

SELF-EVIDENT
The Truths That Built a Nation

STUDY GUIDE EIGHT

“Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness”

The Phrase

“. . . Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776

Key Terms

Liberty. The freedom to do what is right by governing oneself under God, so that one need not be governed by force.

License. The false freedom of doing whatever one pleases; slavery to one's own appetites, and the opposite of true liberty.

Pursuit of happiness. In founding-era usage, the pursuit of a flourishing life of virtue and purpose, not merely the chasing of pleasure.

What It Means

The Declaration completes its list with two rights that are often misunderstood: liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Both have been twisted in the modern mind into something the Founders never meant. Liberty has been reduced to doing whatever you please, and the pursuit of happiness has been reduced to chasing whatever feels good. The Founders meant something far higher.

Liberty, rightly understood, is not the absence of all restraint. It is the freedom to do what is right, to govern yourself under God so that no one else has to govern you by force. A people capable of self-restraint can be trusted with self-rule. This is the truth captured in the framework that discipline produces freedom: the more a person masters himself, the freer he becomes, because he no longer needs external chains to keep him in line. License, by contrast, is not liberty at all. It is slavery to your own appetites.

The pursuit of happiness meant something deeper than pleasure to the founding generation. In their vocabulary, happiness was closer to flourishing, to a life well lived in virtue and purpose. To pursue happiness was to pursue the good life in the fullest sense: to become the kind of person, and to build the kind of family and community, in which real human flourishing is possible. It was never a right to feel good. It was a right to pursue what is truly good.

Where It Came From

The Founders' understanding of liberty was shaped by a long tradition holding that true freedom and moral order go together. Scripture ties freedom directly to living in the truth. “You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:32), and “where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (2 Corinthians 3:17). Biblical liberty is never freedom to sin; it is freedom from sin, freedom to become what God made us to be.

The founding generation frequently warned that liberty cannot survive without virtue. They understood that a people who will not govern themselves from within will eventually be governed by force from without. Freedom and self-restraint were, in their minds, inseparable. A nation of people mastered by their passions could not remain a free nation for long.

The phrase pursuit of happiness drew on the older idea that the purpose of human life is to flourish by living rightly, an idea running from the classical philosophers through the Christian tradition. The Founders were not promising happiness; they were protecting each person's freedom to pursue a good and worthy life. The pursuit was to be aimed at virtue, not merely at pleasure.

In Their Own Words

"Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious People. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other."

— John Adams, letter to the Massachusetts Militia, October 11, 1798

Why It Matters Today

Our culture has largely traded liberty for license and the pursuit of happiness for the pursuit of feeling. The results are visible everywhere: people freer than any generation in history, yet more anxious, more enslaved to their appetites, and less content. When freedom is cut loose from virtue, it does not produce flourishing. It produces bondage of a subtler kind.

Recovering the Founders' meaning would change how we live. It would teach us that real liberty is the fruit of self-government, that discipline is the path to freedom rather than its enemy, and that true happiness is found not in chasing pleasure but in pursuing a life of purpose, virtue, and service. This is the freedom the Founders fought for: not the freedom to do as we please, but the freedom to become what we were made to be.

Discussion Questions

1. What is the difference between liberty and license? How does the idea that discipline produces freedom help explain true liberty?
2. The Founders understood the pursuit of happiness as the pursuit of a good and flourishing life, not merely pleasure. How does that change the way we should live out this right?
3. Read John 8:32. How does living in the truth relate to being truly free?
4. The founding generation warned that liberty cannot survive without virtue. Why can a people who will not govern themselves not remain free for long?
5. Where do you see freedom cut loose from virtue in our culture today, and what fruit is it bearing?

Going Deeper

With life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, the Declaration has named its examples and completed the foundational sentence. But the Founders said these rights are among our rights, not all of them. That single word opens a door. If these are examples, what other rights flow

from the same source? The next guides in this series follow that thread, tracing the rights that grow naturally out of the ones the Declaration names.

Next in the series: “The Right of Conscience”, the first of the rights that flow from a Creator who made us free to know and worship Him.

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