

## FREEDOM

## STORIES

*Philadelphia, PA**May 25, 1787*

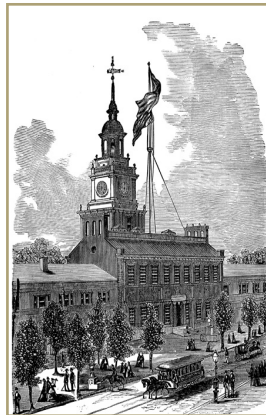
## The Constitutional Convention

On May 25, 1787, fifty-five men gathered behind closed doors in the sweltering Pennsylvania State House in Philadelphia. They shut the windows against the summer heat and prying ears, swore one another to total secrecy, and set about doing something that had never been done before in the history of the world: writing a constitution for a free republic.

Most people today assume it went smoothly. It did not. The delegates had arrived in crisis. The young nation was on the verge of collapse. The Articles of Confederation, America's first governing document, had proven catastrophically weak. Congress could not enforce its laws, collect taxes, regulate trade, or pay its war debts. States were quarreling over borders and currency. Shays' Rebellion in Massachusetts the previous year had seen desperate farmers take up arms against their own government. George Washington, who had worried privately for years that the republic was unraveling, wrote that the country was "fast verging to anarchy." James Madison had spent months in preparation, convinced that if the convention failed, the American experiment in self-government was finished.

Washington was elected president of the convention on its first day. He said almost nothing for the next four months, sitting elevated on a carved wooden chair at the front of the room, his mere presence holding the enterprise together through the force of his reputation alone. Around him, the arguments began almost immediately.

The central crisis came over representation. Larger states like Virginia and Pennsylvania demanded seats in Congress proportional to their populations. Smaller states like Delaware and New Jersey refused to accept any plan that reduced their equal voice. For six weeks the delegates argued in the stifling heat, men sweating through their wool coats in the Philadelphia summer, getting nowhere. By late June the convention had ground to a standstill. Delegates from New Jersey threatened to walk out. Some feared the entire enterprise was about to collapse.



It was in this moment of near-collapse that Benjamin Franklin rose to address the room. At eighty-one he was the oldest man present, too frail to stand long, his speeches read aloud by others when necessary. He was, arguably, also the most famous American alive, the man who had charmed Paris and secured the French alliance that won the Revolution. When Franklin asked for the floor, the room fell silent.

What he said startled the room. Not because it was politically shrewd, though it was. But because of what it revealed about where Franklin's mind had gone after a lifetime of skeptical inquiry. He reminded the delegates that when they had gathered in this very room during the darkest years of the Revolution, they had opened each session with prayer. "Our prayers, Sir, were heard," he told them, "and they were graciously answered. All of us who were engaged in the struggle must have observed frequent instances of a superintending providence in our favor."

*A late nineteenth Century illustration of Independence Hall*

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## IF YOU CAN KEEP IT

Then came the question that silenced the room: “And have we now forgotten that powerful Friend? Or do we imagine we no longer need His assistance?”

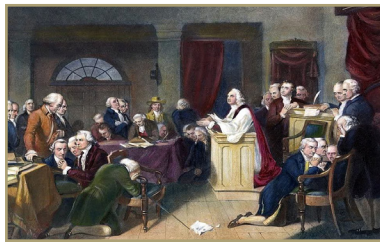
Franklin’s speech was saturated with Scripture, whether he fully realized it or not. His reference to the sparrow echoed Matthew 10:29. His phrase “the Father of lights” came directly from James 1:17. His warning that they were “groping in the dark” echoed Job 12:25. His invocation of Psalm 127 was unmistakable:

“Except the Lord build the house, they labor in vain that build it.” Franklin’s theology was unorthodox and always had been. But in that overheated room in Philadelphia, staring into the abyss of failure, the old printer reached instinctively for the language of Scripture.

