

When Freedom Was Only a Dream



This Thanksgiving, as liberty is under attack on every continent including our own, it is critical that we remember the forerunners of our freedom who came to New England almost 400 years ago. But do we really know their story and how they birthed liberty in an age of plague, tyranny and Christian persecution?

We tend to think of our time as “the crises of the ages.” (C.S. Lewis called this self-centered thinking “chronological snobbery”!) The time of the Pilgrims was even more desperate than that of America today. Freedom was only a dream in the world when a small, underground church began to meet in Scrooby, England in 1604. That moment, England was in the midst of a pandemic, an explosion of the Bubonic Plague. Over 20,000 died in the streets of London that year alone.

At that time, the Thirty Years’ War was ravaging Europe, killing over five million people in Germany alone. Southern Europe had been dominated for decades by a religious zealot, King Phillip II of Spain. Using the new-found treasures of the New World, Phillip brought the Spanish Empire to bankruptcy in a forty year attempt to exterminate serious Christian believers throughout Europe. In Holland alone he killed over 300,000 people, wiping out entire cities in a day. In England, the

tension between the king and the liberty loving Christians was building toward a devastating civil war, as King James I tortured, killed or exiled all who disagreed with him.

In this age of tyranny, *the most successful freedom revolution in history was birthed.* A small group of English Christians, later called Pilgrims, faced death or imprisonment under King James I. They finally escaped to Holland in 1609, the only place they could go where there was a degree of religious freedom. In Leyden, Holland they learned the biblical principles of religious, economic and civil liberty from John Robinson, their pastor and former dean of Cambridge University. For a decade they endured horrific trials of poverty and exile. After much study and prayer, they decided to sail to the wilderness of America, knowing that they faced almost certain death.

As a general on the battlefield, Pastor Robinson sent out the core of his church as pioneers. The scent of the powder of battle was in the air as he gave his final charge:

“Thus this holy army of saints is marshalled here on earth by these officers, under the conduct of their glorious Emperor, Christ. Thus it marches in this most heavenly order and gracious array, against all enemies, both bodily and ghostly: peaceable in itself, as Jerusalem, terrible to the enemy as an army with banners, triumphing over their tyranny with patience, their cruelty with meekness, and over death itself with dying.

Thus through the Blood of that spotless Lamb, and the Word of their testimony, they are more than conquerors bruising the head of the Serpent; yea, through the power of His Word, they have power to cast down strongholds, and everything that exalts itself against God. The gates of hell, and all the principalities and powers on earth shall not prevail against it.”

The deeply felt optimism of this letter is incredible. It is almost as though Pastor Robinson knew that the voyage of his people that summer of 1620 would initiate a peaceful revolution, following the selfless strategy of their Savior, which would free more people, both spiritually and physically, than any army in history.

After a 66 day perilous voyage the former wine cargo ship, the Mayflower, sailed into Cape Cod five hundred miles north of their intended destination. And so, outside of the king's charter, they needed to form their own government. On November 11, 1620, forty six men gathered in the captain's cabin and signed the Mayflower Compact. This was a government of the people, unique in all of history.

It begins "In the name of God, Amen." It placed in the hands of the people the right to create laws and constitutions under God's direction. This document became a basis for more than eighty colonial constitutions, agreements and covenants out of which was crafted America's Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution.

Then, after eighteen days scouring the Cape for water, they found a little harbor, a spring fed stream and land that had been cleared of the overwhelming forests. It was here that the Pawtuxet Indians had died in a great plague several years before the Pilgrim's arrival and the bay was abandoned.

After coming ashore in the middle of a harsh winter, over half of the Pilgrims had died by March of 1621. Most of the women died while protecting their children from the elements. They buried forty six settlers in a common grave to disguise their weakness. Their problems were compounded by the communal farming that had

been forced on them by the merchants who had funded their voyage, resulting in two years of near starvation.

In the summer of 1623, this failed experiment in socialism was abandoned. Governor William Bradford gave each family a plot of ground on which to plant their own crops. Under this biblical structure of free enterprise, each family worked their own land resulting in an explosion of productivity. Corn began to rise in the fields. But no rain fell in July and August to water the crops and the settlers faced starvation. Remembering that they had forgotten to thank God, they declared a day of fasting, repentance and prayer for God's

deliverance. A gentle rain began that afternoon and lasted for three days, restoring their crops and saving their lives. After this miracle, Governor Bradford declared a Day of Thanksgiving to God for His rain and provision. This story is the heart of our national holiday, Thanksgiving.



Why is it that even to this day, Americans love Thanksgiving more than any other holiday? Deep within their psyche Americans know that the God who is acknowledged on our coins, who is exalted in our national motto, "In God We Trust", and to whom the Founders dedicated the Declaration of Independence, is the God who has blessed us with freedom and prosperity.

This Thanksgiving, let us remember the Pilgrim model for peacefully creating a nation of liberty and prosperity. Their biblically based roadmap is the only way back to the blessing of God and the restoration of our Constitutional Republic.

-Marshall Foster