

# Discussion Notes on Christian Faith in Politics



*The Discussion Notes support the Discussion Guide. The Discussion Notes may also be used for a longer, detailed lesson or sermon.*

## How the Pilgrims' Faith Inspires Us

Ecclesiastes 12:13 describes our individual duty: "Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the duty of all mankind."

Psalms 33:12 describes our national duty: "Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord."

Alexis de Tocqueville, a French diplomat, political scientist, and historian, visited America in 1831 traveling for nine months to determine what made America unique and so successful.

In 1835 and 1840, he published his celebrated two-volume *Democracy in America* where he wrote, "I sought for the greatness and genius of America in her harbors and her ample rivers – and it was not there, in her fertile fields and boundless forests and it was not there, in her rich mines and her vast world commerce – and it was not there, in her democratic Congress and her matchless Constitution – and it was not there.

"Not until I went into the *churches* of America and heard her pulpits flame with righteousness did I understand the secret of her genius and power. America is great because she is *good*, and if America ever ceases to be good, she will cease to be great."<sup>1</sup>

The key to America's success was their **faith** in God. That faith was affirmed and shaped by the *unapologetic* preaching in Bible-believing churches.

Dr. Paul Barkey, author of *On This Day: A Daily Guide to Spiritual Lessons from American History*, wrote, "We've been taught that the American Revolution was fought for economic reasons. We've been told that the main reason was 'No taxation without representation.' The Declaration of Independence says *little* about economics, but it says a *great* deal about *God-given* rights. The Declaration enumerates more than thirty issues and rights which had been denied by the King."<sup>2</sup>

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“Many people in our modern world think that they have rights because the government gives them rights. Our Founding Fathers, and we as Christians, have a different view. Our rights are not granted by government, but by God. And it’s because of those God-given rights, we have a duty to speak up against any government which attempts to take them away.”<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps there’s no *better* description of faith in Scripture than that of Hebrews 11:1-2, 6. “Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. *This* is what the ancients were commended for. ... And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to Him must believe that He exists and that He rewards those who earnestly seek Him. “

*True* Biblical faith begins with the certainty that God does indeed exist. For the believer, this is a non-negotiable. But once you settle that issue, there is the “full assurance of faith” (Hebrews 10:22) that God can accomplish anything we request, as long as it fits within the revealed truth of His Holy Word. Hence, we have the “confidence” referenced in verse 1.

The evidence for the solid Christian faith of our Founding Fathers is ample. If there is one common denominator among our Founding Fathers, it’s their heart-felt, reverential faith in God which inspired them to take a stand for liberty.

At the 1787 Constitutional Convention, Benjamin Franklin, U.S. Ambassador to France, first Postmaster General and inventor, said, “God governs the affairs of men. And if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without His notice, is it probable that an empire can *rise* without His aid? We have been assured, Sir, in the Sacred writings, that ‘except the Lord build the House, they labor in *vain* that build it.’ Without His concurrent aid, we shall succeed in this political building no better than the Builders of Babel.”

As Christians, we do not draw an arbitrary dividing line between our relationship with God and the civic arena. If Jesus is our Savior, He is Lord of *every* institution He created including the family, the church, *and* the government.

Noah Webster, who became known for the original Webster’s dictionary in which he frequently used Scriptures to help illustrate the meanings of words, said, “No truth is *more* evident to my mind than that the Christian religion be the basis of

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any government intended to secure the rights and the privileges of a free people.”

Webster famously stated that: “Whatever makes men good Christians, makes them good citizens.”<sup>4</sup>

And John Quincy Adams, our sixth president, said, “The *highest* glory of the American revolution was this. It connected in an indissoluble bond – the principles of civil government and the principles of Christianity.”

## The Faith of the Pilgrims

When you think of the Pilgrims, no doubt you think about their treacherous voyage across the Atlantic on the Mayflower in 1620. But their story is so much deeper than that.

In *God’s Mighty Hand: Providential Occurrences in World History*, Richard Wheeler explains how God spared the lives of our faithful ancestors so that they could plant the seeds of liberty in the soil of America.

Ephesians 1:11 underscores the theological doctrine that God is in control, and has a *specific* plan for our lives. “In Him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will.”

