

July 1, 2021! And here we are living in our beloved nation, the "land of the free and the home of the brave." 190 years ago, 1831, the French historian and sociologist, Alexis deToqueville wrote in his monumental work, "Democracy in America," "I sought for the greatness of America in her harbors and rivers and fertile fields, and in her mines and commerce. But it was not there. Not until I went into the churches and heard her pulpits flame with righteousness did I understand the greatness of her power. America is great because she is good; and if America ever ceases to be good, America will cease to be great." On July 4, just 3 days from now, we will celebrate Freedom's Holy Light. May God help us to pray much for our nation, its leaders and its people. And may God keep us strong in our loyalty to the heritage we love and cherish.

FREEDOM'S HOLY LIGHT!

A Devotional prepared by Dr. Robert L. Morris

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"But the one who looks intently into the perfect law of freedom and perseveres in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer who acts – this person will be blessed in what he does." (James 1:25; HCSB)
In 1832, Samuel F. Smith, a twenty-four year old seminary student at Andover Theological Seminary, at the request of musician and composer Lowell Mason, translated some German songs into English. As the familiar music for those songs was attached to those words, they inspired him to write an original patriotic song. He penned the words that have been etched into the fabric of American history. The song, he called "America," and later changed to "My country, 'Tis of Thee," became our "unofficial" National Hymn or Anthem, until in 1931 when the "Star-spangled Banner" was officially adopted for that role. I am including the fourth stanza in this "patriotic" Devotional as follows:

Our fathers' God, to Thee, Author of liberty, to Thee we sing;

Long may our land be bright with freedom's holy light;

Protect us by Thy might, Great God our King!

Early in the 1940s, leaders in the government of the United States of America felt that the citizens of this nation needed some rather uncommon reminder of their priceless heritage of freedom. They needed to know more about the history of this republic, the struggles that gave it birth, and the many documents that protect and guarantee the original principles upon which this nation was founded.

To accomplish this goal, support was found for an "official" Freedom Train that would tour the nation. The idea of the Freedom Train was to provide an opportunity for all Americans to view the 127 important documents and six flags carried on the Train, and to learn more about our nation and its history. All documents were either original or were fully authorized official copies.

The Freedom Train of 1947 was a seven-car train that traveled across the United States for 413 days, September 17, 1947 until January 22, 1949. The Freedom Train was dedicated to the history of American democracy, and had two specific goals: to recreate an awareness of our American heritage, and to generate interest in safeguarding and preserving the very important, priceless key documents of America's history. The Freedom Train of 1947-1949 was very popular. More than 3½ million American people walked through the train, viewing the documents it held.

Early in the 1970s, the people of America were facing the bicentennial of our nation, her 200th birthday! There were many who had ideas about how to celebrate that historic moment, coming on July 4, 1976. Inspired by the memory of the 1947-1949 Freedom Train, the idea and concept of a new Freedom Train was conceived. It was born, and on April 1, 1975 the American Freedom Train embarked from Wilmington, Delaware on its tour of the 48 contiguous states. It provided a very meaningful opportunity for the American people to celebrate the 200th birthday of our nation. This Bicentennial instrument of celebration, the 26-car American Freedom Train, featured 10 display cars carrying more than 500 treasures of America's history. The additional cars provided for the care of the many persons who traveled with the train, managed and cared for it throughout the long journey. The American Freedom Train zig-zagged its way across the United States before completing its year and a half journey on December 31, 1976. More than seven million Americans visited the train during its journey, and tens of millions stood trackside to watch it pass by.

Among the more than 500 documents and other treasures of historic significance carried on the American Freedom Train are five I want to identify:

1. Thomas Jefferson's 1776 "Rough Draft" of The Declaration of Independence,

2. George Washington's 1787 copy of The Constitution of the United States,
3. The Bill of Rights, of 1779,
4. Lincoln's hand-written 1863 Gettysburg Address, and
5. Martin Luther King's Bible, George Ford's Inauguration Bible, and the Book of Psalms, the first book printed in the United States.

