced in the course and conclusion of the late war—for the great degree of tranquility, union, and plenty, which we

have since enjoyed—for the peaceable and rational manner, in which we have been enabled to establish constitutions of government for our safety and happiness, and particularly the national One now lately instituted—for the civil and religious liberty with which we are blessed; . . .

. . . that we may then unite in most humbly offering our prayers and supplications to the great Lord and Ruler of Nations and beseech him to pardon our national and other transgressions—to enable us all, whether in public or private stations, to perform our several and relative duties properly and punctually—to render our national government a blessing to all the people, by constantly being a Government of wise, just, and constitutional laws, discreetly and faithfully executed and obeyed—to protect and guide all Sovereigns and Nations (especially such as have shewn kindness unto us) and to bless them with good government, peace, and concord—To promote the knowledge and practice of true religion and virtue, . . .¹¹

George Washington, selection from Farewell Address to the United States, 1796

Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, Religion and morality are indispensable supports. In vain would that man claim the tribute of Patriotism, who should labour to subvert these great Pillars of human happiness, these firmest props of the duties of Men & citizens. The mere Politician, equally with the pious man ought to respect & to cherish them. A volume could not trace all their connections with private & public felicity. Let it simply be asked where is the security for property, for reputation, for life, if the sense of religious obligation *desert* the Oaths, which are the instruments of investigation in Courts of Justice? And let us with caution indulge the supposition, that morality can be maintained without religion. Whatever may be conceded to the influence of refined education on minds of peculiar structure—reason & experience both forbid us to expect that National morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle.

'Tis substantially true, that virtue or morality is a necessary spring of popular government. The rule indeed extends with more or less force to every species of Free Government. Who that is a sincere friend to it, can look with indifference upon attempts to shake the foundation of the fabric.¹²

President John Adams, selection from "National Proclamation for a Day of Solemn Humiliation, Fasting, and Prayer," March 6, 1799

As no truth is more clearly taught in the Volume of Inspiration, nor any more fully demonstrated by the experience of all ages, than that a deep sense and a due acknowledgment of the governing providence of a Supreme Being and of the accountableness of men to Him as the searcher of hearts and righteous distributor of rewards and punishments are conducive equally to the happiness and rectitude of individuals and to the well-being of communities; . . .

For these reasons I have thought proper to recommend, and I do hereby recommend accordingly, that Thursday, the 25th day of April next, be observed throughout the United States of America as a day of solemn humiliation, fasting, and prayer; that the citizens on that day abstain as far as may be from their secular occupations, devote the time to the sacred duties of religion in public

and in private; that they call to mind our numerous offenses against the Most High God, confess them before Him with the sincerest penitence, implore His pardoning mercy, through the Great Mediator and Redeemer, for our past transgressions, and that through the grace of His Holy Spirit we may be disposed and enabled to yield a more suitable obedience to His righteous requisitions in time to come; that He would interpose to arrest the progress of that impiety and licentiousness in principle and practice so offensive to Himself and so ruinous to mankind; that He would make us deeply sensible that "righteousness exalteth a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people;" that He would turn us from our transgressions and turn His displeasure from us; . . . that He would favor us with fruitful seasons and so bless the labors of the husbandman as that there may be food in abundance for man and beast; that He would prosper our commerce, manufactures, and fisheries, and give success to the people in all their lawful industry and enterprise; that He would smile on our colleges, academies, schools, and seminaries of learning, and make them nurseries of sound science, morals, and religion; that He would bless all magistrates, from the highest to the lowest, give them the true spirit of their station, make them a terror to evil doers and a praise to them that do well; . . . that he would extend the blessings of knowledge, of true liberty, and of pure and undefiled religion throughout the world.

And I do also recommend that with these acts of humiliation, penitence, and prayer fervent thanksgiving to the Author of All Good be united for the countless favors which He is still continuing to the people of the United States, and which render their condition as a nation eminently happy when compared with the lot of others.¹³

President Abraham Lincoln, during the Civil War, spoken to journalist Noah Brooks

I have been driven many times upon my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere to go. My own wisdom, and that of all about me seemed insufficient for that day.¹⁴

President Harry Truman, selection from first address to Congress, April 16, 1945

Note: Vice-President Harry Truman had been sworn into office as President after the death of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who had just been laid to rest the day before this speech. World War II was still underway, and the new President was greatly aware of his grave responsibilities. He ended his speech with the following words.

At this moment, I have in my heart a prayer. As I have assumed my heavy duties, I humbly pray Almighty God, in the words of King Solomon:

"Give therefore thy servant an understanding heart to judge thy people, that I may discern between good and bad; for who is able to judge this thy so great a people?"

