

# America The Beautiful

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Preacher: Dr. Rudy Gray

[ 0 : 00 ] Thank you, Wes. When he sang, I saw the light, I could almost picture Hank Williams with his white hat on singing.

I was teasing him about that at the 8 o'clock service. But Fred Stone and I have been friends since before both of us were married.

And over the years, talked and carried on. And you heard him say something last Sunday about my attire, didn't you? Pray that I wear the proper attire.

So we email back and forth this week and doing the things that we typically do. But I've got a photograph I need to show you. Or you have it.

Now he says he's not fond of bow ties, but a picture is worth a thousand words. And after having done that, I'll probably be my last Sunday here.

[ 1 : 20 ] I do want to share with you something this morning that's really important, I think.

And I don't know what to call it, so I just call it America the Beautiful. And we have been blessed within the confines of our borders.

But the question is, why are we the beautiful? Why have we been blessed? And it's not because we're just special.

It's not because we work hard. It's not because we fought. But it's because God in his infinite wisdom decided to show us his faith.

And so he's blessed. So I want you to look in Acts chapter 17. I believe there is such a thing as a proper patriotism where you love your country, but you don't worship it.

[ 2 : 34 ] You worship God. And if you can see in your country, whatever country that is, the blessings of God, then that should attract our attention.

Over 20 years ago, when we went to Utica Baptist Church in Seneca, we brought a practice with us that we had started in Spartanburg, and we would have an annual God in Country celebration.

And it just grew to the place that we had to have two services. And at one time, we had over 1,000 people coming to it. And especially had a lot of people coming to it when you gave away free barbecue.

But it was one of those flag-waving things. But here's what it did. We had all of these people coming and packing the place out, singing patriotic songs, but we transitioned, and the second half of the program, we presented the gospel.

And some of those people might not have ever given us a hearing if we hadn't had that for them. But I want you to look in Acts 17.

[ 3 : 51 ] Paul is in Athens. That's important. He's doing his sermon on Mars Hill. He's talking to a group of philosophers and intellectuals who wanted to debate issues just for the sake of debating issues.

They weren't interested necessarily in anything life-changing. They just wanted to talk about different things. So if you look in verse 24, well, back in verse 23, he says to these Athenians, he notices that there's pictures of God, statues of God all around in the city.

And he said in verse 4, you even have an inscription at one altar to an unknown God. So there are all kinds of gods and goddesses they worship in Athens. And then just to make sure they covered all the bases, they had one that said altar to an unknown God.

But when you look in verse 24, the God who made the world and all things in it, since he is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands, nor is he served by human hands as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all people life and breath and all things.

Now in verse 24 and 25, this is what Paul is preaching. God is the creator of people of the earth. God is the creator.

[ 5 : 17 ] So he does not live in temples that we could make for him, and he does not need our help. He's not served by human hands. Now sometimes the question will come, people will ask this question, why did God create people?

And the answer will come back, because God was lonely. Well, that's not true. Well, because God needed us to accomplish his purpose.

Well, that's not true either. God created people for the same reason that God created the rest of creation, and that was for his glory.

But we're made to honor God. Well, in verses 26 and 27, that's the center of Paul's message in the Sermon on the Mount.

God is sovereign over humanity, and man is responsible to God. That God in his sovereignty over humanity gives good gifts to people.

[ 6 : 24 ] James 1.17 said, every good and perfect gift comes from the Father, from which there's no variable or light, or changing light. God is a giver of all good gifts.

Then you come in verse 26, and it says, and this is the verse I want to camp out in for a minute this morning. And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation.

The Greeks considered themselves to be superior people. They thought they were better than the other races and the other people.

They thought highly of themselves. Now realize that when Paul is preaching this sermon at Mars Hill, these are the people that he's talking to.

This is the attitude they have. They're thinking they're superior. And what Paul basically says is, there is no room for racial prejudice at all.

[ 7 : 42 ] Why? Well, I look out among all of us today and we're pretty much the same. But every one of us comes from a common ancestry.

