

Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness

By Bob Hunsaker

As we look at world history and at our world today we see that true liberty and freedom are extremely rare commodities. Ours is a world governed largely by selfishness and self-indulgence, and a world governed by these principles always results in oppression and bondage. Sadly, this is what we see everywhere we look today and in earth's history as well.

Let's examine how the principles designed to govern the United States of America are modeled after and resemble the government of God. Although I think we all recognize that the application of these principles certainly falls short through our human frailties, it is extremely valuable, nonetheless, to understand these fundamental principles of God's government and ours.

This may surprise some, but yes, God has a government of freedom, of choice, and of individual liberty, contrary to what many people understand about God. Satan began a war against God in heaven and unfortunately, his accusations against God - that God is demanding, restrictive, and uses force to control His subjects - are echoed by many religious and secular people today.

Even more unfortunate is that critics of Christianity can find ample evidence for their charges in the history of Christianity (e.g. the Dark Ages, the English persecution of Pilgrims, and the Pilgrims' persecution of others in America). So often, those who claim to represent God here on earth have attempted to control others by force, coercion, and fear, rather than using the divine methods of persuasion, love, and patience.

Scripture tells us "*where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom/liberty.*" 2 Cor. 3:17. And the Spirit of the Lord that brings liberty represents God perfectly.

As I am sure the reader is aware, the Fourth of July was selected as Independence Day for the United States of America because that was the day the Declaration of Independence was signed by the founders of our country. It is interesting to read that document and observe that the themes and principles presented there are the same principles upon which God has based His government.

The most famous lines from the Declaration of Independence are probably those at the very beginning: "*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.*"

Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are all things that ultimately have their origin in God's design for us! Let's look at these three "unalienable rights" and discern their true source.

Scripture clearly teaches that God is our Creator and the One who gave all of us *life*.

God also gave Adam and Eve everything they needed for *happiness*-a beautiful home, companionship with each other and later with children/friends, fellowship with heavenly beings, health, delicious food, pleasant labor in caring for gardens and animals, etc.

God also gave them *liberty* as evidenced by the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Many people consider the tree of knowledge of good and evil as an arbitrary test given by God to see if Adam and Eve would be faithful to Him, when in reality it was a revelation of the freedom and liberty that God gave to them to choose for Him or to choose against Him. If God had not valued and given them liberty, He would not have placed that tree in the Garden. It's amazing that our Creator God valued human liberty and freedom so much that He allowed our first parents to reject Him and go their own way.

Notice that the Declaration of Independence calls "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" UNALIENABLE RIGHTS, and not merely GIFTS. While they certainly originated as gifts from God, He gave them to us as rights, not gifts. God gave us "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" as "unalienable" rights -- rights that He would not take away. God actually gave us rights that He would not take away! Notice Psalms 115:16: "*The heaven, [even] the heavens, [are] the LORD'S: but the earth hath he given to the children of men.*"* So God has given us liberty to control our individual and planetary destiny here on planet earth. And He could only do that by risking the reality that we would abuse our freedom and liberty in ways that would harm ourselves, others, and this planet.

If we lose "life, liberty, and happiness" it is not because God took it away from us, or took back His gifts, it is because one of two things have happened:

A. We as individuals sacrificed those rights/gifts that God gave to us on the altar of selfishness which led naturally to the opposite of life, liberty, and happiness, that being death, bondage, and unhappiness. OR

B. Someone else has used their freedom to take away our life, liberty, or happiness.

Let's see how this reality works:

-God gives us LIFE:

-Now, the choices we make, and the choices others make in relating to us, determine if we continue in life. By contrast, the choice to sin leads to a totally different result. *"Sin when it is full grown brings forth death"* (James 1:15). *"Death came through sin"* (Rom.5:12). Death comes because sin inevitably and inherently produces death by separating from the Lifegiver!

-God gives us LIBERTY:

-We have the freedom to choose the bondage of sin, or live in the freedom of love and righteousness.

"Knowing this, that our old man was crucified with him, that the body of sin might be done away, that we should no longer be in bondage to sin" (Rom.6:6). Sin leads not to freedom, but to bondage. Just ask any addict, no matter what his addiction, whether it is substance abuse, sexual addiction, gossiping, gambling, etc. These addictions didn't lead to greater freedom, but to loss of freedom. *"His own iniquities shall take the wicked himself, and he shall be holden with the cords of his sins"* (Prov. 5:22). All sin and addictions take away our freedom. They take away our ability to choose.

-On a broad scale, we all know and have observed how participating in sin makes it easier to fall again the next time, and the next time, until a habit or pattern of thinking or acting is established that "binds" us and controls us. At that point only the Lord can deliver us.

-Contrast that experience with: *"I shall walk at liberty, for I have sought your precepts"* (Ps.119:45).

When we seek and appreciate God's principles the result is liberty of thought and action.

-God gives us HAPPINESS:

"Thus says the LORD: Maintain justice, and do what is right. Happy is the mortal who does this, and refrains from doing any evil" (Is. 56:1-2). The pursuit of happiness is successful only when we live as just and honest and upright people who do the right thing. Living for self always leads, ultimately, to despair and unhappiness.

