

### ***In God We Trust***

In the name of him who died for us and was raised, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep, dear friends in Christ: I'm sure you know that the National Motto of these United States is "In God we trust". What you might not know (or remember if you did) is that it's not the original motto of our country. The first, adopted in 1782, was E Pluribus Unum, Latin for "From many, one". It was officially changed in 1956 during the Eisenhower administration. The so-called "cold war" was then being waged. The thought in changing the motto was to sharply distinguish our then generally religious nation and people from the communistic atheists of the Soviet Union. It was a way of saying we're the good guys, they're the bad guys because after all, God is on our side.

The phrase "in God we trust" comes from the rarely sung third and final stanza of the National Anthem, *The Star Spangled Banner*, which, as you may recall, was penned by Francis Scott Key in 1814 during the shelling of Fort McHenry. The stanza goes:

Oh, thus be it ever when free men shall stand  
Between their loved homes and the war's desolation.  
Blessed with victory and peace, may this heaven blessed land  
Praise the power that hath made and preserved us a nation.  
Then conquer we must, when our cause it is just,  
And this be our motto: "In God is our trust".  
And the Star Spangled Banner in triumph shall wave  
O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave.

So, the idea that "In God We Trust" should or might become our National Motto was already out there and had been for a long time. But what I think is most ironic (or perhaps most fitting) is that two years before it became the motto, Congress already passed a law that demanded that those words appear on all of our coins and paper currency. Yes, we as a people trust in a god – but which one? Is it the One True Lord God on high or the god we know better as the almighty dollar? Or is it, perhaps, some other god?

It's worth noting that there have been several challenges from atheists who have sued to have the motto changed on the grounds that it violates the Constitution's ban on the government establishing a national religion. In such cases the Supreme Court has consistently ruled that the "God" mentioned in the motto is not sufficiently specified to make that argument. It's not like they're saying every US citizen has to be a Presbyterian or a Roman Catholic – or a Jew, Muslim, Hindu, or Buddhist for that matter. Nor are they saying you can't be an atheist. The word "God" in the motto is just too generic. There is no national religion – at least not officially.

Which is as it should be: nations don't trust in a god; individual people do. And every person has a god, even an atheist. Luther said that whatever it is you trust in, whatever it is you look to in order to provide happiness, meaning, fulfillment, security, and help in time of trouble – *that* thing, whatever it is, is your god.

With that in mind, it might be said that we the American people *do* have a national religion. What do we trust in? Or rather, what have we put our trust in for most of our history as a nation? That's easy. We trust in the integrity, general goodness, common sense,

ingenuity, and strong work ethic of the American people. We trust in the strength of our financial institutions and the fairness and prosperity of the free market economy. We trust in our military might for defense and our ability to extend that might all over the world to enforce our will and combat evil. We trust in our system of government and the people we elect to represent us. We trust in our institutions of higher education, our excellence and advances in science, engineering, medicine, and technology. And behind it all, I think it's fair to say that most Americans who have any religious inclination at all (and that is most Americans) place some trust in that generic, unspecified god mentioned in the motto: the divine power that hath made and preserved us a nation. Whoever he is, he's on our side because we're the good guys. In other words, we trust in ourselves. We trust in false gods. And in these past few years, we're learning again just how weak and unreliable these false gods are.

God's people living in the land of Judah at the time of the prophet Jeremiah were in a remarkably similar situation. The main difference is that they actually had (or at least were supposed to have) an official national religion. Their capital, Jerusalem, was the city of the Lord God. That's where he manifestly dwelled among his people in the Temple. And they the children of Abraham and heirs of the promise were to worship him and him alone. They were to trust in him alone. But they didn't. They too trusted mostly in themselves. And they overtly worshipped any number of false gods. They even set up some of their idols in the Temple of the Lord. They indulged themselves in all kinds of sensual pagan practices. And they thought they could get away with it because in the back of their minds they knew they were God's chosen people. We're the good guys. God chose us because we're the good guys. And so we can do whatever we want because whatever we want must be good because we're the good guys. You see? Their circular logic makes perfect sense.

The Lord called Jeremiah to tell them otherwise. He was to tell them they were wrong. He was to tell them that they need to repent and return to the One True God because if they didn't, the Lord would pour out his wrath upon them. The Lord would remove his presence from the Temple and cause them to be destroyed. You turned away from me; I'll return the favor and turn away from you.

Two things: first, needless to say, it was a highly unpopular message. It fell almost entirely on deaf ears. And for his faithful speaking of the Lord's Word the prophet was rewarded with mocking, ridicule, rough handling, and imprisonment. Meanwhile there were any number of very popular false prophets who flatly denied Jeremiah's message, telling the people exactly what their itching ears wanted to hear: "Don't worry. Everything will be all right. We are the Lord's chosen. We're the good guys. We can do no wrong."

The second thing is this: the Lord told Jeremiah from the outset that almost no one would listen to him and that his overall mission would fail miserably. The vast majority of the people would refuse to repent and return to the Lord, and the Lord would be forced to carry out the judgment he threatened. You can well imagine how frustrating and depressing that would be for the prophet. To be called to beg people, people he loved and cared about as fellow citizens of the city and nation he loved, beg them to save themselves from destruction by repenting of their evil ways and idolatry knowing full well in advance that they would not. It's like Jesus weeping over Jerusalem for their rejection of him: "How often would I have gathered your children as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not! Behold your house is left to you desolate."

It's small wonder that Jeremiah is called the weeping prophet. At times in his writings he bursts into bitter complaints against the Lord: "Why are you making me do this? I do what you tell me, I say what you tell me to say, but nothing good results of it – ever. No one listens to me.

And I get beat up in the process! What's the point?" Then, when the Lord doesn't answer his complaint right away, he grumbles, "It's bad enough that no one is listening to me, but worse is that even *you* won't listen to me!"

It's after one such outburst that we find the Lord's response to Jeremiah. It's today's Old Testament reading. "Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his strength, whose heart turns away from the Lord. He is like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see any good come ... Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord ... He is like a tree planted by water, that sends out its roots by the streams, and does not fear when heat comes, for its leaves remain green".

You'll notice that the Lord's response sounds an awful lot like the First Psalm that we read together earlier. Recall that the collective psalms were the hymnbook of Israel. That being the case, the Lord is directing Jeremiah to the first stanza of their national anthem. Let this be your motto, Jeremiah: "In God is our trust". Yes, the heat is on. Those who trust in themselves and other false gods, they'll dry up and blow away. But you have nothing to fear because you trust in me. You are the tree planted by the stream. Your roots are sunk deep into the living water of my word and I will not fail you.

Nor did he. Jeremiah and a handful of others who actually heeded his warnings escaped the destruction of Jerusalem and Judah when they fell. And though Jeremiah wept for his people and nation when it was destroyed (that's what his Book of Lamentations is all about), he lived to see happy days again. As Jesus said, "Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh".

And that, I believe, is the takeaway for us. All around us we see our idols falling. They are showing their true colors. The integrity, goodness, common sense, and overall work ethic of the American people are highly doubtful. Our financial institutions are shaky, and roughly half of our people are seriously considering the free market a failure and thinking socialism is a better way to go – even though it's never worked anywhere ever. Our military might is questionable at best, and seems to be more concerned about being "woke" than defending the nation. Our system of government is showing its weaknesses. And who can trust even one of our elected officials? Our institutions of higher learning? Really? They can't even distinguish between men and women anymore.

Fine. Let these idols fall. And let fall especially the idol of the generic god who is on our side because we're the good guys. There is no generic god. There is only the One True Triune God who reveals himself through his Word. And we aren't the good guys. We are wretched sinners who have trusted in and worshipped false gods. And for that we richly deserve the Lord's severe judgment. But through Jeremiah and the rest of the Lord's true prophets, the Lord calls us to repent and return to him and to him alone. For the sake of Jesus, his Son, who loved us and gave himself for us, he forgives our sin and he plants us like trees by the living water of his Word.

As we've seen, the Lord doesn't save nations. He saves individuals out of the nations who put their trust in him. Therefore, as Christ's redeemed people, let this be more than our motto, let it be our one true faith: In God Is Our Trust. In Jesus' name.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***