Let me ask you a question. In the beginning, God made, when he made people, who did he make? Adam, and then he made... So if those are the first two people, then where did we come from?

But we all, today we look so different. We're very different, but we have a common ancestry. And if we have a common ancestry, and God is the creator, and God is the one that created humanity, then there is no room for this racial indifference of any kind.

Well, as G. Campbell Morgan says, in Acts 17, Paul is standing at a great moment and a great location. As he stood to preach that day, he would have looked to his right, and to his right was the Acropolis.

And in the Acropolis was the Parthenon. And the Parthenon was that place primarily for the worship of Athena, the goddess.

[ 8 : 58 ] And they would, some of the population would worship her. Some would worship other gods. Some would worship themselves. Some would worship nature.

And what Paul is writing, he's wanting them to know that the reason they even exist is because of God. Paul reminds them they were not living in Athens because they studied hard, because they were smart, because they worked hard, or just they were the recipients of some favorable accident. They were able to live in Athens that some have called the cradle of philosophy because of the grace of God. We live in America today with all of its blessings because of the grace of God.

So I want you to look at just a few things about America. First, at the first Constitutional Convention, Ben Franklin was 81 years old.

During the course of that meeting, when things got rather heated, he stood up and said this, I have lived a long time, sir, and the longer I live, the more convincing proof I see of this truth that God governs in the affairs of men.

[ 10 : 19 ] If a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without his notice, is it probable that an empire can rise without his aid? Did you know that when the pilgrims came to this country, they had a purpose statement for their mission?

They came here with a purpose statement. It is recorded in the Mayflower Compact, which was written in 1620. Here's their purpose statement. Having undertaken for the glory of God and the advancement of the Christian faith.

There's no doubt why they came here. That's why they came here. We live in America not by mistake, but through the providence of God.

Every nation's boundaries are determined by God. A.T. Robertson, the great Greek Southern Baptist teacher and theologian, said, nations rise and fall, but it is not blind chance or hard faith. Behind it is the movement of God. So I want you to look at five things real quickly about America the Beautiful. The first one is our land. We have 50 states, 50 state government, 12,383 miles of coastline where the waves of both the Atlantic and the Pacific touch us, four different time zones, three divisions of the equator.

[ 11 : 41 ] We have marvelous works of God in nature, Yellowstone Park and Old Faithful, Mount McKinney, Alaska, 20,000 feet above sea level, and Death Valley, California, 282 feet below sea level.

We have mountains and deserts and plains and lush valleys and water from stream to springs and everything else in between. Niagara Falls, the Mississippi River, the Shenandoah Valley, the San Joaquin Valley, the Redwood Forest, the Petrified Forest, the Rocky Mountains with its Grand Teton Range, the Pocono Mountains, the Great Smoky Mountains, the Great Lakes, the Grand Canyon, the Florida Everglades, the Great Plains, the Frozen Tundra of Alaska, the Tropical Paradise of Hawaii, and South Carolina.

We are blessed naturally by this land that God has given us in our boundaries. But make no mistake, Acts 17, 26, He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation.

And God has given us 3.7 million square miles of land full of treasures. Did you know that following World War II, America produced twice as much oil as the rest of the world combined?

We have a great land that God has given us. The second thing is our heritage. Now, it would be dangerous to say that America is a Christian nation.

[ 13 : 21 ] In fact, it would be a lie to say America is a great, is a Christian nation today. And not everyone that lived in America from the very beginning was a Christian.

But America could be called a Christian nation in its beginning. And here's why. Because about 95% of the Founding Fathers were Christians.

Some people go so far to say, some scholars say, that maybe 90% of those were not just Christians, they were Calvinists. They were hardcore believers in the sovereignty of God.

But God was at the core of the thinking of the Founders. Now, what difference does that make? Well, when they begin to write something like the Declaration of Independence or the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, when they begin to pen all of these things, in their thinking is the influence of God's Word of Truth in what they wrote.

And so in those founding documents, we have a reflection of those values and those ethics, the documents that they gave them. Patrick Henry, did you know that he was a Baptist?

