

Trusting God: God's Sovereignty Over the Nations

If you are like me, you are highly frustrated and disappointed with the decisions and policies of our government, both state and national. Our government enforces policies and promotes ideas that I find absolutely reprehensible. Because our state and national governments are controlled by people who disagree with us so profoundly, we are often exceedingly disappointed by what our governments are doing.

We should temper such feelings by our trust that God is in control of government. One of the most frequent expressions of God's sovereignty is his control of nations and their leaders. Governments, rulers, legislatures, and parliaments—even dictators and tyrants—all operate under the sovereignty of God. That does not mean that what they do is good, but what they do ultimately fits into God's plan.

We just celebrated the 4th of July, commemorating the founding of the nation. We are very blessed in the US that our founding documents assert that our freedoms are inalienable and come from the Creator, not from the government. Because of these freedoms, we can gather here without threat and without danger. In some places in the world, governments are intentionally attacking Christians. E.g., in the Islamic world; Africa; N. Korea. We should be very thankful that we live in a nation that still allows a degree of religious freedom.

John Newton (1725–1807), converted slave trader, Anglican minister, and author of the familiar hymn “Amazing Grace,” wrote:

The kings of the earth are continually disturbing the world with their schemes of ambition. They expect to carry everything before them, and have seldom any higher end in view, than the gratification of their own passions. But in all they do they are but servants of [our] great King and Lord, and fulfill his purposes...¹

We trust that God is fulfilling his purposes through his sovereign control of political leaders and nations. We must recognize and affirm God's sovereignty over the nations. We can rest secure in the fact that the heart of the king is in the hand of the Lord.

Let's consider several things the Bible says about God's sovereignty over the nations.

¹ Quoted in Jerry Bridges, *Trusting God* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1988), 79.

I. God sovereignly ordains rulers.

A. God ordains the “powers that be.”

Dan 2:20-211 ...*[God] changeth the times and the seasons: he removeth kings, and setteth up kings: ...*

Rom 13:1-4 *Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation. For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same: For he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil.*

1. It may be hard to see how government officials are “ministers of God to thee for good” when many in government are clearly opposed to everything that God stands for. In some nations, the whole structure of government is opposed to God—e.g., North Korea.
2. Remember that Paul wrote this statement about government when the notorious and evil Nero was in charge of the Roman Empire. Even tyrannical and abusive governments are under God’s control.
3. Government officials should be agents of good in the world, but often they are not. Government officials are often the direct cause of suffering, pain, and torture for Christians. Government leaders violate God’s moral will very frequently. Some of them claim to be followers of God as they actively violate God’s moral will.
4. If governments fail to be what they should be, the citizens of that country may rise up in rebellion and establish a new government.
5. No matter who is in power, we believe that God is somehow sovereign over governments. Those powers exist because God allows them to be in power. He could put them out of power if that were his will. As we saw last week, the heart of the king is in the hand of the Lord, and he can change the thinking and behavior of those in authority if it suits his purposes. He can set them up, and he can tear them down.

6. How do we respond to the powers that be?
- a) Normally, we obey the laws. We believe in the rule of law, as long as the laws are just.
 - b) Normally, we honor those in positions of authority. E.g., the police, government officials.
 - c) We should also pray for those in authority (1 Tim 2:1-2). We should pray that government would allow us to live a quiet and peaceful life. We should pray for our persecuted brethren in parts of the world where they are suffering persecution because of the government.

Because the heart of the king is in the hand of the Lord, so we should pray that God would change the hearts of minds of government officials so that they make good decisions.

- d) And we also recognize that there are times when we cannot in good conscience obey government authorities (Acts 5:29).
 - (i) We may disobey when the authorities try to force us to do something sinful.
E.g., public accommodation laws allowing men into the women's facilities.
 - (ii) We may disobey the authorities if they try to prevent us from fulfilling our biblical duties.
E.g., if another pandemic hits, they may try to shut down churches again.
 - (iii) But normally speaking, we try to be good citizens and obey the powers that be.

