

What Does It Mean To Love My Country?

1. Warm-up Question: Sunday was July 4. As you look back over the years, what's a favorite July 4 memory of yours?
2. Nobody ever loved their country more than the ancient Israelites. They set the standard for patriotism. The ancient Israelites saw their nation through the lens of God's promise to Abraham, the founder of their nation. Read Genesis 12:1-4, as printed on p. 3.
 - a. In this passage God promises to bless those who bless Abraham and his descendants and to curse those who curse them. What do you think that means?
 - b. God promises to make a great nation out of Abraham so that "all the families of the earth shall be blessed." When Abraham first heard that promise, how do you imagine he thought his nation might bless all the families of the earth? Has this promise been fulfilled? If so, in what ways?
 - c. In the early days of America, many Americans thought of our country as "the New Israel," with a divine mission and destiny as grand as that of ancient Israel. Do you think that's a good way to see our nation? If so, what do you believe is our special mission or destiny?
3. Because of the promise made to Abraham, Israelites saw themselves as God's chosen people, destined to bless the world. All of which makes it really odd that almost half of the Hebrew Scriptures, i.e., the Old Testament, is dedicated to Israelites saying bad things about their nation – pointing out all its flaws. We call these critics "prophets." There are 16 books of the prophets in the Old Testament. For a sample, let's read Isaiah 1:2-4 and 12-18, as printed on p. 3.
 - a. According to the Isaiah passage, what were the principle sins of Israel in Isaiah's eyes and what reforms was he advocating?
 - b. How do you think patriotic Israelites felt about Isaiah's criticism of their nation? How do you think the nation's political leaders felt about the criticism?
 - c. If Isaiah were alive today, saying similar things about the United States, would he be regarded as a patriot? Why or why not?
 - d. Sometimes we encounter people who see our nation as nothing but wonderful. Other times we encounter people who see our nation as all messed up. Which way do you lean – and why?
 - e. What are some of the most wonderful things our nation has ever done?
 - f. What are some of the most shameful things our nation has ever done?

- g. Jeff said, “As people of faith, we believe that confession of sins is very important. What’s true for a good person is also true for a good nation. A good nation, like a good person, understands how important it is to confess sins. Patriots are people who, like the Israelite prophets, love their country enough to call out its failures and insist that it do better.” Evaluate that statement. Does it resonate with you? Why or why not?
4. Langston Hughes said, “Let America be America again/The land that never was/Yet still must be.” In other words, we have lots of unfinished business to realize the fullness of the promise of America. But how we go about this prophetic work is very important. As we all know, America is very polarized right now. It’s easy to get exasperated and “go off” on our political opponents.
- Galatians 5:15 says, “If you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.” Is it fair to apply this verse to modern American political discourse? If so, how should it affect our discourse?
 - Jeff said, “Patriots are people who love their country enough to do the hard work of engaging in genuine dialogue with our opponents so as to win allies for progress.” Venting against our opponents is satisfying, he said, but doesn’t lead to progress. Far better to seek to engage them respectfully. He gave two examples: (a) the example of dialogues SoulForce had with Jerry Falwell and other opponents of the LGBTQ civil rights movement; and (b) the example of Ellen DeGeneres befriending George W. Bush. How do you feel about this? Is it more effective to demonize our political opponents or befriend them or some combination of both?
 - The motto of SoulForce was, “Speak the truth in love, relentlessly.” I Corinthians 13:1 says, “If I speak in . . . the tongues of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.” Is it too idealistic to think we should love our political enemies? To quote Tina Turner, “What’s love got to do with it?”
5. The last point in Sunday’s sermon was that patriots recognize that our allegiance to God must be even greater than our allegiance to country.
- Read Hebrews 11:13-16, as printed on p. 3. What does this passage say to you?
 - Jeff said “Our primary citizenship is in heaven. Christianity has always been a transnational movement. God is a transnational God. Heaven will be a transnational place. The Bible doesn’t say to love our country with all our heart, soul, and might; it says to love God with all our heart, soul, and might.” How does Jeff’s statement sit with you? What do you like or dislike about it?
 - John 3:16 tells us, “For God so loved the world. . . .” Great nations love what God loves. So the mission of great nations, like ancient Israel, should be to “bless all the families of the earth.” Should blessing the world be America’s highest priority? Why or why not? How well do you think America is doing in that regard?

Genesis 12:1-4

Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. ²I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." ⁴So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran.

Isaiah 1:2-4 and 12-18

² Hear, O heavens, and listen, O earth; for the LORD has spoken: I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me. ³ The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master's crib; but Israel does not know, my people do not understand.

⁴ Ah, sinful nation, people laden with iniquity, offspring who do evil, children who deal corruptly, who have forsaken the LORD, who have despised the Holy One of Israel, who are utterly estranged!

¹² When you come to appear before me, who asked this from your hand? Trample my courts no more; ¹³ bringing offerings is futile; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and sabbath and calling of convocation—I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity. ¹⁴ Your new moons and your appointed festivals my soul hates; they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them. ¹⁵ When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. ¹⁶ Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, ⁷ learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.

¹⁸ Come now, let us argue it out, says the LORD: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.

Hebrews 11:13-16

¹³ All of these [Bible heroes] died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, ¹⁴for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. ¹⁵If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them.