[ 14 : 27 ] How many of you knew Patrick Henry was a Baptist? Oh, somebody knew that. Patrick Henry was a Baptist and he said this, America was not founded by religionists but directly on the gospel of Jesus Christ.

John Adams, our second president, said this, Our Constitution was designed only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate for the government of any other.

52 of the 55 signers of the Declaration of Independence were Christians. George Washington, our first president, said, It is impossible to govern the world without God and the Bible.

Reason and experience both forbid us to expect that our national morality can prevail in the exclusion of religious principles. And John Jay, who was a member of the very first Supreme Court, said this, Providence has given to our people the choice of their rulers.

It is the duty as well as the privilege and interest of our Christian nation to secure, select, and prefer Christians as their rulers.

[ 15 : 42 ] In 1782, the Congress of the United States passed a resolution and this is what it says. We recommend and approve the Holy Bible for use in all schools.

We've come a long way since then because now the Gideons have nothing like the freedom they used to have just to pass out these Christians.

And in very many places they can't go on the property and have to stand on the sidewalk. But it wasn't always that way and we had a congressional resolution that said they wanted the Bible, thought it was a good thing to teach in schools.

Of the first 108 colleges founded in America, 106 were Christians. James Madison, who you might have read from history, is regarded as the father of the Constitution, said this, We have staked the

whole future of our new nation, not upon the power of government far from it. We have staked the future of all our political constitutions upon the capacity of each of ourselves to govern ourselves according to the moral principles of the Ten Commandments.

[16:57] If any people just took the Ten Commandments, the moral teachings of the Ten Commandments, and they said this will be the basis for our laws, that nation would automatically become a better nation as they followed those laws.

The Bible says in Psalm 33 and verse 12, Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord, the people whom he has chosen for his own inheritance. Now remember speaking to the Athenians, the Greeks, he said, Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord, but their gods were not the Lord. They're all kind of gods, but they did not have a God that was the Lord and Paul is teaching to them about the one true God, the Lord. And so that's what Psalm is talking about.

We have a great land, we have a heritage, but we also have a great history. Our history is filled with stories of God's providence and man's faith and man's faith in a sovereign God.

The revisionists have, in later years, tried to take away references to God or to the Christian faith or the Christian values from history books.

[18:16] And you say, Oh, are you a conspiracy theorist? Where are you going with this? Well, let me give you an example. There was a best-selling American history text by Kenneth Davis. It was, and still is used widely in schools.

In there, he quotes Patrick Henry in a 1775 speech. This is what he quotes. Is life so dear or peace so sweet as to be purchased at the price of change and slavery?

I know not what course others may take, but as for me, give me liberty or give me death. That's what he said, Patrick Henry said. But we know that's not exactly what Patrick Henry said.

Here's what Patrick Henry actually said. Is life so dear or peace so sweet as to be purchased at the price of change and slavery? Forbid it, Almighty God.

Why did somebody feel inspired to take out that phrase, forbid it, Almighty God? except to try to remove references of God from the fabric of our history.

[19:24] One of the things that has baffled people throughout the ages has been how America, which was made up of farmers and merchants and others like the French that helped us, how could they come together on this vast piece of property and actually defeat the world's superpower of the time?

And the only answer for that, and as you read some of the history books like Collins, for example, has written a series of history books, God in American History and things like this. But the only answer for that is because of the grace of God.

We were outgunned. We were outmanned. They had greater supplies. They had greater logistics. They had better training. They had everything else. The British should have destroyed us, but they couldn't.

They could, but they didn't. So what happened? How could a government in a new land be established so quickly, rise so rapidly, and then, in just a short period of time, actually become the envy of the world?

What some historians have called this experiment in democracy that actually worked? How could that happen? Only, only, by the grace of God.

[20:51] Remember what Paul said in Mars Hill. Acts 17, verse 26, He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation.

when James Smith, the founder of Jamestown, Virginia, 1607, came to this country and looked at the land where he was going to build a settlement. He said this, Heaven and earth never agree to a better frame, to better frame a place for man's habitation than here.

