AMERICAN FAITH

27 SKETCHES FROM WINTHROP TO WILKERSON
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John Winthrop (AD 1587-1649)
John Winthrop: America’s Founding Father

Praise the LORD!
Blessed is the man who fears the LORD,
who delights greatly in His commandments.
His descendants will be mighty on the earth.
The generation of the upright will be blessed.

—Psalm 112:1-2

If historians were to choose five men as the earliest Founding Fathers of America, no doubt they would include John Smith (Virginia Colony), William Bradford (Plymouth Colony), William Brewster (Plymouth Colony), John Endecott (Salem Colony), and John Winthrop (Massachusetts Bay Colony). But if we were pressed to reduce the list to a single person, America’s Founding Father would have to be John Winthrop. No other leader sacrificed so much, contributed so much, and exerted so vast an influence in the early years of America. Part Separatist and part Puritan but rejecting the immoderate extremes of both parties, he was all Christian all the way. John Winthrop exemplified genuine Christian faith better than many if not most of
the early settlers in America. He was a great leader and a humble Christian. The first roots of this country are found in the Puritans, and John Winthrop was the true Puritan exemplar.

The English Reformation and the Roots of the British Empire

On October 6, 1536, William Tyndale was burned at the stake in Vilvoorde, Belgium. His crime was translating and printing of the Bible in the English language. Tyndale’s last prayer was for the King: “Lord, open the King of England’s eyes!” Three years earlier King Henry VIII had appointed Thomas Cranmer Archbishop of Canterbury in hopes that Cranmer would annul the king’s marriage to Catherine of Aragon. Reformation was on its way to England.

During this time Lutheran ideas from Europe were seeping into England’s colleges and churches. The Reformation in England solidified under the reign of Henry’s son, Edward VI, who ruled from 1547 to 1553. But, tragically, this young king did not survive his 16th year. Following Edward came Queen Mary (daughter of Henry VIII), a zealous Roman Catholic. During her reign from 1553 to 1558 “Bloody” Mary had her own cousin Lady Jane Grey executed, along with almost 300 other Protestants. In 1558 Mary’s sister Elizabeth I assumed the throne and reigned for forty-five years. These were glory years for England, in which the roots of the British Empire formed. As God’s providence played out, England would defeat the Spanish Armada in 1588 and put an end to the threat of a Roman Catholic army conquering Protestant England. Queens Mary and Elizabeth began promoting the colonization of Ireland (by the
English) in the mid-1500s, and it was the Englishman Humphrey Gilbert who attempted the first colonization of Newfoundland in 1578. Then the English attempted a colony in 1585 on Roanoke Island. However, the colony disappeared mysteriously, probably due to disease or Indian attack. Finally, the English managed to pull off a successful colony in Virginia in 1607 under Captain John Smith’s leadership at Jamestown. These were the rustic beginnings of the British Empire.

The Puritan Conflict

It was the relationship of church and state in England that crippled the Reformation from the outset. Although a Roman Catholic, King Henry supported the Reformation for personal and political reasons. He sought an escape from his marriage to Catherine, and the pope refused to approve the annulment. Henry’s only alternative was to repudiate the pope and embrace the Reformation.

Henry VIII was a tyrannical king. Estimates vary, but historians say this king killed thousands of his political and religious opponents. The church in England was placed under the control of the king. Archbishops and heads of the church were appointed directly by the crown. State control of the church is unbiblical and is always unhealthy both for the church and the state. During and after Henry’s reign, the British universities and seminaries were also corrupted by

**Annulment:** A legal act which cancels a marriage. An annulment voids a marriage and declares it to have been invalid from its beginning. Annulled marriages are treated as though they had never legally existed.
humanist thinking and state control. The English monarchs following Edward VI were not enthusiastic about the life-transforming teachings of men like Martin Luther and John Calvin. With such authorities exercising control over the Church of England, it was only natural that the church would slouch into moral and theological corruption.

Despite this decline, God mercifully raised up a remnant within the churches of England. In the 1570s and 1580s, Puritanism formed among the young students attending Cambridge University, under the tutelage of men like Laurence Chaderton and William Perkins. The life and writings of William Perkins were hugely important among the first American Puritans including Thomas Hooker, William Brewster, and John Winthrop.

In 1584 Puritan leaders in Parliament tried to change the form of church government in England to a Presbyterian model. However, the attempt failed and actually made for trouble between the Puritan faction and the monarchy. Queen Elizabeth now came to view the Puritans as a threat to her authority over the church. So she began persecuting the more radical of the Puritans and Separatists.

In 1593 Elizabeth’s Star Chamber sentenced three Separatists to death by hanging—John Penry, Henry Barrow, and John Greenwood. The three men had “separated” themselves from the Church of England and they had urged others to do the same.

**Puritans and Separatists**: Puritans sought to reform and purify the Church of England from within. Separatists shared many beliefs with the Puritans but decided to separate from the Church of England and form their own churches. This was illegal, and many Separatists were arrested or fled England to the Netherlands.

**John Winthrop’s Uncle William**

It was John Winthrop’s Uncle William who led the family into the reforming church. After moving his residence in 1553 at the beginning of Bloody Mary’s reign, William Winthrop began meeting secretly with other like-minded believers. He would join fellow Christians for worship in private homes and
sometimes on ships in port. William may have provided some of his own merchant ships for this purpose. Uncle William was personally acquainted with some of the martyrs who lost their lives under Queen Mary. He kept in close contact with John Foxe and provided important first-hand information about some of the martyrdoms recorded in Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs*.

Later in the 1560s William served as a lay elder in a church called St. Michael’s in Cornhill, London. The church purchased copies of John Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs* and John Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion* to make available to the congregation. It was clear that these people were serious about reformation. The church also encouraged congregational singing at this time, using psalms adapted to music in Calvin’s Geneva.

Uncle William also sponsored and funded several foreign Protestant churches in London. Two of his sons migrated to Ireland and helped lead the Irish Reformation (which in some respects was stronger than England’s). Although operating somewhat in the background, William Winthrop was a major player in the English Reformation. His devout commitment to the reformation of the Christian church had a profound influence on his younger brother Adam (John Winthrop’s father), nineteen years younger. While Adam admired his older brother’s courage and faith, it would be Adam’s son John who would take the reformation vision to the most radical conclusions.

### Early Years

*I charge you therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who will judge the living and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom: Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables. (2 Timothy 4:1-4)*

John Winthrop was born in 1588 to Adam and Anne Winthrop in
Edwardstone (located about sixty miles northeast of London). John’s father did not start out rich, but he worked his way into England’s upper middle class. In a day when books were considered a luxury, Adam Winthrop managed to collect a library of eighty-seven volumes. He was both a lawyer and a farmer in a time when a single source of income was insufficient to provide for a large family. John was the second child born to Adam and Anne. His sisters, Anne, Jane, and Lucy were born in 1586, 1592, and 1601.

John grew up in the Stour Valley in Essex, England. Beginning in 1563 the valley received two godly, Calvinist pastors: Henry Browne and William Bird. It was the preaching of these men that lit a fire under the families in the valley. And Stour Valley became known as the godliest commonwealth in any part of England.1 Largely through the influence of a godly bishop (pastor) named Edmund Grindal, reformation swept through Essex. Two important elements came to characterize these Puritan churches:

1. Evangelical preaching.
2. “Prophesying” or Scripture-based, Spirit-filled encouragements and exhortations from ordinary men in the congregations or pastors gathered in small groups.

Puritan preachers preferred the powerful proclamation of God’s Word to empty rituals and outward ceremonies. Typically people favored outward ceremonies when they did not want to be convicted of their sin or be subjected to the powerful truths of Christ’s redeeming gospel. The devil does not like unfettered Gospel preaching and this was certainly the case in 16th century England.

