



# THINK ON THESE THINGS

Philippians 4:8

July-August-September, 2025

Volume 56, No. 3

## 'I Pledge Allegiance to...'

By ANDY DIESTELKAMP

**L**OYALTY, FIDELITY, faithfulness, devotion, and allegiance are all synonyms which generally have positive connotations. Of course, whether or not allegiance is actually admirable behavior depends upon whether the *object* of the allegiance is itself good. For example, when a bride and groom make vows of fidelity to one another in the sight of God and men, people are often emotionally moved by the solemnity of the event and believe that such pledges can and should have major impact on their attitudes and behaviors as husband and wife. We take these pledges seriously.

However, consider this pledge of allegiance.

"I swear to God this holy oath that I shall render unconditional obedience to the Leader of the German Reich and people, Adolf Hitler, supreme commander of the armed forces, and that as a brave soldier I shall at all times be prepared to give my life for this oath." (Defense Force Oath - effective March 16, 1935)

It is quite easy to see the danger of whole nations of people taking such oaths even (and especially) if God's name is invoked and divine terms like *holy* are employed. Pledges are essentially vows which must not be taken lightly or recited casually. Indeed, it should cause us to ponder how many oaths any one person should undertake in their lives and whether or not such an oath to any earthly government is wise in view of the devotion we are to have first and foremost to God. Loyalties are things which are constantly tested, and our loyalty to God is no exception.

The stories of Daniel and his fellow Hebrew companions as captive servants in the governments of Babylon and the Persians are exemplary of what faithfulness to God looks like when tested by other allegiances. From their conscientious (yet respectful) objections to the defilements

that would come with the official regimen prescribed for preparing young men for the king's service (Daniel 1:8ff) to their absolute refusal to bow down to the king's image of gold under the threat of death (3:1ff), their allegiance to the one true God is unquestionable. Indeed, so well-known was this devotion, that Daniel's enemies figured that the surest way to get him out of favor with the king was to pit the king's own law against the law of Daniel's God (6:4,5). They concocted such a law which forbade Daniel's custom of prayer; and when Daniel persisted in his devotion (as they knew he would), they challenged his allegiance to the king saying, "That Daniel, who is one of the captives from Judah, does not show due regard for you, O king, or for the decree you have signed ..." (6:13). Of course, since we know the rest of the story and share Daniel's perspective with regard to where our allegiance should be, it is easy for us to imagine ourselves doing likewise in like circumstances.

The purpose of any national pledge of allegiance is to inspire patriotism, affirm loyalty, and evoke pride in one's native or adopted country. While none of these are inherently incompatible with being loyal to God, nationalistic fervor certainly has the potential to warp one's worldview and values. Thus, for those of us whose allegiance is "seek[ing] first the kingdom of God and His righteousness" (Mt. 6:33), there is reason for concern because nationalistic pride easily moves to extremes and, if unbridled by a greater allegiance to God, can lead to all kinds of rationalizations and compromises which blaspheme God's ways even as His name is invoked.

It is relatively easy for us to see this danger in the citizens of *other* nations or ethnic groups as their pride drives them to oppose American interests and influence. We certainly see it in the Jews of the first century in their rejection of Jesus even as they imagined themselves being God's chosen people simply because they had Abraham as their father (cf. Jn. 8:37ff).

Seeing that nationalistic proclivities have blinded the loyal citizens of other times and countries to the point of abominable behavior should be sufficient caution for Christians of any nation.

Thus, I propose a pledge that imitates the length and meter of the American pledge of allegiance as one which should cause our hearts to swell in greater loyal devotion to a cause much more noble and far-reaching than anything the USA can offer.

I pledge allegiance to the LORD,  
The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,  
And to their Dominion for which I stand,  
One Body, under Christ, indivisible,  
With liberty and justice for all.

While this pledge might be thought a parody by those whose love of country is unbalanced, for followers of Jesus Christ it would be an affirmation that their pledge of allegiance is first and foremost to Him as King. It is God and His divine rule that actually makes possible the liberty, justice, and unity that is merely idealized in our nation's patriotic pledge and certainly has not been realized (and never will be) under any human government.

