

LIFE, LIBERTY & HAPPINESS

Finding Real Freedom in a Free-for-All World

In the famous Declaration of Independence we especially recall this holiday weekend, the founders of our country wrote this: *We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are **Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.***¹

Where did anyone ever get this radical idea – that there exist certain human rights that cannot be taken away? What did this idea really mean at the start? And how does it relate to some of the topics we battle over today – the right to life and the liberty to end an unwanted pregnancy... the right to live through your school days or the liberty to have whatever guns we choose? How do we hold the value of LIFE alongside the value of LIBERTY? And how is the way we have been holding these things affecting our pursuit of HAPPINESS?

We Were Given Original Liberty

As I've shared in the past and am happy to furnish to any who write in, there is great evidence that the founders of our nation drew their vision for life largely from the pages of the Bible. To an extent unknown or denied by many today, even the most irreligious of those who founded this nation were soaked in and permeated by a biblical worldview. It was from the pages of Scripture that they became convinced – despite all of the tyranny and restriction of rights that had been the world's norm for century upon century – that the Creator of this universe had something very different in mind.

Reading the pages of Genesis, for example, the Founders saw that God created human beings with an "original liberty." It's critical to note that some of the Founders held this view with a terrible blind-spot. They failed to include persons of color and, in some cases, even women in their concept of "human beings." They missed badly in the application but they got the core value right -- that God had sown into the original fabric of creation a fabulous freedom. In fact the very first words we hear God speaking directly to human beings in Genesis 1 reflect that spirit of liberty: **And God blessed them and said, "Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth... have dominion over the fish of the sea and the fowl of the air, and over every living thing" (Gen 1:28).** The original context of life was a Garden so lush and laden with options and choices that tradition came to call it "Paradise." **YOU ARE FREE to eat from any tree in the garden (Gen 2:16),** says God.

You can imagine the first man and woman standing in Eden like children at the gates of Disneyworld with a V.I.P. Pass to the entire park. This is the life that God intended. God is not some stingy Scrooge seeking to narrowly confine our lives. We know now that God wants every human being to know a glorious freedom and enter into the full possibilities of LIFE. This is why those who threw off the bonds of royal tyranny at the start of this nation did so with such daring conviction; they were convinced that humanity was divinely made for self-governance. This is why Christians led the fight to abolish slavery in Britain, America, and around the world. This is why, Jesus-followers have risked and laid down their lives to overthrow dictators. This is why students of God will naturally care deeply about the cause of human rights wherever the essential liberty of humankind is trampled. When people's free

choices and opportunities are taken away, biblically-rooted Christians may disagree over what to do about it, but they can't help but take notice.

We are Called to Reverence the Line Around Life

What the Founders understood, however, is that the liberty God gave humanity came with certain lines around it. *First, there was the line of ownership that God drew AROUND life itself* – what theologians call God's "sovereignty." Genesis 1 declares: **And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness... And God said, "Let there be an expanse between the waters to separate water from water." So God made the expanse and separated the water under the expanse from the water above it. (Gen 1:3-7)**

Genesis is telling us here less about *cosmology* than about *theology*. The message here is that the work of creation involved the setting of boundaries, the separating and ordering of things, by the sovereign hand of God. In creating the Garden of life, God drew a line in the midst of the chaos and established within that circle a place of order and fruitfulness. He drew a line around the entirety of creation that was essential to its prosperity. Those of you who've ever fenced off a plot of land to be gardened understand this. You know that without a formal boundary and the overseeing interest of the Owner, any garden will quickly become either a jungle or a desert. It will either be invaded by weeds that overrun it or by predators that strip it. Without a line around it and a good Lord above it, there is no Garden – at least not for long.

The Founders understood this about liberty. If I had the time I could give you scores of quotes attesting to their belief that any people who forgot God as their supreme provider and defender were in for serious trouble. This was Abraham Lincoln's concern too as he called this nation to repentance and prayer during the time of the Civil War: *We have been preserved, these many years, in peace and prosperity. We have grown in numbers, wealth and power, as no other nation has ever grown. But we have forgotten God. We have forgotten the gracious hand which preserved us in peace, and multiplied and enriched and strengthened us; and we have vainly imagined in the deceitfulness of our hearts, that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own.*²

I wonder if we in America today are not caught up in our own version of what Lincoln called "*the awful calamity of civil war.*" Maybe we've lived in a blessed garden for so long that we've come to think that it became abundant by accident or by human efforts alone. Lincoln said: *Intoxicated with success, we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace, too proud to pray to God that made us!* That was in 1863. How much further has our intoxication gone?

Genesis 2 goes on to say that: **The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it (Gen 2:15).** The crucial message here is that *human beings were NOT given an OWNER's level of freedom over every matter in Creation.* They were given a STEWARD's level of authority of the LIFE God had made. *Human liberty was to be seen as a gift and a responsibility – a privilege to be exercised with final accountability to the Owner of the Garden.*

That idea seems to be lost today. Today, people speak almost exclusively of their rights and as if there should be no limits or guidelines imposed on their freedoms. Nobody should get in the way of my right to pursue my happiness on my terms. But is this actually producing greater happiness today? For the past 50 years, we've set very few limits on ourselves. We've bought more guns, aborted more babies, erased sexual boundaries, abandoned civility in favor of freer and freer speech. I get it – we do have or have had legal RIGHTS to these things. But do you ever wonder if maybe we need to be talking less about rights and more about our responsibilities – about places where we ought to be voluntarily limiting ourselves? Do we understand all the stories of Jesus that tell us that one day the Owner will return and ask us to give an accounting for what we've done with our LIBERTY – how we have stewarded LIFE?³ Shouldn't we be more concerned with God's HAPPINESS?

