

I doubt that the Virginia delegate Richard Henry Lee would have known on June 7, 1776 that his motion made during the Continental Congress for the colonies' independence would result in our holiday celebrations 241 years later. That day debate broke out among the delegates, with the result that five men were chosen to draft a formal statement explaining why they wanted to separate from Great Britain.¹ It was then on July 2 that the Continental Congress voted in favor of the resolution for independence. John Adams wrote the day after on July 3:

“The Second Day of July 1776, will be the most memorable [Epoch], in the History of America. It ought to be solemnized with Pomp and Parade, with [Shows], Games, Sports, Guns, Bells, Bonfires and Illuminations from one End of this Continent to the other from this Time forward forever more.”²

Since the Continental Congress officially adopted the Declaration of Independence on July 4, this date became known as the day of celebration,

much to the objection of Adams who thought today, July 2, should be the day. It wasn't until nearly 100 years later in 1870 that Congress officially adopted July 4 as Independence Day.

This week we will give thanks for our freedoms, regardless of whether your celebration occurs today or on Tuesday. Many will pause and give thanks this week, along with the fireworks and food, but if you struggle to find just the right words to say during your family gatherings, the opening verses of Psalm 30 provide some words of gratitude that just might fit the occasion:

1 I exalt you, LORD,
because you pulled me up;
you didn't let my enemies
celebrate over me.

2 LORD, my God, I cried out to you for help,
and you healed me.

3 LORD, you brought me up
from the grave,
brought me back to life from among
those going down to the pit. (CEB)

We don't know the exact nature of the trouble that this psalm writer faced, but at some point in

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this psalm's history a title was added: "A song for the temple dedication." Some suggest these words might offer thanksgiving for a time when God's people experienced independence from oppressors, 500 years before Jesus when they rededicated the temple after it had been rebuilt following their many years of exile in the land of Babylon. Or it could have been a thanksgiving of rededication 165 years before Jesus when the Maccabean family took back the temple from the Greek ruler Antiochus IV, an event Jews continue to celebrate today known as Hanukkah. Regardless of the exact nature of the historical context, the psalm gives thanks for God's help in deliverance from oppressors.

In the midst of this psalm of thanksgiving, several verses hint at the struggle that led up to the celebration: "I was terrified. I cried out to you, Lord. I begged for mercy." The words of thanks came only after times of intense difficulty.

As we celebrate the 4th of July this week, fireworks remind us of the "bombs bursting in air" that occurred as part of the struggle to claim

independence. I imagine those who lived 241 years ago in the midst of the turmoil probably cried out with the psalmist: "Hear, O LORD, and be gracious to me! O LORD, be my helper!"

In our own nation, even after declaring independence a year after the conflict began, the Revolutionary War went on for another seven years. They may have longed for signs of hope along the way, just as the psalmist looked for signs of hope. In the middle of Psalm 30, the writer expresses a glimmer of hope: "Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning."

Have you ever had one of those nights? A night of tossing and turning, worrying about something that seemed so overwhelming in the middle of the darkness? The next morning when waking up, the tossing and turning cease and the world looks somehow different. Whatever worries plagued us the night before seem to dissipate with the morning sun.

It's in these times of restless nights that we cherish the joy that comes in the morning, but

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sometimes the joy may take longer than one restless night, as was the case with Angie's parents. Their daughter

could not see through the fogged-up windows in her car. Inadvertently, she pulled out in front of a truck. The accident caused such damage to her brain that she could no longer speak or take care of herself....

Around the time of the accident [her parents'] grieving was so deep that they wondered if they would ever have joy again. As they both leaned upon God, they experienced countless unexpected provisions for the physical and spiritual care of Angie and their entire family. Although Angie may never regain her ability to speak, she now responds to them with wide smiles and this gives them joy. Her parents' favorite verse continues to be [from Psalm 30]: "Weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning."³

I imagine each one of us at some point has wondered why we have to endure hardships. We

often have this fantasy in our minds that life is supposed to be filled with ease and pleasure, that bad things are not supposed to happen to good people. When we face tragedies and loss, we cry out to God, as did the psalmist, longing for wholeness and peace once again.

By reading Psalm 30, along with other similar psalms, I find it comforting to know that I'm not the only one who has faced difficult times, that I stand within a faith tradition that contains countless people who have faced the same struggles. The psalms are filled with laments, but they most often end with words of thanksgiving and trust.

In the midst of the struggles of life, I have come to see that God has been there all along, but somehow my eyes become more open to seeing the presence of God during the difficult days. When facing the anxieties and despairs of life, my spirit somehow becomes more aware of God's Spirit. Maybe it's in those times that I realize I cannot put my life back in order by myself, that I need a vision

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beyond myself to put the pieces back together again.

I've grown to understand the psalmist's words as he cried out to God: "I cried out to you for help, and you healed me." By the end of the psalm, the writer exclaimed, "You turned my mourning into dancing." In English this phrase is almost a play on words, for although the Hebrew word translated as "mourning" (m-o-u-r-n) can mean wailing and lamentation, in English we also hear the word *morning*, the time of day when the sun once again appears. A night of struggles somehow looks different in the morning sun when God transforms our sadness and mourning into dancing. God turns our sadness into joy and our sunrise into dancing.

Jim Henson, the creator of the Muppets, wrote the following poem that seems to echo the struggle

of the psalmist on a restless night that turns into dancing:

"Sometimes I have trouble falling asleep but it's not so bad
I don't worry and I don't weep. In fact I'm glad.
Because I get up off my pillow and I flip on the light.
I get down and get hip in the still of the night
I stretch and I yawn and then I breathe real deep
And dance myself to sleep.
I hoof around my beddie just a-tappin' my toes
Before I know what's happened I'm a-ready to doze
Got some partners I can count the boogie-woogie sheep
I dance myself to sleep."⁴

May you celebrate this week the freedoms we cherish, while also recognizing that such freedoms come with struggle. God hears our cries for help in the middle of the night and can turn our sadness into hope, our mourning blues into morning dance.

¹ www.history.com/topics/holidays/july-4th

² <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/OTUS/things-fourth-july/story?id=16707033>

³ Dennis Fisher, *Our Daily Bread*, July 2001, <https://odb.org/2011/07/26/joy-in-the-morning/>

⁴ Jim Henson, *It's Not Easy Being Green: And Other Things to Consider*, www.goodreads.com/quotes/tag/sleeplessness