What's my point? Saints gather on the first day of each week to remember the most important series of events in human history: the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is only in Him that we should boast. In Christ alone (not America) is the last, great, hope of mankind. We cannot serve two Masters. We will be loyal to one and despise the other (Matt. 6:24). If our nationalistic patriotism comes anywhere close to rivaling our passion for and allegiance toward Christ, then not only do we do a great disservice to our nation, families, and churches, but we are on the road to idolizing the things of Babylon and being loyal to it while despising the Kingdom of God. We sing, "The kingdoms of earth pass away one by one, but the kingdom of heaven remains." To which do you pledge your allegiance?

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# DO NOT REMOVE

By SCOTT MILLER

**M**Y CAR'S LICENSE PLATE renewal sticker came recently. As I was putting it on top of the other stickers from prior years, it reminded me that this sticker, once applied, cannot be removed without being ruined. I'm sure they designed it this way so that it couldn't be stolen from one vehicle and put on a different one. Knowing this to be the case, I am more careful to put it on correctly.

**Matthew 19:3-6:** *And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, "Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?" He answered, "Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate."*

God designed marriage to be for life. What He "has joined together" was never intended to be separated by man. We live in a society of "no fault" divorce, where a marriage commitment lasts only as long as the husband and wife are both happy, and there is a denial of the permanent damage caused by the breaking of the marriage union. It is impossible to divorce and not have damage. The intimacy and trust that God made to be a part of the marriage union is irreparably damaged. Children whose parents divorce may deal with feelings of rejection and even guilt as they imagine they are somehow at fault for their parents' decision.

Much like the sticker that cannot be removed without being destroyed, divorce cannot happen without doing damage. For the unmarried, great care must be given when choosing a spouse. Those of us who are married must understand that divorce must be an absolute last resort even if it is for a scripturally permissible reason. Spouses must make every effort to address the issues that exist between them with the goal of reconciliation. If such efforts are ineffective, then we must humbly seek wise counsel from other mature Christians.

**Malachi 2:14-16:** *But you say, "Why does he not?" Because the Lord was witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant. Did he not make them one, with a portion of the Spirit in their union? And what was the one God seeking? Godly offspring. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and let none of you be faithless to the wife of your youth. "For the man who does not love his wife but divorces her, says the Lord, the God of Israel, covers his garment with violence, says the Lord of hosts. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and do not be faithless."*

May God help us to be faithful in our promises, especially in the covenant of marriage. Let us see the damage that will certainly come from discarding one's commitment to a spouse. Let us reject the world's view that divorce is a harmless option. We must commit to serving God in

our marriages and seek the holiness and godly offspring He desires. May we bring God glory rather than shame in our marriages and draw closer to each other in holiness as we faithfully serve our spouses as Christ commands.

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## *You Wouldn't Have Liked John The Baptist If...*

By DAVID DIESTELKAMP

**I**F YOU STRUGGLE to listen to a preacher because of the way he dresses, you wouldn't have liked John the Baptist. His clothing was rough and was neither stylish nor formal (Mt 3:4; 11:8).

If you don't like a preacher because of his awkward social habits, you wouldn't have liked John the Baptist. He ate an odd diet of locusts and wild honey (Mt 3:4; Mk 1:6), "neither eating bread nor drinking wine" (Lk 7:33), and his disciples fasted often (Lk 5:33).

If you don't like the inconvenience of traveling to hear preaching, you wouldn't have liked John the Baptist. He preached in the wilderness and not in urban areas (Mt 3:1).

If you insist that a preacher be from a certain region of the country or have a special education, you wouldn't have liked John the Baptist. He "was in the deserts till the day of his manifestation to Israel" (Lk 1:80).

If you don't like lessons about real repentance that hold people's feet to the fire, you wouldn't have liked John the Baptist. He primarily preached on repentance and even refused to baptize those who had not repented (Mk 1:4; Mt 3:2-3, 7-9).

If you don't want to study about divorce or have unscripturally married people told they are wrong, you wouldn't have liked John the Baptist. He did exactly that with Herod (Mt 14:3-4).

If you want preaching to be politically correct and never offend anyone (including the government), you wouldn't have liked John the Baptist. His preaching offended the king (Mk 6:17-18) and addressed social, tax, and military issues (Lk 3:10-14).

If you don't want to hear about caring for the poor, you wouldn't have liked John the Baptist. He taught about giving your second shirt to one who has none and sharing your food with the hungry (Lk 3:11).

If you aren't comfortable with people confessing their sins, you wouldn't have liked John the Baptist. People regularly came to him confessing their sins (Mt 3:5-6).

If you are resisting being baptized for the forgiveness of your sins, you wouldn't have liked John the Baptist. He preached "a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins" (Mk 1:4; Lk 3:3).

If you don't want to be baptized by immersion, you wouldn't have liked John the Baptist (literally John the Immerser) because John immersed people (Jn 3:6, 16; Mk 1:5, 9; Jn 3:23).

If you don't like to think about God's coming judgment, you wouldn't have liked John the Baptist. He warned of the wrath to come as an ax that is ready to cut down a tree (Mt 3:7-9).

If you aren't interested in the kingdom of God, you wouldn't have liked John the Baptist's primary kingdom theme (Mt 3:2).

If you don't want criticism of religious leaders and false teachers, you wouldn't have liked John the Baptist who called them a "Brood of vipers!" (Mt 3:7-9).

If you insist on miracles in order to believe, you wouldn't have liked John the Baptist who "did no sign" (Jn 10:41).

If you are impressed with leaders, preachers, or writers because they are popular with other leaders, preachers, or writers, you wouldn't have liked John the Baptist who was rejected by the Pharisees and the experts in the law (Lk 7:30).

We think, "No, no, I would have gone to John and listened to him." But if you let even one of the above things stop you now from listening to the gospel preached, you would have let it stop you when you smelled John, had to walk to hear him, or get wet in the muddy Jordan River.

Jesus said, "...among those born of women there is not risen one greater than John the Baptist" (Mt 11:11). Jesus said John "...has borne witness to the truth" (Jn 5:33) and was "...the burning and shining lamp" (Jn 5:35). How could anyone not have liked this guy? How could anyone not have listened to him? But it is often the same today. People won't look past the man to see the message. Jesus said there was no greater prophet, but I'm not optimistic that we would like him.

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# SCRIPTURALLY SPEAKING: *Immanuel*

By NOAH DIESTELKAMP

**W**HEN JOSEPH, the carpenter betrothed to Mary, discovered his betrothed was pregnant, he “resolved to divorce her quietly” (Matt. 1:19). Before he could do so, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream informing him that Mary had not been promiscuous and that the child she bore was a fulfillment of what Isaiah the prophet had spoken, “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name *Immanuel*.” Matthew’s account specifies for us that *Immanuel* means “God with us” (Matt. 1:23). When we read this literal meaning of *Immanuel* through twenty-first-century eyes, I think we quickly jump to the deity of Christ. Jesus was, after all, literally God incarnate. This is certainly a part of what can be inferred from Jesus being called *Immanuel*; but if we spend time considering Isaiah’s prophecy, we will find that Jesus’ designation as “God with us” has more implications than the incarnation of deity alone.