B. God ordains *who* those powers will be.

Ex 9:16 ... *for this cause have I raised thee up, for to shew in thee my power; and that my name may be declared throughout all the earth.*

Psa 75:6-7 ... *God [is] the judge: he putteth down one, and setteth up another.*

Dan 4:17 ... *the Most High rules in the kingdom of men, Gives it to whomever He will, And sets over it the lowest of men.*

It is certainly true that God allows the “lowest of men” to occupy positions of great political authority. It’s interesting that even the ancient people recognized that the worst people were often had political authority. That condition still pertains today; we see that in our own country all the time. It’s rather surprising to think that God sovereignly granted the worst people these positions of authority. God does that for his own purposes.

We ought to pray fervently that God would allow good and decent people to hold positions of authority. Our founding fathers believed that decent and religious people ought to hold authority in our country. That no longer pertains in our political system; very evil and wicked people hold political office today. We should pray to change that and vote good people into office.

Ps 12:8 *The wicked walk on every side, when the vilest men are exalted.*

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

Pr 29:12 *If a ruler hearken to lies, all his servants are wicked.*

C. God ordains *when* those powers will rule.

Isaiah 40:23–24 *He brings the princes to nothing; He makes the judges of the earth useless. Scarcely shall they be planted, Scarcely shall they be sown, Scarcely shall their stock take root in the earth, When He will also blow on them, And they will wither, And the whirlwind will take them away like stubble.*

A good example of this truth is Nebuchadnezzar. God gave him the Babylonian kingdom, caused his insanity, and then restored his mind and his kingdom. Even the most powerful dictator in the world rules only as long as God allows it.

Quote: the God who ruled absolutely in the life and fortunes of the most powerful monarch[s] of that time still rules in the fortunes and destinies of governments today. No government or dictator is so powerful as to be beyond the sway of His sovereign rule over all the nations of the earth.²

Trans.: God sovereignly ordains the powers that be.

² Jerry Bridges, *Trusting God* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1988), 82.

II. God sovereignly ordains the decisions of the rulers.

- A. In today's world, those in authority make decisions based on what would benefit them or their friends or what would benefit the nation. We hope that they are not making decisions by flipping a coin or rolling dice.
- B. In the ancient world, rulers would sometimes make decisions by casting the lot. The process of casting the lot was something like flipping a coin or rolling dice.
- C. The Bible shows how people made all sorts of decisions by casting lots—choosing government officials, selecting dates for various actions, settling disputes, even determining military strategy.

Proverbs 16:33 The lot is cast into the lap, But its every decision is from the Lord.

God declares that even the casting of the lot—a seemingly random action—is within God's control. The outcome of the cast lot might seem to be totally random, but it's not; its outcome is under God's control.

- D. In other cases, people made their decisions by seeking advice and counsel from others. God can influence leaders through the advice they receive or reject.

- 1. In one OT story, God directly intervened so that Absalom followed bad advice.

2 Samuel 17:14 So Absalom and all the men of Israel said, "The advice of Hushai the Archite is better than the advice of Ahithophel." For the LORD had purposed to defeat the good advice of Ahithophel, to the intent that the LORD might bring disaster on Absalom.

In this case, God used bad advice to advance his purposes. God influenced the situation so that the people acted on bad advice.

- 2. In the account of Rehoboam, Solomon's son, we read that Rehoboam was deciding how he would lead his kingdom. He asked advice from both the older people and the younger ones, and he decided to follow the bad advice of the younger people.

1 Kings 12:15 So the king did not listen to the [older] people; for the turn of events was from the LORD, that He might fulfill His word,

3. In both of those stories, someone was seeking advice, they received both good and bad advice, and they chose to follow the bad advice. It was God's purpose that the king followed the bad advice so as to bring ruin and destruction on those kings.
4. Thus, we find that God can and does influence the hearts and minds of government officials through the advice they receive, both good and bad.
5. And we also see that God's purpose in influencing someone to make a bad decision might be for judgment. God ordains that these people take bad advice and make bad decisions so as to bring judgment on an individual or on a nation. God's discipline may fall on a nation through the bad decisions of its officials.

