



THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA, 1776–2026

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Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people. (Prov. 14:34 [ESV])

This weekend Americans celebrate the 250th anniversary of the passing of the Declaration of Independence (July 4th, 1776), the formal separation of the thirteen British Colonies in North America from Great Britain, and thus the founding of our nation. As loyal citizens, we Christians join in the celebration, humbly acknowledging God's goodness in keeping and using this land that we love, while interceding before God that these United States would continue to know his favor.

In recognition of this significant milestone and to guide our patriotism, we briefly weigh Solomon's proverb in Proverbs 14:34.

Some challenges

The biblical challenge: While the Bible speaks of families and tribes, nothing is said therein of nation-states. This concept did not emerge until the Treaty of Westphalia in 1649, which ended Europe's Thirty Years' War. Nevertheless, the Bible includes expressions of the love of homeland (Ps. 137), and of countrymen: "I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart," wrote Paul. "I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh" (Rom. 9:1-3; cf. 10:1-4).

The cultural challenge: Such examples of patriotism, in context, extol the uniqueness of Israel ~ one ethnicity ruled by God. Yet now the new Israel is multi-ethnic and multi-national, teaching us that a love for our homeland is not to be exclusive. In Christ, our supreme desire is to see God glorified and his kingdom advanced not only in America but the world over.

The spiritual challenge: We ask, then, how we may love these United States of America without undervaluing our primary citizenship in heaven (Phil. 3:20), for that would be idolatry; and how we may rejoice in the great favor America has received without covering up our national sins, for that would end our prosperity (Prov. 28:13). In short, we seek to evade both jingoism and ingratitude. In navigating between these polar opposites, we find in noteworthy Presbyterian J. Gresham Machen (1881–1937) some timely counsel:

The child ought indeed to be taught to love America, and to feel that whether it is good or bad it is OUR country. But the love of country is a very tender thing, and the best way to kill it is to attempt to inculcate it by force. And to teach, in defiance of the facts, that honesty and kindness and purity are peculiarly American virtues ~ this is harmful in the

extreme. . . . Surely the only patriotic thing to teach the child is that there is one majestic moral law to which our own country and all the countries of the world are subject." (*What is Faith?* [1925])

A balanced patriotism, Machen says in effect, is found not in history, culture, geography, or achievements, but in the majesty of God's moral law (the ten commandments). We ought then, to love our country regardless, but as Christians we celebrate most when our nation upholds God's law. This we are taught not chiefly by Machen, or even by Solomon writing during the golden age of Israel (1 Kgs. 10:1-13), but supremely by God. Speaking in this instance through Solomon, he shapes our patriotism.

Some distinctions

Every patriot wants his or her nation exalted, yet God has revealed that righteousness alone achieves this. Since, however, it is neither natural to man nor can be concocted by him, the righteousness that exalts a nation must be God's gracious provision. We see this in each of its four types:

General righteousness: This is the fruit of what theologians call God's common grace or common providence. God so puts his hand on man that we do not follow through with all the sin that is in our minds and hearts. Instead, we comply, at least outwardly, with God's law.

This external conformity has characterized much but by no means all of our national history. Not only has God written his law on our hearts, thus giving us a sense of right and wrong, he brought to these shores early European settlers who valued the core truths of Christianity: the knowledge of God, his law, and his remedy for sin found in Christ. Thus, while not always sound, Americans have at least possessed a fear of God and a respect for his law. While a mere outer alignment to it cannot save us from our sins (for the law is holy but weak), we thank God that notwithstanding the overwhelming bloodshed of the Civil War, America has enjoyed a general cohesion rooted in respect for God's commands. We have experienced the reality expressed by Scottish Presbyterian Thomas Chalmers (1780–1847) when he observed that for every ten the gospel saves it moralizes fifty. It is, then, only by God's kind restraint of the evil within us that the American experiment has known success.

Legal righteousness: For their exaltation, though, nations need more than an external respectability. They depend on the influence and witness of Christians. We are those who have been acquitted by God on account of his imputing to Christ our sin and the imputing to us his righteousness. This "wonderful exchange," to quote Martin Luther, is hinted at earlier in Proverbs 14: "Fools mock at the guilt offering, but the upright enjoy acceptance" (v. 9). They also forget that it is Christians ~ now considered among some the enemies of the Republic ~ who have used their liberty in

Christ not only to serve the nation in countless ways, but from these shores the world as well. Historically, for instance, Baptists and Methodists ran throughout the land with the gospel, and while Presbyterians, insisting on an educated ministry, were generally slower to do so, they made their own seismic contribution in the realm of education and public service.

