

The Kings You Have Set Over Us

Today is Independence Day, and I would really like to talk about the founding of the nation and the biblical principles the founders believed in. I'd love to talk about God's historical blessing on our nation and how Christian principles have led to prosperity, freedom, and power. I'd like to encourage patriotism and loyalty to a great nation. It would be nice to do a little flag waving on the 4th of July.

But it's hard to wave the flag over a nation that has strayed so far from its founding principles, and it seems like we are moving farther from them all the time. John Adams famously stated that our constitution is suitable only for "a religious and moral people." Almost every indicator available today shows that the US is less and less a religious and moral people. And that's part of the reason that our nation is experiencing the distress that it is currently under.

The other day in my private Bible reading, the words of Nehemiah 9:37 stood out starkly to me. The verse mentions, in part, "the kings whom thou hast set over us because of our sins... have dominion over our bodies, and over our cattle... and we *are* in great distress." The biblical writer ascribes the distress he and his people were experiencing to the tyrannical rulers that God had set over them as a consequence of their sin.

Israel as a nation had endured seventy years of exile and abuse because of its sin—primarily idolatry. God had graciously allowed the nation to return to Jerusalem, to rebuild the temple and the walls of the city. But the returned exiles almost immediately repeated the pattern of sinful living that incurred God's wrath previously, and godly leaders led the people in confessing their sin. They admitted that the terrible situation they were in was caused by their sin. Even the fact of their slavery in their own land was a result of their previous sins. They admit that they deserved to suffer under the foot of an abusive government because of their sins.

I know that America is not Israel, Judah, or Jerusalem. God's relationship with our nation is not the same as His relationship to the Jews. But I wonder if the same general principle applies to us (and to any nation).

Pr 14:34 *Righteousness exalteth a nation: but sin [is] a reproach to any people.*

As a general rule, any nation will prosper when the people of that nation determine to live righteously. And as a general rule, any nation will suffer distress when the people of that nation determine to live in sin. Much of the greatness of America is due to the fact that our founders established the nation on biblical foundations, and for many years the US as a whole respected biblical morality. As Tocqueville supposedly said, “America is great because America is good...”

Likewise,...

Pr 29:2 When the righteous are in authority, the people rejoice: but when the wicked beareth rule, the people mourn.

Like the people of Judah 2500 years ago, we are mourning under the distress caused by the fact that the wicked are bearing rule. We long for a time when the righteous will be in authority. Frankly, I’m not sure that a righteous person could be elected into high office these days.

This morning I want to consider several principles from Neh 9:37 that we should keep in mind as we experience “great distress” because of our leaders.

I. God sets rulers in authority over nations. “kings whom thou hast set over us”

A. God is sovereign over the affairs of men. He sets up kings and removes them. We find this idea throughout the Bible.

Jer 27:5 I have made the earth, the man and the beast ... by My great power and by My outstretched arm, and have given it to whom it seemed proper to Me.

Dan 2:21 He changes the times and the seasons; He removes kings and raises up kings; ...

Dan 4:35 And all the inhabitants of the earth [are] reputed as nothing: and he doeth according to his will in the army of heaven, and [among] the inhabitants of the earth: and none can stay his hand, or say unto him, What doest thou?

Rom 13:1 ... the powers that be are ordained of God.

B. The fact that God sovereignly places rulers over us has several consequences:

1. We should obey those God has put in authority over us. We should not resist the ordinances of civic authorities because those powers are ordained of God.

Ro 13:1-2 Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. ... whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves.

1Pe 2:13 Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake: ...

2. We should pray for those in authority over us.

1 Tim 2:1-3 I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, [and] giving of thanks, be made for all men; 2 For kings, and [for] all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty.3 For this [is] good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour;

3. We should honor/respect those in authority over us.

1Pe 2:17 Honour all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honour the king.

Even if those in office are dishonorable people personally—which many of them are—we can still give honor to the position they hold.

4. We should pay our taxes.

Ro 13:7 Render therefore to all their dues: tribute to whom tribute [is due]; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honour to whom honour.

5. In other words, we should be good citizens. We should obey the authorities and strive to live a quiet and peaceable life.

6. Only in extreme cases would we disobey our civic authorities. Acts 5:29
 - a) We can disobey when the authorities try to force us to violate biblical commands. E.g., forcing the church to perform same-sex marriages
 - b) We can disobey when the authorities try to prevent us from fulfilling biblical obligations. E.g., preventing the church from meeting
 - c) We try to obey and be good citizens, but when the government itself is wrong, we have the right to disobey.

Trans: We recognize that the powers that be are ordained of God and that God expects us to obey those in authority in most cases.

II. National sins incur God's wrath. "because of our sins"

- A. Another general principle from the Bible is that God punishes sin. That's true personally, and it's also true nationally.
- B. Particularly, for the nation of Israel, God repeatedly states that the trouble they were experiencing was because of their sin. Their distress was a direct result of their disobedience.
 1. We find many promises throughout the Bible that God would prosper Israel if only that nation would obey the laws of God. E.g., Deut 28:1-14
 2. If they disobey, God would curse them. E.g., Deut 28:15-68
 2Chron 7:19-20, 22 *if you turn away and forsake My statutes and My commandments which I have set before you, and go and serve other gods, and worship them, then I will uproot them from My land which I have given them; and this house which I have sanctified for My name I will cast out of My sight, and will make it a proverb and a byword among all peoples. ... Because they forsook the LORD God of their fathers, which brought them forth out of the land of Egypt, and laid hold on other gods, and worshipped them, and served them: therefore hath he brought all this evil upon them.*
 Eze 16:27 [After a long list of sins the Jews had committed, we have this threat:] *Behold, therefore, I stretched out My hand against you, diminished your allotment, and gave you up to the will of those who hate you*

- C. That was true for Israel, but is it true for all the nations?

Pr 14:34 *Righteousness exalteth a nation: but sin [is] a reproach to any people.*

Just like people, nations reap what they sow. There are natural consequences for sin and rebellion, personally and nationally.

So I think it's generally true that God blesses those nations who are following basic moral principles, and he withholds his blessing from those nations that turn away from basic standards of morality.

You may remember that one of the reasons God allowed the Israelites to destroy the Canaanites was because of the Canaanites' sin. And God promised Israel that if they committed the same sins, God would cast them out.

God sent Jonah to Nineveh to announce a message of impending judgment, and when the people repented, God spared the nation.

Jonah 3:10 *And God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God repented of the evil, that he had said that he would do unto them; and he did it not.*

God seems to hold even the heathen nations to basic standards of right and wrong. And even the heathen nations benefit when they observe basic standards of decency and morality.

- D. Many of the early founders of America believed that our success as a nation was because of God's blessing. It was the providence of God that has led to American greatness.
- E. The earliest colonists were almost all professing Christians. Virtually all of the founding fathers were professing Christians or at least had respect for the Christian worldview.

I recently read that, of the 56 men who signed the Declaration [of Independence], the great majority, perhaps all, identified themselves as Christians, and all but one were Protestants. Four were either present or former ministers, and a number of the signers were the sons of clergy. At least half of them had studied "divinity" at their various universities.¹

¹ Gregory Elder, "Professing Faith: The religious foundations that bolstered the Declaration of Independence." *Redlands Daily Facts*, 4 July 2019. <https://www.redlandsdailyfacts.com>

So the men who founded the nation had a Christian worldview and upheld Christian morality. They were not perfect, but the vast majority of them were striving to live a godly Christian life.

- F. For many years, Christianity was the dominant cultural influence on the nation. Although America was far from perfect, at least those in authority professed to respect the morality of the Bible.
- G. All of that has now changed. For the last few decades, many of those in leadership in our nation have advocated policies directly contradicting Christian morality and ethics. We have leaders today who promote everything God hates.

E.g., one of our senators, Tammy Baldwin, recently co-sponsored the Women's Health Protection Act, a bill proposing to guarantee equal access to abortion everywhere across the country. This act calls abortion "essential health care." If *Roe v. Wade* is overturned, this law would guarantee the right to abortion in every state. 47 out of 48 democratic senators support this bill, and 176 representatives in the House support it. That means that a huge portion of our elected representatives believes that abortion is a good thing; they support it, defend it, and they want to encode abortion protection in law. And if our elected representatives believe that, it means that a large portion of our citizens believe it.

The authors of this act don't even call the person having an abortion a mother; they call her "a person who is pregnant." Why do they use that language? Because they know that some women pretend to be men; women identify as men, but they can still get pregnant and have babies. So they don't want to say "woman" or "mother" who is pregnant; they say "person who is pregnant." Or "birthing person." And the whole culture is expected to adopt this ridiculous, absurd new language.

That's the kind of immorality that is now pandemic in our country.

- H. With all the immorality that our country now promotes and protects, should we be surprised if God pours out his wrath on the US? I believe that our country richly deserves the distress that we are currently experiencing. Like Nehemiah said, we are in distress because of our sins.
- I. There are still pockets of vibrant Christian testimony throughout the country, but as a whole, America is ripe for God's judgment.

Trans: Nations are blessed to the degree that they serve the Lord and uphold Christian morality. Nations are cursed to the degree that they disobey the Lord and reject Christian morality. As Christian influence subsides in the US, I expect greater “distress” will come upon us. I believe God is slowly withdrawing his blessings from us.

III. Rulers have great authority.

Nehemiah mentions (9:37) several ways in which rulers exercise authority over us.

A. Over our bodies

1. The Jews at this time were subjects of the Persian Empire. The Babylonians had taken them into captivity, but the Persians overthrew the Babylonians and took over their empire.
2. He says in vs. 36 “we are servants.” In the land they once considered their own, the land that God had previously given them—the promised land, Canaan, the land that they had previously conquered and settled, they were now slaves. They no longer owned the land; foreigners now controlled every aspect of their lives.

App: We know what it’s like for our rulers to exercise authority over our bodies. We just experienced a year of the government telling us what we can and can’t do with our bodies in a very detailed way.

One of the marks of a tyranny is that it wants to have total control over the citizens; it wants to tell everyone what to do; it wants to control the bodies of the people. And it seems that some in our government want to extend that control. And it seems that many of the citizens of this nation are happy to submit to the total control of the government. A desire for safety/security has replaced a commitment to freedom for many. People today are willing to give up a great deal of freedom for the promise of safety and security.

Conservative Christians usually believe in limited government, the smaller the better. Government should have a limited role and limited influence over individual citizens.

But national sin may result in a tyrannical, totalitarian government. God may allow that kind of government to gain control as a form of judgment on that land.

B. Over our cattle

1. Many of the Jews were farmers at this time, and the Persians controlled what the Jews could do with their cattle.
2. Cattle represents money and property. Cattle were worth something; you could trade cattle for other things. You could use cattle to produce income. The problem was that they had no freedom to use their money and property as they saw fit. They were under a system that controlled what they did with their capital—their property, their money.
3. Does that idea sound familiar? The idea that government controls money and business is common to both socialism and communism. And there are many in the government today who are advocating socialism; they want more government control and regulation, not less.
4. Note the first part of the verse: “it yieldeth much increase unto the kings...” Much of the income from their crops and herds was being taken as taxes collected by the foreign rulers.

Governments love to issue regulations and rules restricting how people can use their own money and how business can conduct their business. Governments love to impose taxes on those making money. High taxes is nothing new, and it’s a mark of a corrupt government.

5. Right now, some state governments want to compel/force business owners to violate Christian principles by involvement in immoral practices.

E.g., bureaucrats want to force bakers to make custom cakes for same-sex “weddings.” They want to force photographers and florists and artists and tee shirt manufacturers to produce things that contradict their Christian values. If they don’t do it, they will be punished.

E.g., Jack Phillips, Baronelle Stutzman – they represent hundreds who have been sued or who have lost their businesses because they would not comply with government demands to participate in immoral activities.

The demands of a corrupt government cause much distress.

- C. At their pleasure

1. The government imposes its will on people; it demands that people do what it says. The Persian Empire had total control over the people and they forced them to comply with the will of the government.
2. In our nation, the “pleasure” of the government shifts back and forth. One administration has one set of values, and the next administration has a totally different set of values.
3. So in a certain sense, we have to put up with the “pleasure” of those in power. Once we elect them, our officials impose their will on the nation.

These days, the President imposes his will largely through executive orders. Occasionally, the Supreme Court makes a ruling that has drastic implications. In a real sense, the course of the nation depends on the “pleasure” of 5 of the 9 justices of the SCOTUS.

BTW, the SC recently refused to take up a case regarding transgender people and their access to facilities like bathrooms and locker rooms in public places. Most of the court seems not to be interested in that issue.

Pr 29:2 When the righteous are in authority, the people rejoice: but when the wicked beareth rule, the people mourn.

4. Who is in authority right now? Who is imposing their pleasure on the nation? The current president claims to be a Christian, but many of his policies contradict Christian morality. His personal conduct contradicts Christian morality. Many of the people in the current administration are deeply hostile to Christian morality.

One of our senators is a homosexual who supports abortion. The federal assistant health secretary is a man who thinks of himself as a woman. The secretary of HHS (Xavier Becerra) is a rabid abortion and LGBT supporter. Likewise, our governor is in favor of many wicked, evil policies, especially as they concern abortion and LGBT rights. So in a large sense, the wicked are bearing rule right now.

5. Perhaps the political situation will change in 2022 and in 2024; I hope so. But the wicked can do a lot of damage while they are in control. We have good reason to “mourn” over the wicked policies of wicked bureaucrats. But those wicked people in power were put there by the voters. Many voters in Wisconsin love Tammy Baldwin and Tony Evers. They are in power because of the support of like-minded people, people who support abortion and the LGBT agenda. I find this greatly distressing.

Which leads to the final point...

IV. Rulers may cause “great distress.”

- A. I could read you a long list of policies that the current administration has put in place that I find greatly distressing.

- B. Examples:

1. Pres Biden wants to end the Hyde Amendment, that prevents the federal government from paying for abortions.
2. He’s overturned the Mexico City policy, which prevented federal funds from paying for abortions overseas.
3. He’s put sexual deviants into positions of authority in the government. He’s made it clear that he supports the LGBT agenda in every way possible. Nearly everyone in the Biden administration is fervently pro-LGBT and pro-abortion.

Biden said in a recent speech: “Pride is back at the White House.” He recently visited the Stonewall Inn, where the whole homosexual rights movement got started. He called the Pulse Nightclub “hallowed ground” and made it a national memorial.

4. He’s reversed the Trump-era policy banning “trans-gendered” people from entering the military.
5. He has promised to sign the Equality Act if it ever reaches his desk. If that bill becomes law, it will radically alter life as we know it in the US for the worse.
6. He’s promoted the 1619 project that teaches children that the US was founded in order to support slavery. He supports CRT and diversity/equity/inclusion ideas.

7. All of these issues should cause us “distress.” He’s supporting moral policies that will ultimately harm the nation.
- C. In spite of all of that, we must admit that it could be a lot worse. We could be slaves like the Jews were under a foreign government that recognized virtually no human rights. We could be persecuted like the early church was and like believers in other parts of the world are right now.

In spite of all the distress that we are currently experiencing, we still have many privileges. No one is preventing us from having church this morning. No one is threatening to bulldoze our building. No one is seizing our bank account. No one is threatening our lives. So things could be a lot worse.
 - D. But if things keep going the way they are, I don’t doubt that some of us will see great distress come on Christians and on the church because of our ungodly leaders and a corrupt government.

Nehemiah recognized that the distress he and his people were experiencing was directly related to the sins of the nation. Their economic and social problems were of their own making. So what did he urge the nation to do? What was the solution? Nehemiah and the other godly leaders of Israel led the nation to renew their covenant with God. Here’s part of that covenant:

Neh 10:29 [They] joined with their brethren, their nobles, and entered into a curse and an oath to walk in God’s Law, which was given by Moses the servant of God, and to observe and do all the commandments of the LORD our Lord, and His ordinances and His statutes:

Nehemiah led the people to recommit themselves to God and to his law. The solution to the distress was obedience to God.

The US is not Israel. We are not slaves to a foreign ruler. Citizens of the US are not God’s covenant people like the Jews were. So there is not a *direct* parallel between them and us. But I believe the general principle still holds true—“blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord.” Pr 14:34 *Righteousness exalteth a nation: but sin [is] a reproach to any people.*

If we want to avoid the distress that accompanies disobedience to God's law, then the thing to do is to commit ourselves to walking in his law and observing God's ordinances. Only if the nation as a whole returns to a basic respect for Christian morality can we expect God to bless our nation again. We need a national revival, a wholesale repentance and return to God and to biblical morality.

Do you see that happening anytime soon? Short of a heaven-sent national revival, I don't see that anywhere on the horizon. I see just the opposite—things are going from bad to worse. There are fewer and fewer reasons to be optimistic regarding the future of our nation. Unless we return to the founding principles of America—including a basic respect for biblical morality—I don't have much hope.

Given the current administration and the direction it is going, and given the current moral status of the nation as a whole, there is good reason for concern. There is much to be in distress about because of our rulers and because of our national sin. And our nation does not have a leader like Nehemiah to lead us to national repentance and renewal. We could pray that God would raise up such a leader.

Thankfully, July 4 is a celebration of the *founding* of our nation, not a celebration of the current state of the nation. We have good reason to celebrate the founding of the nation and the many ways that God has blessed our nation historically. And we can pray and work for a time that God will once again bless America.

So today, on July 4th, let's look back to the founding of the nation and celebrate the things that made our country great in the first place. Let's celebrate the freedoms and privileges that still remain. Perhaps we can forget our "current distress" for a while and enjoy the blessings of liberty while we still can.