

Benjamin Franklin Speech at the Constitutional Convention - 1787



“I have lived, Sir, a long time, and the longer I live, the more convincing proof 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 probable that an empire can rise without his aid? We have been assured, Sir, in the sacred writings, that ‘except the Lord build the House they labour in vain that build it.’”

Editors Note: James Madison recorded that at the Constitutional Convention on June 28, 1787, Benjamin Franklin’s request for the institution of prayer at the proceedings. Soon after Franklin’s speech, Washington noted that “A spirit of accommodation was happily infused into the leading characters,” allowing them to work through their differences. Members would later use words like miracle, finger of the Almighty, finger of God, Providence, or superintending Power, to describe the spirit and energy that pervaded Independence Hall.

Mr. President:

The small progress we have made after four or five weeks close attendance & continual reasonings with each other—our different sentiments on almost every question, several of the last producing as many noes as ays, is methinks a melancholy proof of the imperfection of the Human Understanding. We indeed seem to feel our own want of political wisdom, since we have been running about in search of it. We have gone back to ancient history for models of Government, and examined the different forms of those Republics which having been formed with the seeds of their own dissolution now no longer exist. And we have viewed Modern States all round Europe, but find none of their Constitutions suitable to our circumstances.

In this situation of this Assembly, groping as it were in the dark to find political truth, and scarce able to distinguish it when presented to us, how has it happened, Sir, that we have not hitherto once thought of humbly applying to the Father of lights to illuminate our understandings? In the beginning of the Contest with Great Britain, when we were sensible of danger we had daily prayer in this room for the divine protection. Our prayers, Sir, were heard, & 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 that we no longer need his assistance?

I have lived, Sir, a long time, and the longer I live, the more convincing proof 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 probable that an empire can rise without his aid? We have been assured, Sir, in the sacred writings, that “except the Lord build the House they labour 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 bye word down to future ages. And what is worse, mankind may hereafter from this unfortunate instance, despair of establishing Governments 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 blessings on our deliberations, 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.¹

Endnotes:

1. Benjamin Franklin Speech at Constitutional Convention, <http://www.house.gov/forbes/prayer/prayerincongress.htm>

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