

July 4th, 2025

Good Morning everyone! What an honor it is to be gathered today on this the 249th year since the signing of the Declaration of Independence, and I want to thank you all for letting me speak to you.

I want to start by asking you to look around. Note what you see. We see the beautiful trees, the green grass, the flowers, and the rest of this lovely park that your tax dollars have made. Perhaps too you are noticing what your neighbor is wearing or not wearing. But there is something we do not see that many in the world would see if they were at a similar gathering. Here we are assembled in a public place for the specific purpose of worshiping God, and what we do not see is any form of state presence. There is no police, no sheriff, no military personnel, no informant, no spy, nor anyone here hostile to our intent to worship. This reality is certainly not present in many parts of the world. In fact, it is estimated that up to 70% of the world's population –or almost five billion people, live in areas where religious freedom is restricted. These restrictions follow two forms; either the restriction is imposed by the state, or it is imposed by hostile groups, either religious, tribal, or ethnic.

It was the genius of our founders that 249 years since our country's founding, here we are, now freely assembled, and freely worshipping. So, I am going to do two things this morning. I am going to give a history lesson and a spiritual lesson all woven into one tale. And we are going to try to do that by asking the question, where did we get our religious freedom?

Biblically, we can first trace the idea back to Moses requesting Pharaoh for permission to let the Israelites go out into the wilderness to worship God. The next example occurs during the Babylonian exile: as we found in our OT reading this morning from Dan 3. Here we have the familiar story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, telling Neb they would not worship the idol he had set up. The key verses are 3:16-18 in which the principle of religious freedom is first articulated: *Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to him, "King Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. ¹⁷ If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us^[d] from Your Majesty's hand. ¹⁸ But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up."* Note the principle: though SMA were willing to submit themselves to all the other edicts of Neb's government (and indeed they were officials in it) they were not willing to compromise their conscience and worship a foreign god.

We also have two NT examples in Acts 4 and 5. In Acts 4 Peter and John have been brought before the Sanhedrin for healing a crippled man and preaching the gospel. The relevant verses are 4:16-20, *What should we do with these men?" they asked each other. "We can't deny that they have performed a miraculous sign, and everybody in Jerusalem knows about it. ¹⁷ But to keep them from spreading their propaganda any further, we must warn them not to speak to anyone in Jesus' name again."* ¹⁸ *So they called the apostles back in and commanded them never again to speak or teach in the name of Jesus. ¹⁹ But Peter and John replied, "Do you think God wants us to obey you rather than him? ²⁰ We cannot stop telling about everything we have seen and heard."*

A similar event occurs in Acts 5. Peter and the apostles have been thrown into jail for performing signs and wonders and healing people. Miraculously they are released from jail by an angel (vs 19). The angel

commands them to go into the temple to preach, which they do, and they are again arrested and are brought before the Sanhedrin. The relevant verses are 5:27-29, *Then they brought the apostles before the high council, where the high priest confronted them.* ²⁸ *"We gave you strict orders never again to teach in this man's name!" he said. "Instead, you have filled all Jerusalem with your teaching about him, and you want to make us responsible for his death!"* ²⁹ *But Peter and the apostles replied, "We must obey God rather than any human authority."*

Note the principle in the two examples. Like SMA, Peter, John, and the apostles were not willing to compromise their conscience when it came to obeying God. In other words, there is an instance in which you can resist the state; and that is when the state infringes upon the expression of your moral duty to God.

In Romans 13:1-7, Paul states government is a God given institution designed for two things: restraining evil, and promoting the common good. Government is therefore to uphold the law and encourage right civic behavior. 350 years after Paul wrote Romans, Augustine noted that since government is run by fallen men, in other words, men whose nature is centered upon self-love, government too is fallen and centered upon self-love. Because it is based on self-love it is more interested in self-aggrandizement, than promoting good. Though necessary, Augustine felt it to be inherently evil. He termed it legalized oppression. And because it is fallen, it can exceed its God given boundaries; thus, the rule of magistrates is not absolute, as our examples illustrate. As Hugh Whelchel notes in his essay, [The Surprising origins of Religious Freedom](#), "Only God's moral law binds our conscience, and we are to obey God even if it means disobeying lesser rulers in some circumstances. Thus, there is a tension between established government and our personal responsibility before God."