The English Standard Version Study Bible explains that it was not an ad hoc event when God made “those who believe in Him heirs with Christ. God had planned it from all eternity. By definition, God is sovereign, directing all things freely according to His royal counsel. This is in *sharp* contrast with the pagan gods of the time, who were understood to be often fickle or bound by an inscrutable and arbitrary fate. God’s predestination gives His people tremendous comfort, for they know that all who come to Christ do so through God’s enabling grace and appointment.”<sup>5</sup>

## Persecution of the Pilgrims

Queen Elizabeth, King James I, and later, Charles I, did not permit freedom of religion. In May of 1559, Elizabeth issued a law called the Act of Uniformity which

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required *everyone* to attend services at the Church of England. If a British citizen missed one service, he had to pay a \$25 fine. Unbelievably, if he missed church more than three times, it could lead to his torture or life imprisonment.<sup>6</sup>

After the passage of the Seditious Sectaries Act of 1593, which was *specifically* aimed at outlawing the Pilgrims, the authorities hung two of their leaders named John Greenwood and Henry Barrow.<sup>7</sup> (If someone is “seditious” they are guilty of inciting or causing people to rebel against the authority of a state or monarch.)<sup>8</sup>

Not surprisingly, the Pilgrims, also known as Separatists, wanted to “separate” from the Church of England in 1605 because they believed that the Bible taught that each church should be accountable, not to a central authority structure like a nation, but to God Himself. Plus, the Pilgrims *rejected* the trappings and traditions of the Church of England including clergy vestments and rote prayers, and formed Separatist congregations in the north of England.<sup>9</sup>

## The Pilgrims Escape to Holland

In 1608, after much prayer and fasting, the Pilgrims decided to escape England and move to Holland, a country that permitted religious freedom.<sup>10</sup> According to William Bradford’s account in his book *Of Plymouth Plantation*, after they boarded a Dutchman’s ship, they endured a fearful storm at sea.

He wrote, “It was 14 days or more before they reached port, seven of which they saw neither sun, moon nor stars, being driven near the coast of Norway. The sailors themselves often despaired, and once with *shrieks* and cries gave over all, as if the ship had foundered and they were sinking without hope of recovery. The voyagers cried to the Lord in their great distress, even remaining fairly collected when the water ran into their mouths and ears; and when the sailors called out, ‘We sink, we sink’ they cried, ‘Yet Lord, Thou *can* save; yet Lord, Thou *can* save!’ Upon which, the ship not only righted herself, but shortly afterwards the violence of the storm began to abate, and the Lord filled their afflicted minds with such comfort.”<sup>11</sup>

Wheeler notes that “People came *flocking* to see this ship because in 14 days it was the only ship to have crossed the English Channel – all others having been lost at sea. Aboard the ship was the ‘cream’ of the Pilgrim crop – the leaders who knew the source of Christian liberty, and the germination for the future of liberty

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to be planted in America. Had Satan destroyed them, America's Christian foundation perhaps would not have been laid. I firmly believe that Satan threw everything he had in his 'book of destruction' on these pilgrims.

"These Pilgrims were the first real threat to Satan's kingdom on earth. Satan must have thought, 'if these people ever come to America and found a colony that teaches the principles of Christian self-government, free enterprise, the Christian work ethic, missionary motivation, Church order and discipline based on the Bible, Biblical discipline and training for children, and an educational system based on the Bible, I will lose control over them.' But that's *exactly* what happened. Satan tried to destroy the Pilgrims, as he did with Job of old, but he *failed*, because God's mighty hand *prevailed*."<sup>12</sup>

In Job 42, the final chapter of the book, we read in verses 1 and 2, "Then Job replied to the LORD: 'I know that You can do all things; no purpose of Yours can be thwarted.'" God is all-powerful, all-knowing, and *totally* in control. He did not allow Satan to snuff out His followers who sought the freedom to worship Him.

The English Standard Version Study Bible explains that "Job, directly aware of God as never before, responds by humbly submitting to God's sovereignty and penitently despising himself for his earlier wild words (42:1–6)."<sup>13</sup>

For 12 difficult years, the Pilgrims had to work night and day to survive in Leiden, Holland, a town of 30,000 people. They had to contend with the threat of war with Spain, the language barrier, and a morally relativistic culture which led to a *serious* problem with their children.<sup>14</sup>

As William Bradford later recorded, "But still more lamentable, and of all sorrows most heavy to be borne, was that many of the children, influenced by these conditions, and the great licentiousness of the young people of the country, and the many temptations of the city, were led by evil example into dangerous courses, getting reins off their necks ... tending to dissoluteness and the *danger of their souls*, to the great grief of their parents and the dishonor of God. So, they say their posterity would be in danger to degenerate and become corrupt."<sup>15</sup>

"As with Israel of old in the land of Moab, the children of these Godly Pilgrims were becoming corrupted with the ways of the godless Dutch children," proclaims Wheeler. "Satan saw that in time he could assimilate the Pilgrims into the Dutch

