

July 4, 2021 by Steve Brandon



Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness

Various

1. Life

2. Liberty

3. The Pursuit of Happiness

Today is a national holiday. It is July 4th, the day that we celebrate our independence as a nation. On this day, 245 years ago, at the Second Continental Congress meeting in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, after fighting against Britain in the Revolutionary War for over a year, fifty-six of our founding fathers signed the "Declaration of Independence," which explained why the thirteen colonies regarded themselves as independent sovereign states, no longer under British rule. The Declaration of Independence begins this way:

When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

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.

The Declaration of Independence goes on to explain that the role of any government is to work toward securing these rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. When these rights are not secured by the government, it is only right, in fact is the duty of the people, "to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security." The Declaration of Independence then continues on with 27 grievances that the original colonies had against King George III.

This July 4th, it is only right for us to rejoice in the vision of our founding fathers, that they would establish a government, with the aim to protect the self-evident truths, that all men are created equal, and have the inalienable right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. These rights cannot be surrendered in any way. That's what inalienable means. It means that they cannot in any way be taken away from us! They cannot be made "alien" to us. They have been given to us by our Creator. And the government has no business taking them away. That's how our country was founded.

This alone gives us reason to rejoice this day, when we celebrate the signing of the Declaration of Independence, we will celebrate it later this afternoon with a picnic at church. I'm sure that many of you will travel someplace at dusk to celebrate with fireworks. We have reason to rejoice that we live in such a country.

Not all countries have such core principles. Some countries are totalitarian regimes, where the government controls all aspects of the lives of their citizens through coercive power. Citizens are monitored closely. All political opposition is suppressed. Some countries are run by a military dictatorship, where the government is the single, absolute power in the country, using the armed forces, they force their citizens into compliance. In these countries, there are elections, but their leaders often get 100% of the vote. Some countries are communistic, where people are part of a classless society, where the state owns everything and distributes wealth according to their own dictates. Some countries have a ruling monarchy, where a royal family controls the entire government, and have for decades (and even centuries).^[1]

Though people have differing opinions on the various forms of government, and may actually want to live in such countries, the majority of Americans would rather live under our form of government, than the others. I say that because, we have such freedom here that if anyone would rather live in a communistic country, they are able to do so.

And I, for one, am thankful to God to be able to live in such a country.

Now, this doesn't mean that our country is perfect. Nor does it mean that we get it all right. In fact, there are arguments to be made that we don't get it all right. That we even fail at our most fundamental level. The racial divide in our nation is an expression of the many ways that we don't embrace the reality that all men are created equal. The prominent reality of abortion in our nation is a demonstration that we don't really embrace that all men have the right to life. The ever-increasing government involvement in all aspects of our lives shows that we are losing our liberties. And though we are the wealthiest nation that has ever existed, our people are not the happiest on the planet.

This shows that as good as it is in America, it's not utopia, where we experience perfect laws and a just government and wealthy social conditions with upright citizens. For this, we need to wait until heaven. In fact, that's exactly what Paul tells us to do. "Our citizenship (as believers in Jesus Christ) is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ" (Philippians 3:20). As believers in Jesus, we must embrace the fact that any earthly citizenship that we might hold is only temporary, until we experience our citizenship in heaven.

Nevertheless, our founding principles are good. We are promised by our government, the right to life, the right to liberty, the right to the pursuit of happiness.

This morning, I simply want to take each of these phrases, and show how many people in our country pursue them, and then show, how we, as Christians should pursue them.

My message this morning is going to be totally different than 95% of my messages. Normally, I like to take one passage of Scripture, read it, and dig into it, and deeply understand what it is saying, and how it impacts our lives. Not so this morning. This morning, I am going to be totally topical, around these three themes: Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness. It seems only right to do this, as we are worshipping outdoors on this fourth of July. First off, let us consider ...

