

## "THAT IS THE QUESTION"

### Psalm 2:1/Peter 2: 9-12

Recently, an acquaintance related how he came across a religious program on television. The host presented to his viewers the scenario, "When you die and stand before God, what is the first question you will ask him?" My friend asked me about what I would say, but I was more interested in his own views, since he is admittedly hardly religious at all. Most of the time, he's uncomfortable with anything that has to do with faith, and fairly bristles with hostility when God is mentioned.

He didn't hesitate at all. "I'm going to ask God about why bad things happen. . . ." Then he ran off example after example of tragedies personal and catastrophes of epic proportions. "That's what I would want to ask," he concluded on a self-satisfied note of belligerence.

I conceded that yes, these are good questions. He would not be the first one to pose them. Moreover, I gently told him that we don't have to wait until we die to make such inquiries- - it's called prayer.

Questions are at the very heart of biblical prayer- - questions as deep, and searing, and disturbing as the challenges my friend offered.

"Why do you stand far off, O Lord? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?"

"How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?"

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

These questions- - gut-wrenching, sometimes uttered as groans- - are found in just a few of the Psalms. Keep reading, and you'll encounter dozens, if not hundreds more of them in the pages of Scripture.

In fact, in our selection for today the Psalmist asks a question, "Why do the nations conspire, and the peoples plot in vain. . . ." Actually, the terms "conspire" means "to thunder," or "to rage," while the word translated as "plot" means to "whisper," "mutter," "grumble."

"Why do the nations rage and the peoples mutter emptily. . . ." With the purpose of such anger being that "the kings of the earth take counsel together against the Lord and his anointed. . . ."

Why do the powerful and the mighty resent God and his appointed agent?

The words will come to be seen as a prophesy about Jesus. They are quoted by Peter and John not long after Pentecost and associated with Jesus' suffering and death: when on Good Friday, in Jerusalem, against God's anointed servant, Jesus, Herod and Pontius Pilate and all their minions, Gentiles and the peoples of Israel alike gathered and roared and grumbled.

Why did the powerful and the pious oppose the one who healed and helped, comforted and consoled, who sought out and saved the lost and wandering, who brought life to those in the shadow of death? Why did the influential and important recoil from Christ's righteousness as if he were radioactive and treat his truth as if it were toxic- - poison?

Why?

That's a good question. And the Scripture does give an answer. One that my friend would reject out of hand, since he also has a stipulation when he puts his case before God: "I don't want to hear anything about 'sin' in the answer. . . that 'sin' is the reason for misery and mayhem."

Well, he might not like it- - though ironically, his comment attests to the very thing that he would rather not acknowledge: "Give me an answer, God, on my own terms! You're playing by my rules now!" A demand, which, when you get down to it is a prime illustration of human rebellion- - of our separating ourselves from God. Both being typical terms for "sin" in the Bible- - rebellion and running from God's presence.

The kings of the earth and the rulers take counsel against the Lord and his anointed saying, "Let us burst their bonds asunder and cast their cords from us!"

This is a cry of mutiny- - a defiant declaration of complete and utter independence from God. Let us snap the ties that bind us to God! Let us sever ourselves from being in relationship with him!

We do not want to acknowledge God as our Creator, but we would be god!

We do not need his salvation, but we are our own saviors, and we can gain paradise on our own- - or make our own Edens!

The Scriptures remind us- -sadly, but over and over again- - that even when confronted by God's goodness, even when offered his love and life, people recoil at God's Truth, would even run and hide from it. Or run at it with all the anger and venom they can muster and try to trample under foot, bury it, so it would never be seen or heard from again.

Why?

In his autobiography, "Ginger, You're Barmy," British novelist, David Lodge, recounts his military duty in post-war England in the 1950's. Relating his experiences in bootcamp, he described a fellow recruit who is despised and harassed by his fellow draftees.

