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CODA: INVOKING GOD IN WAR: LINCOLN'S PICTURE OF THE SECOND INAUGURAL

Abraham Lincoln's second-term inaugural address gives a stark and incisive analysis of the causes and effects of the Civil War, asserting God's Providence in the working out of history. Here, Dr. Timothy Patitsas reflects on the president's insights and the ethics of wartime prayer.

...One-eighth of the whole population were colored slaves, not distributed generally over the Union, but localized in the southern part of it. These slaves constituted a peculiar and powerful interest. All knew that this interest was somehow the cause of the war. To strengthen, perpetuate, and extend this interest was the object for which the insurgents would rend the Union even by war, while the Government claimed no right to do more than to restrict the territorial enlargement of it. Neither party expected for the war the magnitude or the duration which it has already attained. Neither anticipated that the cause of the conflict might cease with or even before the conflict itself should cease. Each looked for an easier triumph, and a result less fundamental and astounding. Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other. It may

seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces, but let us judge not, that we be not judged. The prayers of both could not be answered. That of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes. "Woe unto the world because of offenses; for it must needs be that offenses come, but woe to that man by whom the offense cometh." If we shall suppose that American slavery is one of those offenses which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but which, having continued through His appointed time, He now wills to remove, and that He gives to both North and South this terrible war as the woe due to those by whom the offense came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a living God always ascribe to Him? Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said "the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether."

With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.

– Abraham Lincoln, Second Inaugural Address, March 4, 1865

DR. PATITSAS: When you enter the Lincoln Memorial, on the left wall is inscribed the Gettysburg Address, and on the right is the Second Inaugural Address. Both parties in the Civil War, Lincoln says, appealed to the same God for victory, but neither side's prayers were answered fully. Here, Lincoln is attaining to the level of *The Iliad*, the one western epoch that doesn't choose sides. In the very midst of this conflict and as the leader of one of its sides, he ascends to the vantage point of divine providence, and says, "Maybe it was God's will that we would not win quickly, that this war would go on until every drop of blood that was drawn by the lash of slavery would be paid for."

So, the war itself, by God's providence, is the punishment on our nation for slavery—but not punishment; rather a therapeutic cleansing for our nation of what we had done. It wasn't sufficient that one day we would just wake up from having sanctioned slavery and say, "Oh, sorry!" Rather, God's will was that we would be cleansed of the evil of slavery by sharing in its sufferings ourselves. Thus Lincoln is taking his enemy, the Confederate soldier, and making his sacrifice an atonement for the sin of slavery, which allegedly he is fighting to defend; he thus heals this man. Lincoln is also taking the blood of the Union soldier shed to end slavery, and making that, as well, a punishment for slavery's existence in their nation; he thus humbles this man.

There are different reasons why we might pray for victory. One is because the cause is good. Another is because we want peace to return quickly. But merely by the fact that we are praying for victory, we are leaving it to God to determine whether we will attain that victory or not, and whether our cause is just or not. We're not praying for victory because we are sure we are right. We are praying because we might be wrong too, and by involving God's judgement we leave it to him.

RTE: But sometimes we know or suspect that our nation's cause is wrong. What if the motive is imperialist aggression or economic greed, or simply a desire for personal power and a crazed world-view, such as Hitler? Why does the Church still pray for victory there?

DR. PATITSAS: Because we are commanded to pray for our authorities and because we know that if the cause is wrong, God will answer this prayer in some other way. Also, if we pray for the legitimate authorities, and the present authorities are illegitimate, then the day will come when they are removed from power.

RTE: But that's a self-aware Christian praying. Most people pray for victory because they don't want their soldiers to die and they want their country or their own interests to come out on top.

DR. PATITSAS: But as long as there is any reference to God in the context of war, there is the possibility that you'll come to see that He is larger than the purposes of any particular nation or war. There's that glimmer of light coming through. There is some kind of separation between our passionate attachment to nation and our love for God. We haven't said this in the in-

terview so far, but look, you know, God permits wars partly to afflict us for everything else that we do, so that we might wake up and turn to him for healing. This secular notion that it's peace, peace, peace, misses something.

It's very tricky, because God wants us to work tirelessly for peace, but Lincoln had it right. God's providence permits certain bad things to happen for our salvation so that we can atone for other things we've done. We can't outsmart God and say we're going to repent of slavery without also directly experiencing its pain. That pain came to us through the war. But of course we expect our presidents to try, and not be fatalists! We expect them to try to resolve things painlessly—but that attempt is their cross, and it will be answered in a providential way. This is a mystery. ✦