

SELF-EVIDENT
The Truths That Built a Nation
STUDY GUIDE SEVEN
“Life”

The Phrase

“... that among these are Life ...”

Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776

Key Terms

Sanctity of life. The sacredness of human life is grounded in every person bearing the image of God.

Innocent. One who has not forfeited the protection of law through wrongdoing; the taking of innocent life is what the right to life forbids.

First law of nature. Self-preservation; the founding-era term for the most basic drive and duty from which the right to life flows.

What It Means

When the Founders finally name specific rights, they name life first. The order is not accidental. Life is the first right because it is the foundation of every other right. A man who has lost his life has lost his liberty and his pursuit of happiness along with it. You cannot exercise freedom, own property, worship God, or raise a family if you are not alive to do it. Life is the ground the other rights stand on.

The word among is important too. The Founders wrote that among these rights are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, signaling that these three are examples, not the entire list. They chose to lead that list with life because it is first in order and first in importance. Everything else assumes it.

To call life a right is to say that no one has the authority to take an innocent life at will, because that life was given by God and belongs to Him. The right to life is not the government's to grant, and it is therefore not the government's to take, except under the careful limits of justice. Human life carries a protected status that flows directly from its Creator.

Where It Came From

The sanctity of human life runs through Scripture from beginning to end. Because human beings are made in the image of God, human life carries a weight no other created thing possesses. “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image” (Genesis 9:6). The reason given for protecting human life is precisely the image of God stamped upon it.

This is the same root we have followed through the whole series: Imago Dei, the image of God in every person. Because that image is present in every human being, every human life is sacred, and the taking of innocent life is not merely a crime against the person but an offense against the God whose image that person bears.

The Founders inherited this conviction and placed it at the head of their list of rights. They understood that a government that does not protect the lives of the innocent has failed at the most basic task a government exists to perform. Protecting life is not just one function of government among many; it is the first.

In Their Own Words

“Among the natural rights of the Colonists are these: First, a right to life . . . These are evident branches of, rather than deductions from, the duty of self-preservation, commonly called the first law of nature.”

— Samuel Adams, The Rights of the Colonists, 1772

Why It Matters Today

A society reveals what it truly believes about human dignity by how it treats life at its most vulnerable and defenseless. Where life is cheap, every other right grows fragile, because a people willing to disregard life will not long respect liberty or property. The right to life is the first thread; pull it, and the whole fabric begins to unravel.

The Founders’ placement of life at the head of the list is a standing reminder of what government is for. It exists first to protect the lives of the innocent. When we defend the sanctity of human life, we are not importing a private religious opinion into public life. We are standing exactly where the Declaration stands, on the truth that life is a God-given right and the foundation of all the others.

Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think the Founders named life first among the rights? In what sense is it the foundation for all the others?
2. The Declaration says these three rights are among our rights, not the whole list. Why does it still matter that life was chosen to lead?
3. Read Genesis 9:6. What reason does Scripture give for the special protection of human life, and how does that connect to earlier guides in this series?
4. How does a society’s treatment of the most vulnerable reveal what it truly believes about human dignity?
5. If government exists first to protect the lives of the innocent, how should that shape the way we evaluate our laws and leaders?

Going Deeper

Life is the foundation, but the Founders did not stop there. A life that is not free is only half a life, and so the next right builds directly on this one. Having secured the right to exist, the Declaration turns to the right to live that existence as free people under God.

Next in the series: “Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness,” what true liberty is, and what the Founders actually meant by the pursuit of happiness.