Franklin’s motion for daily prayer was never formally adopted. But something shifted in the room. The delegates returned to their deliberations with different eyes, and it was then that a quiet, plainspoken man from Connecticut proposed the solution that, some say, saved the republic.

Roger Sherman was not the most famous man at the Convention. He was not a polished orator or a wealthy planter. He had started his working life as a cobbler, walking from house to house mending shoes, a book tucked under his arm to read between customers. A devout Congregationalist deacon, Sherman was shaped by the Reformed tradition and the conviction that Scripture speaks to every domain of life, including the ordering of civil government. Thomas Jefferson said of him, “That is Mr. Sherman

of Connecticut, a man who has never said a foolish thing in his life.” He was also the only person in the room who had signed all three of America’s great founding documents: the Continental Association, the Declaration of Independence, and the Articles of Confederation. He was about to sign a fourth.



Sherman’s proposal was simple and elegant. Let the House of Representatives be apportioned by population, giving large states their due. Let the Senate give every state, large or small, exactly two seats. Each house would check the other. Neither large states nor small states would dominate alone. The Great Compromise, as history would call it, passed narrowly on July 16, 1787. The crisis broke. The convention moved forward.

On September 17, 1787, thirty-eight delegates signed the finished Constitution. As they filed out of Independence Hall, a woman reportedly asked Franklin what kind of government they had produced. “A republic,” he answered, “if you can keep it.”

The Constitution that emerged from Philadelphia was not a religious document in any explicit sense. But the men who built it carried convictions shaped by centuries of Christian thought about power, human nature, and law. The Calvinist doctrine of total depravity and the belief that no man can be trusted with unchecked authority, runs through every clause of the document. The insistence on divided power, checks and balances, and the limitation of

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## RISING SUN

government authority traces back through the Scottish Covenanters, the English Reformation, Magna Carta, and ultimately to the Hebrew Republic itself, the model that the Founders studied and openly cited.

Madison, the principal architect of the Constitution, wrote in Federalist No. 51 that the structure of government must account for the fact that men are not angels. That is a theological claim, even if Madison stated it in political language. The entire design of the Constitution assumes that power corrupts, that ambition must be set against ambition, and that no human being or institution can be trusted without accountability. These are not merely Enlightenment innovations. They are the political inheritance of a civilization shaped by Scripture's unflinching account of human nature.

Roger Sherman understood this most clearly of anyone in the room. The Reformed tradition he carried in his bones taught that ordered liberty under God's moral law is the only foundation on which a free society can stand. He had signed every founding document precisely because he believed the cause of American liberty was, at its root, a biblical cause: the same conviction that had driven the Pilgrims, the Puritans, the Scottish Covenanters, and the signers of the Petition of Right. Power must answer to a law higher than itself.

**What This Means For Us**

The Constitutional Convention opened on May 25,  
Freedom Stories



1787, eleven years almost to the day after the Declaration of Independence. The men who gathered in Philadelphia knew the stakes. They had lived through the Revolution, watched their friends die for the experiment in self-government, and now faced the real possibility that the whole thing was going to fall apart before it had truly begun.



What saved it was not genius alone, though there was genius in that room. What saved it was the willingness of proud and brilliant men to yield to one another, to acknowledge that no single vision was sufficient, and to build a structure that could outlast any one of them. Franklin's call to prayer was, at its heart, a call to humility. Sherman's compromise was humility

in practice.

Os Guinness has observed that the American experiment in ordered liberty was unique in world history because it was built on the conviction that freedom requires virtue, virtue requires faith, and faith requires the kind of humility before God that prevents any man, party, or institution from claiming final authority.

The republic can still be kept if each generation remembers the same thing those men were forced to remember in a sweltering Philadelphia summer in 1787: that self-government begins with the government of the self, and that neither begins without God.

George Washington, taken from "Scene at the Signing of the Constitution of the United States"  
Howard Chandler Christy, 1940