Isaiah’s prophecies regarding *Immanuel* were received in the context of the Divided Kingdom. Ahaz, the king of Judah, requested help from the king of Assyria to defend against the alliance of Israel and Syria. Looking forward from this point in Judah’s history, we can see that Ahaz’s actions led to Assyria taking Israel and laid the groundwork for Babylon (and later the Medo-Persian empire) to conquer Judah. However, before Ahaz requested Assyrian help, God

sent him a message via Isaiah: “Do not fear!” (Is. 7:3-9). To assure Ahaz further, God instructed him to ask for a sign from God, but Ahaz refused under the pretense of not wanting to test the Lord (Is. 7:10-12). God’s response indicates that Ahaz’s protest was not sincere and demonstrated a lack of faith in God. Therefore, God determined to give the king—and, indeed, all his people—a sign anyway. The sign was a child named *Immanuel*. Over the course of multiple prophecies, Isaiah says that before this child is very old, Assyria would destroy Judah’s adversaries and Ahaz’s concerns about Israel and Syria will be irrelevant (Is. 7:16). However, because Judah has chosen the help of Assyria instead of YHWH, this child will also live to witness his land largely subjugated by Assyria instead (Is. 8:5-8).

In Isaiah’s prophecies, we see three themes which find their ultimate fulfillment in Jesus: *Salvation*, *judgment*, and *redemption*. The significance of the child born in the time of Isaiah was not the child himself, but the events that would come about in the child’s lifetime as a result of God’s presence (“God with us”). While the child was still young, God would provide *salvation* by ensuring that Israel and Syria were no longer a threat to Judah. But chapter eight’s prophecy demonstrates that *salvation* is not the only thing that comes with God’s presence—so does *judgment*. Within the child’s lifetime, God would enact *judgment* on Judah by allowing it to be overrun by the Assyrian empire. However, immediately following the description of Assyria

subjugating Judah, God provides hope of *redemption* by reminding all nations (including Judah) that anyone who makes plans to conquer or threaten God’s people will ultimately come to nothing because “God is with us” (Is. 8:10). We see in this Old Testament context that *Immanuel* is a promise of God’s presence—a presence that meant *salvation*, *judgment*, and ultimately *redemption* for God’s people.

In the New Testament, Jesus’ designation as *Immanuel* brings the same implications of God’s presence. The angel of the Lord explicitly tells Joseph that Mary’s child would “save his people from their sins” (Matt. 1:21) and Paul describes the message of Jesus as “the power of God for *salvation* to everyone who believes” (Rom. 1:16). In Jesus’ incarnation, we find God’s intent and power to *redeem* and *save* his creation. But Jesus said that whoever does not believe in him “is condemned already” (John 3:18) and is subject to *judgment* because “the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light” (John 3:19). So in Jesus’ incarnation, we find his condemnation of those who continue to reject him.

Since Jesus ascended to his throne, it might be tempting to think that the days of “*Immanuel*” are over, but even now God’s presence persists (as do its implications)! The most significant symbol of God’s presence in Israelite history was the temple. Only Levites could be priests, only the high priest could enter the holiest place of the temple, and even he could only go once a year and only with blood. In the new covenant, we are told that Jesus is our High Priest (Heb. 4:14-16) and we are his priests (1 Pet. 2:5, 9). Individually, our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit whom we have from God (1 Cor. 6:19); and, collectively, we are being built together into a holy temple and dwelling place for God (Eph. 2:19-22). God is indeed still with us! Jesus is still our *Immanuel*, serving as our High Priest and connecting us to God (Heb. 7:23-25). In Jesus, *salvation* from sin and *redemption* to a restored relationship with God are freely available; but the way of Jesus is exclusive (John 14:6), and those who reject Jesus reject God and are subject to his *judgment*. Just like King Ahaz who received *judgment* for trusting Assyria instead of YHWH, if we choose to trust some *other way* than Jesus, *Immanuel* is a promise of *judgment*.

God became flesh. *Immanuel*. We can be confident in the *salvation* found in his sacrifice. *Immanuel*. He continues to be with us through his Spirit dwelling in us. *Immanuel*. God with us!

## A SERVANT OF THE CHURCH

By AL DIESTELKAMP

**T**HE APOSTLE PAUL commended a Christian named Phoebe, referring to her as “a servant of the church in Cenchrea” (Rom. 16:1). His urging of the brethren in Rome to “receive her in the Lord” and to “assist her” (v. 2) suggests that she had some needs while away from home.

