

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.

This last week, as we celebrated the 241<sup>st</sup> birthday of the United States of America, these well-known words from the Declaration of Independence were once again heralded and tweeted from the rooftops with much passion and pride.

Every good American feels a little shiver down their spine when they hear these monumental words. These words are the American dream. These words are the lifeblood of our nation...

These words also happen to be horrible theology... Have you ever thought that through before? Does the Creator actually consider life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness to be unalienable rights – things he, and nobody else has the right to take away from us?

Thomas Jefferson was a gifted politician, a brilliant man in many fields of study, but he was a *horrible* theologian. He concluded that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights... life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Apparently Jeremiah's God didn't get the memo that he was supposed to endow on Jeremiah life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Because instead of "the pursuit of happiness" let me read to you what God endowed Jeremiah (the plan God had for Jeremiah's life): **The LORD reached out his hand and touched my mouth and said to me, "Now, I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow... Get yourself ready! Stand up and say to [my people] whatever I command you. Do not be terrified by them, or I will terrify you before them. Today I have made you a fortified city, an iron pillar and a bronze wall to stand against the whole land – against the kings of Judah, its officials, its priests and the people of the land. They will fight against you..."**

God had a job for Jeremiah. He was to speak God's word to God's people, the Israelites, but built into that call God had a warning – this wasn't going to bring Jeremiah much happiness. And if you read Jeremiah's book you easily can see why. God didn't have a lot of good things to say to his people. God called Jeremiah and said, "You are going to be the bearer of a lot of bad news to my people. And let me warn you ahead of time, the people are not going to like you very much, in fact, on more than one occasion they are going to try and shoot the messenger" (we read about one of those times today, right? Jeremiah shares God's bad news in chapter 19 and that guy named Pashhur had Jeremiah beaten and thrown in stocks because of it.).

Far from, "Jeremiah, here is your God endowed gift: pursue life, liberty, and happiness", instead he got, "Jeremiah, here is your God endowed gift: say things that are going to make people hate you, hurt you, and treat you as an outcast and pariah your entire life."

And God's endowment to Jeremiah didn't end there. God was going to use Jeremiah as more than just his mouthpiece, he also intended to use Jeremiah's private life as an object lesson for his people.

Later on God comes again to Jeremiah and says, **"You must not marry and have sons or daughters in this place." For this is what the LORD says about the sons and daughters born in this land and about the women who are their mothers and the men who are their fathers: "They will die of deadly diseases. They will not be mourned or buried but will be like refuse lying on the ground. They will perish by sword and famine, and their dead bodies will become food for the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth"**

It doesn't exactly seem that Jeremiah's Creator considered life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness to be unalienable rights...

Jeremiah was not free to live his life how he wanted to.

Jeremiah did not have the liberty to marry, settle down, and have a family.

Jeremiah was not given the right to pursue happiness.

Instead, his endowment from the Creator was **"to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow"**... to be hated by his own people, to be persecuted for his God-given job, and to do it all totally alone, without the joy and blessing of family.

I don't think Jeremiah would have found Jefferson's truths to be all that self-evident.

I know this may come as a shock to some of you who haven't thought through the theology of the Declaration of Independence, but it's not just Jeremiah's God who didn't get the memo from good old Tommy Jefferson. What did Jesus say in the gospel we heard just a few minutes ago? **"The student is not above the teacher, nor a servant above his master... If the head of the house has been called Beelzebul, how much more the members of his household!"**

Jesus says, "If they call me, the Beelzebul (essentially "the spawn of satan"), if they hate me, if they kill me, you, my followers, my family, shouldn't expect any different treatment."

You see, just like Jeremiah, we have been called to be God's mouthpieces to the world. Just like he did to Jeremiah, Jesus says to us, **"What I tell you in the dark, speak in the daylight; what is whispered in your ear, proclaim from the roofs... Whoever acknowledges me before others, I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before others, I will disown before my Father in heaven."**

Jesus says to each of you today, "I'm gonna put words in your mouth – the truths of the Bible. I'm gonna put those words in your mouth and it is your job to shout them from the roofs. It is your job to tell other people about me."

And like Jeremiah, God also warns us that other people aren't always going to like being told that they *need* God... that if they slandered and hated and persecuted Jesus, they are going to slander, hate, and persecute Jesus' followers.

Meaning... It doesn't exactly seem as if our Creator considers life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness to be unalienable rights.

You and I are not free to live how we want to.

You and I do not have the liberty to share or not share the words Jesus has taught us (he gives us a pretty clear ultimatum today: tell other people about me and I'll acknowledge you before the Father... deny me and I'll deny I ever knew you).

You and I do not have the right to pursue happiness at all expense this side of eternity.

Instead, your endowment from your Creator is a job: tell other people about Jesus and expect to be hated and persecuted for it.

And make no mistake about it, Christians are persecuted every day for their faith in Jesus... and I'm not just talking about those people in Africa or the middle east who are being killed for their faith in Jesus. Those literal martyrs certainly deserve our prayers, but we do ourselves a disservice if we limit persecution to only physical abuse and martyrdom. The fact is, we live in a time and country where we face subtle but almost constant verbal and psychological persecution to keep our beliefs to ourselves.

