

# PRAYER UNDERGIRDING THE DECLARATION

Message Celebrating the 222<sup>nd</sup> Anniversary  
of the Declaration of Independence  
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**T**he day after the celebration of the historic signing of the Declaration of Independence 222 years ago is a day for a renewed Declaration of Dependence. After the fireworks are over, the great need is for a [new fire that works in a DEEPER DEPENDENCE ON GOD](#) to bless our beloved nation.



Actually, our founding fathers made a dynamic Declaration of Dependence on September 7, 1774, that eventually led to the courageous Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776. We need to recover the meaning of the first date if we are to reclaim the real significance of the Fourth of July. In fact, I don't think there would have been much to

celebrate yesterday if it were not for what happened on that crucial seventh day in September 1774, twenty-two months before the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

It was the first meeting of the Continental Congress held in Carpenters' Hall in Philadelphia. The delegates from the colonies met under the rumbling thundercloud of growing conflict with British troops. News carried by an express rider from Boston told of the bombardment of the Boston Harbor. The delegates to the Congress came together to air their grievances against England and to focus on their "civil and religious liberties." Silas Dean, the delegate from Connecticut, described the Congress as "the grandest and most important assembly ever held in America."

The other delegates, all relatively young, agreed with Dean and assembled with urgency. Colonel George Washington, age forty-two, was a member of the Virginia House of Burgesses. He had cast his vote for a Virginia Day of Prayer for the besieged people of Boston. Washington's entry

in his diary was, “Went to church and fasted all day.” He was ready for the Continental Congress.

So was John Adams. He confessed his need for God in his diary on the opening day of the Congress. “I wander alone, and ponder. The objects before me are too grand. . . . We have not been fit for the times. We are deficient in genius, in education, in everything. I feel unutterable anxiety. God grant us wisdom and fortitude!” Others shared his sense of dependence on God.

At the opening of the Continental Congress, there was a formal constituting of the body. Then Tom Cushing from Massachusetts and Speaker of that colony’s assembly rose before the Congress to make a motion. With great passion, he moved that the Continental Congress be opened with prayer. Conflict arose immediately. Who would offer the prayer? Which form of religion would be recognized? The divisions between the beliefs of the delegates were exposed. John Adams wrote his wife, Abigail, “The motion for prayer was opposed by Mr. Jay of New York and Mr. Rutledge of South Carolina because we were so divided in religious sentiments; some Episcopalians, some Quakers, some Anabaptists, some Presbyterians, and some Congregationalists, that we could not join in the same act of worship.” The conflict ensued as the problem of disunity was revealed.

Samuel Adams, John’s cousin, was the acknowledged strategist of the assembly. He knew that the many issues and differences could easily divide them. Could they stay together? At the height of the acrimonious discord, Adams rose to speak. He had earned his right to be heard by engineering the Boston Tea Party and vociferous revolutionary leadership. As he spoke to the Congress, his deep faith was expressed.

“I am no bigot,” Adams said, “and I can hear the prayer from a gentleman of piety and virtue who is at the same time a friend to his country. I am a stranger in Philadelphia, but I have heard that Mr. Duché . . . deserves that character, and therefore I move that Mr. Duché (an Episcopal clergyman) might be desired to read prayers to the Congress tomorrow morning.” The future of America was held in balance. [Would delegates to the Continental Congress express their dependence on God?](#)

The motion electrified the delegates. Sam Adams’s strong faith and authentic patriotism brought unity among the diverse traditions. The atmosphere was changed as the delegates realized how much they needed God’s blessing and power in their deliberations and for the struggle for independence. Cushing’s motion was passed and an invitation extended for Jacob Duché to open the next day’s meeting with prayer. It was a momentous decision with lasting ramifications. The record of the Congress for the next day, September 7, 1774, reads, “Agreeable to the resolve of yesterday, the meeting was opened with prayer.”

John Adams’s letter to Abigail preserves the impact of Pastor Duché’s reading of the [35<sup>th</sup> psalm](#) and a prayer that lasted ten minutes. “I never saw a greater effect upon an audience,” said Adams. “Duché struck out in prayer which filled the bosom of every man present. I must confess I never heard a better prayer or one so well pronounced . . . such fervor, such ardor, such earnestness and pathos, and in language so elegant and sublime. . . . It had an excellent effect upon everybody here.”

