

SELF-EVIDENT
The Truths That Built a Nation
STUDY GUIDE TWO
“Self-Evident”

The Phrase

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

Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776

Key Terms

Self-evident. A truth seen the moment it is understood, needing no proof; a starting point of reasoning rather than a conclusion.

First principle. A foundational truth on which other truths are built, but which is not itself derived from something more basic.

Conscience. The inner sense of right and wrong; in the Biblical view, the place where God’s moral law is written on the human heart.

What It Means

Having told us they hold these truths, the Founders now tell us what kind of truths they are. They are self-evident. A self-evident truth is one that does not need to be proven by argument because it is seen the moment it is understood. You do not build a case for it; you simply recognize it. That the whole is greater than the part, that a thing cannot both be and not be at the same time, that two contradictory claims cannot both be right; these are not conclusions we reach at the end of a debate. They are starting points we see at the beginning.

By calling these truths self-evident, the Founders were making a bold claim. They were saying that human equality and God-given rights are not fragile theories propped up by clever reasoning. They are bedrock. They are the kind of thing an honest person sees plainly once the fog is cleared away.

This is why the Declaration does not argue for equality. It declares it. You do not argue for the foundation of a house; you build on it. The Founders placed equality and unalienable rights in that foundational position, as truths so basic that everything else in the American order would be built on top of them.

Where It Came From

The language of self-evident truth came largely from a tradition of reason that ran through thinkers the Founders read closely, and it rested on an older Biblical foundation beneath that. The reasoning tradition held that certain first principles are known directly by the mind, without proof. The Biblical foundation held that God had written His law on the human heart.

The Apostle Paul described exactly this in his letter to the Romans, writing that the requirements of the law are written on human hearts, with conscience bearing witness (Romans 2:14-15). In the Biblical worldview, human beings are not blank slates who must be argued into

knowing right from wrong. They come already knowing, because they are made in the image of a God who is Himself the author of truth.

This is why the Founders could appeal to truths every honest person could see. They believed those truths were not invented by philosophers but planted in every human conscience by the Creator. Self-evident does not mean obvious to the careless. It means visible to the honest.

In Their Own Words

“Facts are stubborn things; and whatever may be our wishes, our inclinations, or the dictates of our passion, they cannot alter the state of facts and evidence.”

— John Adams, Argument in Defense of the Soldiers in the Boston Massacre Trials, 1770

Why It Matters Today

We live among people who have been taught that nothing is really self-evident, that every claim is just a construction of power or culture or personal experience. But a society that believes nothing is self-evident cannot hold anything steady. If human equality is merely one opinion among many, then it can be revised, revoked, or voted away the moment it becomes inconvenient.

The Founders understood that some truths must sit beneath the reach of majorities and rulers alike. That is the whole point of calling them self-evident. They are not up for negotiation. Recovering that conviction is not a matter of nostalgia. It is a matter of survival, because a people who can no longer say what is self-evidently true have no ground left to stand on when their rights are challenged.

Discussion Questions

1. What does it mean for a truth to be self-evident rather than proven? Give an example of something you know to be true without needing an argument for it.
2. The Founders declared human equality rather than arguing for it. Why might some truths be weakened, not strengthened, by being treated as debatable?
3. Read Romans 2:14-15. How does the idea of God’s law written on the heart support the claim that certain truths are self-evident?
4. Self-evident does not mean obvious to the careless, but visible to the honest. What keeps people today from seeing truths that should be plain?
5. If a society decides nothing is truly self-evident, what happens to its ability to defend human rights?

Going Deeper

This phrase is the hinge of the Founders’ whole method. Because these truths are self-evident, the Declaration can move quickly to what they reveal: that all men are created equal, and that they are endowed by their Creator with rights. Self-evidence is the doorway; the created order is the room it opens into.

Next in the series: “All Men Are Created”, the claim that our worth is rooted in being made, not manufactured, and what that means for human dignity.