I ask only to be a good and faithful servant of my Lord and my people.¹⁵

President Ronald Reagan, selection from National Day of Prayer Proclamation, February 3, 1988

Americans in every generation have turned to their Maker in prayer. In adoration and in thanksgiving, in contrition and in supplication, we have acknowledged both our dependence on Almighty God and the help He offers us as individuals and as a Nation. In every circumstance, whether peril or plenty, whether war or peace, whether gladness or mourning, we have searched

for and sought God's presence and His power, His blessings and His protection, His freedom and His peace, for ourselves, for our children, and for our beloved land.

That was surely so at the very beginning of our Nation, in the earliest days of our quest for independence and liberty. It could only be thus, for a people who recognized God as the Author of freedom; . . .

We have, then, a lesson from the Founders of our land, those giants of soul and intellect whose courageous pledge of life and fortune and sacred honor, and whose "firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence," have ever guided and inspired Americans and all who would fan freedom's mighty flames and live in "freedom's holy light." That lesson is clear—that in the winning of freedom and in the living of life, the first step is prayer.

Let us join together, Americans all, throughout our land. Let us join together, in factories and farms, in homes and offices, in places of governance and places of worship, and in outposts everywhere that service men and women defend us. Let us, young and old, join together, as did the First Continental Congress, in the first step—humble, heartfelt prayer. Let us do so for the love of God and His great goodness, in search of His guidance and the grace of repentance, in seeking His blessings, His peace, and the resting of His kind and holy hands on ourselves, our Nation, our friends in the defense of freedom, and all mankind, now and always. . . .

Now, Therefore, I, Ronald Reagan, President of the United States of America, do hereby proclaim May 5, 1988, as a National Day of Prayer. I call upon the citizens of our great Nation to gather together on that day in homes and places of worship to pray, each after his or her own manner, for unity in the hearts of all mankind.¹⁶

Notes

¹ First Prayer of the Continental Congress, 1774, Library of Congress, <https://chaplain.house.gov/archive/continental.html>.

² First Thanksgiving Proclamation, Second Continental Congress, 1777, Pilgrim Hall Museum, http://www.pilgrimhallmuseum.org/pdf/TG_First_National_Thanksgiving_Proclamation_1777.pdf.

³ Pub. L. No. 100-307, 102 Stat. 456 (1988).

⁴ Abraham Lincoln, "Proclamation 97—Appointing a Day of National Humiliation, Fasting, and Prayer," March 30, 1863, online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=69891>.

⁵ George W. Bush, "National Day of Prayer Proclamation," April 26, 2002, The White House Archives, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/04/20020426-2.html>.

⁶ William J. Federer, *America's God and Country Encyclopedia of Quotations* (Coppell, TX: FAME Publishing, Inc., 1994), 275-276.

⁷ Benjamin Franklin, Constitutional Convention, Philadelphia, June 28, 1787, recorded by James Madison, *Notes of Debates in the Federal Convention of 1787*, (NY: W.W. Norton & Co., 1966, 1987), 209-210.

⁸ William J. Federer, *America's God and Country Encyclopedia of Quotations* (Coppell, TX: FAME Publishing, Inc., 1994), 643.

⁹ William J. Federer, *America's God and Country Encyclopedia of Quotations* (Coppell, TX: FAME Publishing, Inc., 1994), 646; Access Washington's complete Farewell Circular Letter at the Library of Congress, <http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/presentationsandactivities/presentations/timeline/amrev/peace/circular.html>.

¹⁰ Peter A. Lillback, *George Washington's Sacred Fire* (Bryn Mawr, PA: Providence Forum Press, 2006), 577-578.

¹¹ George Washington, "Thanksgiving Proclamation," New York, October 3, 1789, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/05-04-02-0091>.

¹² George Washington, "Farewell Address," September 19, 1796, Washington Papers, http://gwpapers.virginia.edu/documents_gw/farewell/transcript.html.

¹³ John Adams, "Proclamation—Recommending a National Day of Solemn Humiliation, Fasting, and Prayer," Philadelphia, March 6, 1799, <https://cdn.loc.gov/service/rbc/rbpe/rbpe22/rbpe224/2240110a/2240110a.pdf>; John Adams, "Proclamation—Recommending a National Day of Humiliation, Fasting, and Prayer," March 6, 1799, online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=65675>.

¹⁴ William J. Federer, *America's God and Country Encyclopedia of Quotations* (Coppell, TX: FAME Publishing, Inc., 1994), 378.

¹⁵ Harry S. Truman, First Speech to Congress, April 16, 1945, <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/april-16-1945-first-speech-congress>; 91 Cong. Rec. H3389-3390 (daily ed. April 16, 1945) (first statement of President Harry S. Truman to Joint Session of the House and Senate).

¹⁶ Proclamation No. 5767, 53 Fed. Reg. 3327 (February 5, 1988); see also The Reagan Library, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/sites/default/files/archives/speeches/1988/020388d.htm>.