

WHOSE SIDE IS GOD ON?

Scriptures: Isaiah 19:19-25; 10:5-11, 15-19

I frequently quote from Calvin and Hobbes, but I read other comic strips, too. One of them is Peanuts, which is an amazingly relevant comic strip given that the strips running in the paper right now are reruns produced decades ago. In one Peanuts comic strip Linus runs up to Charlie Brown and says, “Charlie Brown, I just saw the most unbelievable football game ever played. What a comeback! The home team was behind six to nothing with only three second to play. They had the ball on their own one-yard line. The quarterback took the ball, faded back behind his own goal posts and threw a perfect pass to the left end, who whirled away from four guys and ran all the way for a touchdown! The fans went wild! You should have seen them! People were jumping up and down, and when they kicked the extra point, thousands of people ran out onto the field laughing and screaming! The fans and players were so happy they were rolling on the ground and hugging each other and dancing and everything! It was fantastic!” In the last panel Charlie Brown says, “How did the other team feel?”

Charlie Brown sees things from a different perspective—a perspective unnervingly similar to God’s. People sometimes think that God does not take sides, but according to the Bible that is not true. God takes sides; but the side God takes often switches.

We see this in our first scripture lesson from Isaiah 10. Look again at Isaiah 10, starting at verse 5 (OT, p. 639). In verse 5 God takes the side of the Assyrians against the people of Israel. The Lord says,

Ah, Assyria, the rod of my anger—the club in their hands is my fury! Against a godless nation (God is referring to the people of Israel) I send him, and against the people of my wrath I command him, to take spoil and seize plunder, and to tread them down like the mire of the streets.

Does it not sound like God is on the side of the Assyrians? But in verses 8-11 the Assyrian king begins to boast. In verses 10-11 he says,

As my hand has reached to the kingdoms of the idols whose images were greater than those of Jerusalem and Samaria, shall I not do to Jerusalem and her idols what I have done to Samaria and her images?

The Assyrian king figures that he has conquered by his own power and might. He does not realize he succeeded only because the Lord let him succeed. In verse 15 the Lord says,

Shall the ax vaunt itself over the one who wields it, or the saw magnify itself against the one who handles it? As if a rod should raise the one who lifts it up, or as if a staff should lift the one who is not wood!

The Assyrian king thinks he has conquered by his own power, but in reality he was a tool of God’s power. He does not realize or acknowledge who has been helping him.

So now, God switches sides. Look at Verses 16-17:

Therefore the Sovereign, the Lord of hosts, will send wasting sickness among his stout warriors, and under his glory a burning will be kindled, like the burning of a fire. The light of Israel will become a fire, and his Holy One a flame: and it will burn and devour his thorns and briers in one day.

Now God will help Israel become a burning fire against the Assyrians.

When I was in junior high P. E. we played flag football. The class was divided into two teams, but our P. E. teacher was the quarterback for both teams. He said he did this because none of us could throw the ball very well, but I think he was still trying to live out his fantasy of playing in the NFL. Anyway, he took the snap for one team, faded back, and threw a beautiful pass to one of the kids streaking down the field who scored a touchdown. They all cheered and congratulated each other, until we got the ball. Then the teacher took the snap from our center, faded back, and threw a beautiful pass to one of our receivers who scored a touchdown. And suddenly the other team was not so cocky.

That, according to Isaiah, is how God operates in the world. We may think that God is on our side, and sometimes God is. I apologize if I sound presumptuous here, but I think God was on the side of those who gave their lives to free American slaves. I think God was on the side of those who gave their lives to stop the murder of millions of Jews in Nazi Germany. I think God was on the side of that multi-national force that finally stopped the genocide between Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda. God does take sides! But if we ever think for a moment that it is our own power, our own military might, our own national interest that God is blessing, we are better be careful. The minute any individual or nation becomes cocky about their power or position or the “rightness” of their cause, they had better look out, because at that point God is notorious for switching sides.

We see an even more dramatic example of that in our second scripture lesson. Turn to Isaiah 19, beginning at verse 19 (OT, p. 648). Isaiah says,

On that day there will be an altar to the Lord in the center of the land of Egypt, and a pillar to the Lord at its border. It will be a sign and a witness to the Lord of hosts in the land of Egypt; when they cry to the Lord because of oppressors, he will send them a savior, and will defend and deliver them.

In this statement God promises to do the same thing for the Egyptians that earlier in the Bible God did for the Israelites. Look at the following comparisons:

Exodus 14:10—“As Pharaoh drew near, the Israelites looked back, and there were the Egyptians advancing on them. In great fear the Israelites cried out to the Lord.”

Isaiah 19:20—“...when they (the Egyptians) cry to the Lord because of oppressors, he will send them a savior, and will defend and deliver them.”

The Lord hears the cries of the oppressed whether they are Israelites or Egyptians.

Exodus 6:7—"I will take you (Israelites) as my people, and I will be your God. You shall know that I am the Lord your God, who has freed you from the burden of the Egyptians."

Isaiah 19:21—"The Lord will make himself known to the Egyptians; and the Egyptians will know the Lord on that day..."

God wants both Israelites and Egyptians to know the Lord.

Exodus 15:26 (spoken to the Israelites): "... for I am the Lord who heals you."

Isaiah 19:22 (spoken about the Egyptians): "... the Lord will listen to their supplications and heal them."

God wants to heal both Israelites and Egyptians.

But it does not stop there. In Isaiah 19:23 Isaiah tells of a highway that will link Egypt and Assyria, so that the Egyptians and Assyrians will visit each other's country and worship together. Assyria is the enemy that was oppressing the Egyptians at that time. It is God's intention to create a highway between the two that will go right through the middle of Israel. The result of this is explained in verses 24-25:

On that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the Lord of hosts has blessed, saying, "Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my heritage."

Isaiah 19 is like the story of Jonah. Nineveh was the capital city of Israel's arch enemies: the Assyrians. Jonah ran away from preaching in Nineveh, not because he was afraid to preach but because he did not want the people of Nineveh to turn to God. He did not want the people of Nineveh to be saved. He wanted them to be destroyed. But God wanted to save them. God was certainly on Jonah's side; otherwise God would not have saved him from the ocean or given a plant to shade him. But God was also on the side of the Assyrians, because the Assyrians were also God's beloved children.

You realize, of course, that Nineveh is located in what today we call Iraq.

Friends, we cannot understand God until we look at the world the way Charlie Brown does: "How did the other team feel?" Until we understand that God wants to bring blessing to all the people of this world, even our enemies, we will not understand what God is doing in the world. For Christians, the question can not be only "What is in our national interest? Or what is in my best interest?" If that is the only question you ever ask, if that is the only question our political leaders ask, we are not looking at the world the way God does.

- Ken Onstot
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