1. Life

At a fundamental level, we have, in America, the right to live. Now, as I mentioned earlier, with the prominence of abortion in our country, we are failing miserably in this unalienable right. There have been more than 60 million abortions in our country since it was legalized in 1973. This is tragic.

But this morning isn't about decrying the evils of abortion, though there are many. This morning isn't a rallying cry to overturn the decision of our highest courts, though we should seek this very thing. This morning is about reflecting on how our nation lets us live.

We in America, have the privilege of living our dreams during our time on earth. You can decide what you want to do with your life. The government isn't stepping in, telling you that you must be a doctor or a lawyer or a school teacher or a fireman. It is completely up to you.

Furthermore, If there is something that you want to do, If there is something that you want to experience, If there is a place that you want to go, you can go. You can travel anywhere you want in our nation. If you want to travel out west, and have dinner in the Space Needle in Seattle, or tour Alcatraz, or go to Disneyland in Los Angeles, You can. If you want to travel east, and watch an opera at the Metropolitan Opera House in Manhattan, or see the Declaration of Independence at the Rotunda of the National Archives Building in Washington D. C. or see Liberty Bell in Philadelphia, or go to the beach in South Carolina, You can. If you want to travel out of the country, and walk on the Great Wall of China, or see the Crown Jewels in the Tower of London, or climb Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania. You can. If you want to learn to fly and get your pilot's license and solo across the United States, or learn to scuba dive so you can see the Great Barrier Reef in Australia, or learn how to mountain climb, so that you can climb Mount Everest, You can.

Now, depending upon your wealth, you may only be able to do a few of these things in your lifetime. But if you put your mind to it, and save up for a few years, and live below your means, very few things are outside of your opportunities to experience in this life. That's true of almost everyone living in our country.

To be sure, there is poverty among us. We have our poor in this country. But nothing like the poverty of India or Africa, where people seek to survive on a dollar or two for a day's labor. I have seen it. I have visited tea plantations in India, where the women who work, work long and hard hours, for a dollar a day. They are given a place to live, but it's like a slum, with tin roofs and mud floors. They have to work for everything that they have. Those who live in these places are short and skinny from malnutrition.

But the poor of our nation is of a different variety. They have a government safety net to fall upon. There is section 8 housing. There is social security disability monthly payments. Food stamps are readily available. In fact, food is so readily available in the United States that the poor of our country are often overweight, because the cheap food is the high-calorie food.

The poor people of other nations can only dream of a visit to the United States. They can never save up enough in their lifetime for such a trip. It is simply too far beyond them, the plane ticket alone is two years of wages. But the poor in America can. We, in this country, are free to live. And many Americans do. Many Americans live for these things. They live for their vacations and their experiences. They live to see the ball game or the shows. They live for their pleasures.

But a Christian isn't called to live as the world lives. We aren't called to see after all of the worldly adventures. We are called to live for Jesus Christ. Paul said in Philippians 1:21, "To live is Christ." This is because our life is found in him. Jesus said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life, no one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:6). We believe that Jesus Christ is the only way to God. "There is one God and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Timothy 2:5).

If you want to get to God, you need to go through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ to get there. Because he died for our sins. Our life brings us to death. But his death brings us to life. "For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23). Jesus is life. The apostle John said, "In him was life" (John 1:4). If you want to really live, you must live through Jesus Christ.

Do you want to live for the world and for all of its stuff? You will die. Do you want to live for Jesus? You will live. Jesus said it this way, ...

Matthew 16:24-26

If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?

This is the clear divide that Jesus is placing before us this morning. If you want to follow Jesus, you must forsake this life. you must lose your life. you must not be living for this world! There was a time when Jesus encountered a young man, who loved the world, who loved all of the adventures of the world. He came to Jesus looking for life. Here's the account at Matthew records it.

Matthew 19:16-22

And behold, a man came up to him, saying, "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" And he said to him, "Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you would enter life, keep the commandments." He said to him, "Which ones?" And Jesus said, "You shall not murder, You shall not commit adultery, You shall not steal,

You shall not bear false witness, Honor your father and mother, and, You shall love your neighbor as yourself." The young man said to him, "All these I have kept. What do I still lack?" Jesus said to him, "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." When the young man heard this he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.

