



“We Hold These Truths to Be Self-evident...”

Declaration of Independence

When you visit the Capitol Building in Washington, DC, entering into the Rotunda, you look around in amazement at the magnificent circular room, 96 feet in diameter and 180 feet high.

Six statues of former presidents are on display, along with large oil paintings depicting the Baptism of Pocahontas, Discovery of the Mississippi, Embarkation of the Pilgrims, Landing of Columbus, and General George Washington Resigning his Commission.

But one painting, John Trumbull’s Declaration of Independence, has been the main attraction in the Capitol since 1826. It is estimated that three to five million people view this painting each year. It has probably been seen by more Americans than any other painting. Yet the surprising thing is that some of the scene as it is depicted by Trumbull never took place.

The popular understanding is that the painting represents what took place on July 4th, 1776. But history aficionados will tell you that the Declaration of Independence was not first signed until August 2, and other signatures were added throughout the year as absent delegates returned to Philadelphia. No formal signing ceremony took place.

In addition, the doors, chairs, drapes, and display of military trophies are not as they were, but are Trumbull’s the way of “dressing the set.” Yet our eyes are not drawn to the painting to admire the position of the door, or the type of chairs, or the drapes on the windows. What is important is the symbolic power of the painting, and that is where Trumbull put the emphasis.

The scene affirms that in Philadelphia in the year 1776, a momentous statement of historical

consequence was committed to paper. It was not an edict handed down by a sultan, emperor, czar, or distant parliament. It was a declaration freely arrived at by a congress—something entirely new.

In the final sentence of the Declaration of Independence, the framers promised to “mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor,” as they sought to uphold their right to self-govern and to be able to determine their own future, with a focus on “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

This past week as we have celebrated Independence Day with family, friends, fireworks, and fixin’s, it has been good to look back and give thanks to God for His multiple blessings on our lives. Yet it is also good to look forward and ask, as the founding fathers did, what kind of future do we wish to have, and what kind of people do we wish to be?

One Nation Under God

In the last 100 years, our society has made incredible progress in the areas of medicine, education, agriculture, technology, and numerous others. In doing so we have also sought to respond to needs in the developing world, and at times we have succeeded on a global scale. We do have a great deal to be thankful for.

We must also recognize that we have been less than successful in other areas. As a nation we continue to see the horror and addictive nature of sin manifesting itself in human trafficking, mass shootings, domestic violence, child abuse, alcohol, drug addiction, and various other displays of cruelty.

We know from the teaching of Scripture and from our own experience that sin is not only pathological in nature, but has direct consequences that are traumatic, dark, distasteful, debilitating, and so utterly shocking that many never fully recover.

Yet as people who have experienced the transforming love and grace of God, we know

that there is hope. Despite the powerful, tranquilizing, addictive nature of sin, we are convinced that morals matter and spiritual values are important. We know that honesty, transparency, integrity, holiness, righteous living, character, and compassion lie at the heart of those values. As recipients of God’s grace, we know that despite the circumstances we sometimes find ourselves in, God not only gives to us a second chance, but also a third chance, and a fourth chance... He continues to refine us, and shape us, and fashion us into the people He has called us to be.

As individuals and as a nation, we recognize that we are far from perfect; we have a long way to go. Yet God calls us to live out our faith each day, in education, law, medicine, retail, construction, finance, and manufacturing, but also in the arts and literature and theater. It is often in these places that we experience His enabling and equipping, especially as we seek to be people who follow Him and care about who we are and what our future holds.

As we celebrate our independence, we want the very best for our nation and for our children and grandchildren. We want them to excel in all aspects of their lives. If we model for them what it means to excel, perhaps it will be contagious. Let’s excel in prayer, compassion, holiness, character, love, truth, and credibility. Let’s excel in making a difference, holding on to His grace and remembering:

In God we trust,
believing the promise of His Word.

His hand sustains,
affirming the wonders of His love.
His grace, it knows no boundaries,
transcends the test of time;
for sacrifice births freedom
upheld by love divine.

The years before us call us,
to trust and faith and prayer.
Our nation’s hope and freedoms
remain within His care.