

HOW GOD USES GOVERNMENT

by Ray C. Stedman

It was the summer of 1787. The heat in Philadelphia was oppressive and the delegates to the Constitutional Convention fanned themselves languidly and longed for adjournment. Debate had dragged on for days over the issue of how the States would be represented in Congress. Luther Martin of Maryland had held the floor for the best part of two days in a long-winded speech on States Rights that left everyone weary and querulous. The Convention faced an impasse. At this point aged Dr. Benjamin Franklin rose and addressed himself to General Washington in the Chair.

In this situation of this Assembly, groping as it were in the dark to find political truth, and scarce able to distinguish it when presented to us, how has it happened, Sir, that we have not hitherto once thought of humbly applying to the Father of Lights to illuminate our understandings?

He went on to remind the Convention that at the beginning of the war with England the Continental Congress had, in that very room, prayed for divine protection, and their prayers were answered. He continued:

I have lived, Sir, a long time and the longer I live, the more convincing proofs I see of this truth that God governs in the affairs of men. If a sparrow cannot fall to the ground unseen by him, is it possible that an empire could arise without his aid?

He stated that it was his firm belief that without divine aid the Convention would succeed in their political building no better than the builders of Babel, but would find themselves so divided and split by local interests that they would become a reproach to future ages. He then concluded:

I therefore beg leave to move that henceforth prayers imploring the assistance of heaven and its blessings on our deliberations, be held in this Assembly every morning before we proceed to business, and that one or more of the clergy of this city be requested to officiate in that service.

The motion failed, largely due to the embarrassment of the Assembly at not having funds to pay for engaging a chaplain. But Franklin had soundly made his point. Nations do not rise or continue at the whim and desire of men. A higher Power must be reckoned with, for the ultimate destiny of nations lies in his hands.

THE LAW OF RETRIBUTION

Surely there is one great fact everywhere revealed in history, in nature, in Scripture. It is called "the law of retribution." Even an atheist, who does not believe in God at all, must admit that when he examines the laws of nature he is faced with the fact that one either obeys them, and lives, or disobeys them, and dies. There is no other alternative. All man's wisdom and adaptability must function within these inexorable limits. He is not at liberty to go beyond them. No one fools around with 10,000 volts of electricity, hoping to make up the laws of electricity as he goes along. The laws are already in force and he had better discover them before he goes much further.

So it is also with nations. Napoleon's cynical answer to someone who asked him whether God was on the side of France was: "God is on the side of the heaviest artillery." Then came the battle of Waterloo, the loss of his

empire, and, finally, exile to St. Helena. There, chastened and humbled, he said, "Man proposes; God disposes." What Franklin saw so clearly and Napoleon learned so painfully is that nations, like individuals, can lose their right to exist. "The powers that be are ordained of God," (KJV) writes St. Paul in Romans 13:1, and J.B. Phillips translates I Corinthians 2:6 as referring to "the powers-that-be, who soon will be only the powers that have been."

The rise and fall of empires is, of course, the very stuff of history. We chronicle it in voluminous detail without actually understanding it. We record the flux of political and economic change which results in toppled thrones, violent or peaceful conquest, radical swings from world leadership to obscurity, and feel we have analyzed the underlying reasons for change. But political movements and economic pressures are as much effects as they are causes. The causes in turn which produce them are ill-defined and little understood, arising as they do from forces that operate in our essential humanity, and are, therefore, so close to us as to make detection difficult. For example, an unknown writer has said:

If a man does not believe in God, his own ego becomes the ruler of his life. Since there are no standards of right and wrong existing apart from himself, right becomes that which pleases him, and wrong that which does not minister to his own ego. Since he himself is the supreme consideration, he is restrained by nothing but his own wishes and easily reaches the conclusion that the best possible world is one in which his will is supreme. He therefore enforces it upon others to the limit of his ability. The denial of God thus becomes the seed from which totalitarianism develops.