He looked at the land and he said what Dr. Kelly, the president of the New Orleans Seminary, used to say, an old Hebrew word. Wow! He said, This is great.

He was carried away by the beauty, by what the land had to offer. And then something stunning, in the course of the revolution, and some of you I know have studied some of the details of that, but in the course of the revolution, there are so many stories that never get told that happen in the revolution that have no explanation other than God.

There was a stunning thing that happened at Valley Forge. It was what some have called the Gethsemane of our struggle for independence. And one of the famous paintings of that day was

George Washington.

[ 22 : 13 ] And whether that painting was actually him doing that or somebody just thought that's what they should paint, there is a painting of George Washington kneeling and praying in the snow. But in this battle that was fought at Valley Forge, Washington decided to take his troops across a partially frozen Delaware River and lead a surprise against the British at Fort Trenton.

The British were not expecting that. In fact, that was the last thing from their mind that somebody would do something so foolish as that. And Washington, it is said, being led by what he believed was God did that and defeated the British.

One person recorded that, recorded his thoughts, and he said, until that hour, the life of the U.S. flickered like a dying flame, but the Lord of hosts heard the cries of their distress and said, an angel for their deliverance.

A British soldier wrote in his diary these words, the hand of God is against us. Our history is filled with his providence. The stuff that he prepared beforehand that we should walk in.

Providence. God preparing beforehand. And then there's our freedom. Sometimes if you ask an American today, what does America mean to you? You might get the answer that means freedom.

[ 23 : 32 ] But what does freedom mean? You might get this answer. Well, it's the right to do as you please. And that's somebody that does not understand freedom. Freedom is not the right to do as you please.

It is the power to do what is right. And so our freedom is based on a simple and yet profound concept that God is the author of real freedom.

In John 8, 32, Jesus said, you will know the truth and the truth will make you so you can't have freedom apart from truth. So freedom is knowing the right thing to do.

In recent years, the ACLU has established itself as pretty much an enemy of the church, of the Christian faith.

And especially for some reason, the Ten Commandments. I don't know if you remember it, but when Roy Moore was the Chief Justice of the Alabama Supreme Court, anybody remember that saga that happened down in Alabama?

[ 24 : 35 ] Yeah, and he takes, he brings into the judicial, state judicial building a monument of the Ten Commandments that weighed 5,280 pounds.

You talk about boldness, this guy had that thing delivered and set up in the judicial building. And the media went bonkers and the ACLU went ballistic.

They were firmly against that. And they fought and they fought and they fought and they claimed that Roy Moore was just this weird, eccentric, and they got the Ten Commandments removed. But another question, and maybe a better question, is what about all of those references to God in Washington, D.C. in all the federal buildings? What are we going to do about that? You cannot remove.

You might remove commandments, you might remove statues, you might remove photographs, you might remove statements, but you cannot remove the fact that God in His providence gave us this land, saw that it came to a good birth and a good growth and even into good blessings.

[ 25 : 48 ] It was all by the grace of God. Well, in 1987, Ted Koppel, does anybody remember who Ted Koppel was? He was at ABC News, he was a sort of an intellectual commentator, I guess.

Well, this is what he was speaking at commencement at Duke University. Now, I think you know that Duke University is not the citadel of fundamentalism. It is not.

And he was there speaking at commencement, and this is part of what he said to the students.

What Moses brought down from Mount Sinai were not the ten suggestions.

They are commandments, are, not were. The sheer brilliance of the ten commandments is that they codify in a handful of words acceptable human behavior, not just for then or now, but for all times. Language evolves. Power shifts from one nation to another. Messages are transmitted with the speed of light. Man erases one frontier after another. And yet, we and our behavior and the commandments governing that behavior remain the same.

[ 27 : 03 ] Because no matter how technologically advanced we become, there are certain moral principles encoded in the ten commandments that will always be helpful to mankind.

our national freedom, our freedom is the envy of the rest of the world. But we've got to understand what our freedom is.

