

## A LETTER TO AMERICA

Dear America.

Happy birthday! Well, almost.

In three days you will be 242 years old. You don't look a day over 220! In historical terms you're still a fairly young nation. But in your almost two and a half centuries of existence, you've seen a lot, accomplished a lot, and endured a lot. There have been good times and bad times; times of joy and times of sorrow; times of struggle and times of success. And through it all, you have never let us down, even though there have been times when your citizens and your leaders let you down.

I read a story once about how, soon after the U.S. constitution was ratified, a woman came up to Benjamin Franklin and asked, "Well Doctor, what have we got, a republic or a monarchy?"

And Franklin replied, "A republic . . . if you can keep it."

Well, so far, with God's help and the wisdom and foresight of our founding fathers who left us a resilient system of three branches of government with their checks and balances to guard against any one branch becoming too powerful, we've managed to keep it. And despite our faults, fears, ignorance and apathy, I believe the light of liberty and justice will continue to shine in you.

You've had your share of challenges and struggles, America, and yet you continue to be the land of the free and the home of the brave, not only for those of us who live here but also for the world. I thank God for your strength in the face of adversity and danger. You have withstood a nasty civil war, a sad history of intolerance, prejudice and racism, instances of corruption, greed, scandal, partisan politics, xenophobia, and times when we involved ourselves in wars that we probably should have steered clear of, but you are still here, bloodied but not defeated. And I'm very grateful to be one of your citizens.

I have to confess, dear America, that these days there are times when you don't look like the same country I grew up in. There are times when I see you in the news but I don't really recognize you. I feel as though some things have changed, in some cases radically, and not necessarily for the better. And there are moments when things seem kind of bleak to me, and I get a bit discouraged

and angry, and on occasion even fear for your future.

Maybe I'm kidding myself, or maybe I was just being naive, but I seem to remember a time when people were more civil and respectful; they weren't so angry at each other and so afraid of change, and we looked toward the future with unbridled hope and optimism.

Was it just a dream I had, or was it actually true that once upon a time individuals of different religious faiths, political affiliations and national origins could agree to disagree and accept others as fellow Americans despite their differences because they understood that you were a big enough, great enough nation to embrace them all. Why can't I seem to find much of that kind of tolerance and acceptance among us these days? Am I blind to it? Am I just not looking hard enough? Or are those traits now so rare that they barely exist from sea to shining sea?

America, it wasn't so long ago, was it, that the words engraved on the Statue of Liberty—*"Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"*—those words were a guiding principle for us to live by, and your citizens were proud to call themselves a nation of immigrants.

And God knows the vast majority of us never, ever expected to see, in the land we're so proud of, the horribly disturbing pictures of young children being taken away from their parents and people being put in cages. Can that really be happening here in this sweet land of liberty? Thank God, thank God, the powers-that-be are starting to hear the outrage of the vast majority of American people and seem to be responding to their cries—although unfortunately that's happening much too slowly. I pray that those who are committed to your principles of justice and due process, will not cease to make their objections heard until that cruel and ungodly policy is ended.

But that's the wonderful thing about you, America. That's why I thank God for you all the time. Because we the people have the power to put a stop to such injustices, if we choose to utilize our power. We can demand that our leaders listen to us; we can protest and demonstrate without fear of reprisal; and if we demand loud enough and protest and demonstrate long and hard enough and use the ballot box to vote our consciences as our founders intended us to do, we can bring about change for the better. That's how we can respond to Ben Franklin's challenge and work to keep our republic.

America the beautiful, I have been praying a lot for you lately. My prayers have been fervent and passionate, because I believe God wants us to be better than we are right now. I believe God has high standards and expects a lot more

of us than we are currently doing. Every time we pledge allegiance to your flag, America, we declare that we are “. . . one nation, under God.” People proudly say that we’re a Christian nation, founded on Christian values and morals. But if we want to call ourselves a Christian nation, we need to do more than pay lip service to that identity, because just saying it’s so doesn’t necessarily make it so. There must be action to back up the claim of a special relationship between us and God, if that relationship is to be real.

If we truly are a “Christian” nation and want to exist as “one nation under God,” then we need to get cracking and do better, try harder, and recommit ourselves to practicing what we preach. Because we have a ways to go before we can honestly say we’re living up to the lofty ideals we profess as Christians and as Americans.

Dear America, I believe God is speaking to you right now. I believe God is calling us, your citizens, to a higher standard than we are achieving right now. I believe God is saying, “You can do better, America. You can do much better. And I want you to strive to be that better America. I want you to be that nation the world looks at with hope and aspiration: a nation where freedom flourishes; the rights of the poor and downtrodden are protected; equality, truth and justice are more than just spoken ideals but are the way Americans strive to live their lives; and the hopes and dreams of all citizens, not just the privileged, are within reach.”

America, I believe the Word of God as found in the Scriptures is a living, guiding word, and that right now, through the Scriptures, God is speaking to us. And this is what I believe God is saying. These are some of the visions and ideals that I believe God is holding up to the United States of America.

“He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.”

“Seek good, not evil, that you may live. Then the LORD God Almighty will be with you, just as you say he is. Hate evil, love good; maintain justice in the courts, and perhaps the LORD God Almighty will have mercy. . . .”

“Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them. Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. But let justice roll on like a river, and righteousness like a never-failing stream!”

“For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. God defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the foreigner

residing among you, giving them food and clothing. And you are to love those who are foreigners, for you yourselves were foreigners in Egypt.”

Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them. He said:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

“Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.”

Then people brought little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them and pray for them. But the disciples rebuked them. Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.” After he had placed his hands on them, he went on from there.

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes.”

Dear America, land that I love, those are very high ideals and standards by which to live. Indeed, we realize that some are impossible ideals and standards to live by, because as wonderful as you are, you’re not the Kingdom of God. But we American citizens and leaders can help you reflect the Kingdom of God, as best we can, so you can be a shining beacon on a hill for the world, and an example to inspire other nations by the way we act, govern and live. I believe that is what God is calling America to be as a nation, and calling us to be as Americans: letting our light shine and being the salt of the earth.

So this is my letter to you, my beloved America, as you stand on the cusp of turning 242 years old. This is my wish and my prayer for you: that you can be the blessed nation, the one nation under God we often talk about, especially as Independence Day draws near; because that’s the America the world so badly needs.

I pray that Almighty God will help renew our efforts to live according to the ideals our forebears intended when they declared that all people are created equal, and were endowed by God their creator with “certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

That’s the America I envision and yearn for.

That's the America I desperately want us to strive to be.  
That's the America I sing to and sing about when I loudly and proudly  
recite the words:

"God bless America, land that I love.  
Stand beside her, and guide her,  
through the night with the light from above.  
From the mountains, to the prairies,  
to the oceans white with foam,  
God bless America, my home, sweet home.  
God bless America, my home sweet home. Amen.