John Winthrop’s mother, Anne Browne Winthrop, was the daughter of Pastor Henry Browne. As a child she had been well discipled in the reformation faith in her father’s home. Pastor Browne taught her, “A minister must tell the people of their sins,” and “we must remember the law of God continually.”2

In his youthful days John played football (soccer) with his friends and hunted rabbits with his musket and bow, although he was never a good shot. His father taught him to fish in the manor pond and streams. Each Sunday his parents took him to hear two sermons at the church in Groton or Boxford. Often his parents
invited the pastors to their home for more fellowship in Christ.

John’s father taught him a basic Christian catechism called “Principles of the Christian Religion.” When his dad asked him, “What sure ground do we have to build our religion upon?” John would answer, “The Word of God contained in the Scripture.” The catechism taught him that God really does “ordain whatsoever comes to pass.”

Young John Winthrop was a sinner, and he came to be sharply aware of this truth about himself early on. When still a lad he stole two little books he found left in the house. Later in his life he wrote that, “ever since, when they have come to my mind, I have grieved at it, and would have gladly made restitution.” As early as twelve years of age John began struggling with sexual temptation. He admitted to having “attempted all kinds of wickedness.” He was, in his own words, “very wild and dissolute.”

At fourteen, John went off to Trinity College, Cambridge. At this time Cambridge was a seedbed of a robust, reforming faith. The young men rose early and assembled at chapel by 5:00 a.m. for early morning prayers and a sermon. Each student was assigned a tutor who held him to spiritual accountability and discipled him in the faith. Tutoring was a vibrant college ministry in the 1590s. During these years young John sat under the evangelical preaching of the most famous Puritan of the day, William Perkins. John Cotton was one of his classmates, a young man who would become the most famous pastor in the early days of America.

Calvinism: Calvinism is the term used for those who generally accept the doctrines of the Swiss Reformer, John Calvin. Usually, Calvinists emphasize the doctrine of predestination — that God determines who will be saved and who will not be saved.

Nevertheless, the college scene was still not perfect in Cambridge. Tales of drunkenness and fornication among the student body were common. John Winthrop’s days at college were marked by strong temptations to sexual sin. After barely two years at Trinity College John quit school never to return.
Immediately afterward, at only seventeen years of age, he married Mary Forth.

To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single, as I am. But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion. (1 Corinthians 7:8-9)

Adult Life

Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord. . . (Acts 3:19)

By his own admission, the first years of John’s first marriage were marked by impatience, self-centeredness, and quarrels with his wife. At times John gave himself to “negligence and idleness.” He hunted birds along the creeks, but at times he would participate in illegal poaching. It was around this time that Winthrop began to pray that God would give him “a new heart, joy in His Spirit; that He would dwell with me, that He would strengthen me against the world, the flesh and the Devil, and that He would forgive my sins and increase my faith.”

Trinity College, where Winthrop attended from fourteen years of age.
John committed himself to fighting against the sins of “pride, covetousness, love of this world, vanity of mind, unthankfulness, sloth (both in my service and in my calling), and not preparing myself with reverence and uprightness to come to His Word.” John’s faith now had a seriousness about it. He was assured of God’s love at this time, even to the point that he “dreamed that I was with Christ.” He fell on his face and wept for a very long time, sensing the love of Christ like never before.

Six children were born to the couple—John Jr., Henry, Forth, Mary, and two daughters who died at birth. John’s relationship with Anne was marred by his pride but improved as he grew closer to God. He committed himself to family worship both morning and evening. He wanted to “have a special care for the education of my children and to banish profaneness from my family.” He committed every morning to “private prayer, meditation, and reading,” and to “pray and confer privately with my wife.” These commitments turned out to be life-transforming for John Winthrop.

John made the entry in his journal at this time: “I will always walk humbly before my God, and meekly, mildly and gently towards all men . . . to give myself, my life, my wits, my health, my wealth to the service of my God and Saviour.” His commitment to the Lord solidified during his marriage with Mary.

Between 1605 and 1613 John and Mary lived in Southeast Essex with Mary’s family. This part of the country was less committed to the reformation faith. Upon returning to the Stour Valley in 1613, John began meeting with a “covenanted group”—an accountability group of pastors and committed Christian men and women. They met every Friday for prayer and to discuss sermons. This provided a pattern for John Winthrop’s spiritual walk in the years that followed.

On the birth of a seventh child, Anne, John’s wife Mary died. A year later John married again. His second wife Thomasine died in childbirth in November 1616.

John Winthrop’s third wife Margaret was a true jewel. Never was a relationship so sweet and so tender as that of John and Margaret. One historian described Margaret as “one of the most appealing women in American history.” Her husband called her “a very gracious woman,” probably an underestimation
of her character. Margaret’s letters to John were filled with kindness, tenderness, concern, and love, as were his to her. He referred to her as his “sweet spouse,” “most sweet heart,” or “most loving and dear wife,” and ended his letters with phrases like “the sweetest kisses and pure embracings of my kindest affection.” In her letters Margaret wrote him, “I have no way to manifest my love to you but by these unworthy lines, which I would entreat you to accept from her that loveth you with an unfeigned heart.” When she heard that he had injured his hand, Margaret wrote in the most tender, affecting language, “I will not look for any long letters this term because I pity your poor hand if I had it here I would make more of it than ever I did, and bind it up very softly for fear of hurting it.” In response John affirmed his appreciation for her and her letters as “the true image of thy most loving heart, breathing out the faithful desires of thy sweet soul towards him that prizeth thee above all things in the world.” Such records utterly dispel the myth that Puritans were a cold, emotionless, and hard-hearted people.

For his life’s calling John Winthrop pursued the legal field. At 21 years of age his father appointed him as magistrate in a local court at Groton Manor. He continued to work as a local county judge from 1617 onward. Each day before he entered the court he prepared his heart “by earnest prayer.” Few men had a clearer view of the decline of English society in the 1620s than John Winthrop from his seat as judge. Crimes of murder, theft, witchcraft, and infanticide were not unusual in that part of the country. Local preachers called attention to the moral slipping, especially on the part of the civil leaders. Pastor Bezaleel Carter in particular preached against the extortion and bribery that was increasingly common in the Stour Valley.

By 1615 King James I began appointing men to positions of authority in the church who had little interest in reformation. Anglican bishops like William Laud discouraged the preaching of the Word by reforming, Holy Spirit-filled men of God. Under these new leaders the Winthrops had less access to preaching during the week than they had enjoyed for some forty years prior. In 1622 King James tried to stop preaching that addressed controversial matters. This included the teaching that God is in control of man’s salvation. Humanist
kings like James believed that man should be sovereign instead of God. When King Charles I took the throne in 1625, matters got even worse. Pastors who did not conform to the new rules enforcing certain ceremonies in the church were dragged into court. Later, in 1629, the king shut down all Sunday afternoon sermons in the land, a devastating blow to the Puritans. As late as 1633 Charles I insisted that pastors read *The King's Book of Sports* from the pulpit on Sundays. Such regulations imposed on the churches were deeply disturbing for the Puritan congregants.

During the decade of the 1620s some of the faithful pastors began leaving Stour Valley for Ireland. Puritans like John Winthrop feared that England was returning to the old Roman Catholic tyranny over the church. At first, John considered migrating to Ireland but decided against it. He wondered if God’s judgment would descend upon England. Winthrop soberly noted in his journals:

> “We have humbled ourselves not, to turn from our evil ways, but have provoked [God] more than all the nations round about us; therefore he is turning the cup towards us. I am verily persuaded that God will bring some heavy affliction upon this land, and that speedily.”

The cultural situation continued to degenerate in the Stour Valley where the Winthrops had lived and prospered for generations. Violent crime was on the rise. Roman Catholicism gained popularity in the valley. During the decade...

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**The King’s Book of Sports**: King James I issued his “Book of Sports” for national distribution in 1618. It was intended to encourage Englishmen to participate in certain sports on Sundays, including archery, dancing, “leaping, vaulting, or any other such harmless recreation” as permissible sports, together with “May-games, Whitsun-ales and Morris-dances, and the setting up of May-poles.”
election cycle of 1626, John Winthrop was rejected for the position of Member of Parliament representing the borough of Sudbury. The Puritans had committed themselves to laws prohibiting adultery and fornication, and these positions were unpopular at the time.

