FREEDOM STORIES

John Calvin

July 10, 1509

A Light That Helped Shape The Modern World

Historical Spotlight

Few men have left fingerprints on both the Church and the rise of liberty quite like John Calvin. Born in France on July 10, 1509, he transformed the small city of Geneva into a beacon that drew refugees, pastors, scholars, and statesmen from across Europe.

Geneva became the proving ground for an audacious experiment. Could an entire city order its public life according to the principles of Scripture? The answer was imperfect, as every human endeavor is, yet visitors streamed into the city to witness what was happening, and be sheltered from persecution in other cities. They left carrying more than memories. They carried books and sermons, trained pastors, and gained a biblical vision for family, church, education, honest commerce, and civil government under God's law.

For nearly twenty-five years Calvin rarely slowed his pace. Before his death at age 54, he preached through books of the Bible several times each week, trained ministers in Geneva's academy, counseled refugees, advised princes, filled Europe with thousands of letters, and produced more than twenty thousand pages of books and commentaries. His pen reached places his feet never would.

Among the refugees who found safety in Geneva were English Protestants escaping Bloody Mary, including John Knox and Miles Coverdale, as well as Calvin's colleague, Theodore Beza. There they produced the Geneva Bible, the Bible of the Puritans and the Bible carried aboard the Mayflower. By the time the Pilgrims reached New England, Calvin himself had been dead for more than fifty years, but the biblical worldview he helped recover had already crossed the Atlantic.

Why it Matters Today

As one of America's greatest historians, George Bancroft, concluded,

"He that will not honor the memory and respect the influence of Calvin knows but little of the origin of American liberty."

John Calvin never crossed the Atlantic, but the influence of his life and ministry absolutely did. The Geneva Bible, compiled in his adopted city, became the companion of the Pilgrims and contained a biblical vision of ordered liberty out of which our own freedom sprouted.

Few passages have done more to shape the Protestant understanding of liberty than John Calvin's treatise on civil government. Read his own words in our Paper Trail of Liberty vault HERE.

Portrait of John Calvin
artist unknown