A City Upon a Hill

June, 1630

After nearly three months of braving the harsh Atlantic Ocean, passengers aboard the Arbella were just days away from reaching the American continent. They were English Puritans, led by John Winthrop. Like their Pilgrim predecessors, they were filled with faith in God and were on a mission to fulfill His will. That mission, and God’s will, was to establish a righteous and obedient people upon a choice land.

This understanding is best illustrated in a famous speech given by Winthrop himself before landing in Salem.

“Thus stands the cause between God and us. We are entered into covenant with Him for this work. We have taken out a commission. The Lord hath given us leave to draw our own articles [legal agreement. . . . Now if the Lord shall please to hear us, and bring us in peace to the place we desire, then hath He ratified this covenant and sealed our commission, and will expect a strict performance of the articles contained in it.”

John Winthrop helped the people understand their covenant relationship with God. A loving God had promised to preserve them, if they would do His will. Winthrop warned his people that if they were to fall into sin and seek to fulfill their “carnal intentions,” the Lord would forsake them. If they broke their covenant, they would lose His preserving power. That would be the end of their American experiment. To inspire them to keep their covenant with God, Winthrop offered the following counsel:

“Now the only way to avoid this shipwreck, and to provide for our posterity, is to…do justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with our God. For this end, we must be knit together, in this work, as one man. . . . We must delight in each other; make others’ conditions our own; rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our commission and community in the work. . . .

“The Lord will be our God, and delight to dwell among us, as His own people, and will command a blessing upon us in all our ways, so that we shall see much more of His wisdom, power, goodness and truth, than formerly we have been acquainted with.”

Winthrop then closed his speech with words that since have been quoted by many U.S. presidents—most famously by Ronald Reagan.

“For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us. So that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken, and so cause Him to withdraw His present help from us, we shall be made a story and a by-word through the world. . .. And to shut this discourse with that exhortation of Moses, that faithful servant of the Lord, in his last farewell to Israel, Deut. 30. ‘Beloved, there is now set before us life and death, good and evil,’ in that we are commanded this day to love the Lord our God, and to love one another, to walk in his ways and to keep his Commandments and his ordinance and his laws, and the articles of our Covenant with Him, that we may live and be multiplied, and that the Lord our God may bless us in the land whither we go to possess it. But if our hearts shall turn away, so that we will not obey, but shall be seduced, and worship other Gods, our pleasure and profits, and serve them; it is propounded unto us this day, we shall surely perish out of the good land whither we pass over this vast sea to possess it.

Therefore let us choose life,

that we and our seed may live,

by obeying His voice and cleaving to Him,

for He is our life and our prosperity.

Submitted by Tim Ballard

Notes: John Winthrop, “A Model of Christian Charity,” in *A Library of American Literature: Early Colonial Literature, 1607-1675*, Edmund Clarence Stedman and Ellen Mackay Hutchinson, eds. (New York: 1892)**,**304-307.