Lodge concedes that the reason for the hostility was that the young man would pray, and he refused to engage in the profanity that spewed from the mouths of his company. But he especially would grow pained when the other soldiers went out of their way to blaspheme and mock Christ.

The author ponders why did the other men- - and he included himself in their disdain- - but why did they react towards a person whom they had never met before, who never harmed anyone, or said an unkind word towards anybody.

It seemed as if his goodness- - his living his faith- - sparked outrage. That by just being a Christian, was cause enough to set them off.

"Why do the peoples explode with anger, why do they grumble without reason?"

Why?

That is a good question, and I have been mulling it over myself recently. I don't know whether any of you are aware of the controversies surrounding the phrase, "Christian nation." Hollywood actors have savaged the term, and sophisticated commentators scoff at the phrase. Clergy within mainline denominations reject the idea that America in any way, shape, or form is a "Christian nation." And editorials appear in newspapers expressing alarm.

In their disdain, they conjure up images of medieval Inquisitors garbed in red, with racks and whips; crusaders drenched in blood; women forced to wear habits from "The Handmaid's Tale." And to be sure, we have to reckon with the sins of the past; of how far short those who would claim to be the Body of Christ have fallen from the glory of God. No doubt about it!

Still, I am struck by the vehemence of many people- - educated and influential- - to simply the very notion of a "Christian nation." Or the proposition that America should be a "Christian nation."

Past generations in the United States would have accepted this was the case. And if you don't believe me, then listen to the words of an act of Congress:

Whereas the Senate of the United States devoutly recognizing the supreme authority and just government of Almighty God in the affairs of men and of nations. . . (and) whereas it is the duty of nations as well as of men to owe their dependence upon the ruling power of God. . . to recognize the sublime truth, announced in the Holy Scriptures and proven by all history, that those nations only are blessed where God is the Lord. . . (the Senate)

has. . . by a resolution requested the President to designate and set apart a day for national prayer and humiliation. . .

This was signed by President Lincoln during the Civil War.

When I read that passage to students they rise up in indignation. Yet, up until fairly recently, it would have been taken for granted that America is a Christian nation of some sort.

However, for those who do rage and grumble at the mere possibility that America even was, is now, or ever should be a "Christian nation"- - my question is not to God, but to them. And it is this:

If we would not be a Christian nation, what kind of nation should we be? What should we substitute for that adjective, "Christian"?

How about America is an atheist nation: one that relies only upon the designs and desires of humans? Well, look at the former Soviet Union and the Peoples Republic of China, and see what government without the God of the Bible has wrought.

How about America should be secular. Well, look at France during its Revolution, where the cult of Reason was extolled, and churches burned and clergy executed, and thousands sent to the guillotine to be sacrificed before the altar of the god of Reason and Secularity.

How about America should be a pagan country? Well, that's been tried, over and over again. And to gloss over the evidence of history is to our own peril. Look at how the pagan nations treated the poor, children, women, the weak. Look at the deities they worshipped: gods and goddesses who declared violence a sacrament and cruelty was at the basis of their creeds.

If not a "Christian nation"- - a nation whose citizens whose ethics are founded upon and guided by the faithful love of God in Jesus Christ; a nation whose actions are to reflect mercy and forgiveness. A nation, which in the light of the Word of God is constantly summoned to repentance and reformation

If not this kind of nation- - - then what would you have? For those who rage and roar and grumble against God and his anointed- - - the Crucified and Resurrected Christ- - - what would they- - - you- - - we- - - put in its place?

Whether they like it or not- - - or we like it or not- - - we are a Christian nation.

"You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light."

The church- - - called, chosen, elected, claimed, cleansed- - - to declare before the nations that would rage and grumble, "That God has set his king on Zion, my holy hill." And nothing, and no one can remove him from his throne over us, and for us. The scandal of the cross and the surprising sight of the empty tomb, assures us that God has the last laugh over them all. And that we- - - his body, his church, his nation- - - can take joy- - - that is real joy- - - in Him.