Magna Carta: The Charter That Changed The World

Historical Spotlight

On June 15, 1215, in the Runnymede meadow beside the River Thames, King John was forced to affix his seal to the Magna Carta. John had abused his authority, imposed heavy taxes, and ruled cruelly according to his own will rather than the law. A band of barons rose in rebellion and demanded recognition of ancient rights that marked the limits of royal power.

To help resolve the crisis, the barons turned to Stephen Langton, Archbishop of Canterbury. A man of deep learning and faithful courage, Langton became one of the Charter's principal drafters.

When Pope Innocent III sided with King John, and later annulled the Charter, Langton refused to abandon the barons or publicly denounce their cause. His leadership helped secure the king's agreement to the Charter and gave moral force to its principles.

The Magna Carta did not create new rights. Instead, it recognized the God-given liberties long held by free men, drawing on biblical principles and ancient English law, including Alfred the Great's Domboc. By affirming that even the king was subject to the law, it established a foundational principle of liberty: that rulers are accountable, justice must be impartial, and freedom is not a gift bestowed by government, but a God-given inheritance that righteous government is bound to protect. This was a turning point in the advance of liberty throughout the world.

From the laws of Moses to the prophets' warnings against tyranny, the Bible teaches that all earthly authority is subject to God and that rulers are called to uphold justice, mercy, and righteousness. The Magna Carta stands firmly in this tradition, affirming that power exists to serve rather than oppress.

The Magna Carta's protections reflected biblical principles of justice, including due process, protection from unlawful imprisonment, security of property, and equal justice under the law. Though written to address immediate concerns in medieval England, its enduring principles helped shape English common law, the Petition of Right, the English Bill of Rights, and ultimately the constitutional heritage passed on to the American colonies.

> "To no one will we sell, to no one deny or delay right or justice."
> - Magna Carta, clause 40

Why it Matters Today

More than eight centuries later, the Magna Carta remains a cornerstone of freedom. Liberty is not self-sustaining. It must be understood and preserved by each generation. At Runnymede, foundational truth was affirmed: rulers are accountable, rights are God-given, and freedom depends on power being restrained by a higher law.

Windsor
Edmund Bristow, 1857