After the semifinal playoff game of the College Football National Championship Series this year, Clemson University quarterback Trevor Lawrence attributed its victory over Ohio State to God being on their side. He told a national audience about the Bible verse, written on his wristband, that gave him inspiration: “I have Ephesians 3:20 and it says, ‘God can do immeasurably more than any of us can because of Him within us.’ And that’s just so true. ... ‘Me, what we did tonight – it ain’t us.’”

His head coach, Dabo Swinney, joined in, saying, The favor of God was just with us tonight. He ended his ESPN interview by declaring, To God be the glory.¹

Now, this is the sort of thing that plays in the pew in Peoria. But is it true?

I was a college quarterback more than a few years ago. I was at the University of Miami, right before we got good and then bad again. What I can tell you is this: somehow, God’s favor usually falls on the teams with the better players, not the better pray-ers. We prayed a lot when I was a player, and we lost a lot.

Now, it’s easy to take apart the prosperity gospel of college athletes who are doing their best to honor God and use their platform for something positive. Their hearts are in the right place, even if their heads aren't. We shouldn’t look to football players to be our theologians. (Present company excepted, don’t you know?!) We could all learn something about the self-deprecating spirit of these athletes. Instead of saying Look at me, how great I am, they’re trying to point people’s attention to matters more important than football.

Inadvertently, though, they’re reinforcing the idea that God is with them in some way that enables their success in a contest that God likely doesn’t care a fig about, even if too many of us do. Can you imagine colleges all over

America—including public institutions like Clemson and LSU—hiring chaplains to promote sports spirituality for a competitive edge? Oh, wait—they already do. Just saying. I do know some of these chaplains personally, and some do a good job of helping athletes integrate their faith in a healthy way during a pressure-packed time of young adult life. But the union of God and sports can distort faith itself—distortions we see in other areas of life as well.

They are like politicians who claim that God is on their side. We have been hearing way too much of that lately. We heard it this past week when a drone bomb killed an Iranian general. No matter how evil he may have been, there was way too much celebration by Christians over the deliberate government-ordered preemptive assassination of a human being. Was God really on our side in that action?

Or similarly, this happens when certain preachers pray over the president—not just for him to be wise and good, but for the demonic powers of his political opponents, including Christians who don't support his behavior or policies, to be defeated. They assume that God is on their side against anyone who disagrees with them. In fact, one person even made the claim that support for the president is a litmus test of someone's salvation. This is just too much.

Such a view also isn’t new. How could we have arrived at this point in history and learned so little? Since the beginning of human society, people have organized themselves into groups and clans and tribes that wanted to believe that God (or the gods) was (were) on their side.

The most blatant example of this unholy alliance might have been the German armies of two world wars. It started with the Prussians in World War I, with the motto engraved on their pith helmets. Then Nazis in World War II wore the same words on their belt buckles: Gott Mit Uns—"God with us."

The Nazis rounded up six million Jews, gypsies, homosexuals and physically handicapped persons in the most gruesome genocide in history. They dehumanized people. They experimented on them. They starved them, hanged them, shot them, gassed them and incinerated them. And
they did all that while believing what their uniforms said—that God was with them. How could that be?

In his speech from Acts 10, the Apostle Peter claimed that God was with Jesus. How did he know? How could he tell that God was with Jesus? What criteria of judgment might any of us apply before we make such a claim?

First, we should remember that we have just celebrated the birth of Jesus, whom Christians claim to be the Christ, the full presence of God in human form. He is the one that Isaiah called \textit{Immanuel}, God with us. And when the angels announced his birth to the shepherds amid their \textit{Gloria in excelsis Deo}, they claimed that their good tidings of great joy were for \textit{all} people! All of us. So we have to reckon with the angels’ promise that God is with the whole world. Every Body.

I think we can make that affirmation. God \textit{is} with us, as in that God is among us all. God is not distant from creation; God is near to us. God has taken our part. God is not apart from us.

As long as we keep this understanding before us, we’ll be on the right track. We can believe that God is with us, in other words, as long as we resolutely believe that God is with others, too. \textit{I truly understand}, St. Peter says, \textit{that God shows no partiality, but in every nation, anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him}. Anyone. Anyone who fears God and does what is right.

