

## Chapter 1

### Freedom and the Lamb

It began among thatched-roof houses between the Atlantic Ocean and a vast wilderness. It began in a settlement hurriedly built in the territory of the Powhatan people. This is where the great American experiment began. The colonists called it Jamestown in honor of their king. It was to become the first permanent English settlement in North America.

The people of Jamestown would have an incredibly hard time maintaining their toehold in the New World. They barely survived those first few harsh winters. They came close to starving to death many times. The Indians whose country they'd invaded sometimes fought back. Their numbers dwindled.

But something very powerful kept these American forefathers from giving up and sailing back to England. Something very powerful had moved them to forsake their homes, sail across the stormy Atlantic, and try to create a civilization from scratch, from the raw materials of an unknown continent.

There is a structure that dates back to the original Jamestown settlement. It's the tower of a church built in the 1640s, now part of the Memorial Church built in 1907.

After the colonists had constructed some fortifications and arranged for temporary shelters, their primary concern was to provide a place in which they could worship God. They built a church.

Longing for freedom

It was a longing for freedom that propelled the settlement of the New World. But not just any freedom. It was the desire to worship God freely, as conscience dictated - without interference. It was the desire to escape religious persecution.

Yes, there were some adventurers among the Jamestown colonists. There were some who just wanted to make their fortune in the New World. But among the colonists landing at Plymouth Rock or Chesapeake Bay or Cape Henry, it was chiefly the desire for religious freedom that burned in their hearts. That's why they could endure incredible hardships. That's why they wanted to build a new civilization from scratch.

Imagine what it must have been like setting out across the vast Atlantic in boats like the Susan Constant, the Godspeed, and the

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Discovery. Imagine what it must have been like being tossed about by mid-ocean storms in boats like these.

We get a close-up look at what the colonists endured in the records left to us by those aboard the original Mayflower. That's the ship that brought the Pilgrims to Plymouth Rock. We hear of storms that almost tore the boat apart. Rough seas splashed into the ship at one point and extinguished the galley fires. The Pilgrims had no heat for cooking after that. They stayed wet and cold most of the time. Many became sick. Crude seamen on the Mayflower took out their frustrations by tormenting the Pilgrims - many of whom wondered if they'd ever see land again.

But there's something else that stands out in the record of the Mayflower crossing. And that is the Pilgrim worship services. These people praised God. They worshiped in fair weather and foul. They worshiped in sickness and health. They worshiped in joy and in despair.

Everyone is familiar with the picture of the Pilgrims kneeling on Plymouth Rock and giving thanks to God after landing safely. But these people had been falling on their knees all along. That's how they lived their lives. That's what drove them across the ocean. That's what enabled them to endure so much - the dream of religious freedom.

The Pilgrims were really taking a journey away from centuries of religious persecution in Europe. They were hoping to put an ocean between them and a long, bloody tradition of intolerance.

Peaceful, Bible-believing Christians had been hunted down, arrested, imprisoned, burned, or sold as galley slaves - simply because they disagreed with the established church.

In the 1400s and 1500s, people like the Hussites, the Huguenots, the Lollards, the Anabaptists, and the Waldensians suffered greatly because they chose to "Obey God rather than men." They would not conform to traditions they believed contrary to the Bible.

And religious intolerance was still the norm when the Pilgrims set sail. William Brewster, the man who pastored the group embarking on the Mayflower, had to be smuggled on board the ship. The authorities were trying to arrest him. Brewster had dared to criticize the established Church of England in print.

These Puritans, these religious dissenters, wanted to be able to express their convictions without fear of oppression. They wanted to be able to share their faith freely.

Interestingly enough, one of the items they brought aboard the Mayflower was a large iron press. They intended to print religious

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pamphlets in the new colony. And that press came into good use - quite unexpectedly during the Atlantic crossing. After a fierce storm, one of the main beams in the middle of the ship began to bow and crack. The crew feared the Mayflower would break up. There seemed to be no way to repair the beam.

But the Pilgrim passengers remembered their press. It had two strong iron plates that could be pulled together by a large screw. The pilgrims used this to jack up the main beam and slip a solid post underneath it. With this as a foundation, the Mayflower made it to Plymouth Rock.

A divine mission

You know, the faith of the Pilgrims was a lot like that central beam that held the Mayflower together. These people believed they were on a divine mission. They wanted to become a 'Tight set on a hill' That gave them stability. They made it through one hardship after another because they believed they were part of God's big plan.

Those who came here to create a New World looked at the whole world from God's perspective, from the Bible's perspective. And the Bible actually unveils for us the great drama of religious intolerance versus the struggle for religious freedom.

