

A DECLARATION OF DEPENDENCE

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Ps 11

INTRODUCTION

The first inauguration of a president of this nation took place April 30, 1789, 13 years after the Declaration of Independence we celebrate this weekend. In between those two events, the Revolutionary War was fought, a constitution was written and then finally, General George Washington was elected as our first president. The nation badly needed healing. When the Revolutionary War began, at least a fourth of the colonists supported England. So now trust had to be rebuilt between Patriots and Loyalists. Once the cord to Mother England was broken, inflation spiraled and international trade was disrupted. The challenges facing our first president were overwhelming. For his inauguration, George Washington stepped out onto the balcony of Federal Hall on Wall Street in New York City with thousands of people jammed in the streets below. With judge Robert Livingston presiding, he placed his left hand on an open Bible sitting on a table beside him and raised his right hand, and swore to “faithfully execute the office of the president of the United States.” There was a pause, and then the president added his own words: “I swear, so help me God.” He then bent forward and kissed the Bible. Following his inaugural address, the president walked seven blocks to a service of prayer at St. Paul’s Episcopal Church.

Those four simple, prayer-like words, “So help me God,” were not in the prepared oath of office. They were added unexpectedly by George Washington. But, all 42 presidents following Washington have likewise concluded their oath of office with those four words: “So help me God.” Some of those presidents have been strong Christians and others have been not been Christians. But everyone of them has sensed their need for help from God. Everyone of them has placed a hand on the Bible as they took their oath of office— acknowledging it’s higher authority under which we stand.

While we celebrate our independence as a nation, let us also be freshly aware that our freedom will only be maintained as we, like George Washington and every president after him, are willing to humble ourselves before Almighty God and declare our dependence upon Him. I think we understand this as foundational to who we are as a nation. But, I don’t need to tell you that many forces are laying siege to any reference to God in our national life. Your presence here in worship is a declaration of dependence upon God. However, this sense of trusting Him in all our lives needs to be actively cultivated and put into practice in everything. Psalm 11 is a good source of wisdom for us and for our national life.

“WHEN THE FOUNDATIONS ARE BEING DESTROYED”

There is a central, rhetorical question this Psalm is responding to,

*When the foundations are being destroyed,
what can the righteous do?*

It is written in a time of trouble. Wicked adversaries seem to have the upper hand. They are underhanded, like terrorists, they *shoot from the shadows at the upright in heart*. David is getting some advice from people around him, *Flee like a bird to the mountains*. And, the foundations, those things he thought were solid, that he could count on, are even being destroyed.

Have you ever felt like that? It feels like everything is crumbling, coming apart in your life. You feel like those out to destroy you seem to have the upper hand. Maybe you're not even sure who the enemy is because they attack us "from the shadows." All you want to do is get away to some safe place, escape from the trouble and the enemy to hide where they can't find you and bother you. You just don't have what it takes to stay in the battle. You want to get away from it all.

Maybe you remember a time in school when you were ridiculed and rejected and never wanted to go back to school again. Some of us know what it is to be betrayed by someone or at least have them gossip about us and you feel like you can never face them again. You just want to get away. Perhaps you've taken a courageous, unpopular stand on a moral issue and felt rejection from people. In the midst of the flack, you think, "If only I could get away!"

But we all know, we can't really run away, escape, in the long-run. Of course, that doesn't keep us from trying. Escape is a favorite way of coping in America. Travel, vacations, work, and vegging-out in front of the TV are all ways we try to escape. Unfortunately, some resort to alcohol and other drugs to keep from facing things. But ultimately, the right way is hanging in there in the midst of trouble and going through it.

However, David does have a source of security in the midst of trouble. He begins the Psalm with that affirmation, *In the LORD I take refuge*. Trouble is a powerful invitation to run to the Lord, letting Him be our refuge, rather than the hiding places of this world. We'll always get found in those. In the Lord, we are safe.

David goes on to tell us how he maintains perspective in the last half of the Psalm, beginning with vs. 4:

*The LORD is in his holy temple;
the LORD is on his heavenly throne.*

We need to be reminded of who is really in charge. He goes to church and reflects that God is still with him. His thoughts go up to God's ultimate rule and justice. In the end, His justice will be done.

John Quincy Adams, our sixth president, had a rough time while in office. Because of his Christian convictions, he took an unpopular stand in that day against slavery. His distress in the presidency is reflected in these words,

I can scarcely conceive a more harassing, wearying, teasing, condition of existence.
But, he drew strength from public worship, saying,

Hope in the goodness of God, reliance upon His mercy in affliction, trust in Him to bring light out of darkness and good out of evil are the comforts and promises which I desire from public worship. They help to sustain me in the troubles that are thickening around me.

Like David, he found refuge in the Lord and strength in worshiping God in church.