Freedom is possible only if men believe in God and seek to do his will. William Penn was right when he said that if men will not be governed by God, they must be governed by tyrants.

In the fact of history, it is hard to argue with that. One must not, of course, make the mistake of equating the widespread practice of religion with being truly "governed by God." Religious totalitarianism is perhaps the worst kind of all; certainly it is the most deeply hated. But the religious tyrant is no more being governed by God than the iron-fisted atheist is. Pirate ships often flew the flags of lawful nations to deceive and disarm their intended victims, and even modern dictators are not averse to flying the flag of the church. But Senator Daniel Webster caught the essence of true government by God, in a speech made in 1847.

If truth be not diffused, error will be; if God and his Word are not known and received, the devil and his works will gain the ascendancy; if the evangelical volume does not reach every hamlet, the pages of a corrupt and licentious literature will; if the power of the Gospel is not felt through the length and breadth of the land, anarchy and misrule, degradation and misery, corruption and darkness will reign without mitigation or end.

"THE LIFE OF THE LAND IS PRESERVED IN RIGHTEOUSNESS"

When Hawaii became the 50th State of the Union, she brought with her to statehood the motto she had adopted as a territory, reflecting her missionary beginnings: "The life of the land is preserved in righteousness." It sounds like a pious platitude, but it is actually a profound truth which should be taught in every classroom in the land. A widespread myth exists in our day that the foundation of our freedoms lies in the great documents that launched our national history: the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. But important as these may be as instruments of freedom, they are not the foundation of it. Freedom rests on the moral righteousness of each individual member of the nation. When individual righteousness fails on a large scale, laws lose their force, judges fail in their powers, enforcement becomes impracticable, and the Constitution itself is soon changed to reflect the currently acceptable level of morality.

This was clearly demonstrated in the late sixties of this century, when violence swept the country, youth exploded in revolt, a tidal wave of drug abuse and occultism hit, and Chief Justice Earl Warren, of the Supreme Court, sensing the impotence of laws, called for "a company of moral counselors" who would hopefully build a moral climate in which laws again would have meaning, and enforcement would again be possible. Those were days in which the nation came perilously close to total disaster, but how quickly they

have been forgotten, and the salutary lessons they unfolded have been lost.

If Benjamin Franklin's mature conviction is indeed true that "God governs in the affairs of men," allotting to each their due portion of world leadership and status, and permitting each to continue without overthrow only as long as they fulfill his purposes it is certainly in order to inquire: what are the values which God seeks to achieve in bringing nations into existence; and what are the wrongs which he will no longer tolerate that mark their appointed end? It would surely be the highest possible exercise of statecraft to discover the answers to these crucial questions and disseminate them widely and clearly, not only in legislative halls, but in the shops, offices, homes and classrooms of a land.

For centuries Western statesmen have turned to the Bible for the answers to the questions formulated above. Abraham Lincoln termed the Bible "God's best gift to men," and the impact of its pages upon his thinking is apparent in many of his speeches and writings as president. The Bible's view of nations seems to group them in two major classifications: Those who are moving toward darkness, or those who are moving toward increasing light. A nation moving toward light is growing in two essential areas: truth and love. Its knowledge of reality is increasing, manifesting itself in growth in literacy, education, science, medicine, and above all (since God is the greatest Reality), theology. But light also means that along with increasing truth there is increasing love, manifesting itself as legal and social justice, public and private courtesy, care for the aged and infirm, help to the poor, the safeguarding of personal liberty, and, of course, cleanliness and conservation of resources.

A nation moving toward darkness experiences the reverse. Truth declines so that, though surrounded by books and knowledge, the general populace learns less and less, illiteracy increases, personal liberties diminish, violence and crime mount, pollution and corruption abound, and the courts find it hard to administer justice. One remarkable fact about a nation in decline which the Bible reveals is that its increasing spirit of cruelty and violence may be used by God as a cudgel to awaken a more enlightened nation to its declining state, and, hopefully, to arrest that decline and turn it again toward truth and light. Thus the Babylonians were raised up to punish Israel and Judah, much to the dismay of some of the prophets who could not understand how God could use a wicked and rebellious nation to chastise a more God-fearing state. Communism in our day is a case in point.

