

# GOD AND GOVERNMENT

By Steve Zeisler

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As we near the Presidential election, I suggest we step back from the advertising blitz for a moment and consider matters instead from an eternal perspective. We must never forget that we are citizens of two kingdoms. We are citizens of these United States, and that means we have certain responsibilities which we must take very seriously. First and foremost, however, we are citizens of the kingdom of God. Empires, kingdoms and nations come and go. Unless the Lord returns first, our country too will one day fade from the scene. Nothing that man does or creates can stand the ultimate test of time, but the kingdom of God is eternal.

We have been discussing things eternal and things temporal in our studies in the book of Ecclesiastes, asking questions like, What is the point of our existence? Why am I made the way I am? How do events on earth stack up when they are set in the context of eternity and examined from an eternal perspective? Our purpose this morning is to put the pressure of this coming election in a setting that reminds us that our first responsibility is to be about our Father's business. Important as this election is to all of us, we need to view it from that perspective.

## PILATE ON TRIAL

The Roman Empire had the most formidable government this world has ever known. Its rule lasted hundreds of years. If it was our purpose to study government, we could not find a better example than the government of Rome. Pontius Pilate, the Roman the governor of Judea during Jesus' time on earth, is a good example of how effective was the government of the empire. A bright, savvy, ruthless man, he was everything a good governor ought to be. Yet he is best remembered, not for his effective governance, but for an incident that occurred during his tenure when government itself was brought under judgment.

Pilate had to pass judgment on a prisoner, Jesus of Nazareth, who refused to defend himself. Instead, Jesus put Pilate and the entire Roman system of government-and by extension, all future governments, when viewed in the light of eternity-on trial. Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world, or else my servants would defend me... I am come into the world to testify to the truth. Every one on the side of the truth listens to me." When Pontius Pilate heard these words in the quiet of a private interview, he realized that he, not Jesus, was the one being examined. "What is the truth?" asked Pilate. His question has echoed down through the centuries since. "Don't you know," said Pilate to Jesus, "that I have authority to either free you or put you to death?" Jesus answered, "You have no power over me unless it is given you from heaven."

Pilate's response to his own examination was to wash his hands of the whole matter and hand Jesus over to the Roman soldiers. They mocked him, crowned him with thorns, and clothed him with a purple robe. The crowd screamed that he be executed. A human government, which, according to Jesus himself, had been brought into existence by God, was found wanting by the Lord when he brought it under scrutiny and set it beside truth which would last forever. "I am a witness to the truth," said Jesus, testifying to people's need to respond to God. Questions like taxes, roads, refurbishing of government buildings, rebellions, etc., suddenly became less urgent when compared with the challenge of Jesus. Pilate, the representative of the might of Rome, blinked when he found himself under the scrutiny of the Eternal Sovereign.

In two days, our nation will be called upon to make some extremely important choices and decisions. Important as these are, however, they will soon fade into insignificance. We are citizens of this country yes, but we also are citizens of heaven. We, too, can say, with Jesus, "You would have no power except it be given to you from on high." Thus, we have opportunity to respond in two arenas, the temporal and the eternal. Let us look then at the observations of Solomon the wise, a king who preceded Rome by a thousand years.

## WHAT SOLOMON SAW

The author of this remarkable book of Ecclesiastes set about his work, deliberately ignoring heavenly revelation and choosing instead to write about life as it is observed "under the sun." Solomon, the wise examiner of life, bequeathed this work to the generations so that people would have a hunger to look beyond the things of earth to the heavenlies, to faith, and to a God who reveals himself. Up to this point in our studies, Solomon has been wrestling with personal fulfillment, life and joy, and where he could find them; where man fits in the grand scale of things, in other words. But he also speaks about the corporate human experience, of government and laws, of kingdoms and power. This is the subject of our study this morning.

We will be looking at four different passages from Ecclesiastes. As we do so, let us remember that Solomon is not prescribing answers. He is merely describing the way things are. Thus, today we will take a tour with Solomon the wise observer, and look at what government is and is not, its strengths and weaknesses. And we will see, not only what was true thousands of years ago, but what remains true today as far as the possibilities and the limits of government are concerned. So at this point we are not advocating anything, but merely observing, with Solomon.

Chapter 3, verse 16:

Furthermore, I have seen under the sun that in the place of justice there is wickedness, and in the place of righteousness there is wickedness.

Next, Solomon interjects a parenthesis. He takes up his argument again in 4:1. First, however, let's look at the parenthesis. 3:17:

I said to myself, "God will judge both the righteous man and the wicked man," for a time for every matter and for every deed is there. I said to myself concerning the sons of men, "God has surely tested them in order for them to see that they are but beasts." For the fate of the sons of men and the fate of beasts is the same. As one dies so dies the other; indeed they all have the same breath and there is no advantage for man over beast, for all is vanity. All go to the same place. All came from the dust and all return to the dust. Who knows that the breath of man ascends upward and the breath of the beast descends downward to the earth? And I have seen that nothing is better than that man should be happy in his activities, for that is his lot. For who will bring him to see what will occur after him?

Solomon then returns to the issues of injustice and oppression in high places. 4:1:

Then I looked again at all the acts of oppression which were being done under the sun. And behold I saw the tears of the oppressed and that they had no one to comfort them; and on the side of their oppressors was power, but they had no one to comfort them. So I congratulated the dead who are already dead more than the living who are still living. But better off than both of them is the one who has never existed, who has never seen the evil activity that is done under the sun.

## OBSERVING OPPRESSION

First, Solomon raises the issue of oppression and injustice versus righteousness and justice. Can society or government effectively bring about justice for the needy, care for the weak, and share power? Solomon's answer is no. Power is concentrated in the few, he observes. As a consequence, justice is not done. Wickedness, not righteousness, is what resides in high places.

Solomon hints that the average person responds to oppression in one of two ways. The first response is given in the parenthesis 3:17-22. Are men really different than animals? he wonders. If God does not reveal that they are, he is tempted to conclude that there is no difference. Both come from the dust, which is later dispersed following their death. The breath of either (or spirit; the word may be translated either way) is not obviously

distinguishable one from the other. They live, deteriorate and die in the same way. How can anyone know for sure that a spirit inhabits man, one which ascends upward toward God? Isn't he just like the animals? Besides, we treat one another the same. In the animal world the powerful prey on the weak. Big animals feed on littler animals; big fish on littler fish. This is the nature of things. One life is prey to another.

But it is no different with humans. The powerful and strong prey on the powerless and weak. Mark Twain once said that you can take either a man or a dog who has been beaten and mistreated and you can cause them both to prosper; the only difference in their response to your action will be that the dog will be grateful. Solomon is saying something similar here. He muses that the way in which man responds to oppression is to take care of himself. This is the point of 3:22: "...nothing is better than that a man should be happy in his activities..." Maximize your own self-interest, in other words. If we cannot know for sure whether man is more worthwhile than the animals, if we have no independent knowledge or guidance in this area, the wisest thing to do is take care of yourself. As you see what may or may not be wickedness and oppression, therefore, protect yourself and look the other way.

## **OUTRAGE**

The second major option which Solomon observes is highlighted in verses 1-3 of chapter 4. He looks again at oppression but this time sees the tears of the oppressed. This moves him to recognize that humans and animals are different after all. Humans cry; animals don't. The tears and the crying out of the suffering so affect him so that he is outraged.

So the first option was to take care of number one. Like the water polluters who discard their toxins into our rivers and seas, and the legal eagles who debate the fine points of the law, take care of yourself first. But the second option is to be outraged, to cry out against injustice and oppression. It is wrong that this be so. We should not have to live to see these things. They are so reprehensible that we would be better off dead than seeing or experiencing them.

There are many examples of people who have protested oppression. Rosa Parks, a kind, Christian woman, sat down in a bus in Montgomery, Alabama, back in 1955, and refused to give up her seat to a white man. She was arrested. Martin Luther King and others protested, and the civil rights movement was born. The oppression had gone far enough. The organization MADD, *Mothers Against Drunk Driving*, came into being because one or two women decided to take on criminal drivers, the courts, government, and even the liquor industry. A few people began to protest the pornographic magazine racks set at eye-level for children in 7-11 stores, holding that this was an outrage and an injustice to children and grown-ups alike. The Southland Corporation, owners of these stores, finally agreed to stop selling these magazines. *The Silent Scream*, a documentary film of an actual abortion, pictured a struggling baby, mouth open in a silent scream, struggling as it was being sucked out of its mother's uterus. "Behold I saw the tears of the oppressed," says Solomon. Solomon sees that power is concentrated among the few, and that those in power oppress those not in power. And we could point out that a change in the power structure brings new oppressors into power. The revolutionaries who overthrow power structures, in time become worse than those they overthrew. We can respond to this by withdrawing from any involvement in fighting injustice, or we can become involved in trying to right wrongs.

## **THE YOUNG HERO**

Let us look at some more observations which Solomon makes about life and government. Here is another phenomenon of his time and ours as well. Chapter 4, verse 13:

A poor, yet wise lad is better off than an old and foolish king who no longer knows how to receive instruction. For he has come out of prison to become king, even though he was born poor in his kingdom. I have seen all the living under the sun throng to the side of the second lad who replaces him. There is no end to all the people, to all who were before them, and even the ones who will come later will not be happy with him, for this too is vanity and striving after wind.

Occasionally a new voice, a new political hero, a young, energetic and enthusiastic personality comes on the scene. People begin to hope that the old, foolish, doddering king, together with his old and foolish advisers, will fade away. When the new blood takes over, they reason, things will be different. This happens, says Solomon, but the new king one day becomes old, just like his predecessor, and you are faced with the same problems. "This too is vanity," he concludes.

David's son Absalom rebelled against his father and the people flocked to the young man, thinking that David had lost his ability to reign. But Absalom was not the answer to their problems. The Republicans nominated Dan Quayle, a young, attractive, energetic new face, for Vice President. Many look to Jesse Jackson, a passionate, charismatic man drawn from a tough and deprived background, as their hope for the future. Even the Forty-Niners football team has a problem deciding between a young and an old quarterback. The younger man, however, will soon become an old quarterback. Solomon says all this is vanity, striving after wind. Heroes don't last very long.

In chapter 5 verse 8 he talks about bureaucracies:

## **BUREAUCRACIES**

If you see oppression of the poor and denial of justice and righteousness in the province, do not be shocked at the sight, for one official watches over another official, and there are higher officials over them. After all, a king who cultivates the field is an advantage to the land.

If you see oppression and you bring it to the attention of the bureaucracy, do not be surprised that the officials you are dealing with are unmoved. Their main interest is in gaining their supervisor's approval for their job performance. This material may be three thousand years old but it sounds like it was written about the Department of Motor Vehicles! As a matter of fact, it could be written about any of our bureaucracies. No matter how well grounded your appeal, when you deal with the bureaucracy you come away feeling as if you had just been pounding your head against a wall. Bureaucracies are layered, one on top of the other, and each level is mainly concerned with pleasing the one above. If the king has a field to cultivate, he may advance policies that will benefit all. Your best hope is that the top man's interests and yours coincide. Bureaucracies don't change.

Solomon, of course, is not endorsing any of these circumstances which he brings before us. He is merely reporting on what he has seen. Once again, we must conclude with our wise observer that there is nothing new "under the sun."

## **LIMITS TO GOVERNMENT**

I say, "Keep the command of the king because of the oath before God. Do not be in a hurry to leave him. Do not join in an evil matter, for he will do whatever he pleases." Since the word of the king is authoritative, who will say to him, "What are you doing?" He who keeps a royal command experiences no trouble, for a wise heart knows the proper time and procedure. For there is a proper time and procedure for every delight, when a man's trouble is heavy upon him. If no one knows what will happen, who can tell him when it will happen? No man has authority to restrain the wind with the wind, or authority over the day of death; and there is no discharge in the time of war, and evil will not deliver those who practice it. All this I have seen and applied my mind to every deed that has been done under the sun wherein a man has exercised authority over another man to his hurt.

The first point made in this section is that government is legitimate, and therefore one is wise to obey the commands of the king. Governments exist because God allows them. When you pledge allegiance to your country, God takes your pledge seriously. We find the same advice from the apostle Paul in Romans 13. We ought to subject ourselves to civil authorities. Furthermore, says Solomon (and Paul agrees with this), if you do not obey, you will be punished. The government does not bear the sword in vain. In dealing with sedition, "the king will do whatever he pleases."

The Scriptures consistently teach that we ought to be honest, contributing citizens. We ought to vote, and we ought to encourage others to vote also. When we see oppression and injustice we should attempt to make courts and legislatures responsive. We should be wise enough to use the system ("proper time and procedure") to bring about the desired results, to seek ways within it to right wrongs. God uses governments to restrain

some of the possibilities for evil. We are gloriously gifted of God to live in this country. Let us respond by being active, obedient citizens.

But recall that we are citizens of two kingdoms. Human government has the right to collect taxes, to call people to jury duty, to draft soldiers into the army, to supervise businesses, education, medicine, etc. But there are some things it cannot do. No government official can say what will happen, and "if no one knows what will happen, who can tell him when it will happen?" Governments cannot foretell the future, when the next natural disaster will strike, when the next beneficial scientific breakthrough will occur. The Lord God, not governments, is the one who controls the future. And no government can tell people when their lives will end. God, not government, ordains each person's life span.

"There is no discharge in the time of war," says Solomon. Once events have taken over so that war is imminent, no king or president can avoid the inevitable, short of surrendering. Evil does not deliver us. We can't use the wind to restrain the wind. In other words, there is a whole array of things in which the government has no say.

Our recognition of the limits of government should lead us to recognize the greater authority of our heavenly Sovereign. We have been drafted into a spiritual army to fight with weapons, "divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses" (2 Tim.10:4). We are ambassadors, heralds, stewards-dispensing the riches of Christ, announcing the glorious verdict that the heavenly Judge does not hold our sins against us. Jesus' ministry is extended to his followers: "preach good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, freedom to the downtrodden, the favorable year of the Lord" (Luke 4:18,19).

We must respond to and obey the machinery of government. This is what Scripture teaches. But we must also obey our Father in heaven, knowing that his words will never change, and that the governments of earth are temporary.

Solomon began his reign by asking God to make him a good king. He wanted to reign wisely, appoint just judges, and build a model kingdom. Years later, however, following the building of the temple, he was more interested in people coming to know, believe and respond to God. He was on his knees before his people, praying that as they came to know the heavenly Sovereign, his own role as an earthly sovereign would be reduced. This too must be our perspective. We must obey the King of kings, as well as be model citizens of our government.

Here then are Solomon's words which he spoke at the dedication of the temple:

And it came about that when Solomon had finished praying this entire prayer and supplication to the Lord, he arose from before the altar of the Lord, from kneeling on his knees with his hands spread toward heaven. And he stood and blessed all the assembly of Israel with a loud voice, saying,

"Blessed be the Lord who has given rest to his people Israel, according to all that He has promised; not one word has failed of all His good promise, which He promised through Moses His servant. May the Lord our God be with us, as He was with our fathers; may He not leave us or forsake us, that He may incline our hearts to Himself, to walk in all His ways and to keep His commandments and His statutes and His ordinances, which He commanded our fathers. And may these words of mine, with which I have made supplication before the Lord, be near to the Lord our God day and night, that He may maintain the cause of His servant and the cause of His people Israel, as each day requires, so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the Lord is God; there is no one else. Let your heart therefore be wholly devoted to the Lord our God, to walk in His statutes and to keep His commandments, as at this day."

Now the king and all Israel with him offered sacrifice before the Lord.

Will you retain the high calling of a "heart wholly devoted to the Lord our God," during this season of politics, presidents, and propositions?

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