



Anthony Benezet



THE CLOCK ABOVE THE MARKET SQUARE WAS ABOUT to strike midnight. Thick clouds hid the moon, and a cold wind threatened to bring the first winter snow. In the empty street, someone was quietly knocking on John Benezet's door. Taking a candle, the merchant went to lift the latch. "Who's there?" he whispered.

"Pierre," came the reply. A young man, wrapped in a dark wool cloak, stepped into the hallway.

"Did anyone follow you?" John asked as he bolted the door firmly.

"No, the soldiers were drinking. But I don't have much time. I've heard that you have been denounced as a traitor to the King. Any day now, the soldiers will come to take your house and property."

John Benezet sat with his head in his hands. "But what have I done?" he sighed. "All I want to do is to worship the Lord and to follow God's teaching in the Bible. Why can't we be left alone to worship as we want?"

"You must make a plan!" the young man paced the floor. "Remember there are other countries where you can worship freely."

"Yes, I know that's true. But it's illegal to try and cross the French borders. I have a young family to think about. My wife is pregnant and





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shouldn't be travelling at such a time. Let me pray about this news. God will guide us. He will show us what to do."

"My friends and I are here to help," Pierre said as he prepared to leave. "The French government can take our houses, destroy our Bibles and exile our pastors. But they can never take away our faith. You know how to reach me. But don't delay, because you will be watched. If you leave it too late you will be unable to flee."

As the young man vanished into the shadows, John kneeled on the cold stone floor to pray, "Lord you know my heart. Do not forsake me now. But give me the strength to stay faithful to you until the end..."

Judith Benezet stirred restlessly as the weak winter sun broke through the clouds over the French town of St. Quentin. With her eyes closed, she reached out to her husband but the bed was empty. Suddenly she was wide-awake. "John?" she called. There was no answer.

For a moment, Judith feared the worst. Perhaps the soldiers had come in the night. Had they taken her husband? She flung back the blankets and reached for her gown.

At that moment the door creaked open. John stood in the doorway looking exhausted, his eyes red from lack of sleep. Without a word, he hugged his wife and then quietly began to explain. "My dear, the time has come for us to leave the country. I have been praying and believe that we must act immediately."

Judith wanted to cry, but the tears would not come. She had already cried for her friends who had fled their homes to escape religious persecution. She had already cried at the news of the murder of some of those who had been caught. She had already cried for the young men who had refused to turn from their Christian faith and who were now in prison. Yet for herself, there were no tears. Instead a feeling of peace filled her heart.

Despite being heavily pregnant, Judith felt calm about her husband's announcement. She had been preparing for this day. Locked away in a secret cupboard was a small bundle. Inside the bundle was a bag of gold, a warm blanket and a Bible.

"Our dear Lord will guide us to a new home. I am ready to leave," Judith reassured her husband.





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It was a cold night in February, when Pierre entered the Benezet's house again. This time he did not come through the front door. Instead he had slipped over the back wall of their house and now stood waiting in the kitchen. A little boy of two years old looked up at him.

"Hello Anthony, look what I have for you." Pierre opened his hand slowly as the child watched. In Pierre's hand were three of Anthony's favourite sweets.

"Here is one sweet for you now. Soon we are going on a walk across the fields. If you promise me not to make a noise until we reach the woods, I will give you the other two sweets."

At that point a girl dressed in a thick woollen dress ran into the room.

"And of course Marie, I have some sweets for you as well," Pierre said to Anthony's sister. "Now remember, both of you must not make a sound."

Anthony was too young to understand why his family was leaving their house that night. Yet as his father carried him across the frozen fields, he sensed that something was very wrong. However, only when they reached the cover of the wood, did he begin to cry.

"Shh! Don't cry!" his mother whispered to him as she climbed up into a waiting wagon.

"Perhaps this will help!" Pierre said as he passed more sweets to each of the children. As the horses pulled away, Anthony stopped crying and within a short time had fallen fast asleep on his mother's lap.

The Benezet family travelled as quickly as they could across the French countryside towards the border. Keeping to quiet roads well away from towns and villages, they managed to avoid the roadblocks and the soldiers.

Pierre had made this journey before. He knew that the most dangerous part still lay ahead. As the border crossing came into sight, he turned to John Benezet.

"From here you must walk. Let me go first. I will speak to the guard."