And it is not the power to do as we please. It's to know the truth. It's the power to do what's right. That's our freedom.

But our freedom, all those freedoms we have will not be able, will not have the strength, will not have the power to endure unless those freedoms are anchored in God and His Word.

Because that's where those freedoms come from. Well, the last thing I want you to see is our opportunity. Our opportunities today are vast.

[ 28 : 04 ] But, I'm over here in the darkness now because I escape from the light sometimes just for a brief reprieve. Our opportunities are like this great treasure that's out there.

If we go looking for them, we'll find them. There's so many things. What can we do? Well, here's what we can do. We can vote. We can vote.

We can put people in the office that are not going to be self-perpetuating but are not going to be looking out for their interests or not going to be bought off by lobbyists but we can put people into office that really believe in moral principles.

We can protest. We can write letters. Why, you could even get a blog and 10 to 15 people would listen to you.

But most of all, what we have the freedom and the opportunity to do, what we have the obligation to do is to seek God. Why did God establish us and why did He put these boundaries where He did?

[ 29 : 13 ] Look in verse 27. It begins, that they would seek God. Jesus said in Matthew 6, 33, seek first His kingdom and His righteousness and all these other things will be added to you.

Where does that start? What is this? Taking our country for what it is. A gift from God, by God's grace.

And we live in it. But what are we going to do with it? Do you know that still today the greatest potential for reaching the world for Jesus Christ is in the United States?

We have the resources, we have the wherewithal, we have all the things that God has in His providence provided for us to reach the world. And yet, we are so fragmented and we are so distorted and we're so disagreeable among ourselves that we're not able to accomplish it.

Do you think that the answer for America's woes in the current time is going to come from Washington, D.C.? I know I'm in the magazine business now, so I've got a news flash for you this morning.

[ 30 : 33 ] Washington, D.C. is broken. And even though Trump came in to clean out the swamp and make America great, it's still broken. What about Columbia?

I see Davey Hyatt sitting back there and he works in Columbia. And I hate to say this, but I hope he'll agree with me that Columbia is pretty much broken too. Washington is not the answer.

Columbia is not the answer. God in Jesus Christ is the answer and his church is the biggest one. If the churches across this land rose up together on these moral principles, carried them into the streets, carried them into the halls of government, carried them across this nation, permeated society with this freedom, with this truth, we would see a difference in America that would be not a long time in developing.

It could be, it might be just like the beginning when a nation rose so rapidly it mystified the rest of the world. Maybe it could be when the church, when the church comes together, when the church gets strong, when the church goes out to be salt and light, that the world would see a different picture of America.

Well, I love America. I really do. But it's not my God.

[ 32 : 07 ] My God gave us America and he wants us to worship him and use the place that he's given us for his glory.

So I just ask you today as I close this, when Jesus said, seek first the priority above all priorities, seek first his kingdom, his righteousness.

Are we doing it? Are we doing it? Are we seeking first his kingdom, his values, his principles, and his righteousness? And if we're not, just a moment when we bow our heads and close our eyes, it might be that God would nudge your heart just to say a prayer to him and say, you know, that's what I want to be.

I want to be somebody that seeks first your kingdom and your righteousness. And I want to make a difference in this country which I live. Would you pray with me?

Father, thank you. Thank you for your grace and your wisdom and your great power that has been displayed in the way you have worked through the ages and the rise and fall of many nations.

[ 33 : 27 ] And thank you that today we have the privilege to be living in a nation that has been so blessed by your grace. Give us eyes to see the origin of our land, of our country and give us the strength to be people who seek first your kingdom and your righteousness as the priority of our life.

Bless us, bless the church that we might in turn become a blessing, a leader for our country. with our heads bowed and eyes closed if you'd like to spend a moment and pray to God make a commitment to Him something along those lines I hope you will.

Musicians are going to play and as they play if you have a decision to make if you have a commitment that you want to make if you have something you want to share Mike's going to be here would invite you to turn to join.

Thank you.