But we have an incorrigible tendency: we can hardly accept the view that God could accept so many people that we wouldn’t accept. So we start the dividing. We turn the world into us-versus-them. We seem to need there to be losers for us to feel like winners, whose side God is on.

David Bentley Hart is a theologian who has recently written a book titled \textit{That All Shall Be Saved}. He recounts the fact that the prevailing view of the church in the first three centuries, including the New Testament itself, is that God redeems the whole world in Jesus Christ and that even hell cannot survive his assault on anything that would separate people from God. Once Christianity became the religion of the Roman Empire, though, it
suddenly became important to show that there were eternal consequences for those who didn’t take the official position. Hart says that he has never received more hateful responses to any of his work than from those who needed to justify the eternal punishment of the wicked. And even if you do hold the idea that some will suffer after death while others will enjoy eternal blessings, this should not be something to celebrate. St. Thomas Aquinas took the bait on this and actually claimed that the salvation of the faithful in heaven will be all the sweeter for their being able to look upon the torments of the damned in hell. Talk about Schadenfreude—the secret delight over the failure of others.²

Let’s go back to Peter and his claim about God being with Jesus. Peter had a hardened view of God being with Jews and not being with Gentiles. It all came down to lifestyle: Jews maintained the laws of purity in regard to food and sex and other rituals, while Gentiles were

considered impure for not doing so. But God gave Peter a vision that taught him that these things were not requirements for acceptance by God. God shows no such partiality, because God is the God of all people and Jesus is Lord of all.

This was to be the gospel message, the good news that Jesus lived and preached. And this is the good news we are called to preach and live, too. Peter recounts how Jesus did that: *he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him.* In other words, he was able to do good and heal people from oppressive forces because God was with him. Conversely—and this is the crucial point—we can only rightly say that God was with him or is with us when we are doing good and healing the oppressed.

This is the direction of God’s favor. It’s one thing to say that God is with us all in the sense that we are not alone in a cold and meaningless universe or even to make the bigger claim that God is with us in the sense of loving us all completely and limitlessly. But if you are going to say that God is with us—with

power to achieve certain things—it will have to be in the way God was with Jesus.

God’s favor rests on us when we are working to overcome the divisions among people and bring us together in God’s name. God’s favor rests upon us when we are doing good and healing those who are oppressed in every way. This also means that we can’t make a Christian claim that God’s favor rests on us when we are the ones doing the oppressing, demeaning and dividing of people.

President Abraham Lincoln summarized this idea well when he answered someone who asked him if he thought God was on the side of the Union in the Civil War: Sir, my concern is not whether God is on our side; my greatest concern is to be on God’s side, for God is always right. If we could not see it then, we should be able to see it now. One side wanted to demean and divide humanity; the other side wanted to affirm and unite it.

In the winter of 1993, Professor of Systematic Theology at Yale Divinity School Miroslav Volf delivered a lecture on embracing our enemies as God embraced humanity through Christ. At the end of his lecture, his theological mentor (and mine, by the way) Jürgen Moltmann, stood up and asked, But can you embrace a Chetnik? Chetniks were notorious Serbian fighters who were causing desolation in Volf’s native country, Croatia: herding people into concentration camps, brutalizing women, burning down churches and destroying cities. For him, the Chetnik was the ultimate other, the main enemy.

Volf later wrote about that question by saying, What would justify my embrace? Where would I draw strength for it? What would it do to my identity as a human being and as a Croat? I felt two betrayals—the betrayal of the suffering, exploited, and excluded, and the betrayal of the very core of my faith. I could not just hang up my commitments, desires, rebellions, resignations and uncertainties like a coat on a coat rack.

Volf took some time to answer the question and finally said, No, I cannot—but as a follower of Jesus Christ I want to be able to.3

Being on God’s side in matters like these is no easy thing. But

3 Thanks to Jakob Topper for this reference.
this is what God’s power in us by the Holy Spirit is meant for. It’s not meant to make us winners and others losers. It’s not meant to make us privileged and others underprivileged. It’s not meant to make us insiders with God and others outsiders. It’s meant to make everybody know that God is with us—God is with us all.

In this spirit, then, I invite you to join me in praying for the Tigers to win the big game tomorrow night. I believe that God is on the side of the Tigers. God’s favor rests on the Tigers. Either Clemson Tigers or LSU Tigers. 
*Go, Tigers!* Amen.