As tensions grew between the king and parliament, John Winthrop and other local magistrates were forced by law to collect illegitimate taxes for the king. John resisted, along with several of his Puritan friends. Some were sent to jail, although in God’s good providence Winthrop escaped this treatment. John presented a bill to his friends in Parliament that would have prevented “the loathsome vice of drunkenness and other disorders in Alehouses [bars],” but this effort failed.

In early 1629 Parliament attempted to pass two bills, one that discouraged the reverting to “papacy” and another that would have prevented anyone from raising taxes for the king. Charles quickly dissolved Parliament, imprisoned nine members, and shut down the people’s government for eleven years. This was the last straw. It was clear to these Puritans that the tyrant in London was determined to create a tyrannical state, destroy representative government, and put an end to the Protestant Reformation in England. Seeing where his nation was headed, John Winthrop had very little hope for the future of his mother country. Its colleges were corrupt, its churches were compromised, and its civil government had become tyrannical. As far as he could see, the judgment of God was closing in on England. It was time to begin seeking a haven elsewhere. In his own words:

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\text{All other churches in Europe are brought to desolation . . . and who knows but that God hath provided this place [America] to be a refuge for many whom He means to save out of the general calamity, and seeing the Church has no place left to flee into but the wilderness. . . . The fountains of learning and religion are so corrupted as most children are perverted, corrupted, and utterly overthrown by the multitude of evil examples and the licentious governments of those seminaries.}^{23}
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Moving to America
Seek you the LORD, all you meek of the earth, who have kept his commands; seek righteousness, seek meekness: it may be you shall be hidden in the day of the LORD’S anger. (Zephaniah 2:3)

Three small settlements had already found their way to Massachusetts Bay on the new American continent—Plymouth (1620), Cape Ann (1623), and Salem (1626). Cape Ann had failed, but the other two were still breathing as John Winthrop made plans for a larger settlement in the Bay.

All three of his older sons, John (24 years old), Henry (22 years old), and Forth (20 years old) agreed to join their father on the venture into the wilderness of America. Henry had already attempted his own plantation on Barbados at the age of 20, but the endeavor had failed. Now this adventurous (and somewhat rebellious) young man was ready for a new venture with his father.

By August 1629 John Winthrop was the primary visionary among the Puritans for settling New England. Publishing a document called “General Observations,” he laid out to his countrymen his reasons for going to the New World. These reasons included the following:

1. Protestants have a commission to carry the Christian gospel to America and to “raise a bulwark against the Kingdom of Antichrist which the Jesuits labor to raise in all parts of the world.”24 Despite Scripture’s clear injunction, Protestants in the 17th century were still slower to engage in mission work than their Roman Catholic contemporaries.

2. The judgment of God was hanging over Europe. America was a land that God had prepared “for a refuge for many whom he meaneth to save.”25

3. England was overpopulated, in Winthrop’s view. Moreover the European population had grown “vile and base.”26

4. Economically, England was facing a terrible inflation which made it difficult for the middle class to succeed in business.

5. Oxford and Cambridge universities had become corrupt.

6. Opportunities were available in America to take dominion over lands
Massachusetts Bay where John Winthrop helped found a colony
which had never yet been cultivated.

7. The Reformation church was still in its infancy, and Winthrop felt that a fresh start would help the Protestant church develop in this new land.

8. If wealthy Christians were willing to give up their comforts to build the church in New England, they would follow through on Christ’s exhortation to take up the cross and follow Him (Luke 9:23). Sacrifice is part of the Christian life, and this sort of strenuous application of faith played strongly in Winthrop’s mind.

The risks of Winthrop’s venture were enormous—far beyond what most modern Christians would ever consider. The death toll of the endeavor was staggering. Between 1605 and 1625, 80% of new arrivals to the Virginia Colony died within fifteen years of their arrival. Yet these harsh facts did not deter such staunch Puritans. On March 4, 1629, the king issued a charter to the Massachusetts Bay Company which permitted them to begin a settlement. John Endecott, already leading the Salem Colony, was made the first governor. On July 28, 1629, John Winthrop called a meeting with pastors John Cotton, Thomas Hooker, and Roger Williams to discuss the objective of planting a “godly commonwealth” in New England. Then, on October 29, 1629, John Winthrop was elected governor by the court or board of the Massachusetts Bay Company.

Preparations were made for the first voyage, which would sail in late 1629, and another in early 1630. Provisions included eighty muskets, six long fowling pieces, 100 swords, and sixty pikes. Food supplies included forty-five large casks of beer, six casks of water, twenty-two hogsheads of beef, forty bushels of peas, twenty bushels of oatmeal, candles, beer vinegar, mustard seed, oil, soap, butter, and cheese. Over seventy of John’s Puritan neighbors in Groton accompanied him on the first voyage. Because of the many dangers inherent in the new
venture, John left his wife and young children at home until he was well settled in the new land. John’s two younger sons, Stephen (11 years old) and Adam (10 years old) went with their father aboard the Arbella. He reported to his wife that the boys slept well on the ship, wrapped in a rug, “for we have no sheets here.”28

As he prepared to leave England, John Winthrop preached his famous sermon called “A Model of Christian Charity,” in which he outlined his vision for America. He wanted this new commonwealth “to improve our lives, to do more service to the Lord,” and “to increase the body of Christ whereof we are members, [so] that ourselves and our posterity may be the better preserved from the common corruptions of this world” and might “serve the Lord and work out our salvation under the power and purity of his holy ordinances.”29 Ultimately Winthrop desired more obedience to God among the people of God.

John described the form of government of the new commonwealth as a “Covenant with God for this work.”30 The covenant was a “near bond of marriage” between God and the colony.31 John hoped this would be the highest example and the very citadel of Christian virtue and influence in the world. Foremost, he wanted the members of the community to love one another. He desired a society knit together in love.

John Winthrop hoped that God would make this new settlement “a praise and a glory.”32 He envisioned that future colonies planted around the world would say, “The Lord make us like that of New England.”33 He wanted New England to be a true “City upon a Hill.”34 This was a reference to Jesus’ words in Matthew 5:13-16:

You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt loses its flavor, how shall it be seasoned? It is then good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men. You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven. (Matthew 5:13-16)

Suffering and Tragedy
The first church meetings in the Massachusetts Bay Colony were held outdoors under a tree. Nearly one hundred members formed the first church, including the leaders John Winthrop, Thomas Dudley, Isaac Johnson, and Pastor John Wilson. They swore to a covenant, “solemnly and religiously promising and binding ourselves to walk in all our ways according to the rule of the Gospel and in all sincere conformity to [God’s] holy ordinances, and in mutual love and respect each to other, so near as God shall give us grace.”

Tragedy marked the first months in the new land for John Winthrop. In July 1630 one of the colonists noticed a canoe on the far side of the river and John’s son Henry volunteered to swim over to fetch it. The boy never made it across the river, probably because the water was colder than he had anticipated. Of the first 1,000 members of the first settlement, some 200 had died by the first winter. Winthrop himself lost twelve members of his household, including a number of hired servants. That first cold winter was particularly hard on those who were living in tents or carved-out caves in the hillsides. Wolves picked off the livestock. The situation was so dangerous that John dared not venture away from his home without a gun in hand. One evening he lost his way in the wilderness and spent all night by a fire, singing psalms. By God’s grace he found his way back home the following morning.

During the first difficult year, Winthrop exhibited the highest caliber of leadership which can only be demonstrated under the most severe circumstances. Despite the numerous hardships, John wrote to Margaret, “I like so well to be here . . . and if I were to come again, I would not have altered my course, though I had foreseen all these afflictions.” He wrote to his friend Sir William Spring that “these afflictions we have met with need discourage none, for the country is exceeding good.”

Few political leaders are willing to give up their own power or possessions for the sake of others. John Winthrop exhibited the best of Christian leadership in hard times. Using his own resources, he traded with the natives for corn to feed the colony. He funded more shipments of goods out of England. He dipped into his own supplies to keep the other members of the colony alive during that first winter. Cotton Mather reports in his history of early America that Winthrop
was in the act of reaching into a barrel for the last handful of grain for a poor starving man when a ship “arrived at the harbor’s mouth, laden with provisions for them all.”

In the spring of 1631, John Winthrop wasted no time in setting his household and hired servants to work. The team, himself included, set out to cultivate 600 acres of land. Right away John built a large house for Margaret (who joined him later that year). It was a two-story house with a kitchen, pantry, buttery, a large meeting hall, and bedrooms upstairs for the children. The meeting hall was used for the gathering of the local government as well as for the first church in Boston.

The first judicial cases taken up by Winthrop and his small court included fining Nicholas Knopp for selling plain water as a “cure” for scurvy. They forbade the use of dice and cards and instituted punishment for those who went hunting on the Sabbath (Sunday). For serious crimes like adultery, the first government required the death penalty. A man named John Dawe was punished for seducing a Native American woman into sexual sin. The trading of guns and alcohol with the natives was also prohibited. The first court of New England protected the rights of the Native Americans as well as the British colonists, and an important leader in the colony was fined for burning down two Indian wigwams.

In May 1631 the government held another election, the first in Massachusetts. Only men who were members of Protestant churches were permitted to vote. A total of 116 freemen voted, and John Winthrop was reelected governor.

Meanwhile back in England things weren’t getting any better for Winthrop’s Puritan friends. As the decade progressed, more pastors were imprisoned. King Charles I and Archbishop Laud were working systematically to dismantle biblical theology in the churches and reintroduce Roman Catholic practices. Between 1630 and 1642 at least 13,000 immigrants moved into the Massachusetts Bay area. The population of New England reached 22,800 by 1650.
In-fighting within the Colony

*And the Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil.* (2 Timothy 2:24)

John Winthrop and the colonial court ran into a little trouble when Watertown (one of the towns over which John governed) resisted an imposed tax. The colony was collecting the tax to construct fortifications to provide a defense for the towns against attacks from the surrounding native tribes. Eventually the town agreed to pay the tax.

The first major political quarrel in the new colony occurred between Winthrop and his deputy governor, Thomas Dudley. This fight would continue for over a decade. Basically, John Winthrop was hoping to maintain unity with those Christians who disagreed on minor doctrinal issues. On the other hand, Thomas Dudley was a hard man and best known for his hatred of “heresy.” While Winthrop would freely give away his goods to help the poor and starving, Dudley would lend food to the poor and require a large repayment at harvest time. Although Dudley would raise a number of false charges against Winthrop, none of them stuck. By the grace of God the two were eventually reconciled and Winthrop’s daughter Mary married Dudley’s son Samuel.

Controversy again arose with Roger Williams, who had embraced a more complete separatism. Roger eventually left the colony and made his way down to the Plymouth settlement, but wasn’t happy there, either. Although the Plymouth colonists were Separatists, some still attended Anglican churches when visiting England. This leniency was intolerable for Roger. The greatest point of contention for these hyper-separatists was a purely regenerate church membership. They wanted to know the condition of every person’s heart. They carried this belief to such an extreme that they refused to baptize or receive anyone into church membership unless everyone else in the church was absolutely convinced that the new member had genuinely experienced the new birth. As Scripture clearly reveals, it is impossible for man to infallibly know the condition of another person’s heart. Regeneration is a secret, mysterious
work that the Holy Spirit produces in people’s hearts, and the true effects of this mysterious work may take a long time to be outwardly visible.

_Do not marvel that I said to you, “You must be born again.” The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit. (John 3:7-8)_

To attempt to infallibly judge another person’s heart is to attempt to usurp the role of God Himself. It would be good for all to remember that the Lord Jesus received Judas into the membership of His group of disciples even though He knew that Judas was “a devil” (John 6:70).

As time went on Roger Williams became even more rebellious against the whole social order and began to call the colonists to reject the king’s patent, dissolve the colony, and send everyone back to England. A generally unstable man, Roger invented increasingly wild ideas. He moved into Salem and caused more trouble there. Almost every leader in the colony vehemently opposed Williams, except John Winthrop. By this time Winthrop had proved himself to be a remarkably patient and tolerant leader in the colony. Hoping to avoid a clash between Roger and the town leaders, John advised Williams in a letter to quietly “steer his course” to the more remote Narragansett Bay. Roger Williams later wrote, “I took his prudent notion as a hint and a voice from God.” Their friendship continued to be affectionate and respectful as the years progressed, though John expressed a deep concern for Roger’s spiritual condition in his letters. Roger accepted the letters as truly loving and caring, but in the end he rejected John’s advice.

John Winthrop’s moderation was also revealed in how he handled the problem of witchcraft. As early as 1638 Salem encountered the problem of demon possession. A certain Dorothy Talby suffered from spiritual delusions and “was so possessed by Satan” that she committed infanticide. The first recorded execution for the crime of witchcraft in Massachusetts happened in Charlestown in 1648. Winthrop was not involved in the trial. However, it was Winthrop’s son, John Jr., who helped to put a halt to the witchcraft trials in the 1650s.

In 1635, an attempt was made to produce a body of laws “in resemblance
of the Magna Carta” for the colony. This failed largely because Winthrop desired more flexibility for future legislatures and judges to determine laws and implement them. A year later a committee produced a code based largely on John Cotton’s *Moses His Judicials*. This was almost a word-for-word copy of God’s law in the Mosaic code. Winthrop continued to question the wisdom of implementing this code. However, he did not believe that the church should control the “judicial proceedings in any court of civil justice.” Neither did he want to dismiss the tradition of English Common Law. Yet, he still wanted each magistrate to “search the Scriptures for the proper rule in each case.” 42 He realized that God’s law still provided the perfect standard, yet the application of God’s law to each particular case is not always cut and dried. While accepting the principle or “general equity” of the Old Testament civil law, he insisted on flexibility in the application of it. Winthrop understood that no person and no society could perfectly live up to God’s laws. Common Law represented the outworking of the morality of a society, and it is not to be neglected by judges who want to make wise application of God’s law.

Finally, in 1648, John Winthrop supported the Massachusetts Laws and Liberties document issued with a full preface authored by his pastor, John Cotton. A portion of this historical document is included at the end of this chapter. In all, John Winthrop served as governor of Massachusetts for about fifteen years over four terms: 1629-1634, 1637-1640, 1642-1644, and 1646-1649.

**A Great Godly Example in Leadership**

*The Spirit of the LORD spoke by me, and His word was on my tongue. The God of Israel said, ‘The Rock of Israel spoke to me: He who rules over men must be just, ruling in the fear of God.’* (2 Samuel 23:2-3)

In many ways John Winthrop was an ideal Christian leader for a flawed and sinful world. He understood the limitations of sinful human nature. He realized the limitation of political government. His willingness to sacrifice his own resources will forever stand as a remarkable example for those who serve
in civil government. Most political leaders reach into other people’s pockets for
government resources. They want to take other people’s money and use it for
their projects, but John Winthrop did just the opposite at the founding of this
nation. As governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, his actions encapsulated
the truth of Paul’s words: “I seek not [what is] yours, but you” (2 Cor. 12:14).

John Winthrop was a humble man, sensitive to his own failings and sins. He
gave glory to God for his successes and took full responsibility for his own
failures. This enabled him to maintain a good balance and wise judgment in
governance over Massachusetts during those first critical years. Other Puritan
leaders often seemed to give way to a hypocritical ideal by attempting to hold
the political system to a higher standard than the standards they would apply to
themselves.

Governor Winthrop feared God. As Scripture dictates, this is the first
requirement for any decent government leader (Exod. 18:21, 2 Sam. 23:3). He
was a man of deep piety and personal integrity.

It would be hard to find anyone in history who communicated more love
for his wife and children in his diary and letters than John Winthrop. His only
published sermon was a call for Christian charity and taught that we must “love
one another, with a pure heart fervently” (1 Pet. 1:22). This is the only way for
a happy community to exist. Such a thing rarely happens in churches and civil
communities, yet John was a good example of this. He loved his enemies, almost
never held a grudge, and constantly forgave those who ruthlessly maligned and
attacked him.