Take a look at Revelation, chapter 12. In verse one, we see God's pure church pictured as a woman clothed with the sun who wears a crown of twelve stars. An adversary appears in verse three - a great red dragon with seven heads and seven crowns. This dragon symbolizes Satan.

He sweeps a third of the stars from heaven and casts them to earth. That is a reference to the angels who rebelled with Satan in heaven and were exiled to earth.

In this same chapter, the pure woman is about to give birth to a child. And this dragon stands ready to devour her child as soon as it is born. This refers to Jesus Christ, born from God's chosen people. He is the One who proclaimed "liberty to the captives," the One who "let the oppressed go free."

Satan wants to destroy Him, the author of liberty. And he tried to do that through King Herod's massacre. As soon as Herod heard that the Christ had been born in Bethlehem, he had every male infant in that town killed.

Satan, the dragon, continues his war against Christ by continuing to attack God's people, "the dragon ... persecuted the woman who gave birth to the male Child" (Revelation 12:13).

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Satan is the author of religious intolerance. He is behind religious persecution.

Christ came to set human beings free. The heart of Jesus' ministry is set forth in these words: "And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:32).

Satan is determined to keep people oppressed. That's the reason religious tyranny is so diabolical. That's the reason love and intolerance have clashed so fiercely down through the centuries.

Revelation 12 also pictures for us God's coming to the rescue of His persecuted people. "But the woman was given two wings of a great eagle, that she might fly into the wilderness to her place, where she is nourished for a time" (Revelation 12:14).

Revelation 12:6 echoes this thought, telling us the woman flees to the wilderness, to a place prepared by God, and is sustained there.

Down through the years, various groups of believers were forced to meet in remote mountain caves or deep in the forest. They nourished their faith in these secret places.

But Pilgrim believers, perhaps more than anyone else, truly did flee into a wilderness, the vast wilderness of America. And they believed this place had been prepared for them by God. Here they could build a new society of faith to His glory.

Intolerance continues

Unfortunately, that new society still carried something of the Old World with it. Throughout the colonies, stocks stood in the public square of most colonial towns. They were used not just to punish drunkenness or petty theft, but also to punish people for missing church.

The Puritans rejected the creeds of the medieval church. But they weren't completely free of her spirit of intolerance. They very much wanted to practice their religion without interference. But they were quite willing to interfere with others who wanted to believe differently.

The Puritans wanted to create a righteous community so badly that they began to legislate it. They established mandatory religious observances for all colonists. People who missed church too often could be placed in stocks. People who tripped up over some rule about Sunday observance could be humiliated.

Officials of the established church could be even more tyrannical. Sir William Berkeley, one of the early governors of Virginia, wanted to keep the colony safe for the Church of England. He tried to drive out all Quakers. Some members of this peace-loving sect were arrested and

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imprisoned. One of them, a man named George Wilson, managed to get letters out describing what he and fellow believers were going through. They were chained in a filthy dungeon in Jamestown, almost suffocating in the stench of their own filth. Wilson would eventually die in irons.

It's clear that the desire for freedom had populated the New World. But the New World was not always so free. People came here to defend their right to believe as conscience dictated. But they did not always defend the right of others to believe differently.

It would take a very special man to blaze the trail of pure religious liberty in the American wilderness.

Roger Williams arrived in the New World eleven years after the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock. He saw what few of his contemporaries had seen: that religious freedom is a God-given right of all, whatever their creed.

Williams began to speak out in the Massachusetts Bay Colony against a tax-supported clergy. No one, he maintained, should have to support a church "against his own consent."

His opponents were scandalized. "What! Is not the laborer worthy of his hire?" they asked.

"Yes," Williams shot back, "from them that hire him."

Roger Williams was banished from Massachusetts. He found refuge among the Indians. Williams had always tried to protect them from exploitation, and Native Americans had come to trust him. Under his guidance many Indians from various tribes became Christians.

A place for freedom

Eventually, Roger Williams would create a place of refuge in the New World. He bought some land at a fair price from the Naragansett people and established the little colony of Rhode Island.

Its royal charter of 1663 stated this: "No person within the said colony ... shall be in any wise molested, punished, disquieted or called in question, for any differences in opinion in matters of religion."

Williams was the first person in modern Christendom to establish civil government on the basis of liberty of conscience. He offered a haven of protection for Jews, Quakers, Catholics, Seventh Day Baptists, and others who were rejected in both Europe and the New England colonies.

Rhode Island became a refuge for the oppressed. And Rhode Island prospered. Its foundation principles - civil and religious liberty - would become the cornerstones of the American Republic.

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Here at the very beginning of the great American experiment we had two very different views of the church, two very different views of religion. We had people like Sir William Berkeley who tried to drive out non-Anglicans from Virginia. He thought this would make the church strong.