George Washington called the experience “exciting.” Diaries and letters of the delegates reveal the profound impact of the prayer and the unity that resulted. [A nation under God was being born.](#) The Second Continental Congress in 1775 continued to pray and called for a National Day of Humiliation, Fasting and Prayer. [Commitment to prayer undergirded the drafting of the Declaration of Independence the following year, 1776.](#)

Fifty-six men placed their names beneath the pledge of their lives, their fortunes and their sacred honor. And they did, indeed, pay the price. Of the fifty-six men, few were long to survive. Five were captured by the British and tortured before they died. Twelve had their homes—from Rhode Island to South Carolina—ransacked, looted, occupied by the enemy or burned. Two lost their sons in the army. One had two sons captured. Nine of the fifty-six died in the war from its hardships.

Thomas McKean of Delaware was so harassed by the enemy that he was forced to move his family five times in five months. He served in Congress without pay; his family lived in poverty and in hiding.

Thomas Nelson, Jr., of Virginia raised \$2 million on his own signature to provision our allies, the French fleet. After the war, he personally paid back the loans, which wiped out his entire estate. He was never reimbursed by his government.

John Hancock, whom history remembers for his courage as well as his large signature, was one of the wealthiest men in New England. As he stood outside Boston one terrible night during the war, he said, “Burn, Boston, though it makes John Hancock a beggar, if the public good requires it.” He, too, lived up to that pledge.

And the stories go on, but the point is the same. Each man fulfilled his pledge. They paid the price. Freedom was born. God’s grand experiment in democracy was begun. [When the Revolutionary War ensued, a fast was declared in the spring and a day of Thanksgiving in the fall. Dependence on God was the secret of victory.](#)

There are 366 “Fear Nots” in the Bible, one for every day of the year and one extra for leap year. The sovereign Lord echoed those “Fear Nots” in the hearts of Washington and the revolutionary forces as the battle wore on from month to month.

There is a small chapel in the Capitol. On one wall, a stained glass window depicts Washington on his knees. It is a constant reminder to the men and women of the Congress who use this chapel that courage is a special gift from the Lord. I know a small group of senators who meet there to pray each day. I think of the many times I have sat in that little chapel with individual senators to pray for the Lord’s will and the courage to do it.

That’s rooted in our history. At the Constitutional Convention in 1787, a frail eighty-one-year-old man rose to seek recognition. He said, “In the beginning of the contest with Great Britain, when we were sensible of danger, we had our daily prayer. . . . Our prayers, sir, were heard, and they were graciously answered. All of us who were engaged in the struggle must have observed frequent instances of a superintending Providence in our favor. . . . I have lived, sir, a long time,

and the longer I live the more convincing proofs I see of this truth: that God governs in the affairs of men. If a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without His notice, is it probable that an empire can rise without His aid? I believe that without His concurring aid we shall succeed no better than the builders of Babel. We shall be divided by our partial, local interests; our projects will be confounded. . . . I move that we pray.”

The author of that motion was none other than Benjamin Franklin, and the chairman of the Constitutional Congress was George Washington. The motion was passed and prayers were said then and at subsequent meetings. After the first Senate was constituted in New York, the Episcopal bishop from New York was elected the first chaplain. Today, it's an honor to serve as the sixty-first chaplain of the United States Senate.

The secret of the greatness of our nation has been dependence on the sovereignty of God. Careful study of the prayers of our forefathers and foremothers shows that the name *Sovereign* was used more often than any other. The reason is obvious: our nation was begun by women and men who sought to escape the tyranny of human sovereigns who had denied them religious and political freedom. Religious persecution was one of the primary causes of immigration to the New World. Yet, the men of the unified government of the states had to discover their total dependence on God for supernatural power to be leaders of a great new nation and solve the problems and grasp the potential of a nation obedient to God.

Our founding forefathers and foremothers really believed that they, like Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, were heirs to a great promise from the sovereign God. As we learned in this morning's Scripture reading, the founders, with the patriarchs of old, "looked forward to a city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God" (Heb. 11:10).

