

A “Good” Attitude

Phillis Wheatley was born in Senegal, Africa, in 1753 and lived until 1784. At approximately eight years of age, slave traders kidnapped her and sent her on a slave ship to Boston, where the wealthy tailor, John Wheatley, purchased her as a house servant. John’s wife, Susanna, treated her well. She and her daughter Mary taught her to read, and within sixteen months, she mastered her new language of English. She learned many challenging subjects, including the Bible and English poetry. Bostonians called her a child prodigy.

She began writing poetry at thirteen. At sixteen, she composed a poem celebrating the **Great Awakening** pastor, **George Whitefield**, whom she admired. She confirmed her faith in Christ and was baptized in the Old South Church in 1771.¹

Wheatley applied biblical symbolism to evangelize and comment on slavery. For instance, in her best-known poem, “On Being Brought from Africa to America,” she chides the Great Awakening audience to remember that Africans must be included in the Christian stream:

“Remember, *Christians*, *Negroes*, black as *Cain*, /May be refin’d and join th’ angelic train.”

Many of Wheatley’s themes are classified as celebrations of America. She was the first to applaud this nation as glorious “Columbia” in a letter to no less than the first president of the United States, **George Washington**, with whom she had corresponded and was later privileged to meet. Her love of America, as well as her religious fervor, is further suggested by the names of those colonial leaders who signed the endorsement that appeared in some copies of her book *Poems on Various Subjects* to authenticate and support her work:

Thomas Hutchinson, governor of Massachusetts; **John Hancock**, one of the signers of the **Declaration of Independence**; **Andrew Oliver**, lieutenant governor; and another fervent Wheatley supporter, abolitionist **Dr. Benjamin Rush**, also a signer of the **Declaration of Independence**.²

In 1773, Phillis experienced failing health, so the Wheatleys freed her and sent her to England to recover. The English dignitaries accepted her, and she wrote her first collection of poems there. She began corresponding with the American Commander-in-Chief, George Washington. He had her read her poems to his officers when she returned to America. She also influenced Washington to include Blacks in the Continental Army.³

Phillis lost her American family beginning when Susanna Wheatley became ill and died on March 3, 1774. Mary Wheatley and her father died in 1778; Nathaniel, who had married and moved to England, died in 1783. Throughout the lean years of the war and the following depression, the assault of reality was more than Phillis’ sickly body or aesthetic soul could withstand.

She married John Peters, a free black man she had known for five years. He turned out to have had a desperately flawed character and did not provide for his frail wife. He deserted her, and five years later, she died in poverty at age thirty.

¹ Cummings, Brad, and Lance Wubbels, editors. *The Founders' Bible*. Newbury Park, CA, Shiloh Road Publishers, 2012, pp. 75-77.

² O’Neale, Sondra A. "Phillis Wheatley." , Poetry Foundation, www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/phillis-wheatley. Accessed 2 Feb. 2024.

³ Cummings.

Phillis experienced illness and tragedy in her life, but she was neither bitter nor complained. She saw the hand of God and His providence in her life. Listen to her famous poem, **On Being Brought from Africa to America.**⁴

'Twas mercy brought me from my *Pagan* land,
Taught my benighted soul to understand
That there's a God, that there's a *Saviour* too:
Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.
Some view our sable race with scornful eye,
"Their colour is a diabolic die."
Remember, *Christians*, *Negros*, black as *Cain*,
May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train.

Satan used harsh circumstances to try and destroy this great woman. He enslaved her, afflicted her health, destroyed the only family she knew, and tormented her with a useless husband (sounds a little bit like Job). Yet she kept a noble attitude, much like Joseph in Egypt. You will remember Joseph's brothers had sold him into slavery. They feared for their lives after Jacob died. Joseph told them:

"Do not be afraid, for *am* I in the place of God? ²⁰ But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as *it is* this day, to save many people alive. ²¹ Now therefore, do not be afraid; I will provide for you and your little ones." And he comforted them and spoke kindly to them.⁵

I admire Phillis Wheatley and Joseph. These are people who keep their eyes on God during the storm. When others cry out like Jesus' disciples on the Sea of Galilee, these people can find the silver lining and have learned to rely on Him through the catastrophes.

The apostle Paul started out as Saul of Tarsus persecuting Christians. Through his conversion experience, he learned the realities of God's presence through His Son and Spirit. He discovered a secret that only believers can find. Listen to his revelation in this passage.

¹⁰ But I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at last your care for me has flourished again; though you surely did care, but you lacked opportunity. ¹¹ Not that I speak in regard to need, for I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content: ¹² I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. ¹³ I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.⁶

Life is not always fair or peaceful. It feels like it is getting more challenging by the day. A real accomplishment is to keep our joy while everything seems to fall apart. It is a matter of a "good" attitude.

Keep The Light of a "Good" Attitude Burning!

GodNAmerica.com GodNAmerica@gmail.com P.O. Box 851819 Yukon, OK 73085

⁴ O'Neale.

⁵ Genesis 50:19-21 (NKJV)

⁶ Philippians 4:10-13 (NKJV)