And we had Roger Williams who created Rhode Island for liberty of conscience. He felt that was the only way real Christianity could flourish.

It makes us wonder. What made the difference? What pushes some toward intolerance - and others toward protecting religious freedom? Why are some driven to control conscience - and others motivated to set it free?

I believe Roger Williams himself gives us an important answer. As an old man, looking back on his life, he pointed to the one thing that had shaped him the most. More than sixty years before he wrote, "The Father of Lights and Mercies touched my Soul with a love to himself."

Roger Williams had experienced grace. Mercy had touched his soul. He knew what it was like for a sinful human being to be accepted by a holy God. He'd experienced salvation as a gift.

Roger Williams had been drawn to God by love. Love had won him over. And that's how he related to other people.

God doesn't coerce. God draws us to Himself with cords of love. So why should we coerce other people?

You can see grace in this man's life in the way he tried to console his wife Mary during a crisis. She was suffering from a serious illness and, in her depression, she began to doubt her acceptance by God as His child.

Williams wrote her a very long letter of comfort and assurance. He went to great lengths to select Bible passages that would encourage her. And he offered them, he said, as a bouquet, "a little posy," to the one he called "My Dearest Love and Companion."

This man knew how to comfort. This man knew he was loved by God.

I believe that's the secret to his courageous stand for religious liberty. He didn't have to control others. He didn't have to force anyone to believe as he did. God had won Him over by love and that's how he expected others to be won over.

As I mentioned earlier, passages in Revelation show us the great drama of religious intolerance versus the struggle for religious freedom. It shows us earthly powers trying to oppress God's people.

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But do you know what other symbol dominates the book of Revelation? The Lamb of God - Jesus Christ. The Lamb of God sacrificed for our sins. He's at the center of the drama.

Worship in heaven

Revelation 5 gives us a vivid picture of worship in heaven. Who is at the center of praise? The Lamb. The heavenly host can't stop declaring, "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain."

Chapter 7 shows us a picture of the redeemed, a great multitude from every nation. What are they doing? Waving palm branches before the Lamb of God.

Chapter 13 shows us a terrible beast who blasphemes against God and who demands human worship. But in contrast we read of "the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world." The beast coerces. The Lamb lays down His life.

Chapter 17 pictures oppressive, corrupt religion as Babylon, the Mother of Harlots. Who overcomes Babylon? The Lamb - the chosen and faithful Lamb of God.

And finally, when Revelation pictures the glorious reunion of God and His people in heaven, it's called the wedding supper of the Lamb.

The Lamb is at the center of the drama. He's the one who can stand against tyranny and oppression.

Friends, do you know what genuine religious liberty is based on? It's based on the sacrificial love of Jesus Christ. It's based on this Lamb of God who gave Himself up for the sins of the world.

God committed Himself to winning us over through love, not coercion. That's what this Lamb is saying to us in the book of Revelation.

And people who don't understand that love don't understand religious freedom. People who are not moved by grace are moved by something else. Human nature moves us to something else.

Without grace, we naturally want to control other people.

Without love, we naturally have to make other people think we're right.

Without the Lamb of God, religion becomes oppressive and human beings turn into beasts.

There's a story that comes to us from the early Jamestown settlement that gives us a beautiful picture of grace. It's the story of Pocahontas and John Smith - the real story.

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Tensions between the colonists and the Indians who occupied this land kept mounting. John Smith, a courageous leader of the settlers, tried to negotiate peace with the Native American, King Powhatan.

But one day, during an Indian ceremony, Smith was seized by warriors who forced his head down on some rocks. They raised their clubs as if to kill him.

Suddenly, the king's favorite daughter, a young girl named Pocahontas, rushed from the crowd and laid herself over the captive. She offered her life in exchange for Smith's. The execution was halted.

Two days later, Smith was astonished to learn that he'd been adopted as the king's honored son.

Afterward, Pocahontas devoted her brief life to promoting harmony between her people and the white people. Sometimes only her gifts of food kept the starving colonists alive. Sometimes she had to defy her angry father. But Pocahontas, more than anyone else, sustained the uneasy peace in this part of the New World.

She eventually fell in love with and married an English farmer named John Rolfe. He was a Christian man of kindness and integrity. Pocahontas began studying the Bible and soon adopted the Christian faith, becoming a believer in the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

She understood what sacrifice means. She understood what giving yourself away means.

Have you made that discovery? Have you encountered the love of God that can set you free? Or are you still trying to control other people?

We can only stop controlling other people if we are free ourselves. We can only draw other people with love if we are loved ourselves.

God wants to create a New World inside us, a new creation. But it has to be built on a foundation of love. Every other foundation will fail.

We need the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. We need His grace to fill our lives. Let's start building on that foundation right away.