On the Freedom Trains also was the original hand-written 1814 manuscript of Francis Scott Key's The Star-spangled Banner, since 1931, our National Anthem. On this 4th of July, when we stand and pledge our allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, and sing our beloved National Anthem, may we remember the liberties and symbolism that the Freedom Trains represented in our nation and helped unite us in times of conflict and affirmed to us that no matter what, we are all Americans.

I want to share my heart on the meaning of those documents listed above.

1. The Declaration of Independence. On July 4, 1776, the Congress of the thirteen United States of America, declared nearly unanimously the very reason we celebrate our beloved nation on July 4th each year. The Congress stated: "with firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence," that

"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 them are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

2. The Constitution of the United States. On September 17, 1787, the Constitutional Congress of the United States of America, writing in behalf of and for the people of this God-blessed nation, established that historic document upon which American jurisprudence for over 230 years of American history has been based. It is the document that has been the subject of thousands of attacks and which has been falsely interpreted by unwise jurists. The Congress of 1787 wrote those dynamic and historic words familiar to all of us:

"We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, secure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution of the United States of America."

3. The Bill of Rights. On March 4, 1789 the Congress of the United States met in New York City, and set forth the Articles of the Bill of Rights, thereby signifying those certain inalienable rights for the people of this great nation.

"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."

4. In 1863, less than 100 years after the Declaration of Independence was signed, the new nation was embroiled in a terrifying Civil War between the Northern and the Southern states. The chief issue was slavery. A young lawyer, emerging from a dimly lighted cabin in the State of Illinois, chiefly self-educated but brilliant in his mind, and trusting in God for his eternal soul and for wisdom to govern the nation, was President. In his quest to abolish the hideous debauchery of slavery, President Abraham Lincoln, standing on one of the hideous battlefields, wrote a document with few words, but that has become a national treasure. It is known as the Gettysburg Address, and reads as follows:

"Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battle-field of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

But, in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate -- we cannot consecrate -- we cannot hallow -- this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us -- that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion -- that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain -- that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom -- and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."

5. The Bible. Long before July 4, 1776, five generations of American colonists had been studying and applying the teachings of the Bible to their lives. When at last they came together in Philadelphia to draft the Constitution, they knew that even though there were sharp differences as to how the new democracy might be achieved, they were nearly unanimous in their agreement as to what it was they wanted. Tyranny must not prevail! Liberty must be protected! To this end the Bible, The Textbook of Freedom must be freely circulated. Thus, one of the earliest acts of Congress was to approve the printing of a large edition of the Scriptures, and to recommend it officially to the people of the land.

What is meant by the statement that “The Bible is the Textbook of Freedom?” The text for this Devotional is before us: “But the one who looks intently into the perfect law of freedom and perseveres in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer who acts – this person will be blessed in what he does.” (James 1:25; HCSB) James adds a statement that helps us understand the “perfect law of freedom.” He wrote: “Speak and act as those who will be judged by the law of freedom.” (James 2:12; HCSB) What is that “freedom” James has in mind? No one has the full answer, but it is logical to conclude that in his Holy Spirit inspired heart and mind he included the following.

1. Freedom from Sin. James wrote earlier: “Get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.” (James 1:21; TNIV) True freedom is not found in a liberty that allows one to speak or write or do as he or she pleases. The Williams translation of James 1:21 states it this way: “... lay aside everything impure and all evils prevailing around you.” The Apostle Paul wrote: “Now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life.” (Romans 6:22; TNIV)

