

SELF-EVIDENT
The Truths That Built a Nation

STUDY GUIDE ONE

“We Hold These Truths”

The Phrase

“We hold these truths to be self-evident . . .”

Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776

Key Terms

Hold. To take and keep as a settled conviction; to stand on something as true, not merely to prefer or feel it.

Truth. That which corresponds to reality; in the Biblical worldview, something recognized rather than invented, grounded in God who is its author.

Self-evident. Known to be true as soon as it is understood, without needing a separate argument to prove it. (Explored fully in Guide Two.)

What It Means

Notice how the most important sentence in American history begins. Not with a demand, not with a complaint, but with a claim about truth. The Founders did not say, “We feel these things.” They did not say, “We prefer these things.” They said, “We hold these truths.”

To hold a truth is to take a settled position. It is to plant your feet on something you are willing to stand on, to defend, and in their case, to risk your life, your fortune, and your sacred honor for. A man does not pledge his life for an opinion. He pledges it for a conviction.

This is the difference between truth and preference. A preference can shift with the mood of the room. A truth does not move, because it was not invented by the one who holds it; it was recognized. The Founders were not creating these truths in 1776. They were declaring truths that were already real, already binding, and already theirs by virtue of being human.

That single word, hold, sets the tone for everything that follows. Before they ever name a right, they tell us where rights come from: not from feelings, not from kings, but from truths a free people are willing to stand on.

Where It Came From

Thomas Jefferson drafted the line, but the conviction behind it was older than the colonies. It came from two streams that the Founders drank from deeply: Scripture and reason.

From Scripture came the understanding that truth is fixed because God is its author. “Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth” (John 17:17). Truth in the Biblical worldview is not a human construction to be voted on. It is part of the created order, as real as gravity and just as unyielding.

From reason came the confidence that such truths could be known by any honest mind willing to look. The Founders were heirs to a long tradition that said the moral law was written on the human conscience. They were not asking the world to take their word for it. They were pointing to truths they believed every reasonable person could see for himself, which is exactly why the next phrase is the one we will study next: self-evident.

In Their Own Words

“The Revolution was in the Minds of the People, and this was effected, from 1760 to 1775, in the course of fifteen Years, before a drop of blood was shed at Lexington.”

— John Adams, letter to Thomas Jefferson, August 24, 1815

Why It Matters Today

We live in an age that has lost its nerve about truth. We are told that what is true for you may not be true for me, that every conviction is really just a preference in disguise, and that the highest virtue is to hold nothing too firmly. The Founders would have found this not liberating but fatal. A people who hold no truths cannot defend any rights, because a right is only as solid as the truth beneath it.

If we want to keep what the Founders won, we have to recover what they began with. We have to be a people willing to hold truths again: to know them, to stand on them, and to live as though they are real, because they are. The recovery of liberty begins where the Declaration begins, with citizens who can say without flinching, “We hold these truths.”

Discussion Questions

1. What is the difference between holding a truth and holding an opinion? Why does that difference matter for a free people?
2. The Founders pledged their lives, fortunes, and sacred honor for these truths. Name a truth you would be willing to stand on at real cost. What makes it worth that?
3. Where do you see the modern idea that all truth is really just personal preference? What does that belief do to a person, a family, or a nation over time?
4. Read John seventeen, verse seventeen. How does the claim that God’s word is truth change the way we understand the rights named later in the Declaration?
5. Why do you think the Founders opened with a claim about truth before naming a single right? What were they building on?

Going Deeper

The whole Declaration rests on a chain, and this phrase is the first link. Truths are held; those truths are self-evident, they point to a Creator, the Creator endows us with rights, and those rights cannot be taken away. Pull out the first link, and the whole chain falls. As you move through this series, watch how each phrase depends on the one before it.

Next in the series: “Self-Evident”, why the Founders rested their entire argument on truths they believed any honest person could see.

