

## In God We Trust

### Psalms 33

Dr. Thomas A. Erickson

Sunday, June 29, 2003

On a September morning in 1814, Major George Armistead stood on the parapet of Fort McHenry, gazing at a British armada anchored just outside the range of his guns. The British had come to capture Baltimore, but would have to destroy the fort first because Armistead's guns could easily blow them out of the water if they stood in one by one. Armistead asked Baltimore resident Mary Pickersgill to stitch together a flag measuring thirty by forty feet to fly over the fort. He wanted the British to make no mistake about the fort's exact location, nor about the patriotic zeal of those who defended it. And defend it they did, against a bombardment of over fifteen hundred shells, each of which weighed two-hundred twenty pounds. The flag did not strike, the fort did not surrender, Baltimore did not fall, the British weighed anchor and sailed away, and a young Washington attorney, who had watched the twenty-five hour action from the deck of a British ship, penned the poem that has become the text for our National Anthem.

The flag that now flies over Ft. McHenry is a replica of the banner that inspired Francis Scott Key in the dawn's early light of September 14, 1814. It is one of the biggest flags I've ever seen, and I remember commenting to one of the staff that it must be difficult to raise and lower. He chuckled as he told me that a strong gust of wind caught the flag one night just as it was released from its rope, and a man, valiantly trying to keep the flag under control, was literally swept over the fort's wall when the flag became a giant sail. Since then the staff at Ft. McHenry have been careful not to be carried away by the American flag.

I offer that as a parable for proper patriotism. For two thousand years Christians have struggled not to let their patriotism carry them away from their paramount duty to God. The danger comes in two forms. Believers who live in nations where Christianity is barely tolerated must walk a tight rope between their devotion to Christ and their allegiance to the state, lest they be thrown in jail or suffer even worse consequences. Just two weeks ago we received an urgent request to pray for Christians in southeast India. A radical group of another faith destroyed an orphanage, threw rocks at a nurse, and threatened the life the mission's director. This is not an isolated incident; similar attacks, many of them lethal, are happening still all over the world. Here at National Church a group called Partners with the Persecuted Church pray daily for Christians who suffer for their faith in many other countries.

The second danger is more subtle. It is the danger we face, we whose Declaration of Independence speaks of divine providence, we on whose coins is stamped the motto, "In God we trust," we who style ourselves a Christian nation, we are perpetually in danger of fusing flag and faith, of making God an American citizen, and of making ourselves the divine Teacher's pet.

From time immemorial we humans have attempted to domesticate God, to insist that God bless our nation's welfare and enhance our country's glory. Ancient Israel thought they had God in their hip pocket. After all, had not God selected Abraham to be the father of a great nation and, further, to bless that nation? And were they not the descendants of Abraham, and therefore the sole heirs of God's benediction? And don't we Americans sometimes imagine that God stands a bit straighter when Old Glory passes by, and that the angels sing more heartily when the band strikes up "The Star Spangled Banner?"

But when the Psalmist writes, "Happy is the nation whose God is the Lord," he is a long way from suggesting that God can be tamed and then tethered to any single nation. The Psalmist goes on to say, "Let ALL the earth fear the Lord; let ALL the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him." Even when God makes a special covenant with Abraham and his descendants, it is not for them alone but for the blessing of all people. Listen again to the stipulations in that covenant: "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, SO THAT YOU WILL BE A BLESSING. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; AND IN YOU ALL THE FAMILIES OF THE EARTH SHALL BE BLESSED."

Nothing could be more clear: if God chooses Israel it is in order that Israel will reflect God's love to all nations. And if God blesses America (and God surely does!), it is in order that America may be a conduit of blessing to the world. Nations are not singled out to be God's favorites, but to be God's allies to make of this world what God intends: a place of peace and plenty for all. So a proper patriotism will never elevate the nation to supremacy over God, and will never relegate God to a position of servitude under the nation. Rather, a proper patriotism will pledge its allegiance to the flag and to the republic for which it stands, and at the same time take very seriously the two words that occurs a bit later in the pledge: "one nation UNDER GOD." That does not mean "under God's special protection," or "under God's singular favor." It means instead, "under God's rule and will;" "under God's justice and judgment." Elton Trueblood made this point in his book, "Abraham Lincoln: Theologian of American Anguish." Trueblood notes that Lincoln inserted the words "under God" extempore when he rose to deliver his Gettysburg Address: "Šthat this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom." Trueblood writes, "We cannot know all that Lincoln meant, but we can at least know that he was seeking to express a non-idolatrous patriotism and that he achieved this by the conviction that the nation, good as it may be, is never really supreme. All that we do as men and as patriots is seen in perspective when we realize that all of us are 'under judgment.'" (p. 133-34) This nation and all nations exist "under God," and not vice-versa. For Christians, this means that we will thank God for the benefits of living in this great and good land, while remembering that God alone merits and requires our ultimate loyalty.

While biking through Normandy several years ago we came upon the American Military Cemetery on the bluffs above Omaha Beach. If you saw the film, "Saving Private Ryan," you saw that cemetery. During the month of June, 1944, a million Allied troops poured ashore between Cherbourg and LeHavre to begin the final assault against Adolph Hitler. Thousands did not see the end of the month, let alone the end of the war, and on that summer day in 1978, we walked reverently past the soaring memorial, and then beside the reflecting pool, and finally, with tears flowing down our cheeks, out among the thousands of granite crosses and stars of David. The great majority of those young men were 18, 19, and 20, with their lives still ahead of them, yet when they joined the military in the crusade against Hitler they gave up their personal freedom to secure the freedom of people they had never met and would never know. They transcended a narrow nationalism to do what all morally conscientious people at that time believed to be God's will. They gave their lives so that the world might have another chance at peace. And their remains lie where they fell as a monument to proper patriotism.

Jesus said, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." Yes, and when patriotism is imbued with the spirit of Christ, the world will be our friend.