Last but not least, John Winthrop was a man of courage. He did not give way
to discouragement in the face of unspeakable tragedy. He inspired courage and
steadfastness in others, characteristics upon which nations are built. It was the
Puritan ethic and attitude that built the nation, and John Winthrop was the prime
example of Puritanism in the first generation.

America’s first native historian, Cotton Mather, called Winthrop the
“American Nehemiah.” John Winthrop was a visionary but not a man who
sought a utopia. He was a reformer but not a revolutionary. He was a humble
man, a godly man, and a repentant sinner. God chose to use this Puritan leader
in a most remarkable way to build a remarkable nation.


Massachusetts Laws and Liberties, 1648

It is ordered by this Court and authoritie thereof, that there shall never be any bond-slavery, villenage or captivitie amongst us; unless it be lawfull captives, taken in just warrs, and such strangers as willingly sell themselves, or are solde to us: and such shall have the libertyes and christian usages which the law of God established in Israell concerning such persons doth morally require, provided, this exempts none from servitude who shall be judged thereto by Authoritie. [1641] ...

Capital Lawes.

1. If any man after legal conviction shall have or worship any other God, but the lord god: he shall be put to death. Exod. 22. 20. Deut. 13.6. & 10. Deut. 17. 2. 6.

2. If any man or woman be a witch, that is, hath or consulteth with a familiar spirit, they shall be put to death. Exod. 22. 18. Levit. 20. 27. Deut. 18. 10. 11.

3. If any person within this Jurisdiction whether Christian or Pagan shall wittingly and willingly presume to blaspheme the holy Name of God, Father, Son or Holy-Ghost, with direct, expresse, presumptuous, or highhanded blasphemy, either by wilfull or obstinate denying the true God, or his Creation, or Government of the world: or shall curse God in like manner, or reproach the holy religion of God as if it were but a politick device to keep ignorant men in awe; or shal utter any other kinde of Blasphemy of the like nature & degree they shall be put to death. Levit. 24. 15. 16.

4. If any person shall commit any wilfull murther, which is Man slaughter,
committed upon premeditate malice, hatred, or crueltie not in a mans necessary and just defence, nor by meer casualty against his will, he shall be put to death. Exod. 21. 12. 13. Numb. 35. 31.
George Washington (AD 1732-1799)
George Washington:
The President Who Feared God

Moreover you shall select from all the people able men, such as fear God, men of truth, hating covetousness; and place such over them to be rulers of thousands, rulers of hundreds, rulers of fifties, and rulers of tens.

—Exodus 18:21

The American War for Independence began on April 19, 1775 when a shot was fired on Lexington Green while Samuel Adams and John Hancock watched from a nearby wood. At the Battle of Bunker Hill (just outside Boston) on June 17, the colonials put up a good fight against the better equipped British. While the Americans lost ground, the British sustained twice as many casualties. These initial skirmishes signaled to the Empire that this would not be an easy fight.

On June 19, 1775, upon the encouragement of Samuel Adams and John Adams, the Continental Congress chose George Washington to command the Continental Army. In March 1776 General George Washington fortified
Dorchester Heights, an eminence overlooking the City of Boston. Sensing their vulnerability to attack, the British troops withdrew to Canada. Following this Washington moved his troops to Long Island, New York, in anticipation of a British attack there.

In late summer of 1776 the British Parliament sent an army of 32,000 men to America (including some German “Hessian” mercenaries). It was the largest force ever sent by Britain to fight in a foreign nation to date. There was no question by this time—the American colonies were facing the most powerful empire on earth.

British General William Howe moved his troops into New York in July 1776. The Americans stationed on Long Island were unable to hold their ground against the advancing British forces. Under cover of night and accommodated by a providential fog, Washington was able to withdraw his troops to New York City, after which Howe forced him to evacuate the city. Washington then retreated to Pennsylvania, losing control of much of New Jersey to the British.

On Christmas Day 1776, George Washington and his troops stealthily crossed the Delaware River and attacked a Hessian garrison at Trenton. The
maneuver was a complete victory for the Americans and helped boost morale for the country. In early January, British General Cornwallis attempted to attack Washington’s position in New Jersey but failed on three separate attempts.

Meanwhile, the British recaptured Fort Ticonderoga (earlier taken by Ethan Allan and the Green Mountain Men). Then British General John Burgoyne marched his troops down the Hudson River valley, attempting to cut New England off from the rest of the colonies. His troops battled American General Horatio Gates’ army at Saratoga, New York between September 19 and October 7, 1777. Saratoga marked the first great victory for the American colonies. The British suffered 1,100 casualties and 7,000 captured, while the Americans counted only 90 killed and 240 wounded. The victory at Saratoga was a shock to the British and an encouragement for the French to enter the war on the side of the colonials.

It wasn’t all going to be easy for the continentalists, however. On September 11, 1777, General Howe seized control of Philadelphia, and General Washington
lost another battle at Germantown on October 4, 1777.

During the winter months of 1777-1778, George Washington chose to bivouac his troops at Valley Forge, about 20 miles northwest of Philadelphia. Because the colonial legislatures failed to provide provisions for their soldiers, disease and starvation resulted in the loss of about 2,000 men during these terrible months.

In June 1778 the British armies pulled out of Philadelphia to return northwards to New York City. Washington attacked them from the rear at Monmouth Courthouse. The battle was a tactical draw but boosted American morale.

Between 1778 and 1780, British and American troops held a virtual standoff in the North. Meanwhile, between the fall of 1779 and the summer of 1780, the Americans were facing the very worst of conditions in the South. The French Navy, allied to the colonial cause, had miserably failed in its attacks on Newport, Rhode Island and Savannah, Georgia. In the most devastating setback of the war, British General Clinton captured Charleston on December 26, 1779. In May 1780 the colonials suffered a tremendous loss at Waxhaws, resulting in a massacre of Virginians. Then, to make matters worse, General Gates’ troops were routed by British General Tarleton, a man known for his cruelty, on August 16, 1780 at Camden. In the North, George Washington was confronting the problem of mutiny among his troops. Some of his regiments were going days without food, reminiscent of the Valley Forge experience. He had also just received news of Benedict Arnold’s treason. Circumstances could hardly have been worse.

The decisive event which turned the tide came about on October 7, 1780. In the early fall of 1780, the British and loyalist armies in the south were feeling confident the war was well in hand. British Major Patrick Ferguson had warned the Carolina patriots that he was coming to “hang your leaders, and waste your country with fire and sword.”¹ The threat of scorched-earth warfare (as condemned in Deut. 20:19-20) became a real concern for the local citizens in the Carolinas. As Ferguson and his troops approached a place called Kings Mountain near the border of North Carolina, the major vowed that he would be “King of that mountain,’ and . . . even God almighty could not remove him.”² This
arrogant proclamation turned out to be a dire mistake. To deny the sovereignty of God while claiming sovereignty to oneself is a hazardous business.

Meanwhile, out on the western frontier, in a town called Sycamore Shoals, Tennessee, the settlers had organized a militia to defend hearth and home from the invading force. They called themselves the “Over-Mountain Men,” largely consisting of Scots-Irish Presbyterians. As the men prepared for battle, they solicited the aid of their Presbyterian pastor to preach a parting sermon. The little-known Reverend Samuel Doak preached what may have been the most powerful sermon in the history of this country. He ended his final prayer with these passionate words from the Old Testament Scriptures: “The sword of the Lord and of Gideon!” (Judges 7:20).3

With that pastoral encouragement, the men marched off to the battle of Kings Mountain on the South Carolina border. It would prove to be the shortest and most decisive battle in the history of American warfare. In a single hour the men shattered Ferguson’s army and Ferguson himself was killed. It was a total rout—the British lost 1,100 men by death or capture, and the Over-Mountain Men lost only twenty-eight. But, in the most significant sense, this would be the turning point for the colonials in the war. It was a decisive moment in American history.

One historian summarizes the effects of the win: “The Victory at Kings Mountain was the first in a series of remarkable events that would change the direction of the war in America’s favor.”4 British General Henry Clinton himself admitted this concerning Kings Mountain in his report to King George III: “Though in itself confessedly trifling, [this defeat] overset in a moment all the happy effects of his Lordship’s glorious victory at Camden, and so encouraged the spirit of rebellion in both Carolinas that it never could be afterward humbled.” 5

General Clinton’s assessment was entirely accurate. War is all about morale. The delicate balance of powers bearing such historical import will shift in wartime when the morale of the armies shifts. Ultimately, there is nothing human leadership can do to maintain a certain morale. Such critical elements lie in the hand of God, and certain obscure battles really do shift morale in one direction or another.
The next momentous battle occurred on January 17, 1781, also on the Southern front. British General Tarleton pursued Brigadier General Daniel Morgan with 1,100 British troops through the South Carolina backcountry for weeks. Finally, Morgan elected to take a stand at a broad meadowland called Cowpens on January 17. The Americans were outnumbered again, but it was a complete rout in favor of the colonials. Almost the entire British force was either dead or captured by the end, and Tarleton fled the battlefield alone. This concluded a series of victories secured by disparaged, motley bands of mostly Presbyterians. General Daniel Morgan was also a devout Presbyterian layman of Welsh background.

Reports have it that General Morgan rode across the field praising God for the victory. Later he recorded these words concerning the Battle of Cowpens: “Such was the inferiority of our numbers, that our success must be attributed under God . . . to the justice of our cause and the bravery of our troops!” An Irish Presbyterian soldier from the Carolina backcountry described the battle more plainly in his prayer: “Good Lord, our God that art in heaven, we have great reason to thank Thee for the many battles we have won . . . the great and glorious battle of King’s Mountain, and the iver glorious and memorable battle of the Cowpens, where we made the Proud General Teartleton run doon the road helter-skelter!”

General George Washington also recognized the importance of these battles and the providential hand of God over these events. He wrote shortly after Cowpens: “The remarkable interpositions of the divine government in the hours of our deepest distress and darkness have been too luminous to suffer me to doubt the happy issue of the present contest.”

Following several minor setbacks for the colonials, the war was over. The Battle of Yorktown was fought just ten months after Cowpens, upon Washington’s troops moving to the Southern front, where the British army had been badly weakened.
George Washington’s Raising

George Washington was born February 11, 1732 on the family farm in Westmoreland County, Virginia about a mile from the Potomac River. His father Augustine was a hard-driving businessman and farmer. His mother, Mary Ball Washington was his second wife, a godly, hardworking woman who had been orphaned as a child. She named her son George for the family friend who had raised her (after she been orphaned on her parents’ death).

George’s mother was particularly careful about her son’s Christian education. She would read to him daily from a book called *Contemplations Moral and Divine* written by the Puritan jurist Sir Matthew Hale. The biblical Gospel message was clearly found in this instruction:

Who it was that thus suffered?

*It was Christ Jesus the Eternal Son of God clothed in our Flesh, God and Man united in one Person, his Manhood giving him a Capacity of suffering and his Godhead giving a Value to that suffering, and each Nature united in one Person to make a complete Redeemer, the Heir of all things (Heb. 1:2), The Prince of Life. The Light that lighteneth every Man that cometh into the World (John 1:9), as touching his Divine Nature, God over all Blessed for ever (Rom. 9:5), and as touching his Human Nature, full of Grace and Truth, (John 1:14). . . . But could no other Person be found that might suffer for the Sins of Man but the Son of God? Or if the business of our Salvation must be transacted by him alone could it not be without suffering and such suffering as this? No. As there was no other Name given under Heaven by which we might be saved nor was there any found besides in the compass of the whole World that could expiate for one sin of Man, but it must be the Arm of the Almighty that must bring Salvation (Isa. 63:5). So if the blessed Son of God will undertake the Business and become Captain of our Salvation he must be made perfect by suffering (Heb. 2:1, 5:9). And if he will stand instead of Man he must bear the wrath of his Father if he will become sin for Man.*

Throughout his teachings Hale, the old Puritan, faithfully adhered to the
reformation doctrines of the sovereignty of God, justification by faith alone, and the holy law of God. George kept copies of the books he received in his Christian education, some signed by his own hand at 13, 14, or 15 years old. These included:


3. A science textbook called *The Wisdom of God Manifested in the Works of Creation*.

4. *The Young Man’s Companion*, which was written by a W. Mather with the goal that his readers would “build upon no other foundation besides the Rock Christ Jesus.”

As a twelve-year-old boy George wrote a sample will, stating that “I recommend my Soul to God who gave it hoping for salvation in and through the merits and mediation of Jesus Christ.” These words are perhaps the closest thing to a public profession of faith in Christ to be found in any of Washington’s letters and personal records.

Young George seemed cut out for battle from his earliest years. While at play he often formed his friends into little battalions and ran them through military drills. George was a born leader. He was always organized, known for taking copious notes and keeping them for future reference. Recognized early on for his athletic abilities, he was without rival when it came to horseback riding, wrestling, and running. To the delight of his friends, he once threw a rock to the top of Natural Bridge, a height of 215 feet.

George’s father died when he was eleven years old, and his tutoring and education came under the oversight of his mother and brother Lawrence, who was fourteen years his senior. Lawrence inherited the family estate in Fairfax County and called it “Mount Vernon.” Previously Lawrence had joined the British Navy. But, when George was offered the opportunity to do likewise, his mother objected. He had already sent his clothes ahead to the ship, but upon his mother’s strong admonitions, George relented. At thirteen years of age he
began studying surveying, and in his sixteenth year traveled to western Virginia to help survey a large tract of land for Lord Thomas Fairfax. In 1751 George accompanied his brother Lawrence on a trip to the West Indies in hopes that the weather would help Lawrence’s worsening lung problems. The voyage didn’t help, and in the providence of God Lawrence died on July 26, 1752. In his will Lawrence left Mount Vernon to twenty-year-old George.

Called to the Battle

_A thousand shall fall at your side, and ten thousand at your right hand, but it shall not come near you. Only with your eyes shall you look and see the reward of the wicked, because you have made the Lord, who is my refuge, even the Most High your dwelling place._ (Psalm 91:7-8)

From the outset of his military career, it was plain that God’s hand was upon George Washington in an extraordinary way. In February 1753 George
was assigned to train a militia by the Governor of Virginia, Robert Dinwiddie. In the fall of the same year he was sent on a dangerous mission up the Ohio River, at the outbreak of the French and Indian War. The French were building forts on American/English territory, and Washington was carrying a letter from Governor Dinwiddie requesting that they cease and desist. An Indian attempted a shot at Washington at fifteen yards’ distance and missed. George’s assistant wanted to retaliate and kill the Indian, but Washington insisted that the man be allowed to go on his way.

They later crossed an icy river on a raft and nearly drowned. The eleven-week excursion was, in Washington’s words, “as fatiguing a journey as it is possible to conceive.”

As the war intensified, a British general named Edward Braddock took command of the Virginia troops. In early July 1755 Braddock moved his army into western Pennsylvania to the Monongahela River outside of modern-day Pittsburgh. With George Washington as his personal assistant, Braddock’s orders were to launch attacks on the French who were attempting to control the Ohio territories. In God’s providence, Washington became sick on the march and was forced to ride in a covered wagon at the rear of the army. Braddock, disregarding the counsel of his Virginian volunteers, rode his troops directly into an ambush, and the French and Indian warriors proceeded to slaughter the American and English soldiers—almost 1,000 men lay dead and wounded at the end of the engagement.