John took his wife's hand and bent to kiss his two children. He knew that if they were stopped at the border, he might never see his





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family again. The children would be taken from them. Judith would be imprisoned in a convent. He could be executed or forced to work as a slave on board the French King's ships. "Oh God, be with us in this our hour of need..." he prayed. "We are ready, Pierre. Let's go."

Pierre reached under the seat of the wagon and pulled out a bundle of rags. His face looked white and tense. Unwrapping the cloth, he took out a pistol and a leather pouch. Pierre quickly slipped the pistol into his belt and walked immediately away from the Benezet family. He did not want to discuss his actions with John. Instead he pushed his hair back from his face, took a deep breath and walked confidently towards the waiting guard.

"Who goes there?" shouted the soldier.

At that point, Pierre tossed his cloak back over his shoulders. The soldier saw immediately that the young man was carrying a pistol in one hand. It was ready to be fired. In the other hand was a pouch containing gold coins.

With the pistol pointing at the soldier, Pierre challenged him. "Choose!"

For a moment the guard stood shocked, unsure how to reply. Pierre continued.

"These are good people who are being persecuted simply because of their religion. You can choose to let them pass safely across the border. If you choose to do this, you will be rewarded with this bag of gold. Or you can choose to fight. If you do this, you will die!"

There was silence for a moment. The guard glanced at his own rifle. It lay useless against the wooden guard hut. He would never be able to reach it in time.

"Quick!" the guard replied. "My companion will be back any moment. Give me the gold and I will let them pass."

Pierre began to smile. "Not so quickly my friend. Let this family pass first, and then I will give you the gold!"

John Benezet, his wife and two children slipped quietly across the border that day into the Netherlands. A few weeks later Judith gave birth to her baby but the child did not survive. Shortly afterwards the Benezet family took a boat and crossed the sea to England as refugees. They made





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their home in London, where they were free to worship with other French Christians and where John Benezet could start his business once again. However, the Benezet family did not remain in London, there was still one more journey for them to make.



Anthony Benezet stood at the back of a smoke filled room, listening to a tall stranger. Anthony was now seventeen and training to be a merchant, like his father and uncle. The three of them had been invited to this meeting, to hear about life in the British colonies in North America.

“America is the land of opportunity. Don’t miss out! Come and join our colony!” the stranger concluded his speech.

A poorly dressed man stood up. “It may be the land of opportunity, but how do we get there? The passage to America is so expensive.”

“You don’t need to worry about that,” came the reply. “Sign a contract with us that you will work as a servant for four to ten years. When you arrive in America your master will pay your passage.”

A murmur went around the room. Anthony’s father and uncle stood to leave and Anthony followed. That evening the Benezet family discussed what they had heard.

“Let’s go together!” Anthony’s uncle declared. “So many of our friends have now sailed for America. We have enough money to pay for our passage, and we could expand our business there.”

“God has always guided us as a family. If it is his will, then we will go,” John Benezet replied.

Finally the decision was made and in 1731 the Benezet family set sail for America. Anthony Benezet stood on the deck and watched the English coast disappear out of sight. Below deck, his mother was trying to organise their trunks and arrange space for her seven children to sleep. The ship seemed very crowded and Judith prayed quietly that the winds would be strong and that the journey would be short. She had brought as much food as she could. Yet she knew that there was not enough to keep hunger away, and that after four weeks they would have to depend on the ship’s supply.





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Within a few days, Anthony also realised that their passage to America was going to be a difficult and unpleasant one. Down below deck, there was hardly any room to move. The pounding of the waves made him feel terribly sick. The drinking water was dirty and people began to fall ill with diarrhoea.

One morning Anthony woke up to the sobbing of a young woman. In her arms was a baby. “My child is dead, my child is dead,” she cried helplessly. Her husband tried to comfort her, but she would not listen. “It’s your fault, you should never have brought us on this ship.”

Within a few days an elderly man also died. A short service was held before his body was dropped into the sea. Anthony stood and listened to the Bible reading. Silently he prayed to God, “If I survive this journey, show me what to do with my life. Help me to follow your paths and to trust you, whatever may happen.”

Finally after five weeks at sea, land was sighted. Some passengers let out a cheer. Others knelt on the deck, thanking God for their arrival. Everyone wanted to celebrate the end of the sea journey.

“Look Daniel, there’s Philadelphia,” Anthony called his brother to the side of the ship as they sailed along the Delaware River. In the distance they could see the docks with their taverns, shops and warehouses.

