

Standing on the Other Side

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The word of God comes to us this evening from three passages in the Old Testament. The first of them is found in the book of Exodus. What these three passages have in common, and the message they will impress upon us, I think will become clear as we attend carefully to their words.

And when Moses saw that the people had broken loose (for Aaron had let them break loose, to the derision of their enemies), then Moses stood in the gate of the camp and said, 'Who is on the LORD's side? Come to me.' And all the sons of Levi gathered round him. (Exod 32:25–26)

We'll repeat the words of Moses' challenge to our own hearts. In this congregation this evening, I ask it in the name of the Lord, who is on the Lord's side? Are you?

The second reading comes from the book of the prophecy of Obadiah, a difficult book to find. He lurks somewhat inconspicuously between Amos and the book of Jonah. When we find him, he has some important things to tell us. The verses we shall read are the words of the Lord to the ancient nation of Edom.

The pride of your heart has deceived you, you who live in the clefts of the rock, in your lofty dwelling, who say in your heart, 'Who will bring me down to the ground?' Though you soar aloft like the eagle, though your nest is set among the stars, from there I will bring you down, declares the LORD . . . Because of the violence done to your brother Jacob, shame shall cover you, and you shall be cut off for ever. On the day that you stood aloof, on the day that strangers carried off his wealth and foreigners entered his gates and cast lots for Jerusalem, you were like one of them. (vv. 3–4; 10–11)

God said to Edom, 'You stood aloof' or, as the King James Version puts it, 'You stood on the other side.' So the words of Moses' challenge ring in our ears, 'Who is the Lord's side?' We search our hearts to make an answer. Suppose God spoke to us now in these moments. He who reads our hearts and knows our thoughts afar off; I wonder what his verdict would be. Would he indeed have to say to any one of us that, far from standing on the Lord's side, 'At this moment you are standing on the other side?'

Our final word comes from the first book of Chronicles. We read an interesting and dramatic event in the life of the ancient Israelite king, King David. As we read it, our hearts will be spurred to remember David's greater son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

And some of the men of Benjamin and Judah came to the stronghold to David. David went out to meet them and said to them, 'If you have come to me in friendship to help me, my heart will be joined to you; but if to betray me to my adversaries, although there is no wrong in my hands, then may the God of our fathers see and rebuke you.' Then the Spirit clothed Amasai, chief of the thirty, and he said, 'We are yours, O David, and with you, O son of Jesse! Peace, peace to you, and peace to your helpers!' (1 Chr 12:16–18)

The ancient story passes, leaving an echo down the centuries, but tonight that greater than David, his greatest son from the very throne of glory, as he hears and sees us assembled here this evening, does he not issue to us that same question? As anxiously as David addressed it to those ancient people as he saw them come towards him? 'What do you mean,' said he, 'coming out like this to me? Are you on my side or are you against me?'

What a wonderful thing it would be if, before this meeting concluded, we could honestly each one raise our heart to the Lord Jesus, look up to him and, in all truthfulness, make our response. 'Oh Lord, you who know our hearts; we are yours and on your side.' So may God write his word upon our hearts this evening.

Taking Sides

These three passages of holy Scripture that we have read together combine to remind us that in that great battle of life upon which our eternal welfare depends, there are only two sides. In everyday living, and in the thousand and one questions that arise in the course of living, it often happens that we cannot clearly take one side or another. Sanity suggests that we must compromise here and agree to differ there. Standing with one leg in one camp and the other in another. But when it comes to that great battle upon which the issues of life depend, upon which the great eternal destiny of every soul depends, there are only two sides. We stand on the one or the other. We are for God, or we are against him. We are for the Lord Jesus, or we stand on the other side.

Our Lord Jesus himself was at pains to make this abundantly clear, was he not? More than once in the course of his ministry he warned his apostles and told the crowd, 'Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters' (Matt 12:30). Sometimes I know we are tempted to say in our hearts, 'Well admittedly I'm not very keen on religion. I don't spend a lot of time thinking about God. I don't feel any great gush of emotion towards the Lord Jesus. I couldn't possibly say I was absolutely hot on fire for Christ.' Yet we tell ourselves that, 'On the other hand, I'm not completely against him—I'm not ice cold.'

That will not do, will it? For our blessed Lord himself said, 'I wish you were either hot or cold. If you try to hold that middle position, and be neither one or the other, and are lukewarm, then it will nauseate me, and I shall spew you out of my mouth.' (see Rev 3:15–16) In this matter, then, there is no neutrality. We come to our first question, *Who is on the Lord's side?* None of us, if we are asked, are going to say we're on the side of the devil; of course not. Are we not often to be found on the side of good, for good neighbourly relations, for promoting the good of men in many things? Indeed, many of us might be quite seriously religious. But our first story reminds us that in this grave matter, as we come to settle the destiny of our souls, we cannot afford to be vague in our thinking or vague in our terms.

It does not merely say, if you notice, who is on God's side. Moses asks us who is on the LORD'S side, who is on Jehovah's side, for Jehovah is a God with a name. He has declared himself, he has told us what he is like, he has told us what he has, he has intervened in history. It is this God with a name that talks to us. Who is on Jehovah's side? The sad story that we have read tells us that when this question was posed, it was posed to none other than Israel, the supposed people of God. When Moses came down the mountain from speaking with God, he found these people at their worship. There they were around their altar with their golden image upon it. They were not playing cards, getting drunk, or in the vice dens. Here they were at their religious exercises. They were praising God and in their fervour they were dancing around the altar (see Exod 32). The singing doubtless was vigorous and enchanting and alluring, and no-one could possibly question their devotion. Yet when Moses saw it, he took the tablets of God's holy law and smashed them on the ground. What a disaster it was into which they had fallen.

He cried from his heart, 'Who is on the Lord's side?' He needed to, for this other was not the Lord's side. We learn our first lesson. We have to distinguish between religion that stands on the Lord's side, and religion that stands on the other side. Now it was that Moses was upset, not because he was a hard old fellow or narrow minded of heart. Here were his people, fervent in their religion. But the god they worshipped was a god of gold that could no more save them than the man in the moon could save them. Here they were, a people in the wilderness, surrounded by enemies galore. On all sides there was drought and famine, and there were hostile tribes. A waste, howling wilderness, and they did not know the way to come to their desired haven.

They needed a God who could save them. They needed the living God. They needed Jehovah, the God of mercy and redemption and forgiveness; the God of power and light and guidance. But Aaron had diverted their attention and their faith from the living God who could save them, and had got them all occupied with their singing and their dancing around a golden calf which could not save them.

Moses issues his clarion call, 'Who is on the LORD'S side? Come to me.' The call comes ringing down the centuries into our hearts this evening. Will we turn from our idols, the things that cannot save us from our enemies, things in which there is no ultimate salvation? Will we turn to the living and true God, that we might know the reality of his living and powerful salvation?

The moment was critical and a little confusing. You see, the Bible tells us that as they were dancing around that golden calf and singing its praise, they called that calf by the name of Jehovah—so Aaron had taught them. It was a deception, a cruel deception. We need to define why they called their golden calf Jehovah. What was the difference between the real Jehovah and this thing they called Jehovah? It is easy, isn't it, to speak the lovely name of Jesus? The real issue is what content you put into that name. What does Jesus mean? The Jehovah that Moses called the nation to was a God who was their Saviour, who had redeemed them out of the land of Egypt. They had forgotten him. Now they were singing the praises of this golden calf and saying, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!' (Exod 32:4). It was a fatal mistake.

Let me tell you about that golden calf and where they got it from. They had once been slaves in the slave labour camps of Egypt and Pharaoh had mightily oppressed them, giving them merely a starvation wage. They had scarcely survived in all the sweat, the toil, the suffering and the sorrow of that oppressed society. God in his great mercy to those people had brought them out. There it stands inscribed in Scripture as a tremendous testimony to the heart of God and the divine protest against all exploitation of labour. Let us be very clear; to grind workers down and give them a mere pittance, to keep people in factories or slave labour camps and give them just a survival diet, and keep back their rightly earned wages—the God of heaven will not have it. The exodus stands as a record of God's command to pharaoh to, 'Let my people go.' Not to grind down the face of the poor. Happy is it, if where the gospel has truly come, it has led to social betterment. We praise God for the memory of the great men like John Wesley who preached that God was not only interested in the souls of men, but interested in their bodies too; that God is on the side of those that are socially and politically oppressed.

Hence it is, wherever the gospel has come, there has frequently followed in its trail social betterment and improvement. The missionaries have added schools to their activities, clinics and hospitals; they have sought the material good of the poor and helped them to rise. There's many a man and woman here who could freely get up and say what Christ has done for them; how he saved them from wasted living and drunkenness, from immorality and drugs maybe, and gave them respectability and helped them rise socially. That is all good. The story tells us that when Israel came out of Egypt by God's deliverance, God made the Egyptians pay them their back wages. After all the long years in which they'd been cheated of their wages, now the Egyptians were obliged to give them back. The Israelites took them—the gold and the silver and the clothing and much else—all very good.

But mark now the sad thing that has happened. A few months and years have gone by and now that they've got their gold, somehow they've got things confused. That gold which was the by-product of their redemption, they're now saying is the source of their salvation. 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!' It was a sad mistake, but then it has happened many and many a time.

I went to live at one stage in the North East of England and opposite my lodging lived a gentleman who initially had been brought up as a Christian, in a Christian church. Eventually he had turned to atheism and abandoned his Christianity. He had gone on the convoys to Russia; he had seen life and death and he came back from those convoys a hard boiled atheist. He sat listening one night to his radio when Billy Graham came on to preach the gospel. 'How shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?' (Heb 2:3). As he sat in his own living room, the Holy Spirit of God moved in his heart and made him aware that there was a great spiritual salvation which was being offered to him. Should he refuse it, nothing else could save him.

There he knelt by his radio and received God's great salvation. Presently, in the joy of his new-found salvation, he went back to the church where he was brought up. They were astounded to see him come. 'Harry,' they said, 'how lovely to see you, of all people.' He told them why he had come; he had found the Saviour, he had been saved, he had been born again. They looked at him coldly and said, 'What nonsense, we don't believe in being saved.'

They didn't believe in that. They believed in social good work, in education, in psychological counselling, and in many other good things that help people. But all combined cannot save. Here were those Israelites worshipping a golden calf in the name of God. They called it Jehovah, worshipping something that could not save them.

How had they been saved out of Egypt? Not by their gold. When it came to delivering them from Egypt, God rose up to judge that guilty land. And when God rises up to judge, differences disappear. Whether they were Egyptians or Israelites, they stood as sinners before God. Whether they were the oppressed or the oppressors, they stood as sinners before God. Whether they were dark and lurid sinners, or refined and cultured sinners, they stood as sinners under the displeasure of God. God, who came down to execute his judgement upon men, whether Israelite or Egyptian, saved all who would believe—by the ransoming power of the blood of the Passover lamb. That ancient story still carries its connotations for us, surely. We may rightly be concerned about the social differences in the world and be doing what we can to alleviate them, but now we come to talk about something far more important, because it is the ultimate thing.

How can I be saved? How shall I stand before God? How shall I arrive at last, redeemed, in God's heaven? Here all other things must, of necessity, disappear; for there is only one thing that can save me:

What can wash away my sin?

Nothing but the blood of Jesus.

What can make me whole again?

Nothing but the blood of Jesus.¹

Tonight we sit before God. Whatever our rights and wrongs, we sit before God as men and women who have sinned. For there is a salvation; the name of it is Jehovah the Saviour and the Lamb's blessed name of Jesus. Who among us has put our trust in Jehovah Saviour, and stand on the Lord's side? Have you? God give us grace that we should be like those early people in Thessalonica who turned from all their idols, religious and otherwise, and all other things that could not save them. They turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God. I ask again, who is on the Lord's side? While I trust that is where we all stand, it is possible, isn't it, that some stand on the other side?

Choosing the wrong side?

Our second passage told us the story of two nations—two nations that started with the story of two boys. Let me just remind you of that story. They were two brothers, sons of one father. Their father, for all his weaknesses and faults, was a godly man who believed in the word of God, in the promises and redemption of God, and looked forward to the future when God would fulfil all his gracious promise made to him. He tried to pass this on to his son. The one son who had the birth right and who might, had he pleased, have enjoyed all these lovely blessings of God and a glorious golden future in the promises of God, despised his birth right and said no. He wasn't a bad fellow, as fellows go. He was a good sporting type, hairy of the

¹ Robert Lowry (1826–99), 'What can wash away my sin?'

chest, and he loved hunting. An expert, I dare say, with his bow and arrow and his club and other things, and he knew how to provide a lovely dish of venison. What's more he was a good chap to be in camp with, a decent fellow—but as for God and salvation, no.

His brother was of a different sort. He believed and he went into these promises and the great salvation that God has to offer. This chap who believed, what type of a fellow was he? Well, to be frank with you, he wasn't always as good as he should have been. Sometimes he was a nasty, mean little fellow who was apt to get up to all kinds of disgusting tricks. Mean little tricks to get an advantage in business. You can understand that his brother despised him sometimes, and his religion. The two boys grew up and nations came from them. The nation that came from the second brother was called Israel, and they did profess to believe in God, to serve him, to know about his salvation and to believe his promises for the future. The nation born of the other brother worshipped idols; they were mere men of this world. They prospered and their cities were secure being built on high rock, and they felt that their position was solid amongst the nations. In their hearts they despised the religious lot down the street. To be honest I have to admit that Israel, the religious lot, in spite of their faith in God, fell into mistaken sin so grievously that God had to discipline them. Salvation, you know, does not mean that, if you profess faith in God, you can live as you like and it does not matter.

When Israel, who professed to believe God, sinned, God dealt with them. He dealt with them severely and judged them, he allowed other nations to come and defeat them and there came much sorrow and trouble. God does that kind of thing. The New Testament says the same about Christians, doesn't it? I wonder whether you have felt sometimes that Christians are a poor lot? Well let me tell you, as one of them, they are. We, who profess to know the Saviour; oh how we must confess it too: how often we have sinned and gone astray, have fallen and been mean and sometimes played dirty tricks of which we are ashamed. That's why, indeed, we need a saviour. How could we face eternity without a saviour?

Our Bible tells us that if we genuinely trust the Saviour he gives us eternal life and he will never let us perish, but if we misbehave here in this world he will chastise us. He does it so that we shall not be condemned with the world. But a sad thing happened when God chastised Israel because of their folly. There came brother Edom. Where did he stand? Did he say, 'Ah my poor brother, you're a sinner like the rest of us, but I'm a sinner too.' No. He said, 'Old hypocrites, I wouldn't want anything to do with them. I will say that they were bogus, just look at them.' He stood on the other side, he stood with the world, he stood with their enemies, and when they tried to escape he cut them down. He stood on the other side.

Sir, madam, perhaps you've got a brother or a sister that's a believer. They're not perfect are they? If you want to make excuses for not believing yourself, you can. You can point to their sins and shortcomings, and all the shortcomings of the people you know who have trusted the Saviour. Yes, we do not deny them. God will discipline us for those very failures. But where do you stand? You will say, 'I don't make a profession, I don't make any profession.' Is that a good excuse for why you can also behave sinfully? Or perhaps you may live in a high cleft of the rock, you may feel secure in your morality. You've not done such bad things as some Christians you know have done. I know that.

But forget them a moment. What should you do when the great storm arises, and God comes to judge? All you respectable citizens, all you good living moral men and women; your morality is no ultimate security. You stand, to be frank, a sinner like the rest of us. You need a saviour as we need a saviour. If, in the end, all you have is your respectability and morality, you shall come crashing to the ground—saviourless, for eternity. Oh hear the word of God. Your brother is a believer, your sister is a believer, your parent was a believer; in spite of all their failings. That's why they came to the Saviour, and the Saviour in his mercy and through his sacrifice will save them to the uttermost. Even though he has to discipline them every step of the way home to glory, he shall save them, and they shall shine like saints and jewels in the Saviour's crown.

Choosing—for or against?

Where do you stand? Must God say to you at last, 'Your father was a believer, your brother and your sister; but you, in the crisis decisions of life, you stood on the other side.' Oh my friend, think what you will of us evangelicals, we are sinners and cling to the Saviour. But as for you, do you stand on the other side? Think of the day when the door will be shut, and the Saviour and the redeemed are on the one side, and you stand forever on the other side. No, God forbid it. In these next moments, as God's Spirit is upon us and we consider life's ultimate issues, all of us sinners, there is mercy. Through the God of redemption, Jehovah, who provided the Passover Lamb in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ. Oh, let's come and stand on his side.

Who is on the Lord's side? We make our response. The Lord Jesus says to me, and he says to you now in this moment, 'Young child, man, woman, what are you doing here this Sunday night? Coming out to this church, coming to hear God's word? What do you mean by it? Are you on my side, or are you against me?'

God grant us now, in these closing moments, that we may lift our hearts to the blessed Lord Jesus and say to him, 'Oh Lord, I am a sinner. I am not really better than other people, and I need your salvation. Lord Jesus Christ, I want you to know I am yours, and on your side.' He that hears his word, and believes in him who sent him, has everlasting life and shall not come into condemnation, but has passed over to the side of Christ.