2. Freedom from Want. James instructs us: “Let the lowly brother glory in his exaltation, but the rich in his humiliation, because as a flower of the field he will pass away.” (James 1:9, 10; NKJV) Let me explain that a little. If God is first in one’s life, He is that person’s satisfaction. We may be grateful for material goods and advantages in life, but we do not depend on these for true joy. We do not have to possess these in order to be happy and free. The danger is that we live in a materialistic-minded society. We are bombarded daily with the desire for the pursuit of happiness. Let’s find it in God. David wrote: “Fear the LORD, you His saints, for those who fear Him lack nothing. Young lions lack food and go hungry, but those who seek the LORD will not lack any good thing.” (Psalm 34:9, 10; HCSB)

3. Freedom from Fear. Someone has calculated or “counted” and state that there are 365 “fear nots” in the Bible! I didn’t make that count! But I do know there are many. For now however, let’s remember the words of the Psalmist: “You will not fear the terror of the night, the arrow that flies by day, the plague that stalks in darkness, or the pestilence that ravages at noon.” (Psalm 91:5, 6; HCSB) Let’s move to the positive side. James wrote: “My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.” (James 1:2-4; NKJV) Here is courage, the opposite of fear, and yes, true freedom from fear. It is not the courage of reckless machoism, but rather the product of righteous living. Do you want to know about this “freedom from fear?” Just read the Biblical Hall of Fame, Hebrews 11, and know truly, that “of these, the world was not worthy.” (Hebrews 11:38; NKJV)

4. Freedom from Death. James wrote: “Blessed are those who persevere under trial, because when they have stood the test, they will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love Him.” (James 1:12; TNIV) “Blessed!” The word is μακάριος – makarios, that is, “happy,” “fortunate,” “blessed.” People of the world worry! They ask: “What is ahead for our world?” They scan the dim horizon of death, wondering what lies beyond. There are three kinds of death identified in the Bible. (1) Spiritual death, designated for those who continue in their sins. They exist here on earth but in a wrong relationship to God, and then they die. (2) Physical death, the cessation of physical life on earth, avoided and feared by the masses of earth people, but the glaring reality for living on the planet. Only Enoch (Genesis 5:24) and Elijah (2 Kings 2:11) did not leave earth by natural death. (3) Eternal, or the Second death, from which there is no escape ... ever. (Revelation 21:8) It is that permanent separation from the fellowship with God for all who refuse His offer of redemption in Jesus Christ. But what the Bible offers, is freedom from spiritual death, so that we also lose the fear of physical death, which is a bridge to that glorious freedom from eternal death, into God’s eternal presence. King Solomon wrote: “Treasures of wickedness profit nothing; but righteousness delivers from death!” (Proverbs 10:2; NKJV)

There it is, then! Freedom from sin! Freedom from want! Freedom from fear! Freedom from death! This is the true freedom we read about in God's Textbook of Freedom. It is when we walk in true "freedom's holy light," that we can then really and truly enjoy America's freedoms!

On this 4th of July, many of us will sing our National Anthem. Here are the two verses that are the most familiar. May they burst forth from our hearts in honor of the countless numbers of men and women who projected, provided, protected, and preserved our American freedoms. With hearts full of gratitude, may we celebrate the cherished freedoms that have been given to us by our forefathers. But above and over all, may we lift our hearts in thanksgiving to God our Heavenly Father, who through Jesus Christ in Calvary-love has given us Freedom's Holy Light!

THE STAR-SPANGLED BANNER

By Francis Scott Key, 1814

1. O say, can you see, by the dawn's early light,
What so proudly we hailed at the twilight's last gleaming?
Whose broad stripes and bright stars, thro' the perilous fight,
O'er the ramparts we watched, were so gallantly streaming?
And the rocket's red glare, the bombs bursting in air
Gave proof thro' the night that our flag was still there.
O say, does that star-spangled banner yet wave
O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave.

2. O thus be it ever when free men shall stand
Between their loved homes and the war's desolation!
Blest with vict'ry and peace, may the heav'n-rescued land
Praise the Pow'r that hath made and preserved us a nation!
Then conquer we must, when our cause it is just;
And this be our motto: "In God is our trust!"
And the star-spangled banner in triumph shall wave
O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave.