

God bless America?

Psalm 67

May 5, 2013

God bless America!

Who would not wish it to be so? Who would not want God to bless America? Yes, there are people outside our borders who would rather America be cursed than blessed, and there are people too even within our borders that wish our country harm, not good. But I am talking about us, about you and me ...

We who feel so privileged to live in this land of diverse and beautiful landscapes, and diverse and beautiful people.

We who feel so proud to be citizens of this nation birthed with a firm commitment to the ideals of liberty and freedom and basic human rights for all people, and proud too of a history which has always aimed for nobility even if it has not always achieved it. Our glory as a nation is not that we have always been perfectly just, but that we desire justice, and that we are continually questioning ourselves, reforming ourselves, changing our course, trying to come closer to achieving justice for all.

We love this nation, not because it is, at the moment, the wealthiest and most powerful and influential nation on earth. No, we love it because of its commitment to justice, to fairness, to doing what is right, because we agree with Lincoln's plea: "Let us have faith that right makes might, and in that faith, let us dare to do our duty as we understand it."

Who among us, who love our country this way, would not want God to bless America?

And yet, sometimes when I hear "God bless America" invoked as a political tag-line, more a slogan than a prayer, and sometimes when I hear people say "God bless America!," defiantly, militantly, in response to a challenge or a threat, I feel uneasy. I feel uneasy, not because I don't want God to bless this nation, but because it feels like the wish is for God to bless America uniquely, exclusively, alone. It seems we are asking God to bless us because we are uniquely deserving, because we are special, set apart from all the other nations, because God is or should be on our side. It's "God bless America ... period."

But do we have the right to ask that of God? Do we have the right to expect that God will have a special place in his heart for this nation over other nations, that God will take special pains to look after our welfare, that God will be on our side?

If any nation ever had such a right, it would not be us, but the historic kingdom of Israel. They were the people God brought out of slavery in Egypt to make his own people. They were the people with whom God made a everlasting covenant, the people with whom God entrusted his law, the people God appointed to be God's own servant people.

If anyone had the right to ask for God's special and particular blessing, it was the people of Israel. And indeed, this was what they did pray, every time they prayed the sixty-seventh psalm: "God be merciful to us and bless us." God bless Israel! But that was not the end of the prayer. It was not "God bless Israel ... period."

"God be merciful to us and bless us," they prayed. "God look on us with kindness." Be good to us, take care of us, bless us, so that ...? So that the whole world may know your will! So that all nations may know your salvation!

It was never just about them. It was never just about Israel. God told Abraham, the father of his people: "Through you I will bless all the nations." The people of Israel were made God's chosen people in order to fulfill a wider purpose: to shine God's light, to proclaim God's message, to be God's priests, interceding with God on behalf of all the nations, offering sacrifices not merely to absolve their own sins, but the sins of all the world.

Do you remember Isaiah's prophecy?

*Because of our sins he was wounded,
beaten because of the evil we did.
We are healed by the punishment he suffered,
made whole by the blows he received.*

When Isaiah wrote these words, about the sacrifice of one for the many, he was not thinking about Christ, he was thinking about Israel! It was only later that Christians applied these words to Jesus, realizing that Jesus had finally fulfilled the purpose God had in mind for his servant people.

This was the purpose God had from the beginning for his people Israel: to be his servants, to be his priests, offering themselves as living sacrifices for the healing and blessing of all the nations. It wasn't that God was on their side, but that they were to be on God's side. Their blessing was not success and wealth and superiority, but justice and righteous and peace.

And this is how God will bless the nations, with justice and righteousness and peace! By judging the peoples, all the peoples, with justice, and by guiding every nation on earth. God's justice is the blessing! God's guidance is the blessing! And these blessings are meant ... for all.

It is a blessing to live by God's light and to walk in God's way, because God's way leads to life. And it was Israel's job to shine God's light, to point to God's way, by pursuing justice, by following God's will. "God be merciful to us and bless us, so that the whole world may know your will, so that all nations may know your salvation." God bless Israel, so that all nations may be blessed.

What do we mean when we say, "God bless America?" Are we praying for our own prosperity, our own security, our own success? Or are we praying, as Israel did in their psalms, to be judged by the measuring stick of God's justice? Are we asking that we be guided by God's righteousness?

Let's be clear: America is not Israel. We are not like biblical Israel. We have no holy calling, no unique divine destiny, only the same calling and the same destiny offered to all nations. God has no favorites. God favors no one nation over another or over all the others. Jesus broke down, once and for all, the walls that divide people from people, race from race, nation from nation. All nations will be judged alike by God's justice, and all nations enjoy alike the privilege of God's providence and guidance.

We are not like the biblical kingdom of Israel, God's chosen nation. The modern state of Israel is not like the biblical kingdom of Israel either. But we can learn from biblical Israel. We can all learn from Israel.

We can learn to pray, as they did, for the blessing of justice, not just the blessing of prosperity; to pray for the blessing of God's guidance, not just the blessing of God's protection; to pray for the blessing of God's mercy, not the blessing of victory; and to pray for these blessings so that salvation, shalom, God's peace, God's blessing, may come to all people, so that all the nations of the earth will be blessed.

So I do pray, "God bless America," but not "God bless America ... period." My prayer is this: "God bless America and ... God bless Chile, God bless India, God bless Cuba, God bless China, God bless Afghanistan, God bless Nigeria, God bless Syria.

*May the peoples praise you, O God,
may all the peoples praise you!*