Abraham Lincoln likewise drew great strength from God during the tumultuous times of the Civil War. He attended the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church. He even sometimes attended midweek prayer meetings, but in order not to disturb other worshipers he often entered secretly through the back door and sat on a settee in the office of the pastor, with the door ajar, listening to the readings from the Scriptures and praying with the people. While Lincoln often kneeled in prayer when in private, in public worship he stood for prayer. Presbyterians in that day (as today) generally sat in their pews during prayer. So Lincoln, at six-foot-four-inches in height, created an awkward contrast with the bowed heads around him in worship on Sundays. When someone asked him why he stood, he responded:

When my generals visit the White House, they stand when their commander in chief enters the Oval Office. Isn't it proper then, that I stand for my commander in chief?

President Gerald Ford wrestled greatly with his decision about whether to pardon Nixon. But it is notable that on the day he made the decision, he attended St. John's Episcopal Church, prayed for guidance and understanding, received Holy Communion and then returned to the Oval Office having made the decision. Of course Gerald Ford realized it was not in his best interest politically to pardon Nixon, but he said he never regretted his decision saying, "I only did what I thought was right."

Evangelist Billy Graham has been a friend and counselor to the last ten presidents. In 1991, as the United Nations Deadline for Iraq to withdraw from Kuwait approached, President George Herbert Walker Bush was much in prayer for a peaceful solution. He prayed with his bishop, and with Senate Chaplain Richard Halverson. Then, on Wednesday morning, Jan. 16, the president called his long-time friend, Billy Graham, with the terse message, "I need you." Billy Graham arrived at the White House at 5:45 p.m. Allied planes were already on their way to Baghdad—the beginning of Desert Storm. Throughout the evening, Billy Graham met and prayed alone with the president five times, and then also with other members of the family.

We can be inspired by these presidents and others who have said in actions as well as words, *In the LORD I take refuge.*

How then can you say to me: "Flee like a bird to your mountain."

And, they knew,

The LORD is in his holy temple;

the LORD is on his heavenly throne.

EXPANDING OUR HORIZON

Knowing we live in relation to God has another important affect on our lives. If there is no fear of God, our horizon shrinks and we become the measure of things. Our lives get focused upon,

“What’s in it for me?” Our behavior becomes governed by, “What can I get away with?” As long as there is no God, we are free to define moral behavior however we want. If this life is all there is, I’d better just get all I can and do whatever will make me happiest. I don’t need to tell you there is a lot of that thinking currently in vogue.

But, with a proper fear of God, all that changes. There are moral absolutes, and we ignore them at our peril and the destruction of social order. Cheerfully, we live a life of service and sacrifice modeled after the Master, knowing it is wise, for God sees and has promised to reward us. We deny ourselves in order to do what is right for others and what will bring about the greatest good. And, we realize in everything, we are called to work for the kingdom of God. We don’t get discouraged because we look forward to the return of Christ when all that is evil will be done away with and good and righteousness will prevail. We are working hand-in-hand with the King of kings and Lord of lords.

Did you know, that by the fourth century, the churches in Rome were feeding an estimated 20,000 poor people each week? Why would they do this? Because they loved God and feared Him. They knew it was the right thing to do. They didn’t let utilitarianism and selfishness shrink their horizons.

The Psalm ends on these words, affirming:

*For the LORD is righteous,
he loves justice;
upright men will see his face.*

When the Bible talks about being righteous, think about right actions and right relationships. Those who love justice and right-living (the “upright”) will see the Lord’s face. That is how we are called to live. When there is a proper fear of the Lord, our lives will be marked by kindness, generous giving, acts of mercy, and myriad other expressions of love.

CONCLUSION

On this Fourth of July, we have much to be thankful for in our nation. We have a rich heritage. Yet, we see troubling signs all around of our nation trying to sever any connection to God. Indeed, many of our foundations are being destroyed.

Let’s follow David in his response. Escapist thinking, ignoring things, or running away are not the answers. We need to boldly reaffirm our trust and focus upon God. Psalm 11 is a call to put our energies into worship and prayer, for *The LORD is in His Holy Temple*. Out of that, our lives will model a different way as we “enflesh” the life of Christ in new, exciting, creative ways.

I’d like to close with a prayer written by Billy Graham:

Our Father and Our God, we praise You for Your goodness to our nation, giving us blessings far beyond what we deserve. Yet we know that all is not right with America. We deeply need a moral and spiritual renewal to help us meet the many problems we face. Convict us of sin. Help us to turn to You in repentance and faith. Set our feet on the path of Your righteousness and peace.

We pray for our nation's leaders. Give them the wisdom to know what is right, and the courage to do it.

*You have said, 'Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord.' May this be a new era for America, as we humble ourselves and acknowledge You alone as our Savior and Lord. **Amen.***