When faced with the issues of this life and the life to come, This man chose the earthly life, that all his money could purchase. Rather than eternal life, which Jesus gives to those turn to him!

Do you remember what Jesus said to Nicodemus? "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). Here's the gospel in plain truth. God loved us. God desired to save us. So, he sent his only Son, Jesus, to live a perfect life, only be condemned unjustly to death. Jesus died that unjust death, that God could be just with us. Because, Jesus gave his life for us. You simply need to believe in him, and you will live forever with him in glory.

Belief in Jesus will change your life now. "For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died" (2 Corinthians 5:14). His love will take over your life and will control you. His love will guide from loving the world, to loving him, and to living for him. "He died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised" (2 Corinthians 5:15). True life isn't found in the pursuit of life here and now. True life is found in Jesus.

Well, this fourth of July, we are looking not merely at life, but at ...

2. Liberty

Liberty is freedom. It is the opportunity for you to do whatever you want to do. I have already touched on this a bit as these three inalienable rights are overlapping. The right to life, to live as you want, implies a freedom to do that.

In America, you can go wherever you want to go. In America, you can do whatever you want to do. In America, you learn what you want to learn. In America, you can spend your days doing whatever you want.

Now, of course, there are consequences. If you stay home all day every day on the couch, watching movies and playing video games, you will soon find yourself in financial trouble. As the Proverb says, "A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, and poverty will come upon you like a robber, and want like an armed man" (Proverbs 24:33-34). But then again, this is your choice, you are free to live this way, if you so choose. But the contrary is true as well. If work hard, you have every opportunity to gain wealth. You can work hard and make your millions. To use however you see fit. You will reap what you sow!

This is the very thing that makes our country so great. You are free to do whatever you want to do. Now, this, by the way, is the very thing that makes our country so bad. You are free to do whatever you want to do. You can use your freedom for good. Or, you can use your freedom for evil. But in the United States of America, you are free. Indeed, as our national anthem ends, we are the land of the free and the home of the brave.

Now again, there are ways that we are failing in this. as time goes on, and our country continues down its path, and the government gets bigger and bigger, we are losing our freedoms.

The story is often told of the encounter that Benjamin Franklin had with an sturdy old woman shortly after completing the work on the Constitution of the United States. She asked him, "Well, Doctor, what do we have, a republic or a monarchy?" To which Benjamin Franklin replied, "A republic, if you can keep it." Franklin acknowledge the inherent difficulty in maintaining a free society. And it is difficult.

But the purpose of my message this morning isn't to lament the freedoms that we are losing. Rather, it's a rejoicing in the freedoms that we have. I simply put it this way. If you compare our freedoms to the freedoms of other countries, we are a free people.

The amendments to the constitution make this abundantly clear. The very first amendment is all about freedom. It reads, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances."

This statement alone is huge! It says that government isn't going to interfere in our assembly here this morning. Our government isn't going to come and disrupt our assembly. We have the right to worship the Lord as we see fit. We have the freedom to say what we want to say. We can protest against the government. Our press is free. Now, that's not to say that our press doesn't have its problems. But it's free.

This amendment to the constitution is so unlike many nations in the world, where you are not free to worship. where you do not have freedom of speech. where you cannot protest against the government without severe consequences. In this, we can rejoice about America.

But this morning, I don't want us to think about our civil liberties. Rather, I want for us to think about our freedom in Jesus. Because, any freedom that we have in our society is simply a reflection of the freedom that we have in Jesus.