App: We can hardly help seeing a parallel to our own times. When we see government leaders make decisions that seem to be so obviously bad and damaging, we have good reason to wonder if perhaps God is bringing judgment on our land through the bad decisions of evil government officials. These bad decisions have disastrous consequences that affect huge numbers of people, including believers. But maybe these bad decisions are also "of the Lord" so as to bring judgment upon our country. E.g., the open border.

We must trust in God to care for his people when we are suffering under the bad decisions of wicked government officials.

And we should pray for our leaders that God would help them to make good decisions in spite of themselves. We don't know if bad decisions by government leaders are part of God's judgment on our wicked world, but we do know that we are supposed to pray for the powers that be.

III. God sovereignly ordains military victories and defeats.

Ps 20:7 Some trust in chariots, and some in horses: but we will remember the name of the LORD our God.

Ps 127:1 ... except the LORD keep the city, the watchman waketh but in vain.

Proverbs 21:31 The horse is made ready for the day of battle, but victory rests with the LORD

Isa 31:1 *Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help, And rely on horses, Who trust in chariots because they are many, And in horsemen because they are very strong, But who do not look to the Holy One of Israel, Nor seek the LORD!*

- A. We know the famous story of Gideon's 300 men and how they defeated a huge army of Midianite soldiers. The text says that God caused the Midianites to fight one another (Jud 7:2-3, 22). God intervened directly in that battle.
- B. King Saul's son, Jonathan, at one point attacked a Philistine outpost. Before the attack he said, *Nothing can hinder the Lord from saving, whether by many or by few* (1 Sam 14). The account goes on to say that the Lord sent a "panic" upon the Philistines in which they were fighting among themselves.
- C. We find many occasions in which God gave the enemy nations into the hands of the Israelites. This happened repeatedly when Joshua and the people were conquering the Promised Land.
- D. God even caused huge hail stones to fall on Israel's enemies.
- E. We have many statements affirming the that Lord gave victories and delivered the enemy into the hands of the Israelites. And we have statements indicating that the Lord allowed Israel to be defeated.

App: Because victory or defeat is ultimately in God's hands, we must put our trust in God rather than in our powerful military.

Psalm 33:16–17 *No king is saved by the size of his army; no warrior escapes by his great strength. A horse is a vain hope for deliverance; despite all its great strength it cannot save.*

That's *not* to say that we should not have a powerful military that is prepared for action. But our ultimate trust is in God. Even a great military can suffer defeat if God so ordains it.

2 Samuel 10:12 *Be of good courage, and let us be strong for our people and for the cities of our God. And may the Lord do what is good in His sight.*

Looking at the current situation, it's somewhat possible that we may be engaged in war in the near future. Given the current conditions, I can easily see how war could spread around the world very quickly. But war cannot happen outside God's sovereign will. It may seem like corrupt officials or terrorists are the cause of war, but behind it all, God is sovereignly bringing about his purposes through the circumstances in play.

And we should remember that God used evil nations to bring discipline or judgment upon Israel. God could do the same to us. The USA is not the nation of Israel. God's relationship with us is not the same as his special relationship to Israel. God can judge or chastise any nation.

God used the Assyrian army to punish Judah, calling Assyria, "the rod of my anger, in whose hand is the club of my wrath," and said, "I send him against a godless nation, I dispatch him against a people who anger me" (Isaiah 10:5–6).³

God is saying here that these mighty nations are little more than instruments in his hands. God is the one ultimately using them to bring about victory or defeat.