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culture and that they would lose their Christian distinction and the seeds of Christian self-government. Thank the Lord that there were parents who began to see these seeds of destruction and decided to undertake a perilous journey across the Atlantic Ocean.”<sup>16</sup>

## The Pilgrims’ Christian Vision for America

William Bradford made this profound, almost *prophetic*, comment about their going to America. “They cherished a great hope and inward zeal of laying good foundations ... for the propagation and *advance* of the Gospel of the Kingdom of Christ in the remote parts of the world, even though they should be but stepping stones to others in the performance of so great a work.”<sup>17</sup>

No doubt, you’re *quite* familiar with Romans 8:28 which declares, “And we know that for those who love God, all things work together for good, for those who are called according to His purpose.” But did you ever apply it to the *founding of America*?

God protected the Pilgrims from England to the Netherlands and finally to America in order that His sovereign purpose of starting a Christian nation from scratch might be achieved. As God looked down through the corridor of time, He *knew* that America would become a “light set on a hill” to the nations of the world, proclaiming the truth of our God-given rights of life and liberty documented in our Declaration of Independence and Constitution as well as the truth of Christ through the *largest* missionary outreach ever.

The English Standard Version Study Bible defines the word “good” in the Romans passage where we read “all things work together for good.”

“The ‘good’ in this context does not refer to earthly comfort, but conformity to Christ (Rom. 8:29), closer fellowship with God, bearing good fruit for the kingdom, and final glorification (Rom. 8:30). Christ can be assured that all things work together for good: God has always been doing good for them, starting before creation (the distant past), continuing in their conversion (the recent past), and then on to the day of Christ’s return (the future).”<sup>18</sup>

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## How God Protected the Pilgrims

In May 1620, after prayer and Bible reading, the first band of Separatists said their farewells amid tears. Not long out of port, a storm arose that drove them to the four winds of the tempest-tossed ocean. All were seasick and were forced to eat wormy biscuits, and all were humbled to use a common toilet, a chamber pot in the presence of all. Children cried, waves *slammed* into the sides of the Mayflower, and the hull of the ship wrenched and creaked as if it would burst into a thousand pieces. In the midst of this, the Pilgrims gathered to pray and praise the Lord in song, committing themselves to God's mighty hand of protection.<sup>19</sup>

A dangerous situation soon arose: The ship's main beam began to crack. After Master Jones, the ship's captain, surveyed the situation, he declared without the beam being laminated together, it would surely split, sinking the ship. Much prayer ensued, and the Pilgrims suggested that Master Jones use a jack they had brought with them. The jack saved the beam and spared the ship. Satan once again *failed* in his attempt to destroy these Godly people.<sup>20</sup>

Providentially, after the 66-day voyage, the Mayflower was driven far north of the Pilgrims' King-granted land charter. This disappointment was God's appointment.<sup>21</sup> In November 1620, the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth, Massachusetts where there were relatively few Indians since a series of plagues had decimated the indigenous peoples of southeastern New England.<sup>22</sup> From the windows of Heaven, Almighty God *preserved* the lives of these precious saints.

After all, when Jesus sent out His 12 disciples into the world and "gave them authority to drive out impure spirits and to heal every disease and sickness" (Matthew 10:1), He bolstered their confidence as He prepared them for ministry.

In Matthew 10:29-31, our Savior asked a *profound* question. "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows."

In the English Standard Version Study Bible, the editors explain that "Sparrows were customarily thought of as the *smallest* of creatures, and the penny was one of the *least* valuable Roman coins. God is sovereign over even the most insignificant

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events. Fear not, therefore. Since the heavenly Father gives constant sovereign supervision even to seemingly insignificant creatures, *surely* He will also care for His disciples in their mission to proclaim the Good News of the kingdom which is of more value.”<sup>23</sup>

In March 1621, an Indian named Samoset paid the Pilgrims a visit. He stayed two days, but not knowing how to speak English well, he left, promising to return with someone who could. A week later, he brought Squanto, who said in an educated English manner, “Greetings English. I trust that you are faring well, and that the Lord Whom you serve has kept you through the past winter.”<sup>24</sup>

Wheeler keeps a Heavenly perspective. He writes, “Had Squanto not been kidnapped years earlier and taken to England, he would have died when the Patuxet, a band of the Wampanoag tribe in Plymouth, Massachusetts, died from the plagues. During his nine years in England, he learned the English language. What better training could he have? And what better purpose could he have than to help these God-fearing English people and show them how to plant, fish, hunt, trap and make peace with the Indians far and wide?”

