

Whose God Is the Lord?

I can vaguely remember the ending of WWII: I remember going to church with my parents on the Sunday after Japan surrendered. The choir sang "Battle Hymn of the Republic," and the preacher said, "God was on our side."

My high school band director was a Navy Corpsman in Europe during that war. One our high school band was preparing to march in a Memorial Day parade; and were going to play "Battle Hymn of the Republic." As we were practicing one day our Band Director told a story about his father, who had been a Navy Corpsman in WWII. He remembered leaving New York Harbor on the troop ship, heading for Europe. The crowds were waving and cheering, and a band was playing "Battle Hymn of the Republic" as they sailed by the Statue of Liberty. And an Army Chaplain was offering a prayer over the ship's intercom.

"It was a stirring scene," his father had said, and he felt very proud to be an American. He also felt confident that God was with him and with the American troops as they prepared to go into battle.

At Normandy, something happened that shook him to his core. His unit trailed most of the action, and their duty was to pick up the dead, and to make sure medics had not passed over any of the wounded, thinking they were dead.

They began to note a particular inscription on the belt buckles of the fallen German soldiers. The inscription said, "Gott mit uns." ["God is with us."]

Psalm 33:12-19 (NIV) Blessed is the nation whose God is the LORD,
the people he chose for his inheritance.
13 From heaven the LORD looks down
and sees all mankind;
14 from his dwelling place he watches
all who live on earth—
15 he who forms the hearts of all,
who considers everything they do.
16 No king is saved by the size of his army;
no warrior escapes by his great strength.
17 A horse is a vain hope for deliverance;
despite all its great strength it cannot save.
18 But the eyes of the LORD are on those who fear him,
on those whose hope is in his unfailing love,
19 to deliver them from death
and keep them alive in famine.

"Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord." But, who's God is the Lord?"

The Allied Forces were finally victorious in Europe. Does that mean God was on the side of the Allies? Was the Lord any less the God of the German soldiers whose belt buckles made the same claim?

Who was the God of the people of Hiroshima and Nagasaki? And was the Lord standing at Douglas MacArthur's shoulder on the deck of the USS Missouri in Tokyo Bay on VJ Day, 1946?

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Have you ever noticed how most national heroes of most countries are military men and women, and patriotism is almost always measured in military terms? A president, whose popularity ratings are low, can leap to public favor overnight with a swift, effective military campaign. And since ancient times, military victory has been a sign, not only of public popularity, but of divine favor.

And yet, consider this quote from the Supreme Allied Commander, and later the 34th President of the United States: "I hate war as only a soldier who has lived it can. Only as one who has seen its brutality, its futility, its stupidity."

Or, this one: "Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies in the final sense a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed. This world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children,"

The history of Israel is further evidence that God's favor is not measured by military force. Israel's own military strength—unparalleled under David and Solomon—deteriorated in later years, primarily because of complacency. Israel assumed God's presence and favor; assumed they would not have to worry about their military strength, because God would fight all their battles for them. They were God's people.

And so, their military force became more of a ceremonial thing; and in 586 B.C. Babylonian forces under the command of Nebuchadnezzar, breached the walls of Jerusalem, sacked the city, and destroyed the temple. Whose God is the Lord?

Unfortunately, national defense is necessary. I'm proud to be a combat veteran, and I'm thankful for our military. On this Memorial weekend it is right for us to remember and honor those who have voluntarily placed their lives at risk for our country. But I do not believe military victory is a sign of God's favor, for war does not originate in the will of God, but in the sin of man.

Nor do I find God's favor in a world-leading economic system that can tolerate some people accumulating more wealth than they need or can ever use, living in the same city with children who go to bed hungry every night and strong, willing men and women who go to bed without an honorable job to awaken to the next morning—and those who do work, even full time, don't earn enough to pay the rent and utilities, put food on the table, clothes on their backs and cover medical costs.

Nor in a political system in which leaders of state are more commonly rogues

"Whose God Is Yahweh?"

than saints and who smirk victoriously about withholding food and medical care from children and the elderly. Even the best political system in human history is no better than the people who lead it. Mahatma Gandhi supposedly said, "Beware of the illusion that you can create a system so nearly perfect that nobody has to be good."

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You may have noticed in the slides this morning that images of patriotism formed the backdrop behind words of faith. It always is dangerous to mix patriotism and religion. From the biblical story of Israel, through the dark ages when the church controlled the state, into modern times when we have seen totalitarian states control the church, that mix has never worked. We must resist the temptation to dress Jesus up in red, white and blue; in fact, the best thing we can do for our nation—*THE BEST THING WE CAN DO*—is love God more than country.

What does it mean to be a nation whose God is the Lord?

The Psalmist wrote, "Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord, *the people he chose for his inheritance.*" The key is, *it's God's choice.* The question then becomes, "Whom has God chosen for his inheritance?" Remember these words we read from the Epistle of Peter:

(1PETER 2:9-17 NIV) *But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, (and here is the key): that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. ¹⁰Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.*

It's not so much which nation God has chosen, as it is for what God has chosen any nation: The nation whose God is the Lord is the nation that declares the praises of the One who calls all humanity out of darkness.

The problems begin when we begin to turn things around and behave as though we had chosen God. To be a nation "whose God is the Lord" isn't a nation at whose beck and call God stands waiting; it is a nation surrendered to God.

The greatness of this nation always has been directly related to the degree to which its people and its leaders have followed the moral and ethical teachings in the Judeo/Christian scriptures; and the shame of this nation has always been directly related to the degree to which such morals and ethics have been contradicted by its leaders and its people. It is prudent for us to remind ourselves occasionally that the words of the song have it right. It is "God, bless America;" not, "America, bless God."

I believe the best way to honor the memory of those who have given their last full measure of devotion is to join in God's work of creating a world of unity and peace, in which all who have gone into harm's way are but an honored memory. [PRAYER SLIDE—]

PASTORAL PRAYER: God of our fathers, lead us in the footsteps of the fathers of our country. Grant us their vision of "One nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all." Grant us an understanding of patriotism—not as that blind loyalty that would have us follow the path of history; but as that vision that would have us lead and mold history according to your laws.

Lead us in the footsteps of the fathers of our faith. Grant us their vision of "One great fellowship of love throughout the whole wide world." Grant us an understanding of faith—not as a blind acceptance of what we are told from pulpits and councils; but as that vision shared by the prophet, Malachi, when through him you challenged your people to "test, try and prove" you.

We thank you for our heritage—both national and sacred. Help us to keep them separated so that one does not control the other; and yet related so that the best values of each influence the other. We thank you that we have not yet lost the hope that one day our nation truly will be "under God." Lead us in the effort to bring about that day.

Hear our petitions, O God, as we pray for our nation and its leaders. Guide us as we vote; inspire our pens as we make known our convictions to those who represent us in government; and guide our action, as we try to influence the path of history.

Hear us as we pray for your church, O God. Lead us to minister to her factions; and where there is brokenness, give us a ministry of healing.

Hear us as we pray for our friends in grief and pain. Send us to minister to them in your name.

And hear us as we offer you our own petitions; many of which are too personal—too private—to mention aloud. In the quietness of our own hearts, minister to our needs.

And now unite us in the mind of Christ; that the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts might be acceptable to you, our Lord and our God. Amen.