While we don’t know the specifics of her needs, I want to emphasize what a blessing it was for Paul to describe her as a servant of her local congregation. This serves as a challenge for each of us to become actively involved in a local church, so that we, too, may be recognized as servants of that congregation.

All Christians are called to be servants of Christ (Col. 3:24) and, therefore, should be servants of His universal church. However, one cannot genuinely claim loyalty and ser-

vice to the body of Christ while neglecting wholehearted service within a local congregation of believers when possible.

Every local congregation needs Christians who are willing to actively participate in its work. While this includes faithfully attending and engaging in assembled worship, this does not encompass the entirety of our service. We must seek out ways to “through love serve one another” (Gal. 5:13).

In our modern world, which offers easy travel, many Christians have various options for where to worship. The temptation is to look for a congregation that best serves them and their personal needs. However, wouldn’t it be better to look for where we can best serve others? After all, the One we profess to follow “did not come to be served, but to serve” (Mk. 10:45).

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Printing, folding, addressing	\$ 461.00
Total postage (including bundles)	409.98
<b>TOTAL COSTS</b>	<b>\$ 875.86</b>
Funds available for past issue	832.44
Surplus balance after past issue	\$ 43.42

### Donations: (as of 6/23/25)

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Surplus balance from past issue	43.42
Funds available for this issue	\$ 1,943.42

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Published quarterly by the Diestelkamp family  
in the interest of purity of doctrine and practice.  
Distributed free as ability permits.

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# EXPERIENCING AMBIVALENCE

By MATT HENNECKE

**A**MBIVALENCE IS DEFINED as “the state of having mixed feelings about some thing.” It’s when we *simultaneously* have *contradictory* strong feelings about a situation or event. Many people confuse ambivalence with indifference. They’re not the same. To be indifferent is to show little or no concern about something. To be ambivalent is to care deeply—to have strong feelings about two conflicting things.

Ambivalence is what parents feel when their child is dropped off for his first day of school. They feel both happiness as their son embarks on a journey of learning and education but feel sadness that those precious “toddler” days have ended.

It’s what parents feel when their child is joined to another in matrimony. They feel joy at the blessed union as their daughter enters a new chapter of life but feel sadness as she transfers her greatest earthly affection to another.

It’s what many of us feel when at a funeral of a faithful Christian. We feel joy that the child of God has been freed from a life of pain and trials and graciously welcomed

into an eternal reward, but we feel anguish to be left behind to carry on without his wisdom and insight.

Indeed, all who have lost faithful loved ones—faithful husbands, faithful wives, faithful parents—simultaneously feel both sadness and joy. They feel heartache at the loss of the loved one but bliss that their loved one now lives with God in eternity.

Paul expressed ambivalence in Philippians 1: 21-24 when he wrote: *For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account.*

Even Jesus felt the tug of two opposing feelings as he prayed in the Garden. Note his mixed feelings—the conflict between desire and duty—expressed in Matt. 26:36-39: *Then Jesus went...to a place called Gethsemane, and said to the disciples, “Sit here while I go over there and pray.” He took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and became anguished and distressed. Then he said to them, “My soul is deeply grieved,*

*even to the point of death. Remain here and stay awake with me.” Going a little farther, he threw himself down with his face to the ground and prayed, “My Father, if possible, let this cup pass from me! Yet not what I will, but what you will.”* Ambivalence often manifests itself in the mixed emotions we feel when our duty and our desire are at odds with one another.

Whenever I partake of the Lord’s Supper, I feel ambivalence—two strong, mixed feelings: great sadness and great joy. I feel sadness because of the evil men who nailed the Son of God to the cross and because my sins contributed to that necessity. I also rejoice, for it was Jesus’ amazing, sacrificial act of love—his horrible death on the cross—that made salvation not only available to me but to those vile men who nailed him there as well.

Think about it: whenever we eat the Lord’s Supper, we participate in a *sorrowful celebration*—a time of both *heartache* and *happiness*. As we partake we are simultaneously reminded of the *horror* and the *hope* of the cross.

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