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## Pilgrims: A story of faith, courage and providence

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By William J. Federer

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Whatever the king believed, the kingdom had to believe. That was the situation in Europe in the 1600s, when James I was not only the king of England and the commander of the military, but was also the head of the Anglican Church. Because some in church leadership were there for political power, there arose a movement to purify the Anglican Church, resulting in the nickname "Puritans."

The Puritans were loyal to the Anglican Church, as compared with the "Separatists," who considered it tainted beyond repair. The Separatists risked breaking the law to meet in secret and hold prayer meetings. Their ministers were often arrested for preaching without a license, their members' homes and farms seized, and some even branded on their face to mark them as heretics.

In 1607, after years of persecution, the Separatists fled to Holland where they could have some degree of religious freedom. Even though they didn't know the language, they struggled to build a community there, but met with limited success.

Governor Bradford recorded:

Being thus constrained to leave their native soyle and countrie, their lands and livings, and all their friends and famillier acquaintance ... to goe into a countrie they knew not ... where they must learne a new language, and get their livings they knew not how ... and subject to the miseries of war, it was by many thought an adventure almost desperate, a case intolerable, and a miserie worse than death.

After 12 years, they were faced with the decision of moving their community or seeing their children assimilated into the Dutch culture. They considered Guyana, but decided against it, based on the tropical diseases and the close proximity to the Caribbean Spanish Main, where Spaniards murdered attempted colonies. The Separatists chose to join Jamestown Colony, though they had heard frightening reports of Indian massacres, starvation, disease-carrying mosquitos, desolate terrain and cannibalism.

In 1618, they applied to the Counsel of England for approval to settle in Virginia, and

secured an adventurer (investor) to finance their way to the New World. By means of beaver skins, they repaid this debt, though it took 40 years due to exorbitant interest rates.

In July of 1620, they departed from Leyden, Holland, to Southampton, England, and from there to America. Little did they know that of the 103 Pilgrims who departed, only 51 would survive the first winter.

A violent storm while crossing the Atlantic cracked the beam supporting the main mast. Blown off course, they landed at a place on the Massachusetts coast, where, according to Governor Bradford:

About three years before, a French ship was wrecked at Cape Cod, but the men got ashore and saved their lives ... When the Indians heard of it, they surrounded them and never left watching and dogging them till they got the advantage and killed them, all but three or four, whom they kept, and sent from one Sachem to another, making sport with them and using them worse than slaves.

Providentially, just a year before the Pilgrims landed, a mysterious illness killed the violent tribe, providing the only place on the eastern coast for a peaceful settlement.

After the first terrible winter where the death toll had reached several a day, Governor Bradford described a miracle. It was an:

Indian whose name was Squanto, a native of this place, who had been in England and could speak better English than himself ... Squanto stayed with them and was their interpreter and was a special instrument sent of God for their good beyond their expectation. He showed them how to plant corn, where to take fish and other commodities, and guided them to unknown places, and never left them till he died. He was a native of these parts, and had been one of the few survivors of the plague hereabouts. He was carried away with others by one Hunt, a captain of a ship, who intended to sell them for slaves in Spain; but he got away for England, and was received by a merchant in London, and employed in Newfoundland and other parts, and lastly brought into these parts by a Captain Dermer.

When Squanto died, in his final request: "He begged the Governor to pray for him, that he might go to the Englishmen's God in Heaven."

On November 29, 1623, three years after the Pilgrims' arrival, Governor William Bradford proclaimed:

To all ye Pilgrims: In as much as the great Father has given us this year an abundant harvest ... and protected us from the ravages of the savages, has spared us from pestilence and disease, has granted us freedom to worship God according to the dictates of our own conscience ... I do proclaim that all ye

Pilgrims, with your wives and ye little ones, do gather at ye meeting house to listen to ye pastor and render thanksgiving to ye Almighty God for all His blessings.

With all the challenges we face today, let us be inspired by the faith, courage and providence of God in the lives of our Pilgrim forefathers!

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*William J. Federer is author of the best-selling America's God and Country Encyclopedia of Quotations, and the CD ROM resource "American Quotations."*

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