FREEDOM STORIES

The Spanish Armada

August, 1588

God's Wind Blew And The Armada Was Scattered

Historical Spotlight

In the late 1500s, Spain was the most powerful nation on earth, and King Philip II meant to use that power to stamp out the Protestant Reformation for good. Tiny, Protestant England stood in his way.

Philip believed, as many monarchs of his age did, that royal authority came from God, and that the crown stood as the highest earthly authority in matters of state. The Reformation stood against that claim as no army could, for it declared that Christ, not Caesar, is Lord, and that the Word of God, not the word of a king, binds the conscience of men. Philip could not suffer such a doctrine to stand unanswered. Having failed by intrigue, diplomacy, and force on land, he resolved at last upon one great and terrible instrument: the largest naval armament the world had yet seen, sent forth to break the will of a small island kingdom and return it, by force, to the obedience of Rome and the throne.

In May of 1588 this Armada set sail. After storm damage forced a delay at Corunna, it was finally sighted off the English coast in the last days of July, one hundred and thirty vessels strong, some bearing more than a thousand tons' burden, floating fortresses of oak and iron. Aboard her rode some nineteen thousand soldiers and eight thousand sailors, together with rowers and servants, more than thirty thousand souls in all, provisioned for a long campaign at sea.

England, by contrast, had raised no field army worth the name. Her navy numbered only a few dozen ships of the royal fleet, reinforced as the campaign unfolded by scores of armed merchantmen and smaller volunteer craft, most of them smaller and lighter than the towering Spanish galleons they now had to face. Here, by every mark of human calculation, was no contest at all: a nation's makeshift fleet set against an empire's pride.

The Spanish came on in a great crescent, convex toward the enemy, and while the weather held they advanced across the Channel unbroken, their towering ships rising high above the water, their decks bristling with cannon. The swifter English vessels darted at the edges of that crescent, biting where they could, yet unable to shatter it. Wood and iron, in the ordinary course of things, would have carried the day for Spain.

Defeat of the Spanish Armada, 8 August 1588
Philip James de Loutherbourg, 1796

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But the ordinary course of things was not permitted to run. The weather turned, and the Armada put into the roadstead at Calais. Its commander, a man who had never before held naval command, watched anxiously every shift of wind. On the night of the seventh of August, English captains gathered what remained, packed it into a handful of blazing hulks, and drove them into the heart of the anchored fleet. It was a bluff, and a threadbare one. But it served. In terror the Spanish captains cut their cables and stood out to sea in disorder.

And then the wind came. Not by English guns alone was the Armada broken, but by a gale that rose from no earthly counsel and drove the battered fleet north around the coasts of Scotland and Ireland, wrecking it upon rocks no admiralty had charted for that purpose. Of one hundred and thirty ships, roughly a third were lost, and the men who returned to Spain carried with them an unmistakable conviction: that English hands alone had not done this thing. It was the hand of God.

The deliverance was commemorated in a medal bearing the words: Flavit Deus et dissipati sunt. God blew, and they were scattered. In the years that followed, England became, as this tradition of history has long put it, a people of the Book, a nation that had seen its deliverance and turned to Scripture with new hunger.

Why it Matters Today

Here is the lesson history will not let us evade. The danger within the Divine Right of Kings was the temptation to turn authority bestowed by God into authority answerable to no earthly restraint, until one man's will could stand where God's law alone belonged. Spain sent one of the mightiest fleet of the age to enforce that claim, and Providence answered with a wind. The battle did not end at Calais; it moved inland, into the printing houses and pulpits and farmhouses of England, where a free people, Bible in hand, began to test every throne and every law by a standard higher than the will of princes. That work outlasted the Armada and Elizabeth both, and it outlasts every power since that has set its will against the Word. God's Kingdom does not advance by the number of a nation's ships, but by the truth of its Book, and by men and women willing to die for it.

Portrait of Elizabeth I of England,
the Armada Portrait
Anonymous, circa 1588

By the breath of God they perish, and by the blast of his anger they are consumed.
- Job 4:9