We Should Approach Life Like a Garden to Be Cultivated Together

And, on that subject, it seems helpful to keep thinking of this world with that Garden metaphor. God apparently likes Gardens. He pictures life at the beginning (in Genesis 1-2) and at the end of history (in Revelation 21-22) as like an abundant and well-tended garden. Those of you who garden know that it takes a lot of inputs to create a beautiful garden. There's tilling and sowing and fertilizing and watering and weeding and staking and fencing. A garden and gardening are a SYSTEM – a set of interlocking conditions and processes. As we try to be good stewards of LIFE today, it seems like we need to think and act more like gardeners than like pundits.

I was struck after the tragedy in Uvalde how many people seemed preoccupied with one input responses. Did you notice that? What happened in that school is all about mental health. It's all about common sense gun laws. It's all about the breakdown of families. It's all about police force failure or school security. That's like saying gardening is all about hoeing. Can we just take God at his Word that LIFE is about multiple interlocking systems that require lots of thoughtful and consistent inputs? Can we stop canceling or shouting each other down when one of us names an issue or input that does need attention? And can we stop talking like there's one solution that's a fix-all? There's not a Miracle-Gro for stopping gun violence or for solving the issue of unwanted pregnancies or dealing with the crisis at our border. We need more patient, persevering Gardening Partners working these problems together.

We are Called to Respect the Lines Within Life

Many of the Founders of this country grasped that God had given human beings an original liberty so good and generous that we should long for all people to have it. They saw that this liberty had a line of sovereign authority around it upon which they were dependent and to which every person and nation will be accountable. But they also respected the fact that *God had drawn a line WITHIN the Garden of Eden as well.*

Genesis 2 reads: **And the Lord God commanded the man, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from [that tree], for when you eat of it you will surely die. (Gen 2:16-17)** In other words, within the context of a phenomenally generous range of choices, God said there some places that human beings were NOT to go. Some things I am asking you not to do simply because I don't want you to do them. Please honor me in this. Some things I am asking you to do because they will lead to your death. Please trust me in this.

If you are a parent, you understand this logic. There are things we ask our children not to do and don't always explain why. Maybe it's because the reasons are too complex for our kids to grasp at that stage. Maybe it's because we are trying to teach them the self-control they need to make the best of life. Usually it is because what we are forbidding – as apparently harmless or helpful it appears to the child – is in fact something which we know from our better vantage point in life will be destructive to them or dishonoring to the family. Good parents draw boundary lines around certain things, not because they are ignorant or stingy, but because they are wise and kind.

God is like this, but on a higher level. And so He says: You are free to pursue material comforts but don't forget to **look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world (Jam 1:27)**. You are free to pursue love but don't make sex your god. You are free to use your body and powers, but don't take innocent life. You are free to admire the blessings of others but don't become covetous. You are free to work and play all week long but don't neglect time for worship and rest. You are free to pursue your independence but remember to honor your mother and father. Use your free speech but don't degrade people.

We Must Go With God to be Truly Free

Do these commandments seem harsh to you? One of the secrets to life being lost in our time is the linkage between obedience and freedom. Many people associate obedience to laws with the loss of freedom. But think how long our roads would remain truly free and healthy places if a large number of people felt that their *rights* superceded most lines and limits.⁴ Liberty without law isn't freedom; it is dangerous license. Liberty without law isn't freedom; it is an open door to anarchy or terror. The Roman senator, Cicero, once said: "We put ourselves in bondage to the law *so that we may be free.*" We accept certain constraints because of the larger benefits. Jesus put it this way: **If you obey my teaching, then... You will know the truth and the truth will set you free. (John 8:31-32)**

It is said that Abraham Lincoln once went down to the slave block to buy a slave girl. As she looked at the white man bidding on her, she figured he was just another master going to buy her and abuse her. Lincoln won the bid and, as he was walking away with his property, he said: "Young lady, you are free." She said: "What does that mean?" "It means you are free." "Does that mean," she said, "that I can SAY whatever I want to say?" Lincoln replied: "Yes, my dear, you can say whatever you want to say." "Does that mean," she said, "That I can BE whatever I want to be?" Lincoln said, "Yes, you can be whatever you want to be." "Does that mean I can GO wherever I want to go?" Lincoln said: "Yes, you can go wherever you want to go." The girl, with tears of joy wetting her face, said, "Then, I will go with YOU."⁵

This is the decision that many of the Founders of this imperfect but hopeful country also made. When they were freed from monarchy and presented with the chance to set themselves up as kings of this new nation, they chose instead to build a nation founded on a vision of liberty and justice for all. This was no accident. They knew the God who'd created human beings free. They knew the lines of providence and obedience upon which human life depends. They knew how much the future depended on men and women who, when faced with the option of settling for a culture of mere license, would keep choosing the way of true liberty and the greater kind of joy that comes from it.

As the Apostle James says: **The one who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it-- he will be blessed (Jam 1:25).** May God bless you and me in this way and, as we walk that path, may God bless America.

TAKEAWAYS FOR TODAY

1. Liberty is God's generous gift to all humanity
2. This Liberty comes with certain lines
 - Around it - the circle of God's ultimate ownership of Life
 - Within it -- the boundaries where he's said "don't"
3. We are accountable for the way we use our liberty to steward life
4. Stewarding life is best thought of as working the garden together
5. By going with Jesus we become truly free and blessed

How are you using your liberty to steward life – yours and others?

¹ *The Declaration of Independence*, July 4, 1776

² Abraham Lincoln, *Proclamation Appointing a National Fast Day*, March 30, 1863.

³ See Matthew 21:33-41; Matthew 25

⁴ Elisabeth Elliot, *The Liberty of Obedience to God*

⁵ Steve Brown, *Preaching Today*, #58