

FREEDOM

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Romans 8:1-11

Today is the 4th of July—Independence Day—the day we regard as the birthday of our nation. We will celebrate with picnics and cookouts and fireworks because it was on this day in 1776 that the Continental Congress adopted that great document that declared a formal separation between Britain and her thirteen American colonies.

The Declaration of Independence was not the opening salvo of this conflict between monarch and colonists. Tensions had been rising for years as the colonists sought for greater self-rule. The British, understandably, were reluctant to abandon what they viewed as rightfully theirs—the large, untapped profit and power of this new continent.

From your high school history classes you should recall the events leading up to the Declaration—the Sugar Act of 1764, the Stamp Act of 1765, the Quartering Act of 1774 (which is also regarded as one of the “Intolerable Acts”). In 1775, Patrick Henry delivered his “Give me liberty or give me death speech.” In April of 1775, the Minutemen clashed with the Redcoats at Lexington and Concord. In January 1776, Thomas Paine published his pamphlet *Common Sense* which sold over 500,000 copies.

Following the adoption of the Declaration of Independence, what had been skirmishes escalated into a war that would continue for seven years and would conclude with the signing of the Treaty of Paris in 1783. It would then take another five years before the U.S. Constitution would be adopted and the nation formed.

The war for American independence was long and complex. Many fought and many died. There are names we know such as George Washington, Paul Revere, Nathanael Greene, and Ethan Allen. There also names that are less well known, I would like to talk about one of those today—James Armistead.

James Armistead was born in Virginia in 1748.¹ At the time of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, he was 28 years old. He was of African descent and had been born into slavery. He was owned by a man named William Armistead, a Virginia farmer. During the Revolutionary War, William Armistead was responsible for managing Virginia's military supplies. In 1780, with the war well underway, James Armistead, now 32 years old, requested and received permission to join the American army. In 1781, he was stationed under the Marquis de Lafayette, the commander of the French forces. It's always odd to think of the French fighting for

¹ or 1760

the Americans in the American Revolution. As the old joke goes, if it weren't for the French, today we would all be speaking... English.

At the time, Lafayette was engaged against the larger and better-supplied army of the British general Cornwallis. What Lafayette desperately needed was better intel on his enemy. James Armistead volunteered to become a spy. So, posing as a runaway slave, he infiltrated the British camp and remained there performing menial duties and gaining their trust, all while he was relaying information back to the Marquis. Because of James' detailed knowledge of the local terrain, the British began to press him to collect intelligence on the Americans. Pretty soon, Armistead was serving as a double agent. He was delivering to Lafayette his own observations as well as the written reports of other American spies. To the British, he was supplying information about the Americans that was 'less than accurate.' It was dangerous work. If he had been discovered, the British would have killed him immediately.

Ultimately, James Armistead is responsible for providing the crucial information that would end the Revolutionary War and secure American independence. In 1781, he reported to Lafayette the plans of General Cornwallis to redeploy from Portsmouth, Virginia, to Yorktown, Virginia. Cornwallis would also receive the reinforcement of 10,000 additional British troops. Armed with this knowledge, the French and Americans established a land and sea blockade around the Yorktown peninsula. This siege, along with constant cannon fire from the Americans, forced the British commander to surrender. Yorktown was the last major battle of the war. The Americans won their freedom in part thanks to the actions of a slave.

Most of the residents of the colonies (who weren't slaves) had come to this new world seeking to build new lives for themselves. For whatever reason, they (or their ancestors) had left their old lives and sought to establish something fresh. Possibly, they wanted the opportunity to build wealth; possibly they sought freedom from the old way of life. Mostly they sought what Thomas Jefferson coined the "inalienable rights" of "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." When the monarchy threatened those ambitions, they fought back and declared their independence. They yearned for a new realm.

As Christians, we seek the same thing. We follow Christ because of the promise of a new life, a life of salvation. We recognize that the old way of living is toxic, and we seek a life with God that is holy.

The old life, very simply, is sin. It is sin when we turn away from God. As the apostle Paul writes in his letter to the Romans, *For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.* As Christians, we seek a life free from sin and a communion with God.

As the catechism defines it, sin is “any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God.” Sin is the world we inhabit. It infects us and pollutes us. As John Calvin stated, as sinners we are “totally depraved.” And again, as Paul writes, *all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God* (Romans 3:23). But it does not have to be that way.

As we find in our reading for today, Paul writes in the eighth chapter of his letter to the Romans, that through Christ, although we are sinners, we need not be condemned. As we read, *There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus*. We may be guilty, but Christ spares our lives. We need not suffer living in the old world. Through God’s grace, we are free to enter into a new kingdom—the realm of God.

What a joy it is to know that God is not there to hold our sin over us. You may feel that God's only interest in you is in your sin. But no. Through Christ, we are set free and offered to live in a new world. Like a loving parent who is willing to forgive their child’s actions, God wants nothing more than to forgive our sins.

Paul goes on to remind us that while we are imprisoned in the flesh, we have the choice to live in the Spirit. We can't escape the flesh on our own, but because Christ took our sins upon himself, we are made free.

Just as those who left their old lives in Europe to create a new life in the new world, as Christians we can renounce our lives of sin and establish residency in God's kingdom.

As Christians, we give thanks to Christ who gave himself for us. In the same way, on this July 4, as Americans, we can give thanks for those who sacrificed for our present freedoms—people like James Armistead.

In 1783, with the war ended and the colonies on the road to becoming a nation, James Armistead, despite his patriotic service, was forced to return to his life as a slave. According to Virginia law, any enslaved men who had “faithfully served agreeable to the terms of their enlistment, and have thereby of course contributed towards the establishment of American liberty and independence, should enjoy the blessings of freedom as a reward for their toils and labours.” Unfortunately, Armistead was deemed ineligible for freedom because he had served as a spy, not a soldier. He petitioned the Virginia legislature several times for his freedom, but was ignored.

It wasn't until Armistead was able to secure a written statement by the Marquis de Lafayette that his petition granted. In this letter, Lafayette wrote, “This is to certify that the Bearer (James Armistead) has done essential services to me while I had the honour to command in this State. His Intelligence from the ennemy's [sic] camp were industriously collected and most faithfully delivered. He

perfectly acquitted himself with some important commissions I gave him and appears to me entitled to every reward his situation can admit of.”

As a result, in 1787, the Virginia legislature determined that James Armistead was indeed a free man. In appreciation to the Frenchman who stood by him, Armistead changed his name to James Armistead Lafayette. For his service to his country, he was awarded \$60 and an annual pension of \$40. He purchased 40 acres of farmland in Virginia. He married and had a family. He died in 1832² at the age of 84 a free man.

On this July 4—a sabbath day—we should give thanks for the freedoms we enjoy as Americans. But more importantly, for us people of faith, we should also give thanks for the freedoms we find in Christ—a freedom from the tyranny of sin and death—and the promise of new life. As James Armistead took on the name of the one who brought him his freedom, we should take on the name of Christ as our own.

Amen.

² or 1830