Most fundamentally, of course, in Jesus, we are free from the consequences of our sin. That is known as "forgiveness." Because of our sin, we are like prisoners on death row. But Jesus, has come into the prison cell and set us free. As Charles Wesley wrote, "Long Long my imprisoned spirit lay, Fast bound in sin and nature's night; Thine eye diffused a quick'ning ray— I woke, the dungeon flamed with light; My chains fell off, my heart was free, I rose, went forth, and followed Thee"

We are free because we are forgiven in Jesus. And this forgiveness is far greater that you probably imagine. Paul writes in Colossians 2:13-14, "And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross." Our forgiveness of sins is total and complete. God has forgiven us "all our trespasses." Our forgiveness is not partial. It is comprehensive.

It's not like God has kept back a few unforgiven sins for leverage against us. He isn't like the struggling married couple, who is constantly bringing up their old grievances against each other. They say that they have forgiven each other, but their sins are not forgotten, and whenever it is convenient for them, they use them as firepower in their arguments. They will use them. No, God is not like this. He has forgiven us our sins. He has forgotten our sins.

God's promise of the New Covenant is this: "I will remember their sins no more" (Hebrews 8:12). "As far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us" (Psalm 103:12).

It's as if our sins are garbage. And God is the garbage man, who takes our garbage away from our home. We never have to worry about it again. It goes into a landfill someplace, and is buried. We will never see it again. God will never bring it up again.

The path to this forgiveness is simple: confession. "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). We have freedom in America because we are citizens. But we receive forgiveness of our sins, because of our confession.

When you see your sin, and confess it to the Lord, he will forgive you. And confessing your sin simply means agreeing with God, that the things you have done are evil and wrong. Confession is acknowledging that. You don't defend your wrong actions. Rather you say, "God, what I have done is wrong. It is wrong in my sight. It is wrong in your sight. I have no excuse. I stand as completely guilty. I only ask that you forgive my sin through Jesus Christ."

The promise of the Scripture is that God is a forgiving God, who will no longer count our sins against us, if we but reach out and ask him for forgiveness. This is the reality of the teaching of the Bible. This is why we assemble: we know that we find forgiveness of sins in Jesus. And we are free.

But Jesus at the cross didn't merely free us from the penalty of sin. He also freed us from the power of sin.

"If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come" (2 Corinthians 5:17). When we are forgiven of our sin, God changes us. He makes us into something new. No longer are we slaves to sin, but we are free from the bondage of our sin, and we willingly submit ourselves to the Lord, so much so, that we can be considered slaves again, not slaves of sin, but slaves of righteousness.

Paul speaks a lot about this in Romans, chapter 6. In Romans 6:17-19, Paul is speaking to those who have experienced forgiveness of sins. He says, ...

Romans 6:17-19

But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. I am speaking in human terms, because of your natural limitations. For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification.

See, when God sets us free in Christ, it's not freedom to do what we want. It's freedom to do what we ought. And God gives us that power through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. God gives us that power through grace. "Sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace" (Romans 6:14).

God's grace is not freedom to sin. God's grace is the power to walk in righteousness. This is Titus 2:11-12, "For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age." God's grace is what trains us to walk in righteousness. That's why maintaining our freedom as a nation is so difficult. Because true freedom requires a moral people, which we are drifting from.

Let's move to my last point. As a nation, we have several inalienable rights. We have looked at (1) Life. We have looked at (2) Liberty. And now, we look at ...

3. The Pursuit of Happiness

Our country is founded upon the principle that it is our right to pursue our own happiness. Again, this is overlapping with the first two. We have a right to live how we want. We have a right to be free in how we choose to live. And here, we have the freedom to live a life in pursuit of our own happiness. This one of our fundamental rights of our nation!

What a blessing this is. We aren't forced into working for the collective, if we don't want to do this. We don't have to work long hours, to earn the big paycheck, to live in the big house, if we are happy and content in our 2 bedroom ranch. But if we want to pursue the world's goods, thinking that this will bring us happiness, we have the right (and opportunity) to do so!

