

SELF-EVIDENT

The Truths That Built a Nation

STUDY GUIDE FIVE

“Endowed by Their Creator”

The Phrase

“... that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights ...”

Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776

Key Terms

Endow. To give as a permanent possession; to grant something that becomes lastingly and truly the recipient’s own.

Creator. God, the source and giver of human rights; in the Declaration, the authority above all earthly rulers.

Natural law. The moral order built into creation and knowable by reason, understood by the Founders as having its source in God.

What It Means

This is the hinge of the entire sentence. Everything before it has been building to this claim, and everything after it depends on it. Our rights, the Founders say, are endowed by our Creator. To endow is to give as a permanent possession, to grant something that becomes truly and lastingly the recipient’s own. Our rights are a gift from God, settled on us at our creation.

The source of a right determines who can take it away. If the government gives you your rights, the government can revoke them, because whoever grants a thing may reclaim it. But if God gives you your rights, then no earthly power stands above Him to overrule the gift. This is the master stroke of the Declaration. By locating the source of rights in God rather than in government, the Founders placed those rights beyond the reach of any king, congress, or majority.

This is why the American founding is different from a mere change of rulers. The Founders were not asking for better treatment from their government. They were declaring that their most basic rights never belonged to the government in the first place. You cannot lose what was never the state’s to give.

Where It Came From

The idea that rights come from God, not from the state, has deep roots in the Biblical worldview and in the thinkers the Founders read. Scripture teaches that human beings answer ultimately to God and bear a dignity that comes from Him, which means earthly rulers are themselves under a higher authority. “The earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it;” (Psalm 24:1), including the rulers who imagine themselves supreme.

The philosopher John Locke, whose writing shaped the founding generation, argued that human beings possess natural rights that come from their Creator and exist prior to any government.

Government, in this view, does not create rights; it exists to protect rights that people already have. The Founders drew this stream directly into the Declaration.

So, when Jefferson wrote endowed by their Creator, he was making a deliberate and radical claim. He was saying that the ultimate source of human rights is not the crown, not Parliament, not even the consent of the people, but God Himself. Human government is the guardian of rights, never their author.

In Their Own Words

“The god who gave us life gave us liberty at the same time: the hand of force may destroy, but cannot disjoin them.”

— Thomas Jefferson, A Summary View of the Rights of British America, 1774

Why It Matters Today

Everything hangs on where we say rights come from. In our own day, many speak as though rights are granted by government, which would mean government can expand them, shrink them, or take them away at will. But rights that the government can give, the government can remove. Only rights that come from God sit beyond the reach of shifting politics and changing majorities.

This is not an abstract point. It is the difference between a citizen and a subject. A subject holds whatever privileges the ruler allows. A citizen holds rights that no ruler granted and no ruler can lawfully take. If we forget that our rights are endowed by our Creator, we quietly trade our standing as free citizens for the status of subjects who must beg permission to be free.

Discussion Questions

1. Why does the source of a right determine who can take it away? What is the difference between rights that come from God and rights that come from government?
2. The Founders placed the source of rights above the reach of any king or majority. Why was that such a radical and important move?
3. Read Psalm 24:1. How does the truth that everything belongs to God affect the authority of earthly rulers?
4. John Locke argued that government protects rights rather than creating them. How should that shape what we expect from government today?
5. What is the practical difference between a citizen, who holds God-given rights, and a subject, who holds only permissions granted by a ruler?

Going Deeper

This phrase is the keystone. Because our rights are endowed by our Creator, they are also unalienable, unable to be taken or surrendered, which is the very next word we will study. The gift comes from God, and that is exactly why no one can take it back.

Next in the series: “Certain Unalienable Rights”, why the Founders chose that unusual word, and what it means that some rights can never be surrendered or seized.