With tears of gratefulness, the Pilgrims blessed the Lord for directing Squanto and them to each other. Had the Patuxet not been wiped out, the Pilgrims would have been attacked and killed. Had they not been blown off course, they would have landed in another place, where the Indians most likely would have been hostile and would have attacked.<sup>25</sup>

Thus, God’s mighty hand preserved the Pilgrims and gave them and our great land the seeds of liberty and self-government based on His Word, the Bible.<sup>26</sup>

Isaiah 45:7-8 drives this point home in *spades*! Speaking through His prophet, God says, “I form light and create darkness; I make well-being and create calamity; I am the LORD, who does *all* these things. Shower, O heavens, from above, and let the clouds rain down righteousness; let the earth open, that salvation and righteousness may bear fruit; let the earth cause them both to sprout; I the LORD have created it.”

Indeed, our God *is* sovereign! We can find great comfort in that theological truth, not only in terms of having a greater appreciation for the Biblical founding of America, but to know, with assurance, that God is in control of our lives as well.

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## Discussion Questions:

1. What surprised Alexis de Tocqueville about America?
2. What was the primary reason why the colonists fought the War for Independence?
3. What did Benjamin Franklin mean when he said, “Without [God’s] concurrent aid, we shall succeed in this political building no better than the Builders of Babel”?
4. According to Noah Webster and John Quincy Adams, what should be the basis of civil government?
5. Name one difference between the Pilgrims and the Church of England.
6. What compelled the Pilgrims to escape England?
7. What is the signature Biblical passage that describes the faith of the Pilgrims and our faith today?
8. How did God’s mighty hand protect the Pilgrims as they traveled to Holland?
9. What was the primary reason the Pilgrims wanted to leave Holland and go to the colonies of America?
10. How did William Bradford describe their Christian vision for America?
11. How did God use the Pilgrims to save the Mayflower from sinking?
12. How were the Pilgrims spared Indian attacks upon landing at Plymouth, Massachusetts in November 1620?
13. How do you see the familiar passage of Romans 8:28 differently now in light of the founding of America?
14. As you look back on the journey of the Pilgrims from England to the Netherlands and finally to America, do you have a renewed gratefulness for America’s Christian heritage and God’s sovereignty?

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Paul E. Barkey, *On This Day: A Daily Guide to Spiritual Lessons from American History*, Third Printing, Ag Press, Manhattan, Kansas: March 2010, p. vii, Foreword by William J. Federer.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, p. 268.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p. 268.

<sup>4</sup> Gary DeMar; *America’s Christian History: The Untold Story*, American Vision, 8th edition, August 1, 2007, p. 669.

<sup>5</sup> *English Standard Version Study Bible*, study note for Ephesians 1:11, Crossway; 1st edition (October 15, 2008)

<sup>6</sup> Richard Wheeler, *God’s Mighty Hand: Providential Occurrences in World History*, Mantle Ministries, Bulverde, Texas, p.78.

<sup>7</sup> Pilgrims (Plymouth Colony), *Wikipedia*, accessed March 8, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pilgrims\\_\(Plymouth\\_Colony\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pilgrims_(Plymouth_Colony))

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<sup>8</sup> “Lexico powered by Oxford”, <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/sedition>

<sup>9</sup> Pilgrims (Plymouth Colony), *Wikipedia*.

<sup>10</sup> Wheeler, *God’s Mighty Hand: Providential Occurrences in World History*, p. 78.

<sup>11</sup> Wheeler, *God’s Mighty Hand: Providential Occurrences in World History*, p. 80.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, p. 80.

<sup>13</sup> *English Standard Version Study Bible*, study note for Ephesians 1:11, Crossway; 1st edition (October 15, 2008)

<sup>14</sup> Pilgrims (Plymouth Colony), *Wikipedia*.

<sup>15</sup> Wheeler, *God’s Mighty Hand: Providential Occurrences in World History*, p. 83.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, p. 83.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, p. 83.

<sup>18</sup> *English Standard Version Study Bible*, study note for Ephesians 1:11, Crossway; 1st edition (October 15, 2008)

<sup>19</sup> Wheeler, *God’s Mighty Hand: Providential Occurrences in World History*, p. 84.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, p. 84.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, p. 85.

<sup>22</sup> Pilgrims (Plymouth Colony), *Wikipedia*.

<sup>23</sup> *English Standard Version Study Bible*, study note for Ephesians 1:11, Crossway; 1st edition (October 15, 2008)

<sup>24</sup> Wheeler, *God’s Mighty Hand: Providential Occurrences in World History*, p. 86.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, p. 86.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, p. 87.