Quote: God establishes governments, determines who will govern and for how long, rules in the councils of state, causes officials to make both wise and foolish decisions, grants victory or defeat in war, and uses ungodly nations to carry out His will.⁴

We must trust God to work out all of these details according to his own plan and purpose. We don't become passive or irresponsible in all of this. I think it is necessary for our country to maintain a strong and well-prepared military. Serving in the military is a legitimate vocation for Christians. The Bible does not require that we be pacifists. But we recognize God's will and purpose behind all things. Victory or defeat is in God's hands.

Our nation used to acknowledge our dependence upon God in these matters. The leaders of our nation used to lead the country in public prayer asking for God's blessing and acknowledging God's sovereignty in national conflicts. E.g., FDR's prayers during WWII. Could you imagine our current president doing that?

We know that when Christ returns and establishes his kingdom, nations will not engage in war anymore.

Mic 4:3 And he shall judge among many people, and rebuke strong nations afar off; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up a sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.

We look forward to that day.

³ Jerry Bridges, *Trusting God* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1988), 89.

⁴ Jerry Bridges, *Trusting God* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1988), 90.

IV. God's sovereignty over the nations may be hidden/not apparent.

- A. As we look at wars around the world, it may seem as if these conflicts are out of control. Wars carry on with all kinds of violence and bloodshed until one side wins or one side gives up. It all seems very chaotic and disordered. But we still believe God is ultimately in charge and that God has a plan or purpose in it all.
- B. And it's the same with the political system. It may not seem as if God is involved in controlling the powers that be, but we trust that God is sovereign over such matters, setting one ruler up, putting down another.
- C. Even those directly involved in making decisions may not be aware that they are carrying out God's will.

- 1. When Caesar Augustus issued his decree to take a census, he had no idea that his decree would cause Joseph and Mary to travel to Bethlehem so that Jesus could be born there. He did not know that his decree set the conditions to fulfill an OT prophecy that Bethlehem would be the place of the Messiah's birth. Caesar did what he wanted to do, but he also did what God planned for him to do.
- 2. Herod and Pilate had no idea that they were fulfilling God's plan for them.

Acts 4:27-28 For truly against Your holy Servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, were gathered together to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose determined before to be done.

Herod, Pilate, the Gentiles, and the Jews all did what they wanted to do, yet they also accomplished God's pre-determined purpose for them. These people did not perceive the hand of God guiding their decisions, but that's what was happening. They unwittingly fulfilled God's purposes.

- D. Normally, we don't know what purposes God is fulfilling behind the scenes. Political leaders are doing what they want to do, yet their actions and policies somehow figure into God's overall plan.
- E. We know that there will be corrupt politicians, wars and rumors of war right up until Jesus returns. Human nature is selfish and violent, and wars are almost inevitable. But such things fit within God's overall plan.

- F. And that plan will culminate with the return of Christ in glory to establish his earthly kingdom. Everything is moving toward that great event. Nothing can stop it, not even corrupt governments or savage wars.
- G. And if you've read Revelation, you know that certain things are going to happen at the end of the church age, and we can see such things shaping up right now. God is moving all these things so that his purposes might be fulfilled. Christ's return and reign will bring an end to the current political system and an end to wars. We look forward to Christ's perfect rule and reign.

Since God is sovereign over nations, officials, governments, and wars, our primary responsibility is to pray. We should pray that God would keep the peace and that he would reduce the tendency humans have for war. We should pray that God would spare those suffering in war zones. We should pray especially for fellow believers who are suffering because of bad governments and corrupt officials.

We should pray for our nation and its leaders, but we should also realize that God may be bringing judgment upon us by giving us terrible leaders. As a nation, we have the rulers that we deserve. We operate by electing our representatives, and wicked people tend to elect wicked representatives. So if our nation suffers defeat and decay, it could be that it was God intended for that to happen as a means of judgment.

We should exercise our rights and freedoms to vote in as many good and decent people into office as possible.

Pr 29:2 When the righteous are in authority, the people rejoice:

Government policies and procedures may not be what we want them to be, but we can be assured that God is sovereign over national, political, and military affairs. We must believe that his purposes are being fulfilled through these instruments.