

Whose God Is the Lord?

PSALMS 33:10-22 (GNB) *The LORD frustrates the purposes of the nations; he keeps them from carrying out their plans. ¹¹But his plans endure forever; his purposes last eternally. Happy is the nation whose God is the LORD; happy are the people he has chosen for his own! ¹³THE LORD looks down from heaven and sees all of us humans. ¹⁴From where he rules, he looks down on all who live on earth. ¹⁵He forms all their thoughts and knows everything they do. ¹⁶A king does not win because of his powerful army; a soldier does not triumph because of his strength. ¹⁷War horses are useless for victory; their great strength cannot save. ¹⁸The LORD watches over those who obey him, those who trust in his constant love. ¹⁹He saves them from death; he keeps them alive in times of famine. ²⁰We put our hope in the LORD; he is our protector and our help. ²¹We are glad because of him; we trust in his holy name. ²²May your constant love be with us, LORD, as we put our hope in you.*

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

My school band director fought in Europe. One year as we prepared for the Memorial Day parade, we were practicing "Battle Hymn of the Republic." He told us about the day he left 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.

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

At Omaha Beach something happened that shook him to his core. His unit trailed the action, mopping up; and they began to note an inscription on the belt buckles of the fallen German soldiers. The inscription said, "Gott mit uns." They found out it meant, "God is with us."

The psalmist wrote: "Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord." But, whose God is the Lord?"

The Allied Forces were victorious in the bloody battle of Belleau Wood. 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 that 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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In the Hebrew Scriptures one theme recurs with utter regularity, namely, that military victory and economic superiority are indications of God's favor. The wisdom of the day said that if you're good, you'll be rewarded; if you're evil, you'll be punished.

Both Job and Jeremiah offer a corrective to that distorted wisdom. Job was a righteous man, and yet suffered greatly. He lost wealth, health and happiness, and his friends said, "It's because you've sinned, and God is punishing you!"

But Job maintained his innocence, and protested the injustice of it all: "*Have you ever asked world travelers how they see it? Have you not listened to their stories of evil men and women who got off scot-free, who never had to pay for their wickedness?*" JOB 21:29-30 (MSG)

And Jeremiah echoes the same sentiment: "*You are right, O GOD, and you set things right. I can't argue with that. But I do have some questions: Why do bad people have it so good? Why do con artists make it big?*" (JEREMIAH 12:1 MSG)

Wealth is not an accurate gauge of God's favor; nor is poverty a gauge of God's disfavor. Whose God is the Lord?

In Israel a king would never consider going into battle until the prophets had assured him of God's favor. Remember Gideon? Gideon was called to lead Israel against a bitter enemy. He wanted assurance of God's favor in battle, so he laid a piece of lamb's wool out on the ground before he went to bed, and prayed, "Lord, if you want me to do this, and if you will be with me, then, when I awaken in the morning, let the ground be dry, and the fleece be wet with dew. And the next morning the ground was dry and he wrung a bowl full of water from the fleece.

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

But, again, the history of Israel is evidence that such is not the case. Israel's own military prowess—unparalleled under David and Solomon—deteriorated, because of complacency. Israel *assumed* they'd 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. 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?

I saw an old war movie late one night recently. Actually, I slept through most of it; but in one scene the soldiers were preparing for a critical battle. It was night,

as the camera panned across the faces of the soldiers, studying their solemn expressions as they anticipated the fighting the next day.

One of the soldiers started reciting the Lord's Prayer [*Our Father, which art in heaven; hallowed by Thy Name,...*]. Others took up the words as the camera panned back and faded into the next scene, as the battle was beginning [*Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, in earth as it is in heaven....*]. The soldiers moved out from their trenches; artillery pounded the enemy position on the hill ahead of them, and fighter planes swooped down to strafe the enemy bunkers [*Give us this day our daily bread*].

As the sounds of rifle fire, artillery and bombs blended with the Lord's Prayer, the strains of the "Battle Hymn of the Republic" swelled and took over the soundtrack.

Oh, it was a very stirring scene; but there was a sour note. Somehow, the blending of the sounds of exploding bombs and the Lord's Prayer didn't harmonize. I could not see God's stamp of approval on that scene.

Unfortunately, national defense is necessary. I proudly served in our armed forces, and I'm grateful for a strong military. But I don't believe military victory is a sign of God's favor, for war originates, not in the will of God, but in the sin of man.

Nor do I find evidence of God's favor in a world-leading economic system, when that system tolerates 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 men who go to bed without an honorable job to awaken to in the morning.

Nor in a political system in which leaders of state are more commonly rogues than saints; even if that system *is* the best available. Whose God *is* the Lord?

It's always dangerous to mix patriotism and religion. From the story of Israel, through the dark ages when the church controlled the state, into contemporary times when we have seen totalitarian regimes 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 to love God ahead of our country.

Whose God is the Lord? The Psalmist wrote "*Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord, the people he chose for his inheritance.*" (PSALMS 33:12 NIV)

That's the key: *it's God's choice*. The question then becomes, "Whom has God chosen for his inheritance?" Our New Testament epistle describes what it looks like to be "a nation whose God is the Lord." Listen:

(1PETER 2:9-12 NIV) *But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.*

The problem begins when we turn things around and behave as though we had chosen God. To be a nation "whose God is the Lord" does not mean to be a nation at whose beck and call God stands waiting; it means to be a nation surrendered to God.

The greatness of this nation has always been directly related to the degree to which its people and its leaders have followed the moral and ethical teachings found in Christianity; 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."