Not to be confounded by his superior officer’s mistakes however, George Washington grabbed a horse and rallied what few troops remained to provide a resistance in the rear guard. In the fighting that ensued, Washington had two horses shot from under him. His coat was shot through in four places, and his hat came through the battle sporting two musket-ball-shaped holes. One officer noted that Washington handled himself with “the greatest courage and resolution.” Quite a number of times in the skirmish the enemy fired on him from point-blank range. God’s providential hand of protection on the man was astounding even to the Native Americans who were present during the battle. Fifteen years later an old chief visited Washington and explained to him how he
had tried to take a direct shot at him during the Battle of Monongahela:

Our rifles were leveled, rifles which, but for him, knew not how to miss — It was all in vain, a power mightier than we, shielded him from harm. He cannot die in battle. I am old, and soon shall be gathered to the great council fire of my fathers, in the land of shades, but ere I go, there is something, bids me speak. . . . The Great Spirit protects that man, and guides his destinies.14

George explained to his brother in a letter written a week after the battle, “I now exist and appear in the land of the living by the miraculous care of Providence, that protected me beyond all human expectations.”15 The Presbyterian pastor Samuel Davies made almost a prophetic call on the life of Washington in a sermon he gave on August 17, 1755. In reference to the Battle of Monongahela fought a month earlier, he included mention of that “heroic youth, Colonel Washington, whom I cannot but hope Providence has hitherto preserved in so signal a manner for some important service to his country.”16 There were two other important Americans who survived the Monongahela massacre—Daniel Boone and Daniel Morgan, the future victor at the critical Battle of Cowpens.

The American War for Independence—God’s Hand Still on the Man

Blessed be the LORD God of our fathers, who . . . has extended mercy to me before the king and his counselors, and before all the king’s mighty princes. So I was encouraged, as the hand of the LORD my God was upon me; and I gathered leading men of Israel to go up with me. (Ezra 7:27-28)

Facing off with the greatest empire on earth was not an easy challenge for George Washington. America had no trained army, and the colonial militias had very little experience in battle. The many successes met with in the War for Independence, Washington believed, were provided him by God alone. He wrote to a friend, “I shall most religiously believe, that the finger of Providence
is in it, to blind the eyes of our enemies.”

The fortification of Dorchester Heights was accomplished in a single night. While the Americans were building the fortified wall, the British general considered sending men across the channel to stop the work, but the Lord sent a storm that evening which prevented the interruption. As he watched 8,900 British troops evacuate Boston in 78 ships, Washington noted: “[This] must be ascribed to the interposition of that Providence, which has manifestly appeared in our behalf through the whole of this important struggle. . . . May that being, who is powerful to save, and in whose hands is the fate of nations, look down with an eye of tender pity and compassion upon the whole of the United Colonies.”

God’s hand of protection continued to follow the General through the war. In one exchange with the enemy in New York, a cannonball landed just six feet from Washington, but he sustained no injury whatsoever. An officer poisoned a dish of peas set before the General, but a young woman intervened and saved his life.

The British General Howe’s 32,000 men were poised to wipe out the last of Washington’s 8,000 men in Brooklyn Heights, New York. But, again, weather prevented the attacks. Washington took the opportunity to evacuate his men on August 29, 1776. A storm had raged for three full days, but on the third night at 11:00 p.m. the storm abated and was followed by a deathly quiet. The continental soldiers began their evacuation during this lull, but as the morning dawned a large percentage of the men were still waiting for boats to convey them across the river to safety. Just in time, however, the Lord commanded a fog to descend upon the bay. Major Benjamin Tallmadge described the scene:

As the dawn of the next day approached, those of us who remained in the trenches became very anxious for our own safety, and when the dawn appeared there were several regiments still on duty. At this time a very dense fog began to rise (out of the ground and off the river), and it seemed to settle in a peculiar manner over both encampments. I recall this peculiar providential occurrence perfectly well, and so very dense was the atmosphere that I could scarcely discern a man at six yards’ distance.”
The fog remained over the British camps until all the American boats had left Long Island. Throughout the war the weather always seemed to favor the Americans, including the victories at Trenton, Cowpens, and Yorktown.

Yet, the most astounding act of Providence, at least in the mind of George Washington, was the discovery of Benedict Arnold’s treason. British Major John Andre in civilian clothes happened to be identified and captured by three American soldiers. These men discovered incriminating evidence on Andre that revealed Benedict Arnold’s intention of surrendering West Point into British hands. Had this plot succeeded, it would have been a “fatal stab” into the heart of the American armies. General Washington wrote to a friend, “Happily the treason has been discovered to prevent the fatal misfortune. The providential train of circumstances which led to it affords the most convincing proof that the Liberties of America are the object of Divine Protection.”

After securing the victory at Yorktown, George Washington wrote to a pastor that, “in the midst of our Joys, I hope we shall not forget that, to divine Providence is to be ascribed the Glory and the Praise.”

Writing to Henry Knox after a full victory over Britain had finally been achieved, Washington voiced his heartfelt conviction that nothing but the mercy and lovingkindness of God had safely carried the Colonies through their long war with England:

*I feel now, however, as I conceive a wearied traveller must do, who, after treading many a painful step with a heavy burden on his shoulders, is eased of the latter, having reached the haven to which all the former were directed; and from his house-top is looking back, and tracing with an eager eye the meanders by which he escaped the quicksands and mires which lay in his way; and into which none but the all-powerful Guide and Dispenser of human events could have prevented his falling.*

The Presidency

*When a land transgresses, it has many rulers, but with a man of understanding and knowledge, its stability will long continue. (Proverbs 28:2 ESV)*
For the eight and a half years of full-time service provided for his country’s defense during the War for Independence, Washington had foregone all financial compensation. Both the Pennsylvania and Virginia state governments offered him some remuneration after the war, but he refused it all. In 1780 he wrote, “If sacrificing my entire estate would effect any valuable purpose, I would not hesitate one moment in doing it.” George Washington’s generosity was only outdone by his humility. When the Continental Congress announced his appointment as commander-in-chief of the American armies, he quickly exited the room and hid in the library. He told his wife that he had “used every endeavor in my power to avoid it.” His adopted daughter, Nelly Custis, reported that she “never heard him relate a single act of his during the war.”

When elected to the presidency in April, 1789, Washington made this inauspicious note in his own diary: “About 10:00 I bade adieu to Mount Vernon, to private life, and to domestic felicity; and, with a mind oppressed with more anxious and painful sensations than I have words to express, set out for New York . . . with the best disposition to render service to my country in obedience to its call, but with less hope of answering its expectations.”

The greatest contribution left by George Washington in his service as president was his commitment to keep America out of European squabbles. His cabinet did not agree with him on this issue and, when war broke out between France and Britain, Thomas Jefferson aligned himself with France while Alexander Hamilton sided with Britain. However, Washington wanted complete neutrality for America in these wars. He wrote, “War having actually commenced between France and Great Britain, it behooves the government of this country to use every means in its power to prevent the citizens thereof from embroiling us with either of those powers by endeavoring to maintain a strict neutrality.”

Both France and Britain persecuted the United States for the next twenty years because the country refused to take sides in their disagreement. The French went so far as to send an agent to America to stir up trouble. Edmund Charles Genet formed Jacobin clubs around the United States and tried to initiate a revolution against Washington in 1793. Ten thousand people were
threatening “to drag Washington out of his house and effect a revolution in the
government, or compel it to declare war in favor of the French Revolution and
against England,” 27 as John Adams put it. Thankfully, Genet fell out of favor
with the Revolution and the French sought to kill him. Fearing execution if he
returned to France, Genet requested permission of President Washington to
remain in America. Even though Genet had recently been plotting Washington’s
overthrow, the president mercifully granted Genet’s request and thus saved
the life of his enemy. Washington’s handling of the Genet affair is a beautiful
illustration of Christ’s command: “Love your enemies, do good to those who
hate you, bless those who curse you, and pray for those who spitefully use you”
prudent international policies, the radical and dangerous influence of the French
Revolution did not destroy the newly-formed United States during these early
years.

The young United States toyed with anarchy and revolution during these
years. It is far too easy for a nation to move from tyranny to anarchy and
vice versa. Both conditions are miserable, and only a wise leader can navigate
between these two curses. George Washington faced the chaos of the French
Revolution bleeding into America, the Whiskey Rebellion, and other signs of
unrest. In the providence of God, he was probably the only man who could have
held the nation together during these years. Washington served two terms as
President from 1789 to 1797.