“Do you think it will be like London?” Daniel asked his older brother.

“No,” Anthony replied. “We’re about to start a new life now. This will be a new world for us. It’s going to be very different indeed.”

Some things, however, did not change for Anthony. His family immediately set up business as merchants. They opened a shop, hired a warehouse and began to trade in luxury goods from London. Anthony was expected to play his role in the family business.

“Tidy the shelves, count the money, write up the ledgers!” came the orders. Anthony did as he was told; yet something inside didn’t feel right. The years began to pass and that feeling of uneasiness grew.

“What’s the matter, Anthony?” Daniel asked one day as he saw his brother sigh as he opened up the shop.

“I’m not sure, Daniel. But ever since I arrived in this country, I have felt that I should be doing something else with my life.”





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His brother laughed. "What else is there to do? We are all merchants! Father, Uncle James, your brothers ... and look at how successful we have become. What more could you want?"

"Well, actually... I think I would like to be a teacher," Anthony replied quietly.

Daniel shook his head. "You're so strange sometimes! You spend far too much time reading. It's not good for you. Here give me a hand. I need to move these furs into the warehouse."

Eventually at the age of twenty-five, Benezet made up his mind. He did what he really wanted to do and became a teacher.

At that time, school was often a boring and harsh place for children. There were no books and children learnt by simply repeating what the teacher said. Children were not allowed to play during school time and had to sit perfectly quiet whilst the teacher spoke. Many of these teachers were hardly educated themselves.

Children who did not behave well were punished. Boys had to remove their jackets and were then whipped with a rod. Girls were also punished by being hit across their legs or by being hit with a ruler. It was not surprising that children were often afraid of their teachers.

"I want my school to be different," Benezet tried to explain to the trustees of his school. "For one thing we need a better school room. The window is broken. It is too dark to work. And there is no room to play." The trustees agreed to mend the window and finally they built a new schoolroom.

However, that was not the only change that Benezet wanted to see in his school. He took the rods that were used to punish children and broke them in two. At home, he explained to his wife Joyce, "I don't need rods in my school. They are cruel and unnecessary. I believe that teachers should be kind and gentle. If you treat children well, then they will learn how to be good and kind themselves."

It was not surprising, therefore, that Benezet's school was extremely popular. However, some of the children still liked to test their schoolmaster. Surely, Benezet could not be kind all the time!





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The classroom was strangely silent, as the short plainly dressed teacher came through the door. Two boys began to giggle at the back. Benezet glanced quickly at his pupils and then stared down at his table. There in a trap was a mouse. It was tied and unable to move. The little creature was squealing with fear. Next to the mouse was a note with the words:

“I stand here, my honest friends
For stealing cheese and candle-ends.”

“Poor thing! Who put you here?” the teacher asked the mouse and then looked sternly at each pupil in turn. However, Benezet had no trouble in identifying the guilty boys.

“Stand on the desk!” he commanded them as he carefully released the mouse and let it go.

The two boys at the back of the class waited to hear what their punishment would be. Perhaps this would finally force the gentle teacher to bring back his rods to the classroom.

For the rest of the lesson, Benezet changed his lesson plan. “This morning, we will study the importance of kindness,” he announced.

At the end of the class, the two boys were kept behind. “You must be punished for your actions,” Benezet spoke firmly. “For the rest of the week you will have to stay behind after school and do extra work.”



At the end of each day Benezet returned home to his wife, ate a quick supper and began work again.

“James, you’re early,” Benezet welcomed a child into his lounge. James Forten was the son of an African American woman who had been freed from slavery. Benezet remembered the first time he had met her.

“Mr. Benezet, I want my son to go to school. But there is no school for black children. Can you help me?”





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The teacher had listened to her plea and as a result had started an evening school for children from African American families. Soon he had a group of eager pupils, who were learning to read and write for the very first time.

At the end of the evening, when all his pupils had left, he turned as usual to his lesson preparation for the next day.

“Anthony, you work too hard,” Joyce would often say. Her husband would then take her hand and reply with the same words.

“Jesus commanded us to love one another as he loved us. We can never do too much to show that love.”



Benezet was working in his vegetable garden when he heard his wife calling to him.

“Quick, come! The Acadian ships have been sighted. They will be in the harbour soon.”

