

Then Sings My Soul 7 **“The Star Spangled Banner”**

In September of 1841 Francis Scott Key was living in Washington DC, not far from the White House and US Capital...both of which were engulfed in flames following a strategic and quite fatal British attack. Key knew his home city of Baltimore would be next on their list of destinations, then Annapolis would soon follow. As word reached Francis that his good friend, Dr. Beane; an esteemed physician and fellow Baltimorean had been captured and was being held on a British ship off the coast opposite Fort McHenry, Key traveled quickly to try and intervene. With papers in hand of British soldiers testifying to Dr. Beane's gracious care and life-saving efforts; Francis Key was awarded safe passage to the British ship where Dr. Beane was being held. He convinced the British captain to release them both, but both must wait till morning to return because of an intensive midnight raid the Brits were making on Baltimore's Fort McHenry. As the sun set over the city, Francis marveled at the irony of standing on the bow of a British war ship while watching the grand American Flag flying placidly over the Fort, in his beloved hometown. How things would change in the night.

A massive attack took place, with an even more impressive defense. With skies filled with mortars, rockets, smoke, clouds and the smell of burnt wood and gunpowder. All through the night Key and his friend wondered, paced, prayed for their beloved new country while captives on a ship of their old one. As morning began to awaken, one thought filled his mind, one question haunted his memory, one wonder had kept him awake all night:

Oh, say can you see by the dawn's early light
what so proudly we hailed at the twilight's last gleaming?
Whose broad stripes and bright stars thru the perilous fight,
O'er the ramparts we watched were so gallantly streaming?
And the rocket's red glare, the bombs bursting in air,
Gave proof through the night that our flag was still there.
Oh, say does that Star-Spangled Banner yet wave
O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave?

Wave it did, and does today! Washington has been rebuilt and withstood numerous attacks since, not the least happening on another September morning just 6 years ago now. Yes, the Star Spangled Banner anthem born in the heart of Francis Scott Key on the deck of a British war ship in 1841; became the National Anthem of the United States in September of 1931. That flag still hangs in the sacred halls of the Smithsonian, and two original copies of Key's great hand-written poem, scribbled on the back of an envelope exist as well. We sing verse one of four, and think we have sung it all. We have sung the fourth today. Let me share the remainder:

On the shore, dimly seen through the mists of the deep,
Where the foe's haughty host in dread silence reposes,
What is that which the breeze, o'er the towering steep,
As it fitfully blows, half conceals, half discloses?
Now it catches the gleam of the morning's first beam,
In full glory reflected now shines in the stream:
'Tis the star-spangled banner! Oh long may it wave
O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave!

And where is that band who so vauntingly swore
That the havoc of war and the battle's confusion,
A home and a country should leave us no more!
Their blood has washed out their foul footsteps' pollution.
No refuge could save the hireling and slave
From the terror of flight, or the gloom of the grave:
And the star-spangled banner in triumph doth wave
O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave!

Oh! thus be it ever, when freemen shall stand
between their loved home and the war's desolation!
Blest with victory and peace, may the heav'n rescued land
Praise the Power that hath made and preserved us a nation.
Then conquer we must, when our cause it is just,
And this be our motto: "In God is our trust."
And the Star-Spangled Banner in triumph shall wave
O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave!

I am filled with great pride at the singing of patriotic hymns and sharing of our national anthem. I am blessed to be living in a free land. I am humbled to be proudly called an American. I am filled with gratitude and overwhelming debt for those who have served; those who have fought, those who are fighting, those who have died, and those who have lost loved ones for the great cause of freedom. And yet as another Independence Day approaches, I am also filled with a profound sense of wonderment. What has become the source of our national pride, and is it legitimate?

I can't help but think of our original forefathers and mothers, those Hebrew people who knew nothing of God, and became God's chosen people. I am in no way saying or trying to imply that I believe Americans are the New Chosen People; or America the new Promised Land. But I wonder if we are failing to remember, failing to learn the lessons Israel tragically learned before us. Listen:

The Lord did not set His heart on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other nations, for you were the smallest of all nations! Rather, it was simply that the Lord loves you, and he was keeping the oath he had sworn to your ancestors. That is why the Lord rescued you with such a strong hand from your slavery and from the oppressive hand of Pharaoh, king of Egypt. Understand, therefore, that the Lord your God is indeed God. He is the faithful God who keeps his covenant for a thousand generations and lavishes his unfailing love on those who love him and obey his commands. But he does not hesitate to punish and destroy those who reject him. Therefore, you must obey all these commands, decrees, and regulations I am giving you today. Deut. 7: 7-11

There is little historical doubt that the founders of our country saw (metaphorical if not real), parallels between them leaving Europe, and Israel leaving Egypt. The pursuant British war machine must have looked vaguely like Pharaoh's army. The colonial days must have felt like the wandering in the wilderness; and the revolutionary war's conclusion had to feel like the entrance (finally) into the land of milk and honey.