There is nothing more powerful than trust in the sovereignty of God. To say with Franklin, "God governs in the affairs of men," is the source of dynamic leadership. Here's why.

Belief in the sovereignty of God provides a sense of destiny. God rules over all and calls men and women to be servant leaders under God's control. William Blake said, "Great things happen when men and mountains meet; the rest go jostling in the street." The founders of our nation firmly believed they were called by God to establish this new nation.

Further, belief in the Sovereignty of God provides supernatural power. The reading this morning from Deuteronomy asserts, "For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome" (Deut. 10:17). There is supernatural power available for supernatural leadership. The gifts of wisdom beyond human understanding, knowledge beyond education, vision beyond our grandest imagination are given to those who surrender control of their lives and their leadership to the Lord's control. All through the dynamic years, from that first prayer at the Continental Congress, to the publishing of the Declaration of Independence, to the War for Independence, to the crafting of the Constitution

and the Bill of Rights, we observe people exercising supernatural leadership anointed by the Spirit of the Lord, Adonai, the Sovereign of all.

God moves in mysterious ways,  
His wonders to perform;  
He plants His footstep on the sea,  
And rides upon the storm.  
Deep in unfathomable mines  
Of never-failing skill  
He treasures up His bright designs,  
And works His sovereign will. (William Cowper)

**Finally, belief in the sovereignty of God produces indomitable courage.** We need to remember how intrepidly bold those founders were. A few colonies barely established on a new continent dared to confront the greatest empire in the world. Sometimes we forget what fortitude it took to declare independence and anticipate nothing less than victory in a revolutionary war. They believed with Samuel of old, “The battle is the Lord’s!” (1 Sam. 17:47).

Now, what does all this mean to us on the Fourth of July weekend on the 222nd anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence? **Indeed that historic document was the result of twenty-two months of prayers for dependence on God for guidance, power and courage, then nothing less is required if this is to be the time of the great spiritual and patriotic awakening so urgently needed in our nation today.**

We, too, face soul-sized issues in our time: denigration of the family, unresolved racism, inequality for those created equal but with culturally debilitated equality of opportunity, the renewal of our inner cities, the confrontation of the inadequacy of public education, growth of youth violence. Behind all of our problems is a lack of prayer for God’s sovereignty in our individual lives, our families, our communities, and our national government.

As Thomas Jefferson said, “God who gave us life, gave us liberty. Can the liberties of a nation be secure when we have removed a conviction that these liberties are the gift of God?”

So often in times of crisis, people say, “Well, all we can do now is pray!” All we can do? Prayer is the mightiest force in the world. “If God knows, why pray?” some people ask. We pray because a study of the Scriptures and history clearly proves that God waits to act until people pray. We pray not to change the mind of God but to discern God’s mind and do God’s will. Not only that, we pray because it is in prayer for our nation that we accept again that the Lord is the author of the American dream, the glorious vision for all nations of God’s plan for democracy, righteousness and justice. What God began 222 years ago, God wants to continue. **God wants**

to think thoughts through us, speak truth through our words, and enable the best for our nation.

In your prayers on this *Dependence Day*, begin with yourself. If everyone lived out his or her faith as a citizen the way you do, what kind of nation would we have? So few could say, “Great!” Most of us would have to say that we have failed in courageously-involved citizenship. When the words of “God Bless America” run through your minds, add the words, “God Bless America *through me*.” There is something each of us must do as an expression of citizenship. If we don’t do it, it won’t be done.

Spiritual renewal of a nation begins with those who know and depend on God. “If *my people* who are called by my name will humble themselves and pray and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land” (2 Chron. 7:14). Patriotism has not gone out of style. God calls us to be loyal citizens. It is part of our Declaration of Dependence. In a time of secularism when mechanistic humanism surges in the hearts of most Americans, you and I are called to a counterculture revolution. If we who belong to God, who are called by God’s name, humble ourselves and seek God’s face, God will forgive and heal our land. A spiritual awakening begins with us.

Added to our prayer of personal commitment, we are also called to pray for leaders. Paul admonished, “*Therefore I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions and giving thanks be made for all men, for kings and all in authority that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all goodness and reverence. For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior*”(1 Tim, 2:1-3).

<https://cathedral.org/sermons/a-declaration-of-dependence/>