If you want to keep your job, don't talk about religion in the workplace, at least not too much.

If you want to be considered a decent and polite person, don't talk about religion at dinner parties.

If you want to stay popular and remain on good terms with all your friends, if you want to keep things from becoming awkward, don't you dare talk about your beliefs as if they are the only right beliefs. It's fine for you to believe what you want, but don't you dare think that everyone else should believe that too.

If you want to get a good grade at your secular university, if you want to succeed if your field of study happens to be science related, don't you dare spout your ideas about a six day creation.

If you want to keep your boyfriend, don't you dare tell him that you are saving yourself for marriage.

And the list could go on and on.

And if you are anything like me (which I'm betting you are), this is where we need to have a good gut check... because you know, there is a real easy way to make these kinds of persecutions go away... just keep your mouth shut. Live in such a way that people don't even know you are a Christian, or if they do know you are a Christian, they think of you as one of those "nice" Christians who doesn't try and force Jesus down their throats... come to think of it, they know you go to church, but they can't even remember the last time you talked about Jesus or invited them to church.

Has the fear of real or possible persecution kept you from doing what Jesus has called you to do?

I'm betting that if you are honest, you can all think of a time when it did... probably lots of times.

And I'm right there with you... I can't tell you how many times my mouth has remained closed because I was afraid of possible discomfort. It's not easy or fun to take

the road of Jeremiah - to courageously proclaim God's word in the face of real, or simply possible persecution.

And that makes this gut check plenty uncomfortable. There are lots of times when we have denied Jesus, and for that he ought to deny us.

By now my may be thinking, "Gee pastor, thanks for the uplifting sermon... If I fail to acknowledge Jesus he says he is going to deny knowing me. If I do preach Jesus from the rooftops Jesus says I'm gonna be persecuted for it. Sounds like a lose-lose situation... and, to top it all off, you've ruined the Declaration of Independence for me!"

Award-winning, inspirational sermon of the year, right?

But can I share something with you? I left out a pretty important part of Jeremiah's call when I read it a bit ago. Jeremiah was called to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow – an unpopular message for sure. He was also called to build and to plant.

Why would Jeremiah share a message that people were going to hate? And why, for that matter, would we share a similar message?

Well, have you heard the message? Have you read God's word recently?

It's not just any message. It is a message shared by a God who wants more than anything to build and plant... It is a message given by a God who wants more than anything to save us from all of the consequences sin has brought into this world, to build up what sin has broken, to plan what sin has uprooted. God wants more than anything to save us and save the people to whom we speak.

It is a message that endows on us blessings far greater than the blessings Jefferson and the other founding fathers were seeking in 1776. No one, no country, no declaration, no job, no family, no amount of success and prestige, nothing on this earth can actually give us life, liberty, and happiness in any real and lasting way. Only Jesus can. And he has.

We have a God who *has* endowed us with life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness – just not in the way Jefferson taught (not in this country, not in this life, not yet).

God has endowed us with life – eternal life. After our lives on this earth are done comes the eternal life in heaven that Jesus won for us on his cross and guarantees us in his resurrection. "Because he was persecuted, we also will be persecuted" is our theme for today, but it is also true that because he lives, we also will live.

God has endowed us with liberty – true liberty; freedom not to do what we want, but freedom from slavery to sin and all of its consequences; freedom to call the God of heaven our Father because even though he had every right to deny knowing us, Jesus calls us his brothers and sisters.

God has endowed us with happiness – not the empty, hopeless pursuit of happiness in this sin-wrecked world, but the perfect happiness of heaven, of having the Creator welcome us to a better and eternally happy life in heaven.

Today is a tough message to swallow. We have been endowed by our Creator with a job: tell other people about Jesus and expect to be persecuted for it (and if we are not feeling persecuted, it's time to take a good hard look at ourselves to see if we are doing the job God has called us to do).

But the good news is that persecution is not all that God has endowed. He has promised us that though the world may punish us for preaching from the roofs, he will not punish us as our sins deserve. He has promised us that though people we love may abandon and hate us, never will he leave us, never will he forsake us. He has promised us that because of Jesus we can have life, liberty, and happiness that will never end.

The very message we are to share is the message that can make us more like Jeremiah. As we come to a deeper and more meaningful understanding and appreciation for how good this message really is, God will give courage – the courage to do what Jeremiah did; the courage to preach even though persecuted.

I'd like to end with some words of Jeremiah that he spoke immediately after the persecution we read about today: **I am ridiculed all day long; everyone mocks me... the word of the LORD has brought me insult and reproach all day long. But if I say, "I will not mention him or speak any more in his name," his word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot!"**

God grant us the courage of Jeremiah, to feel that fire of Jesus' love burning within us so that we can't help but herald and share Jesus' love from the rooftops with passion and pride. God grant us courage to preach though persecuted.

Amen.