In America, we understand this. But sadly, too often, Americans think that their own happiness is wrapped up in things and experiences. And so, we amass our wealth, and we build bigger barns, and live in bigger houses. And we multiply our experiences, with everything that entertains us. And we see our pleasures, in sex, and alcohol, and in drugs. All in pursuit of happiness.

Yet, with all of our wealth, we are not the happiest nation in the world. Oh, to be sure, we are in the upper half. But we are not the happiest. Because those who have everything are often the most discontent.

America reminds me of Solomon. He had everything. He had youth. He had power. He had wealth. He had wisdom. He had popularity. He had a bright future with God's promise of blessing if he would walk the right way. But what happened to him? He multiplied his pleasures and

he came to ruin. The last book that he wrote is the book of Ecclesiastes, which begins this way: "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity!" Throughout the book, Solomon talks about his path on the pursuits of pleasure. with bigger houses with bigger gardens with bigger pools with slaves to meet his every need. with singers to entertain him with fine song. with concubines to satisfy his sexual lust. with alcohol to deaden the pain. And he found it all empty. We, in America, have much to learn from Solomon. The pursuit of the world will bring you into emptiness.

But did you know that God commands you to pursue your own happiness? Only, your happiness will only come when you pursue the Lord.

Psalm 37:4

Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart.

Catch the promise. If you find your genuine delight in the Lord, you will have all of the desires of your heart satisfied. God wants for us to pursue our own happiness and joy! But that doesn't come by seeking our own pleasures. It comes when we see the Lord! Only when you seek your delight and satisfaction in the Lord will you truly be happy.

This is why the Psalms command us to be happy in the LORD. "Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth! Serve the Lord with gladness! Come into his presence with singing!" (Psalm 100:1-2). "Oh come, let us sing to the LORD, Let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation. Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving; Let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!" (Psalm 95:1-2).

God commands us to sing to him with happiness and joy. Not merely because this is how God gets his greatest glory, when his people are happy in him. and not forced to bow to the tyrant. But because it is where we find our greatest happiness as well.

Your happiness doesn't come by pursuing the things of the world. Your greatest happiness will come when you serve your gracious master and king!

When Jesus walked the earth, he wanted his disciples to know true joy. After spending an evening with his disciples, speaking about his ministry and his service to his disciples, Jesus said, "These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full" (John 15:11). Jesus wants for us to have full joy. Paul commands us to have joy as well. "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say rejoice" (Philippians 4:4). Again, this doesn't come through the pleasures of the world. It comes through seeking God. We should rejoice "in the Lord."

The greatest path to happiness in the Lord is experiencing, understanding, and embracing sins forgiven. This is demonstrated in Psalm 32. In this Psalm David reflects upon the forgiveness of sins that he found in the Lord. He concludes with these words, "Many are the sorrows of the wicked, but steadfast love surrounds the one who trusts in the Lord. Be glad in the Lord, and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy, all you upright in heart!" (Psalm 32:10-11). This is the disposition of all who fully know and embrace the gospel. There is joy. There is gladness.

This is what we are seeking as a church! Our purpose statement is clear: We exist to enjoy God's Grace, And to extend God's glory. When you know and understand God's grace, you will find joy in it! When you know and understand God's grace, you will seek to extend the glory of God by telling others of God's grace in your life. This is the message of Psalm 67.

Psalm 67

May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us, that your way may be known on earth, your saving power among all nations. Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you!

Let the nations be glad and sing for joy, for you judge the peoples with equity and guide the nations upon earth.

Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you! The earth has yielded its increase; God, our God, shall bless us. God shall bless us; let all the ends of the earth fear him!

Our heart's desire is for God's blessing upon us and our lives. This blessing isn't so that we can live in our pleasures. God's blessing upon our lives are so that we can extend his glory to the nations! That's how we should use the freedom of our happiness in the Lord!

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on July 4, 2021 by Steve Brandon.

For more information see www.rockvalleybiblechurch.org.

[1] In researching these matters, I was helped greatly by the following website: <https://thebestschools.org/magazine/common-forms-of-government-study-starters/>.