

Blessed is the Nation
Psalm 33

Tomorrow is Independence Day, and I hope that in all our festivities we Americans will take some time to thank the Lord for our political freedom. For we are truly blessed that we don't have to bow down before kings or dictators. Instead, we have both the freedom and the responsibility to participate in our system of government: electing our own public officials, serving on juries, and giving testimony on the witness stand. And the stability of our system, which has remained basically unchanged since 1868, speaks to the enduring value of the political principles that we hold so dear: the freedom of religion, of speech and of the press, the freedom of association and the rule of law. We Americans truly have a lot to celebrate tomorrow.

But at the same time that we rightly cherish our political institutions, we must avoid the temptation of making them an idol, of placing our trust in them rather than in God. The Psalmist warns us about this tendency in verses 16 and 17. For no matter what they themselves thought, it wasn't armies that gave ancient kings their strength, that preserved their dynasties and expanded their empires. It was not the might and valor of their soldiers or the strength and speed of their warhorses. Instead, as verse 10 says, it is the Lord whose plans are always carried out. It is the Lord who has directed the entire course of human history, and not always in the ways that the most powerful kings have preferred.

Just so, we Americans, powerful and wealthy as we are, would be foolish to trust in our army or our navy for our security. We would be incredibly naïve to imagine that our political plans will always work out the way that we want them to. Indeed, as we think about the numerous natural disasters that continue to befall us, from droughts and disease to hurricanes and wildfires, we would be foolish to think that we are in any way in control of our destinies. For neither our immense scientific learning, nor our great wealth, nor our military power have been able to stop so many of those disasters from taking place.

Instead, verses 18 and 19 make clear that it is the Lord who provides for His people. It is the Lord Who keeps them alive in times of famine. It is the eye of the Lord that watches over those who fear Him. It is the Lord Who protects those who hope in His mercy.

No, instead of placing our trust in human armies or governments, and instead of fearing conquest by foreign powers, verses 8-9 make it clear that it is God alone Whom we should fear. It is God alone before Whom we should stand in awe.

And why is that? Most obviously because God is the One Who has created the world. As verse 7 says, God is the One Who created the oceans and the dry land. As verse 6 says, God is the One Who created the heavens and set the stars in the sky. So surely the Creator of the world is ultimately responsible for how it operates. And so, surely it makes more sense to trust in God rather than in any human government.

But there's another reason that we should place our ultimate trust in God: it is He alone Who determines what is right and wrong. Look at verses 4 and 5. It is the Word of the Lord that is right, not the words or the imagination of human beings. It is God who always does His work in accordance with truth, because God Himself is the One Who determines what is true.

Now, we often take our behavioral cues from our legislatures and our courts, determining what we should do according to what is legal. After all, for the last fifty years, the Supreme Court has decreed that our state legislatures could not place any meaningful restrictions or regulations on abortion. Then, just this past week, the state of Mississippi's ban on abortions after 15 weeks was upheld. But abortion wasn't right for 50 years just because the Supreme Court said it was, and it didn't become wrong just because the Mississippi legislature says it is. No, verse 4 tells us that it is the word of the Lord that is right, and that the Lord's work is done in truth and faithfulness. And part of God's creative work was to create men and women so that they could bear children in the image of God and rear them in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.

So, will we let human governments determine how we should behave? Will we place our trust in our collective wisdom? Or will we trust in the Lord of History? Will we rely on the Creator of the Universe? Will we celebrate His word which is always right? Will we look at His work to determine what is true? The psalmist tells us in verse 5 that it is God Who loves righteousness and justice – will we trust Him to tell us what is right and fair? The psalmist tells us that the earth is full of the Lord's goodness – so will we celebrate the way God has made this world? Will we rejoice in the way God has made us, or will we try to recreate ourselves and our families according to our own imaginations?

In the last three verses of the psalm, the psalmist makes his choice clear: He will wait for the Lord to save him. He will trust God to be his help and shield in the face of danger and oppression. And just as modern Christians do, he prays for the Lord's mercy not because he deserves to receive it, but because his hope, his faith is in the Lord. It is because he has trusted in God that he expects God to save him, and to guide his steps in righteousness.

How much more should we modern Christians place our trust in the Lord! For not only have we seen time and time again just how weak, how confused, how fallible human governments and institutions can be. We have also seen much more clearly than the psalmist did the magnitude of God's salvation in Jesus Christ. We have seen how on the cross God has satisfied both His perfect justice and His unfailing love and mercy. We know that Christ has paid the penalty that all our sins deserve, and that He offers this sacrifice as a free gift to all those who, like the psalmist, trust in His Holy name. It is that sacrifice that we remember as we come to this table, declaring our union with Christ by faith.

But as we remember the cross, we also remember the empty tomb. We celebrate the fact that if Christ has died, Christ has also risen and He has ascended to the right hand of the Father. We rejoice that all power in heaven and on earth has been given into His hands. It is for this reason that we can have confidence in God's saving power, even in the face of opposition and persecution. Because Jesus is Lord, not just of the Church but of all the earth throughout all space and time, we can be confident that His eye is upon us. We can be confident that He will deliver us. We can be confident that His mercy will be upon us and save us as we place our trust in Him.

And so our greatest reason for our rejoicing tomorrow is not our independence but our dependence – our dependence on the God Who is mighty and powerful as well as loving and merciful enough to protect us and to provide for us and to save us from all our sins.

So rejoice in the Lord, you who are forgiven by faith in Christ and who are righteous in His sight! Praise the Lord! Sing to Him a new song! And to the extent that we Mississippians in particular and we Americans in general turn back to God and place our trust in Him, we will have even more reasons to be happy. For blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord.