

“ONE NATION, UNDER GOD...?”

(Psalm 115:1-11)

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--I--America's Spiritual Heritage & Today's Danger--

1. Read Text: Psalm 115:1-11 (NRSV at ALL services) and Pray.

2. “*Home of the free and the brave.*” “*Utopia.*” “*Heaven on earth.*” “*The New Israel*”– these are just of the few names people have given to America over the last few centuries.

A–We were a land where people came seeking haven from religious persecution – where they could live and work and worship God according to the dictates of their own conscience, rather than by the mandates of their government.

B–From its beginning, in fact, America has had a profoundly spiritual and religious heritage.¹

1–For example, soon after the Constitution was ratified in 1787, Congress set aside a day of thanks to God, which we today call “Thanksgiving.

2–And it was George Washington himself who established the precedent (that continues today) of having public officials sworn-in with their hand resting on a Bible.

3–Prayers invoking the power and guidance of God have always begun each session of the U.S. Congress and Supreme Court.

C–So from its beginning, America has practiced the words of Vs. 9 in today’s scripture by allowing God to be “*our help and our shield*” – we’ve put our “*trust in the Lord*”² – we’ve lived out the words of Verse 1: “*Not to us, O Lord, but to your name give glory.*”

D–And I believe that we’ve remained great as a nation thus far because we’ve remained true to our Founders' views of the world and of humanity which had at its foundation a profoundly religious and spiritual faith.

3. And yet, I fear that we here in 21st-century America are in danger of losing that which has made us great to this point.

A–On the one hand, we face new ethical, social, and global issues and influences that are threatening to tear our culture and society apart.³

B–And on the other hand, we also face forces which seek to devalue, debunk and in some cases undermine many of the historic, Godly values that have traditionally helped us deal with threatening issues and influences in our past.⁴

--II--David's Warning Vs. National Idol Worship--

4. Interestingly enough, in today's Bible reading from Psalm 115, King David warns his country Israel about these very dangers, as well.

A--In Verse 7 he tells them not to be like other nations who worship "*idols [of] silver and gold, made by [human] hands – [Idols which]... have eyes, but do not see; ...ears, but cannot hear,... hands and feet, but do not feel or walk*" – in other words "gods" which have no *real* power.

B--And Vs. 8 warns that "*Those who make them are like them, and so are all who trust in them.*"

5. And so this leads me to wonder: ...**What are the "idols" worshiped by American culture today...** things that have no *real* power other than what we give by our own imagination? ⁵

A--Now, I'm not talking about "American Idols" like David Cook or David Archuleta or Jason Castro from the hit TV show.

B--No. What I'm asking is: What are the things that you and I as a society too often find ourselves worshipping *instead* of God?

1--Is it success? popularity? the stock market? our work? our possessions?

2--Our military (necessary though it is)? the almighty Dollar? TV? the Internet?

3--What about sports? (Do you know the difference between a "fan" and a "fanatic"? A "fan" is someone who jumps up and down screaming and yelling for their team at a sports game. A "fanatic" is someone who claps or says "Amen" in church = How sad that many of us are more excited about our sports teams than about our Christianity!)

4--You see, these are the *real* "American Idols" – things we worship instead of God.

C--In the "*Pledge of Allegiance*" to our American flag (that we just shared together), we still affirm that we are "*one Nation under God.*"

D--But are we REALLY? ...As a nation, is our trust *truly* in GOD? Or do we more often trust idols/gods which are *other than* Almighty God?

6. You see, today's scripture warns us (like King David warned the Israelites) that if we worship these other things – that is, if we come to rely on them for our happiness and contentment – then we actually *become like* them.

A--David is saying that rather than being people with the freedom to *choose* how we live our lives, we become so controlled by our reliance and trust in these other things that we ourselves *become* idols with "*faces and hands and feet,*" yet unable to truly *live* as children of freedom like God intended.

B--So David is saying here that, far from giving us freedom, the "idols" of national culture –things like our advanced technology, our military might or economic power–can actually *enslave us* and cause us to become one of those "*other nations*" that he warns against.

1–Now don't get me wrong – as a country, we can (and I believe *should*) use these things as *tools* to be bearers of justice and righteousness in and for our world.

2–But we dare not rely on them so heavily for our happiness, contentment, and security that we find ourselves actually *worshiping* them. ⁶

--III--Solution to Our National Dilemma--

7. So, if we as a nation are in danger of losing the spiritual identity which gave us our greatness to begin with, then how do we go about setting things right today?

A–Quite simply, the answer lies with every one of us who goes by the name “Christian.”

B–I believe that we have not only the *right* but more importantly the *responsibility* to become knowledgeable *about*, and then stand up *for* America's spiritual heritage through our words and deeds – and to do so in *all* arenas of society (both private and public).

1–In fact, both of this year's Presidential candidates have even acknowledged this:

(a) John McCain has said that “*liberty is a right conferred by our Creator, not by governments...*” ⁷ and that “*faith bridges the unbridgeable gaps in humanity....*” ⁸

(b) In like manner, Barak Obama has stated that “*It's important for us not to presume that faith has no part in the public square... [for] to say that men and women should not inject their personal morality into public policy debates is a practical absurdity; our law is by definition a codification of morality, ...grounded in the Judeo-Christian tradition.*” ⁹

2–You see, even our political candidates understand that we don't need to buy into the myth (shared by many today) which says that religion is merely a “private matter.”

3–No. Even they say that religion which does not make itself publically known is no real religion at all– in the words of today's scripture, it's merely an “idol” that “*has eyes, but can't see; ears and can't hear; hands, but can't feel*” (i.e., it's powerless, and hence it's not *real* religion at all!).

C–Remember Jesus own words? He says, “*You [meaning people of faith] are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. [And] no one after lighting a lamp puts it under... a basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory [not to the government, but] to your Father in heaven*” (Matthew 5:14-16).

8. So friends, as we celebrate our July 4th holiday this week, I want to challenge us not to hide or be embarrassed by the “light” of our faith.

A—Instead, we first need to remember and be publically thankful for the ways that God has blessed us as a nation throughout our past.

B—But then we also need to be challenged to once again become knowledgeable advocates for that spiritual heritage both for the sake of our present and our future.

C—You see, as Christians, you and I are called to take up David’s cry for *his* people in Verse 1 and make it *our own*, so that it echoes throughout *our* land today:

“Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to your name give glory! O, Israel [O America], trust in the Lord! For He is [your] help and your shield.”

D—Friends, I believe that it is only when we do this, both as individuals and as a society, that America will *truly* be “*One Nation Under God!*”

9. [CLOSING PRAYER]

“O God, we believe that you brought forth our country to be a shining light of freedom and justice for and to the rest of the world. But you brought us forth so that we might show forth YOUR glory and YOUR love, as well. Forgive us for those times and places where we as a nation have turned from your ways to worship idols of our own hands. Forgive us for often ignoring the truth that YOU are the one who made us great, and that without you, we are nothing. Speak to each of us here today, and teach us what WE can help you do to once again enable America to truly be ‘One Nation Under God.’ For its in your holy name and we pray, Amen.”

10. [INVITE PEOPLE TO COME TO ALTAR TO PRAY FOR AMERICA DURING OUR CLOSING SONG]

ENDNOTES:

1. It’s fair to say that America was in large formed and forged by the inspiration, zeal, and motivation of men and women of profound spiritual faith. As a history major in college, I recognize that there were other forces at work in the formation and advancement of American history other than religion (i.e., economics, politics, greed, glory). However, as a person of faith I do not believe that these other forces could have made as large an impact upon America’s history and heritage had God’s hand not allowed it to be so.

2. Something our currency still affirms (at least in theory) in its words “*in God we trust.*”

3. Issues such as how to address and deal with: abortion; AIDS; state-sponsored gambling; violent crime; terrorism; war in Iraq; homosexuality; the devaluing of the traditional family, and many others.

4. It’s happening, for example, in our public schools, where even *voluntary* school prayer has been outlawed at many events, and *historical* references to our nation’s religious heritage have been removed from school textbooks in the name of “separation of Church and State.” It’s also happening in our work places, where -- for example in Alabama -- a man was fired for refusing to work on Sunday because of religious conviction. Its happening even in school sports, where (in Tennessee) a football coach was reprimanded for “*involvement in church activities.*”

In fact, in many settings today, the mere label “Christian” is an invitation for people to pick on you. Hard work, honesty, faithfulness to business promises, fidelity in marriage and celibacy in singleness are all examples of Christian values and principles which are often laughed away by many people today (including some professing “Christians”) as being “*old- fashioned*” and “*out of touch with reality.*”

5. Please note that America's "idols" are *not* idols made of "wood" or "clay" (which I believe represent "idols" often found in what are called "Two-Thirds World" countries). Instead, American idols are "idols" of "*silver and gold*"— things worshiped by those who are more affluent (like computers, fancy cars, nice homes, etc.).

6. And remember, too, that the forebearers of our own country in the past were quick to give credit *to God* for our national "blessings" and "successes," rather than our contemporary tendency to claim credit *for ourselves*.

7. McCain, given February 7, 2008 at the "Speeches to 2008 Conservative Political Action Conference", cited at www.ontheissues.org/2008/John_McCain_Principles+_Values.htm.

8. McCain, given February 28, 2000 during a speech in Virginia Beach, VA, cited at www.ontheissues.org/2008/John_McCain_Principles+_Values.htm.

9. Obama, from two sources: a Democratic party online debate September 13, 2007 (Source: Huffington Post Mash-Up: 2007); and from his own book The Audacity of Hope, pp. 216-219 (October 1, 2006). Both of these were cited at www.ontheissues.org/2008/Barack_Obama_Principles+_Values.htm#Religion.