

**AMERICA THE BEAUTIFUL:
DOES GOD MOVE IN HISTORY?
JULY 8, 2012**

We've just celebrated Independence Day, the 4th of July.

There were flags, cookouts, swimming pools full of bodies, and rivers full of inner tubes.

There were plenty of fireworks, and your dogs going crazy because of them.

But it's important that we remember what the day is supposed to be about:

On July 4, 1776 the Declaration of Independence was

adopted, signed by some very brave and determined men, and published for all to see.

It provided their reasons for the American colonies to break away from England.

They drew on the truth that God is above all human authorities.

And God gives certain unalienable human rights that

no human authority has the right to rescind or infringe upon.

The fighting had already begun prior to the official Declaration.

There were some who had hoped the fighting could be stopped

and negotiations could bring things back to some semblance of normal.

But with the signing of the Declaration, with representatives from all of the colonies,

there would be no turning back.

As we remember those events that we all read about in school,

you might not be aware that many people living through those days

were convinced God was working out something significant

in the history they were living through.

They were sure that God was laying the foundation for this nation.

So I have a question for us to consider today:

Does God move in human history?

The testimony of the Bible is that God most certainly DOES work in history.

From front to back, the story of the Bible is the story of God moving in history to bring

salvation, redemption, new life and, eventually, his completed and perfected kingdom.

You remember how the book starts:

"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth."

(Ge.1:1)

And we get a step by step account of God creating,

doing something real in this world.

Because of increasing sinfulness and corruption, God brings a great flood to destroy all life.

A small remnant in an ark are saved so God can start over.

(Ge.6-9)

God calls Abraham to be his man,

entering into a covenant with him,

promising him a land of his own and descendants without number,

and blesses Abraham so he can be a blessing to others.

(Ge.12)

God sends powerful plagues and frees the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt.

(Ex.)

He raises up judges and kings to lead the people.

(Ju.; 1-2Kg.; 1-2Chr.)

He sends prophets to warn them of the consequences of their sin,

(Is.- Ma.)

and to promise them the blessings of his kingdom.

God raises up enemy nations to punish Israel.

After 40 years God brought them back home to their promised land.

(Ez.; Ne.)

And then God himself comes in human flesh.

"The Word became flesh and dwelt among us."

(Jn.1:14)

It's Jesus.

Then God calls forth the Church, filled with the Spirit of Christ,
 called, commissioned, and empowered to carry on the ministry of Christ. (Ac.)

And one day, history will come to its fulfillment
 when God brings his kingdom to completion in the new creation. (Re.21-22)

The Bible does not give us mythology like what the Greeks and Romans had.

The story is not for entertainment.

It is not a thousand year-long parable of events that didn't really happen
 but do communicate meaning.

The Bible claims to be the true story of God working in human history.

This book says God really exists, really loves his creation,

 and really has a special place in his heart for people he created in his own image.

He cares so much that he really gets involved in our history and our lives.

Sometimes his involvement is subtle and sometimes it is big and miraculous.

But God does move in history.

Well, OK, if you believe God moved in the history of what is often called "Bible times,"
 what about in modern history?

Some people say God was involved in the founding of our nation,

 and point to specific instances in the life of George Washington and the Revolutionary War.

If you read much history or biography from the time of the founding of our nation,

 you'll read about George Washington's valor

 and, some think, God's supernatural protection of his life.

George Washington was 6 feet 3 inches tall, easily recognizable,

 a great target for a British sharpshooter,

 but was never shot,

 though he was often in positions that made him quite vulnerable.

For instance, at the Battle of Fort Wilderness in 1755, during the French and Indian War,

 Washington served in the Virginia militia as aide to British General Edward Braddock.

Near the fort, Braddock's 1,300-man unit was

 trapped in a deadly ambush by the French and their Indian allies.

Eight hundred British and colonial soldiers were massacred.

Washington rode all over the battlefield,

 carrying General Braddock's orders to other officers.

When the two-hour engagement ended,

 Washington had four musket-ball holes in his greatcoat

 and had two horses shot from under him.

Various survivors later reported that

 the hail of gunfire at him was so heavy that

 they expected him to be killed at any moment.

 But he was untouched.

At the Battle of Princeton in January 1777,

 American militiamen began to flee after the British overran Continental Army troops.

On seeing that, Washington rode up with reinforcements and rallied the fleeing militia.

 Then he personally led the counterattack on the British.

 Washington was only 30 yards from the British lines when he ordered his men to fire.

 When both sides fired, Washington disappeared in the smoke.

 When the smoke cleared,

 Washington was unharmed but the British regulars had broken.

At the Battle of Monmouth in June 1778,

 the American soldiers began retreating in disarray.

Washington, who was nearby observing the battlefield,
 rode among them, up and down in front of the British lines,
 to halt and reverse the rout.
 Sometimes he was only 30 to 40 feet from the enemy.
 His only protection was the smoke of battle.

(WSJ op-ed by John White, a Medal of Honor for George Washington, Jan. 27, 2012)

Many in his time and in following generations saw that extraordinary record as evidence that
 he was called and protected by God.

In the course of the Revolutionary War there were turns of events that defied all odds and staggered the imagination.

There were unprecedented changes of weather,
 fog like was never seen before or since,
 and great storms that were totally unexpected,
 all with timing that saved the revolutionary forces.

There were terrible oversights and mistakes by enemy leaders who were normally relentless and flawless.
 There were innumerable “coincidences” that came together to rescue desperate efforts.
 Time after time, strange currents took events in unexpected directions,
 always saving the revolutionaries.

George Washington himself, raised in the Anglican Church, saw God’s hand at work in birthing this nation.

Upon being selected as commander of the American armed forces,
 he spoke humbly of his own inability and his need of God’s help:
 “I am thoroughly convinced that it requires greater abilities and much more experience
 than I am master of.
 I shall rely confidently on that Providence
 which has heretofore preserved and been bountiful to me.”

In 1776, the year the colonies officially declared their revolution and independence, he said,
 “The fate of unborn millions will now depend, under God,
 on the courage and conduct of this army.
 Let us, therefore, rely upon the goodness of the cause and the aid of the Supreme Being,
 in whose hands victory is,
 to animate and encourage us to great and noble action.”

In his General Orders to the Continental Army he called on his soldiers to
 serve in a way that would honor the God upon whom he depended.
 “The General hopes and trusts, that every officer and man,
 will endeavor so to live, and act, as becomes a Christian soldier.”

Looking back on the course of the war, Washington said,
 “The power and goodness of the Almighty were strongly manifested
 in the events of our late glorious revolution...
 In war he directed the sword and in peace he has ruled in our councils.”

And in his first inaugural address, in 1789 President George Washington said,
 “No people can be bound to acknowledge and adore the invisible hand,
 which conducts the Affairs of men more than the People of the United States.
 Every step, by which they have advanced to the character of an independent nation,
 seems to have been distinguished by some token of providential agency.”

What do you think?

Do you think God was at work in the Revolutionary War and the founding of our nation?

George Washington was not the only one of his time to think so.

Perhaps a more uncomfortable question might be:

Do you think God is working in history today?

There have been some pretty outrageous claims made in recent years,

interpretations of world events as the hand of God moving in one way or another.
 Rev. Jeremiah Wright, who was President Obama's pastor for 20 years,
 claimed that the 9-11 terrorist attacks were God's judgment on our nation
 for how we treated foreign nations.

"America's chickens are coming home to roost," he said.

That and a number of other statements did not win him many friends.

And, in fact, it raised enough of a political furor during the last presidential campaign that
 then candidate Obama withdrew his membership from Rev. Wright's church.

Those sorts of things have been said from both sides of the political aisle.

Take, for instance, Rev. Pat Robertson, a one-time Republican presidential candidate.

When the earthquake destroyed most of Haiti,

Pat Robertson claimed it was God's judgment on them because,
 back in the 1700s the black slaves of French plantation owners
 literally made a deal with the devil

in order to ensure the success of their slave revolt.

The only successful slave revolt in history.

In 1791 a voodoo leader gave the signal which started the revolution,
 so the earthquake in 2010 was God's act of judgment on them.

So Pat Robertson said.

I'm not sure I'd have made a claim like that
 without hearing a very clear word from God.

I recall reading a newspaper story about a town hit by a big tornado.

It took out a nice church building,

but left untouched a bar that was right across the street.

And someone asked the question,

"What's God doing in *that* situation?"

If we are to claim that God still works in history today, we have to be very careful in our claims.

Unless God makes it abundantly clear that he is doing something and why he is doing what he is doing,

I believe we would be wise to be very tentative and humble in our claims.

Maybe even ask questions instead of making direct claims,

and consider them as possibilities rather than certainties.

Personally, I'm very hesitant to make claims that God is making this or that happen,
 that he's manipulating events.