This story though leaves out the Native Americans who preceded us here; and the tragic injustices done and still being done; to them. As well as those ignoble depravities inflicted on African slaves, and others with different skin. You see, in so many ways Israel's failures to fulfill God's covenant are also being paralleled in our land today. This is no political immigration statement, but a plea that we not forget that we didn't discover America...it always existed...we were not the original pilgrims here, and truth be told, we were all immigrants at one point in our past! Finding a balance for securing our borders, and holding out Lady Liberty's dream is not easy!

Many today have forsaken the personal reality of God in our midst, whatever role God may have played in establishing this country. Many today have chosen to ignore the Godly inspired principles, and God-honoring values upon which this country was founded. Many today are rationalizing a war to insure we have enough oil to secure our extravagant and excessive lifestyles. Many others are protesting the war while ignoring its nobility and necessity in the face of ongoing struggles with fanatics and evil, all the while dishonoring our service men and women who are living each day in danger so we might live each day...free. Many of us are caught in the middle; knowing war is expensive, destructive, tragic, and sometimes absolutely necessary. No one likes war, and we all want it over...but as we have learned numerous times since the writing of this song...war is necessary and inevitable; tragic and terrible, regrettable and unfortunately oft-repeated!

Francis Scott Key vividly reminds us what we better not forget...God is our only trust...praise and adoration, OF HIS NAME...are our only hope! We are not great, never have been, because we are more numerous than any other tribe on this planet. We are not blessed because we are beautiful or powerful or prestigious or uniquely intelligent.

We are not better than any other race, nationality, country or continent because we have an advanced life that many envy; many more recently despise! We are not great because we are necessarily good, even at giving away our abundant wealth, or even for helping to spread the gospel and end poverty and disease. We are not esteemed because we are enlightened beyond those living uneducated lives. We are not wanting to be the police force for the world, but it behooves us to lead the way; and that too is not the reason we are great. What then?

We are great because God has chosen to love us, BUT NOT JUST US! God loves all who would love Him in return. We are so lucky to be born in America, but if we forget that present...we'll end up where we are headed...without God. Israel is and will always be God's chosen people, but they need to get their act together too. They can no longer just assume on their ancient privilege; they must submit their individual lives to Jesus Christ like everyone else. The Apostle Paul, himself a "Jews Jew" understood it:

The real children of Abraham, then, are those who put their faith in God. Gal. 3:7

They and we, and all others in this world need to get over our misplaced patriotic, even religious pride, that is based only in what we have done, only what we can do...and give ourselves again to the God of the universe who cares every bit as much that the little child in India has air in his bike tire as he cares about our immigration laws.

Zechariah reminded Zerubbabel...and us: "*It is not by force, nor by strength, but by my Spirit says the Lord*"; that anyone is anyone! I can't sing our national anthem without remembering another favorite hymn:

This is my song, O God of all the nations, a song of peace for lands afar and mine. This is my home, the country where my heart is; here are my hopes, my dreams, my holy shrine; but other hearts in other lands are beating with hopes and dreams as true and high as mine.

My country's skies are bluer than the ocean, and sunlight beams on cloverleaf and pine; but other lands have sunlight too, and clover; and skies are everywhere as blue as mine. O hear my song, thou God of all the nations, a song of peace for their land and for mine.

This is my prayer, O Lord of all earth's kingdoms: Thy kingdom come; on earth thy will be done. Let Christ be lifted up till all shall serve him, and hearts united learn to live as one. O hear my prayer, thou God of all the nations; myself I give thee; let thy will be done.

There you have it. Let Christ be lifted up till all shall serve him...myself I give thee; let thy will be done.

You want to honor our veterans this week...then give your life to Christ. You want to honor and celebrate the best that living in this great country has afforded you... then give your life to Christ. You want to continue the legacy we have all received at the sacrifice others have made...then give your life; sacrificially to Jesus Christ! You want to stand tall on Wed. morning's parade as some marching band plays the Star Spangled Banner, or some veteran carries it's replica down Mandan's main street...then give your life unashamedly and without reservation to Jesus Christ.

Francis Scott Key a few years later met the brother-in-law of one of his dear friends; a legislator from England. This new friend became a mentor for Francis, and profoundly influenced Francis to begin a Sunday school class for slaves in the county around Baltimore. This new friend helped Francis Key become a leader in the fight to abolish slavery in America, long after his song became famous. This new friend was named William Wilberforce...England's abolitionist. You see, Francis Scott Key didn't just write a witty poem and set it to a catchy tune. No, his love for God gave birth to a personal action that embodies all the greatness of this once and hopefully once again great nation. We can...we must...do the same. Give your life to Jesus Christ...today!