The Church father Tertullian was perhaps the first person to express this idea in an objective writing. He noted in a letter to the magistrates in Rome in 197 AD, that Christians cannot be coerced into sacrificing to pagan gods since "we stand immovable in loyalty to our conscience." Fifteen years later in a letter to a Roman Proconsul he states, "It is a fundamental human right, a privilege of nature, that every man should worship according to his own convictions. One man's religion neither harms nor helps another man. It is assuredly no part of religion to compel religion, to which free will and not force should lead us."

This idea of religious toleration was formally incorporated into the Edict of Milan, which legalized Christianity and allowed religious tolerance throughout the Roman Empire in 313 AD. Eusebius, the historian commented on the edict in this way, "...every man, according to his own inclination and wish, should be given permission to practice his religion as he chooses...Christians and non-Christians alike should be allowed to keep the faith of their own religious beliefs and worship...This we have done to make it plain that we are not belittling any rite or form of worship."

The idea of Toleration of various faiths lasted throughout the life of the Roman Empire. When Rome fell in 486 AD, the Church stepped in and filled the political and social vacuum. By the medieval period the church was the dominant religious and political force in the western world. It held to the idea that the pope, as the vicar of Christ, should have the ultimate authority over the church and indirectly over the state. Obviously, this caused some tension with the political class and in the time prior to, and accelerated by the Reformation, a separation of church and state became ever more distinct. This

became especially acute with the French wars of religion between the Huguenots and Catholics from 1562 to 1598, and the thirty years war in central Europe between 1618 and 1648. These conflicts gave way to the Enlightenment in which people such as John Locke, Robert Williams (who founded Rhode Island), Voltaire, and Montesquieu, argued for the full separation of church and state. Which now brings us to the founders.

So, while religious toleration was a great innovation after these conflicts, the founders established an even greater principle, and it came to fruition on June 11, 1776. Just a year earlier, The Second Continental Congress was convened on May 10, 1775, at Philadelphia's State House, to consider if the colonies should declare independence. By May of 1776 they were close to passing the resolution. As states were soon to be independent, each colony (or new state) would need to draw up its own constitution. So, on May 6, 1776, delegates from Virginia persuaded George Mason to return from retirement (at age 51) and represent Fairfax county in Virginia and write the first draft of both the Virginia Constitution and the Virginia Declaration of Rights. He presented it to the Virginia Convention, assembled in Williamsburg, on May 27, 1776. In it, Mason adopted the views of the Enlightenment and particularly John Locke, the English political philosopher, and argued for the tolerance of Religion. By this he meant the state could grant permission to religious groups to practice religion. Indeed, many colonies, including Virginia, had tolerated various religious groups, but had themselves established state sponsored churches for which they collected taxes to support, hence forcing people to pay for churches they did not attend. When Mason proffered his draft, James Madison, a young man of only twenty-five, objected and argued that what the state could grant permission for, it could also withdraw, and what it could tax and sponsor, it could also change. Madison saw religious freedom as a natural right, residing in the heart and conscience of each individual, and something the state had no business to interfere with. He argued the language should be changed from "toleration in the exercise of religion" to the "free exercise of religion." This was a profound intellectual and philosophical change, for it explicitly centered the idea of the freedom to worship firmly within the individual, and most importantly, it was to be free of state interference. Government would no longer have the power to decide which groups to "tolerate" and what conditions to place on the practice of their religion. Madison's amendment was adopted, and the revised Virginia Bill of Rights was then passed on June 11, 1776. The twelve other states soon adopted Madison's idea and language, and incorporated it into their own state constitution's soon after independence. Madison then wrote it into the Bill of Rights which were added to the Constitution on Dec 15, 1791. And so, here we are today, in a park in Reardan, Washington, gathered to worship God, and we are free of State interference. That is a miracle! And something we can all take a moment and thank God for the country we live in, and for the foresight of those who founded it. Amen!

