

Precious or Priceless? *Lessons from the Burning of Washington* | Inspirational Article

Washington D.C. stands on the verge of destruction. Even the army left to guard the Whitehouse has fled, and the president's wife, alone in the White House but for a few servants, waits for word from her husband. She is reluctant to abandon the building that is as much a symbol of our nation as a home. For that very reason, however, it is a likely target for the enemy. Her husband is engaged in battle nearby, and he has managed to get a few messages through in the last couple of days, warning her to be ready to evacuate at a moment's notice. He has also charged her with the safekeeping of the "Cabinet papers, public and private."

It might be a scene torn from the pages of a Tom Clancy thriller. But in fact, it is a page from our nation's history. The year is 1814, and the woman who waits anxiously—and in vain—for her husband's return is Mrs. James Madison. The name "Dolly" fits her renown as a charming, vivacious Washington hostess. But it belies the sterner stuff she is made of.

Now she finds herself faced with more than political battles...she can hear the cannon. And she knows the time has come. If she doesn't flee now she will be trapped by our own retreating army choking the roads.

She has already resigned herself to losing almost all of her personal possessions in order to make room for the more valuable national documents. But there is one last treasure that must be rescued before she flees. It is a full-length portrait of George Washington, which, like the White House itself, has become a kind of national symbol.

But the process of unscrewing it from the wall is painstakingly slow. An old friend, Mr. Carroll, who has come to hurry the first lady along, nearly raves with impatience. But she won't leave without the painting.

The British are advancing.

The hands of the servants tremble, working feverishly at their task.

There simply isn't enough time.

Then Dolly makes a choice. She must choose between the valuable and the priceless.

She orders the frame to be smashed. They yank the precious canvas from the ruined frame, and at last, Dolly flees.

Reflecting on her story, I realize the choice that faced Dolly Madison is the same one that will eventually confront most of us in one form or another. It was really a simple question of priorities. And because she was a woman of understanding, she knew what must be done. Dolly sacrificed something that was indeed precious and beautiful to save something greater, something that could never be replaced.

And I ask myself, will I have the clarity of mind to make such a choice when my own moment of decision comes? Will I be willing to sacrifice things I treasure when they put me at risk of losing something even more valuable? What if those treasures come in the form of a job, a habit, or even a relationship? And what—in the big picture of eternity—are the priceless things I dare not lose?

It seems like these are good questions to ask now, in the quiet of my living room. Unlike Dolly, I may not hear the cannon as they approach.