My son, fear the Lord and the king; do not associate with those given to change;
for their calamity will rise suddenly, and who knows the ruin those two can bring?
(Proverbs 24:21-22)

Slavery

I am sending him [the slave Onesimus] back. You therefore receive him, that is, my
own heart, whom I wished to keep with me, that on your behalf he might minister
to me in my chains for the gospel. But without your consent I wanted to do nothing,
that your good deed might not be by compulsion, as it were, but voluntary. For perhaps he departed for a while for this purpose, that you might receive him forever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave—a beloved brother, especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. (Philemon 12-16)

In his letter to Philemon, Paul did not coerce the slave master to emancipate his slave. Paul does not recommend slave revolts or civil wars, but instead pushes for a voluntary release of the slave. The Christian is always looking for a work of love in the heart of the slave master. He seeks social change by regeneration, a change of heart in both the slave and the slave master. Apparently this change of heart really did come upon George Washington in his life.

Although born into a slave economy and inheriting slaves himself, few of America’s founders came to hate slavery as intensely as did George Washington. While acting as president of the United States, he signed the first anti-slavery legislation, The Northwest Ordinance. Some 75 years later, the Fourteenth Amendment which finally abolished slavery in the United States would be patterned after this legislation. In 1786 Washington wrote, “There is not a man living, who wishes more sincerely than I do, to see a plan adopted for the abolition of [slavery].”

George Washington certainly represented a repentant attitude towards slavery, first attempting to shut down the slave trade by the Fairfax Resolves he penned with George Mason in 1774. In his last will and testament, Washington ordered the emancipation of all of his slaves. “Upon the decease [of] my wife, it is my will and desire that all the slaves which I hold in [my] own right shall receive their freedom.” He also made sure that all of them “shall be comfortably clothed and fed by my heirs while they live.” In addition, Washington provided a means of education for the young slaves who were to be freed.

Whereas men like Thomas Jefferson (and later, Abraham Lincoln) would seek to banish the African Americans to a separate colony, George Washington would have nothing of the sort. He wanted a racially mixed community and an end of slavery in America.
The Character of George Washington

Was George Washington a Christian? Hardly any question in all of American history is more hotly debated than this one. Washington was not a pastor and he was not a theologian, but his writings are replete with references to God.

It is important to consider that although not a pastor, George Washington still had his own spiritual struggles and as a Christian would have had to live out a life of repentance and faith himself. In his younger years George was somewhat interested in gambling. In May 1772 his personal records indicate that he gambled twelve times in a single month. Yet, as he grew older, he realized these to be moral failings. Writing to a nephew, Bushrod, in 1783, he warned of this vice of gambling: “It is the child of avarice, the brother of inequity, the father of mischief. It has been the ruin of many worthy families, the loss of many a man’s honor, and the cause of suicide.”

Washington certainly expressed a reverence and fear of God throughout his entire life of leadership. On February 15, 1763, George Washington took an oath in agreement with the “Doctrine and Discipline of the Church of England.” The oath included the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion, in which it is stated: “We are accounted before God only for the merit of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, by faith, and not for our own works or deservings.” Since Washington espoused these beliefs, it would be difficult to disprove his faith unless he quit the church or personally disavowed his previous commitment. The records give no indication that this ever occurred. Moreover, George Washington called himself a Christian on many occasions. He also encouraged the Delaware Indian chiefs in May 1779: “You do well to learn our arts and ways of life, and above all, the religion of Jesus Christ.”

Perhaps the clearest witness to a simple faith we can find in Washington’s writings comes in a letter he sent to the Marquis de Lafayette, his military friend from France who served under Washington during the War for Independence. Washington was asking forgiveness of his friend, and put it this way:

_\textit{I stand before you as a Culprit: but to repent and be forgiven are the precepts of}_
Heaven: I do the former, do you practice the latter, and it will be participation of a divine attribute.33

He also encouraged the entire nation to “confess their Sins before God . . . to implore the Lord, and Giver of all victory, to pardon our manifold sins and wickednesses.”34

The true measure of faith is ultimately known by a man’s fruits and the character of his life. With Washington, it is difficult to find a clear verbal profession of his faith in Jesus Christ. This may have been due in part to his reluctance to use the name of Christ in what some historians see as a respect for His Name. Nonetheless, George Washington’s maxim was “deeds not words.” He resented any kind of a pretense of religion.

And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching. (Hebrews 10:24-25)

Throughout his life, George Washington was relentlessly faithful in attending church. He served as a lay-leader or elder in several Anglican churches before the war, missing only eight Sabbaths over more than ten years. When not attending his home church, he favored Presbyterian churches. He was concerned with the “errors” in the Roman Catholic Church, but also warned against “insulting them.”35 In 1762 George went so far as to rebuke his brother-in-law Burwell Bassett for missing church on Sunday:

I was favoured with your Epistle written on a certain 25th of July when you ought to have been in Church, praying as becomes every good Christian Man who has as much as answer for as you have; strange it is that you will be so blind to truth that the enlightening sounds of the Gospel cannot reach your Ear. . . . could you but behold with what religious zeal I hye me to Church on every Lords day, it would do your heart good, and fill it I hope with equal fervency.36

During the war there were times at which there was no chaplain available on Sundays. In such cases the General would perform the service himself, “reading the scriptures and praying with [his men].”37
While Washington served as president, his private secretary found him on his knees with the Bible opened before him, “and he believed such to have been his daily practice.” During his presidency the Washingtons attended church on Sunday mornings, and in the evenings George would read a sermon to his wife.

Washington’s Death

Although facing death many times on the battlefield, Washington never once appeared afraid to die. At the Battle of Monmouth he rallied General Lee’s retreating troops. His horse was killed under him, but he never faltered; he merely mounted another horse and continued shouting orders. A cannon ball exploded yards away, bespattering him with dirt. A colonel was killed only a few yards from him. One of his officers wrote: “Our army loves their general very much, but they have one thing against him, which is the little care he takes of himself in any action. His personal bravery, and the desire he has of animating his troops by example, make him fearless of danger. This occasions us much uneasiness. But Heaven, which hitherto has been his shield, I hope will still continue to guard so valuable a life.”

While serving as president, George Washington became very ill. It was then he turned to his doctor and said, “I am not afraid to die. . . I know I am in the hands of a good Providence.”

It was on December 12, 1799 that George Washington contracted a cold while riding his horse around his farms surrounding Mount Vernon. Two days later his condition worsened. At 5:00 p.m. he told his doctors, “I am not afraid to go. I believed from my first attack, that I should not survive it.” As Martha read from the Scriptures at the foot of his bed, George Washington passed on to his Maker around 11:00 p.m.

Thus a great man died, and the nation mourned. At least 700 sermons and orations were given in churches, colleges, and legislatures around the country. The chief justice of the US Supreme Court, John Marshall, put it well when he said: “More than any other individual, and as much as to one individual was possible, has he contributed to found this our wide-spreading empire, and to give
to the western world, independence and freedom.”

Between 1776 and 1800, George Washington was clearly the prime leader in the founding of the United States of America. No single person was more important in unifying the nation or leading the nation in the battle for independence. Patrick Henry and Samuel Adams, both Christians, planted the first seeds of liberty, but George Washington became the figure around which the nation would unify during its formative years. Of the founders of this nation, these three were the most committed Christians. Increasingly, the religion of Deism or Unitarianism, and the rejection of Christ as Lord and Savior was infecting men like John Adams, James Madison, James Monroe, Alexander Hamilton, Thomas Jefferson, and Benjamin Franklin during these founding years. Yet, at this critical time in the history of America, God chose three key Christians—Patrick Henry, Samuel Adams, and George Washington to plant the seeds for an independent, free, and prosperous nation.

* Blessed is the nation whose God is the LORD; and the people whom He has chosen for his own inheritance. (Psalm 33:12) *