JEREMIAH'S STIRRING COMMISSION

One book of the Bible is especially given to us to trace how a nation grows increasingly dark until it reaches the point of overthrow and national death. It is the Book of Jeremiah the prophet. He was sent to the nation of Judah to minister during its final forty years. He began his ministry in the days of the godly king Josiah and ended it four kings later, in the days of Zedekiah, who was led captive to Babylon. At the beginning of his ministry he was given a stirring commission:

**"Behold, I have put my words in your mouth.
See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms,
to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow
to build and to plant." (Jer. 1:9-10, RSV)**

Throughout his long ministry Jeremiah was faithful to declare to kings and people alike four great facts about God. He described, first, the sovereignty of God, his right of control over all the nations of earth. Then he spoke of the faithfulness of God to fulfill his Word to the letter, no matter how long it would take. In this connection Jeremiah described the ruthlessness of God, who would not spare or pity his people if they refused to heed his warnings. Finally, in language of infinite beauty and warmth, Jeremiah described the tenderness of God, who grieved over his sinning people and promised that a remnant would survive the overwhelming judgments to reestablish the land in truth and love. There is an illuminating passage in the 27th chapter where Jeremiah is sent by God to Zedekiah, the last king of Judah, to say to him:

**"It is I who by my great power and my outstretched arm have made the earth,
with the men and animals that are on the earth, and I give it to whomever it
seems right to me. Now I have given all these lands into the hand of**

Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, my servant, and I have given him also the beasts of the field to serve him. All the nations shall serve him and his son and his grandson, until the time of his own land comes; then many nations and great kings shall make him their slave." (Jer. 27:5-7, RSV, emphasis mine)

Here is the biblical basis for Benjamin Franklin's statement: "God governs in the affairs of men." Here God calls an idol-worshipping monarch "my servant" and states that it is his God-given destiny to rule for a time over all the nations of earth, but in the end he too shall be judged and be subjected to the rule of other people.

To this same Kind Zedekiah Jeremiah had been sent some years earlier to detail to him what God expects of governments.

"Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!" says the Lord. Therefore thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who care for my people: "You have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. Behold, I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the Lord." (Jer. 23:1-2, RSV)

Who are these shepherds? They are the leaders of the nation Rulers and government leaders are viewed as shepherds by God, responsible to him for the care of his flock. This is what governors, presidents, and legislators are for. God says further to them:

"Thus says the Lord: Do justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of this oppressor him who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the alien, the fatherless, and the widow, nor shed innocent blood in this place." (Jer. 22:3, RSV)

Note what the rulers of this land were expected to do. First, they were to set an example of justice and righteousness themselves: "Do justice and righteousness." This is why it is a serious matter when leaders and elected officials do things which are wrong. Many said during the Watergate crisis: "Why make such a fuss about this? Everyone does this kind of thing businessmen, leaders of industry, common citizens why make so much over what politicians in Washington do?" The answer is: Because all government leaders, elected or appointed, from the president on down, are, as St. Paul calls them in Romans 13:6, "ministers of God." Each is the agent of God and is to represent God's standard of righteousness and judgment. When such leaders are guilty of wrongdoing, the effect of their wrongdoing is greatly intensified. Though we may sympathize with them in succumbing to unusual pressures, nevertheless we must recognize that their failure introduced widespread dissension and evil into a land.

Second, governmental leaders were to "deliver from the hand of the oppressor him who has been robbed." The task of government is to keep the courts honest and just, so that the guilty can be found out and the innocent freed. The uncontrollable rise of crime and violence is an unerring indicator of the darkening of a nation's life and its decline toward obscurity.

The third responsibility of the shepherds was "to do no wrong or violence to the alien, the fatherless, and the widow, nor shed innocent blood in this place." Here the power of government itself is to be held in check and guarded against misuse, especially against minority groups. This is a recognition of the ease by which bureaucracy can increase and turn a deaf ear to those who have no ability to defend themselves: the aliens (those with differing cultural patterns), the widows and the fatherless (who have no one to plead their cause).

The prophet went on to show that special care must be exercised by those in power to avoid using the public purse for their own enrichment.

"Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness, and his upper rooms by injustice; who makes his neighbor serve him for nothing, and does not give him his wages; who says, 'I will build myself a great house with

spacious upper rooms,' and cuts out windows for it, paneling it with cedar, and painting it with vermilion." (Jer. 22:13-14, RSV)

Incredibly, in a day when the city was surrounded by a foreign army, its treasury was bankrupt, and its temple was being looted, the king utilized his power to cause his subjects to build an ornate palace for himself! All this was noted by the God of the nations, and marked this nation as degenerate to the point deserving overturn.

Perhaps the most remarkable statement to be found in the chronicle of Jeremiah, which points to the decay of the nation, occurs in the 34th chapter, after King Zedekiah had issued an order to free the slaves held by the Israelites, and then had abruptly rescinded it when he felt the judgment threatening the nation had been withdrawn. Jeremiah was sent to the king with this message from God:

"You recently repented and did what was right in my eyes by proclaiming liberty, each to his neighbor, and you made a covenant before me in the house which is called by my name; but then *you turned around and profaned my name* when each of you took back his male and female slaves, whom you had set free according to their desire, and you brought them into subjection to be your slaves." (Jer. 34:15-16, RSV, emphasis mine).

The remarkable phrase in this passage is "you . . . profaned my name." This was a serious charge to any Jew. They all had been brought up to revere and respect the name of God, and they went to extreme lengths to avoid defiling the name by using it irreverently or without care. Yet God's charge to this king is: "You have profaned my name." How? By failing to respect the human rights of slaves! God regards it as blasphemy against himself to treat another person in an inhuman or depersonalized way. God holds the nation to account for such actions.

The prophet went on to announce to the king:

"Therefore, thus says the Lord: You have not obeyed me by proclaiming liberty, every one to his brother and to his neighbor; behold, I proclaim to you liberty to the sword, to pestilence, and to famine, says the Lord. I will make you a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth." (Jer. 34:17, RSV)

As we think of our own national history, we can see what a heavy charge must be leveled against us in this respect. How have we treated the American Indians, the original inhabitants of this land? Or what have we done to the Africans whom we forcibly brought to these shores? Or the Chinese and Japanese, the Mexicans, the Puerto Ricans, and other nationalities that have sought refuge and opportunity among us? How often have we despised them and treated them as less than human? The God of the nations says, "You have profaned my name." He has every right further to say, "I will make you a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth." Is this, perhaps, the true explanation for the decline in America's prestige and influence in world affairs of recent years?

WE ARE ALL RESPONSIBLE

Nations live by pursuing truth and love; they die by self deceit, by bigotry and injustice, and especially by ungodliness, pride, and self-sufficiency. It would be a serious mistake to blame governmental agents as having ultimate responsibility for a nation's destiny. It has been said that every nation gets the government it deserves. Final responsibility, therefore, rests with the individuals that make up a nation. "No man is an island," and every one of us is responsible for the influence we exert upon our neighbors, our community, our city, county, state, and national governments.

The ultimate issue is our own personal godliness. Do we "Fear God, and honor the king?" Do we, in the great words of Micah, "Do justice . . . love kindness, and. . . walk humbly with [our] God?" (Micah. 6:8, RSV). The hand of doom rests upon any people who deliberately refuse to hear and heed the Word of God. Ultimately, judgment will come. No political manipulation can avert it. No partial compromise will delay it, no defiance will evade it. There will come at last, as to ancient Judah, some eleventh year, ninth month, and

fourth day, when a breach shall be made in the walls of the city, and the inhabitants shall be led forth into captivity and death.

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