God has not told me that he's doing this or that.

But I'm willing to ask if God might be trying to teach us something or accomplish something
 through the events we're living through.

While I don't believe God causes all things,

I know God can make use of even our sinful worst to get his work done.

Like when he made use of Judas Iscariot

to take Jesus to the cross to pay for the sins of the world.

So I'll ask if God might be doing or saying something through historical events.

For instance:

With the 9-11 terrorist attacks in recent memory,

and repeated uncovering of terrorist plots against America,

might God be trying to tell us that all religions are not the same,

that it does matter what you believe,

and sincerity is not the only thing?

With the rise of homegrown Islamic terrorists,

might God be telling us, the church, that

we have not done our job of sharing Christ with our neighbors,
 much less made disciples of all nations?

Is God reminding us of our mortality, our vulnerability as human beings?

Is he humbling us as a nation?

Is he calling us to recognize the limits of our power,
 and calling our nation to depend only on Him?

What might God be doing through this recession?

Is it an opportunity for families to learn to live below their means,
 to live moderately and save money for their future?

Might it be a time when some people find it challenging to
 keep up their level of giving to God's ministries when their income is down a bit,
 and they discover they can do more than they ever imagined?

Is this an opportunity to learn, once again, that
 the idols of materialism are undependable,
 and are, after all, not really necessary to living a fulfilled life?

Is it an opportunity to reclaim biblical values in which
 God is the most important thing in our lives?

What about the debt crisis being faced by so many nations today, our own included?

Nations have been spending much more than they take in,
 mostly because they have tried to provide more and more benefits
 for the people the govern.

And politicians always vote for those things,
 because that gets them votes from the people who are benefiting.

And now the bills are coming due and governments can't pay their debts.

Is God trying to remind the nations, and perhaps individuals, that his book says,
 "The borrower is slave to the lender," (Pr.22:7)
 and it's really true?

Are we being reminded of the self-seeking nature of sinful people,
 including us, the voters who want more and more,
 and politicians who will do whatever it takes to get re-elected?
 Are we relearning that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God?" (Ro.3:23)
 All, including our favorite politicians and political parties?

Is this a time for us to realize human government cannot do all things for all people?
 That we've made government an idol,
 a substitute for the one true God?

Is God telling us that he is the only one who owns the cattle on a thousand hills? (Ps.50:10)
 And so he alone is our sufficiency?

I could be wrong, but there seems to be a theme that runs through much of our recent history:

A call to turn back to God and God alone,
 to trust him and find our sufficiency in him,
 not in our own efforts,
 not in our stuff,
 not in our government,
 not in anything else.

Just God.

Leo Tolstoy once wrote a story about a successful peasant farmer who was not satisfied with his lot in life.

He wanted more of everything.

One day he received a novel offer.

For 1000 rubles, he could buy all the land he could walk around in a day.

The only catch in the deal was
 he had to be back at his starting point by sundown.
 Early the next morning he started out walking at a fast pace.
 By midday he was very tired, but he kept going, faster and faster.
 Well into the afternoon he realized that
 his greed had taken him far from the starting point.
 He quickened his pace,
 and as the sun sank low in the sky he began to run,
 knowing that if he did not make it back by sundown
 his chance to have more would be lost.
 As the sun began to sink below the horizon he could see the finish line.
 Gasping for breath, his heart pounding,
 he called upon every bit of strength left in his body
 and staggered across the line just at sundown.
 He collapsed, blood streaming from his mouth.
 In a few minutes he was dead.

Afterwards, his servants dug a grave.

It was not much over six feet long and three feet wide.

The title of Tolstoy's story was: How Much Land Does a Man Need?

(Adapted from Bits & Pieces, November, 1991.)

In the end, Tolstoy suggests, all a man really owns is a 6 by 3 piece of earth,
 so we are better off putting our confidence elsewhere.
 That's not far off what I think God may be trying to teach us.
 If we put our trust in anything but God, we will be sadly disappointed.
 But if we'll trust God, I mean really trust God,
 we'll find what we really need.

I think that might be what God's trying to tell us.

I could be wrong.

What do you think?

Scriptures cited: Ge.1:1; 6-9; 12; Ex.; Ju.; 1-2Kg.; 1-2Chr.; Is.-Ma.; Ez.; Ne.; Jn.1:14; Ac.; Re.21-22; Pr.22:7;
 Ro.3:23; Ps.50:10