

What Would We Do Without Freedom?

On the Yorktown outcrop of a tiny Virginia peninsula in 1781, the most elite professional army ever assembled lost to a freedom-loving army of relative upstarts under the command of General George Washington. The British were so humiliated by Cornwallis' catastrophic defeat that their military band marked the occasion by playing "The World Turned Upside Down."

The news shocked the world and forced the British prime minister, Lord Frederick North, to resign in shame. As the victors were hailed, no one was more astonished than General Washington, who measured the weight of this victory as only a battle-hardened commander could.

Years later, as President of the United States, Washington expressed his gratitude for the shocking win in a letter to Rev. Samuel Langdon. "The man must be bad indeed who can look upon the events of the American Revolution without feeling the warmest gratitude towards the great Author of the Universe whose divine interposition was so frequently manifested on our behalf." Cause and effect were equally evident to the father of our country.

While clearly acknowledging the warriors who shed their blood by the thousands, those widowed and orphaned as a result, and the untold number who died of sickness and starvation as casualties of war, Washington credited Almighty God for America's victory.

He experienced firsthand what many only enjoy off-hand: *Freedom isn't free.*

The kind of freedom Americans experience is one of the planet's rarest finds, a reality that has been true for most of human existence. Like any scarce commodity, freedom is so

costly because it is so valuable. In a strictly temporal sense, freedom is the pearl of great price.

Freedom cannot be purchased by the frugal nor preserved by the faint of heart. Just like last year and the year before that, freedom only comes through sacrifice and never goes on sale. There are no discounts on freedom this holiday weekend.

I am proud to be an American because of what we stand for, but I am just as proud because of who is standing for us. Having served alongside those brave enough to bear the battle, my pride is sourced in the names and faces of those for whom freedom was worth the fight. And because God is the ultimate Source of the way of life, we hold dear one minute and take for granted the next.

Yet as valuable as our political freedom is every day of the week, there is much more to life than merely living for a three-day weekend. Our flourishing is the point of our freedom in God's economy.

Our founders understood this value proposition so well that everything in the Declaration of Independence rests on this premise. Beginning with the end in mind, their opening sentence 247 years ago was unmistakably clear concerning the highest ideals of freedom: "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 God-given rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness are the ends of human flourishing. Securing these rights for everyone created in God's image made the benefit worth the cost for them. This is why their Declaration ended with a flourish of its own: "With a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor." Then as now, freedom isn't free.

In ways large and small, America has become a nation of amnesiacs who forget too easily the purpose and the price of our freedom.

As a Christian, I have never been confused about the purpose. We exist for the good of others and the glory of God. As a chaplain, I never lost sight of the price because I saw up close that our fellow citizens and comrades in arms bear any burden to satisfy our yearning to be free.

That yearning has been created in us, not manufactured by us. Freedom is not some scheme we concocted to live our best lives now. It is a gift God gave so we could worship Him freely and serve others joyfully in this life, with an eye on the next life.

I can think of dozens of names and hundreds of faces of my own comrades in uniform who were willing to give their all to secure the blessings of liberty for those who would never know their names or see their faces. All gave some. Some gave all.

Jesus Christ is preeminent in that last category, demonstrating with conviction that freedom isn't free. By His own sacrifice on the cross, He gave all, which gives all that matters to all who believe in the Name above all names. These sacred truths may not be self-evident today in a culture distracted by so many lesser things, but they are the only path to true freedom and genuine flourishing. They are the only sure way to lasting independence from everything holding us back. In other words, where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom (2 Cor 3:17).

Freedom is not free, but those standing watch for us this Independence Day raised their right hands because of their conviction that our gain is worth their pain.

Thanks be to God. {eo}

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