Moral righteousness: Nations need, though, not just converts to Christ but faithful Christian disciples. Claims to a legal standing before God must be accompanied by God-fearing character, motivations, and attitudes within, and God-respecting actions without. The morally righteous thus pursue not only outward conformity to the specifics of God's "majestic law" but Christ's summation of it: the love of God with all we have, and the love of neighbor as ourselves (Matt. 22:36-40). It is, then, our combination of love and duty in Christ that inspires and exalts nations.

Social righteousness: Whereas Pietism stops at moral righteousness, God calls us also to social righteousness. Spoke the Lord to Judah, "He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Mic. 6:8). To quote evangelical pastor-theologian John Stott (1921–2011), social righteousness "is concerned with seeking man's liberty from oppression, together with the promotion of civil rights, justice in law courts, integrity in business dealings, and honor in home and family affairs." Social righteousness is, in short, the outworking of the gospel in the public square, but it must be distinguished from an irreligious, authoritarian ideology of Wokeism that promotes the individual's will over divine revelation and the authority structures God has put in place.

Some warnings

Solomon cautions us that nations can be humiliated as well as exalted. Ironically, he set the course for Israel's decline, his son Rehoboam ensured Israel's division into northern and southern kingdoms (Israel and Judah), and future kings sealed exiles for both, in Assyria and Babylon respectively. The wheels of God's judgment, we learn, move slowly but surely ~ a truth the United States would do well to remember, even as we look on at the evident humiliation of once-Christianized Western Europe.

Today's talk, then, of American exceptionalism is to be very circumspect. It lies in God's sovereign ordering of affairs and not innately in our being American. Other countries in history have also been exceptional, and for longer, but they forgot the origin of their exceptionalism. We dare not follow suit, for just as God is no respecter of persons, so he is no respecter of nations either. Specifically, we must heed Solomon's warning, that:

Sin provokes God: God not only sees a nation's sins, their stench wafts up to him. He may graciously suffer them long, granting nations space to repent, but when he executes judgment, he does so quickly. Recall Daniel 5 and the fall of the Chaldeans the very night the vessels from the Temple in Jerusalem were sacrilegiously introduced into Belshazzar's drunken orgy; and Acts 12 ~ the striking down of Herod for receiving homage instead of giving glory to God.

God warns especially those nations that have known the gospel. King David understood this. In Psalm 16:4 he writes, "The sorrows of those who run after another god shall multiply." Thus, we who profess the gospel have a particular responsibility to intercede on behalf of our nation, that God would not mark our national iniquities (Ps. 130:3) but would so convict us of them that we flee from them.

Sin degrades and corrupts: Sin left unchecked is a cancer that runs through society. We easily blame our leaders, but they often reflect the state of the culture. And where sin in the culture is allowed to corrode the establishment, nations become reproached. This is clear not only from biblical revelation, but from experience. Indeed, once sin is coupled with power, it grows exponentially. Observed Lord Acton (1834–1902), an historian and moralist, "Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely." Thus, we call on God during this Semiquincentennial celebration and beyond, to root out corruption in the land and restore to us all the fear of his name. America's future depends on this.

Sin leads nations to fall: Anglican preacher and theologian Charles Bridges (1794–1869) noted: "Greece in her proud science; Rome in zenith of her glory ~ both were sunk in the lowest depths of moral degradation." Inevitably they fell. Today, we witness the near completion of the humiliation of Great Britain, of which four-time Prime Minister once said at the height of her global influence that, "This nation stands on the rock of holy Scripture."

For America to yet thrive, we pray for God-fearing leaders (thankful for those who are), for laws that align with God's revealed will (so restraining moral decline and protecting the church's liberty to preach the gospel), and for the repentance and salvation of those in the land currently hateful of God and his law. Many love to repeat the mantra "God bless America," but the Christian calls on God more fulsomely, to graciously redeem, bless, and use America (in that order!), and in doing so to display his glory from sea to shining sea. But that is not the end of it, for the biblical patriot desires our entire race, with its varied pursuits of national exaltation, to know that righteousness is the key. As ever, we trust God and his Word.