The Acadians were a group of people who had originally come from France but who had made their home in Nova Scotia, which today is part of Canada. The English commanders feared that these people would not be loyal to the English authorities. So they forced the Acadian people onto ships and took them away from their homes in Nova Scotia to towns in America and England. Four hundred and sixty four people were sent by ship to Philadelphia.

Picking up his hat, Benezet went to call upon other members of the Society of Friends who were also known as Quakers. These Christians believed that if they listened quietly to God, then he would speak to their hearts and show them what to do. Helping the poor and needy was an important part of their faith.

“We must be at the dock to welcome these poor refugees,” Benezet explained to his fellow Quakers. He knew the stories of his own family’s escape from France and how they had been refugees. Many of his friends were also refugees from Germany. He knew the suffering and the needs of people forced from their homes.





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Silently Benezet and his friends watched the four ships with their large white sails make their way into the harbour. One ship was the Royal Navy escort. The other three contained the imprisoned people and the few belongings that they had been allowed to carry with them.

Before Benezet could board the ships, they had to be inspected by the harbour master. However, his inspection did not last long.

"I'm afraid you can't go aboard," the harbour master informed the waiting men. "There's smallpox amongst those people. The Acadians will have to stay on board for another month until the illness has passed."

"But we must get on board and see what help these people need. It is our Christian duty to offer what assistance we can."

Eventually after more arguments, the harbour master agreed to their request. On board one of the ships, Benezet climbed down the ladder into the lower deck. The smell was overpowering. Women, children and men sat exhausted from their sea voyage and from their despair. Benezet greeted the travellers in French.

"You speak French?" one of the men approached Benezet with relief.

"Yes, I do my friend. My family used to live in France."

"Please help us..." a woman reached out her arms towards him.

"What do you need?" Benezet asked gently.

"Clothes. It is so cold and we do not have enough shirts or socks."

"Blankets and sheets!" someone else called out.

Suddenly everyone wanted to talk to Benezet and to share his or her problems.

"We were tricked by the English," an old man tried to explain with tears in his eyes. "We had done nothing against the English, yet their soldiers took everything. They waited until we had finished the harvest and then they arrested all the men. Now we have been taken from our homes, and our houses and farms destroyed. We will surely die..."

Benezet and his friends did what they could to help. One day, Joyce met her husband after school with a worried look. "There have been thieves in our house," she exclaimed. "Two blankets have disappeared."

The teacher smiled. "Don't worry my dear. We haven't had thieves. I gave the blankets away to some Acadians. They are in such need, I couldn't turn them away."





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Benezet and the Society of Friends helped the Arcadians to build some simple houses. However, the winter was harsh and disease spread easily. Large numbers of the people who had come from Canada continued to die. The families turned to Benezet once again.

“Give us coffins so that we can bury our dead with dignity,” they asked.



Also arriving at the ports of America against their wills, were increasing numbers of enslaved Africans. They had been stolen from their homes and were then sold into a life of hard and never ending work. Owned by a master, these people lost their freedom and were treated as things rather than as human beings.

Benezet knew about slavery because he had read the leaflets written by other Quakers condemning the slave trade. The ending of the slave trade was something he totally agreed with. Yet now, as he taught black children and made friends with their families his knowledge changed into a deeper understanding.

He decided to find out everything he could about slavery and the slave trade. This was made easier because Philadelphia was a seaport and many ships from the West Indies came to the town's docks. He met and talked with black sailors, enslaved people, merchants and travellers. He also read everything he could about Africa. What Benezet found out about the slave trade shocked him deeply.



The tired teacher sat looking at the piece of paper lying on his desk. How can I possibly write about these awful things, Benezet thought to himself? Yet he knew that he must. People didn't know the truth about what was happening in the plantations in the West Indies. Someone had to tell them. He began to describe how slaves were treated on the Island of Jamaica. Carefully he wrote down what he had learnt.

“When slaves rebel, they are punished by being burnt to death. If they do not work hard enough they are whipped with pieces of wood.





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They are given a small piece of land on which to grow their own food. Yet Africans are only allowed half a day at the end of the week, to work in these gardens. And this day is Sunday when people should be allowed to rest and worship God.

Africans in the West Indies work from daybreak until noon. Then they work from two o'clock until dark. Even then they are not allowed to go home. They may have to collect fodder for their master's horses or collect fuel. Their owners work them as hard as possible and yet hardly give them enough food and clothes to live. In Jamaica, six out of ten Africans brought to the island do not survive the first three years.