So we see that, "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" are inherent in righteousness and goodness, while death, bondage, and sadness are inherent in sin. God doesn't *take* our "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." He *gave* them as "inalienable rights," but we may throw them away and sacrifice them on the altar of self-service.

Another parallel to understand between the government of God and governing principles of the United States of America is that America is a country governed by a constitution based on right principles. The United States of America is not a democracy in the strict sense of the word. We are not a country governed by majority rule. The will of the majority is subjected to the "scrutiny" and "approval" of the principles of the Constitution. A majority of people cannot pass a law that violates the Constitution.

For example, if the majority of the country voted in a national referendum to require everyone to pray before they eat lunch (i.e. "say the blessing"), that would be against the Constitution. While showing appreciation to God is a respectful and courteous thing to do, it would be unconstitutional to REQUIRE it, because that would violate the rights of people not to thank or acknowledge God if they so choose. So we see that the principles of the Constitution are above the will of the majority. Thus, even though the majority approves something, it can be struck down, because we are not a "strict" democracy, but a country governed by a constitution.

The Constitution, or more specifically, the Bill of Rights, protects the rights of the minority in the face of the demands of the majority, especially when the majority is attempting to violate the protected rights of the minority. We can say, in a sense, that God's government operates on a "constitution" of self-sacrificing love. The government of heaven is not a dictatorship where God makes the rules and if anyone disagrees with Him they will be destroyed. If that were the case, God could have eliminated the rebellious Lucifer, the rebellious angels, and rebellious planet earth much earlier on.

By contrast, God's government is governed by the constitution of unselfishness. God Himself abides by this constitution, and God is the author and primary exemplar of this constitution. It is because God doesn't rule by force, but by "principle" (or we might say, "constitution"), that the rights, needs, and liberties of all the beings in the universe are preserved!

In fact, it is fair to say that God is the author of the principles that are expressed in our Bill of Rights. God gives us the right to free speech, freedom of worship and religion, to live as we please, freedom to assemble. He gives us the right to choose, even if those choices go against His will.

The Bill of Rights is a reflection of the rights that God gives to each one of us, even if we choose to use those rights to oppose, defy, defame, and even hate Him. What a picture of integrity and love is revealed by God. Rather than a universe where a God of micro-managing through controlling rules, we have a God in whose kingdom the principles of freedom and self-determination rule. This doesn't mean that wrong choices don't have consequences that God in His love warns us against, but it *does mean* that we have the freedom to choose right or wrong without *externally imposed threats* against our life and liberty.

Ellen White summed it up when she stepped back and looked at how free God created us: "Every human being, created in the image of God, is endowed with a power akin to that of the Creator-- **individuality, power to think and to do**" (*Education*, p. 17). She recognized that God has given us something so awesome, and so precious - **individuality!** We are all INDIVIDUALS! And we have power to think and reason and understand and imagine, as well as to act and choose based on those thoughts and imaginations.

So many earthly governments don't grant these rights to their citizens, but God has granted these rights to *His* citizens. Thomas Jefferson said it similarly when he looked at how God could have used, if He so chose, force or coercion to control us. But Jefferson recognized that God had not used those methods to influence us, therefore neither should earthly governments use force, coercion or intimidation to manipulate and control people. Notice how Thomas Jefferson got his ideas of free government from looking at how God related to us!

"Almighty God hath created the mind free; all attempts to influence it by temporal punishments or burdens, or by civil incapacitations, tend only to beget habits of hypocrisy and meanness, and are a departure from the plan of the holy Author of our religion, who being Lord both of body and mind, chose not to propagate it by coercions on either, as was in His almighty power to do." (reference?)

Truly God has the power to control or manipulate us, but He does not because He wants fellowship and friendship that is freely given. Isn't that what we really want, too? Would you or I as individuals want someone to "love" us or "be our friend" because he or she "had to" or was "pressured" into it? Of course not, and neither does God. God knows – and so do we– that love and worship and friendship can never be forced or coerced, but only given freely in appreciation for the character and attributes of the one loved.

This principle of how God relates to us has implications not just on governmental levels, but also in how we deal day-to-day with those around us. Whether someone disagrees with us in religious matters, or political matters, or business and professional matters, we need to change their minds via reason and patience and thoughtful dialogue (just as God tries to do with us), not by intimidation, sarcasm, or condescending attitudes. ***"Let each man be fully convinced/assured in his own mind (Rom.14:5). "Condemn no man for not thinking as you think: Let every one enjoy the full and free liberty of thinking for himself: Abhor every approach, in any kind or degree, to the spirit of persecution. If you cannot reason or persuade a man into the truth, never attempt to force him into it. If love will not compel him to come in, leave him to God."*** -- John Wesley.

It is sad how often Christians are perceived as being intolerant and vindictive of others. So often we shoot ourselves in the foot by the way we treat and relate to others who disagree with us. Rather than patient reasoning and persuasion via truth, we too often resort to sarcastic denunciations and poor logic. That does not mean we shouldn't speak plainly and directly about issues of great significance, but always with a *tone and attitude* of generosity and patience which characterizes true Christianity.

May we pursue the establishment of the divine principles of life, liberty and true happiness in our hearts and minds, to prepare ourselves and many others for the company of our freedom-loving God and the holy companionship of heaven.

*emphasis suppld in all quotations