And who are these people whom the planters are treating with such cruelty? They are his brothers! His neighbours! They are the children of our heavenly Father, for whom Christ died. One day each slave owner will have to give an account to God. How will they explain what they have done?"

Benezet carried the finished manuscript to his friend, Christopher Sower, the publisher. "Will people read what I have written?" he wondered to himself. "Will it change anything?"

He need not have worried. Throughout America and Europe, people began to read Anthony Benezet's leaflets. At that time, most people did not question the use of slaves. Slavery was part of life. However, after reading Benezet's writing many people began to think differently.

The Quakers themselves were amongst the first to act. By 1758, the Society of Friends in Philadelphia had condemned slavery and expelled anyone who owned slaves. By 1780, the State government of Pennsylvania had passed the Gradual Abolition of Slavery Act. In Britain, Benezet's books were published and people were beginning to listen to what he had to say about the injustice of slavery. Slowly more and more people began to speak out against slavery because of what they read.



The news spread quickly through the town. "Anthony Benezet is dying," the message passed from person to person. A crowd of people began to assemble outside his house, waiting for the latest information.





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At the age of 71, Anthony Benezet knew that it was time for him to die. Turning to his wife Joyce, he took her hand. “We have lived a long time together in love and in peace,” he sighed. The next day, he was dead.

His body was taken to the Quaker cemetery for burial. Along the side of the road, gathered the people of Philadelphia. Amongst them were over 400 black people.

“Father, why are we here?” asked one little boy. “What’s happening?”

“Anthony Benezet has died. He was the man who taught me to read,” came the reply. “But more than that, he has raised his voice against the the slave trade. So today we have come to pay our respects, and to pray for the freedom of all our people.”





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At a Glance: Anthony Benezet

In the 1750s, Anthony Benezet began to speak out about the slave trade. As a result, the Society of Friends (Quakers) became the first Christian group to totally reject the ownership of enslaved people. Anthony also encouraged people outside America, to campaign against the slave trade. In England, Granville Sharp and Thomas Clarkson read Benezet's anti-slavery pamphlets and helped to start the abolition movement in Britain.

Benezet believed in equality and encouraged the education of African Americans. He set up a school for black children in Philadelphia and taught there himself. In 1775 Benezet founded the Society for the Relief of Free Negroes Unlawfully Held in Bondage. Later this became the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery.

Benezet died in 1784, aged 71. At his funeral 400 black people came to mourn and to honour him for his fight for the rights and freedom of Africans.

Fact File: Slavery in Africa

- 1 Slavery existed in Africa hundreds of years before the start of the African-European slave trade.
- 2 Many slaves sold within Africa were prisoners of war or criminals. However, slaves within Africa were often treated as part of a household and could improve their status through hard work.
- 3 Slaves were also taken across Africa by Arab traders and sold in North Africa, Asia and the Middle East.
- 4 When Europeans arrived in Africa in the 1400s the demand for slaves began to grow. At first these slaves were taken to Europe. Then they began to be taken in large numbers across the Atlantic to countries in South America, North America and the Caribbean.

Faith in action

Anthony Benezet's faith was centred on the teachings of Jesus Christ, particularly the words of Jesus Christ from the book of Matthew: 'So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.' (Matthew 7:12)





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Benezet asked people to think about how they would feel if someone made them a slave. If they did not want to live in slavery, then why were they enslaving others? The challenge of Jesus' teaching remains the same. Do we treat people, as we would like to be treated? Do we care about others, as we care about ourselves?

Talk about it

Why is it important to know about the history of the slave trade? Learning about the past helps us to build a better future. Learning about our history, also helps us to understand why the world is like it is today. However, many people still do not know much about the slave trade or the impact it has had on our world. Have you been taught about the slave trade at school? What did you learn? Do you think that all children should be taught about this subject? Why?

Make your voice heard

Everyone has a right to freedom and their human rights. It is unjust to make some people work for no or little pay, so that others can live a good life. It is unjust to separate families and force people to leave their homes. Other human rights issues include: the fight against poverty; the fight for fair trade; how to look after the environment and our natural resources. Everyone has a part to play in working for a just and fair world. No one's efforts are insignificant. Ask yourself 'How will I make my voice heard?'

One thing you can do is pray for freedom and justice. Harriet Beecher Stowe (Chapter 8) asked her readers to pray for God's Holy Spirit to give power for the fight against slavery. She also asked people to pray for enslaved people and to support those people who had gained their freedom.

