

# GOD AND GOVERNMENT

FOLLOWING THE WISDOM  
OF THE BIBLE



**Our Daily Bread Ministries**



*introduction*

# God and Government

Following the Wisdom  
of the Bible

**W**hat do we owe the government? When a group of religious leaders asked Jesus if Jewish citizens should pay taxes to Caesar, He gave a startling response. He asked His audience to look at two sides of a Roman coin and said, “Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

What does that mean for us two thousand years later? Whether we live within the social order of a democracy, republic, monarchy, military dictatorship,

or communistic system, how do we balance our duties as citizens with our accountability to Christ?

The following pages will help us think through the challenge of not giving to Caesar what belongs to God, or to God what He has entrusted to Caesar.

*Martin R. DeHaan II*

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COVER IMAGE: Stefanos Kyriazis via Adobe Stock

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INTERIOR IMAGES: (p.1) Stefanos Kyriazis via Adobe Stock; (p.5) Pixabay.com and Craig Zdanowicz via Unsplash.com; (p.9) Martin Ludlam via Pixabay.com; (p.17) Bukhta Yurii via Shutterstock.com; (p.26) Igor Oprea via Shutterstock.com; (p.29) John Theodor via Shutterstock.com

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Printed in USA



one

## “Atheist” Christians?

**I**n the second century AD, the respected Roman scholar Celsus leveled the incredible accusation of atheism against Christians. Because believers in Jesus Christ did not worship the gods of Rome or revere Caesar as a god, Celsus charged them with adhering to treasonous, atheistic beliefs. Their radical worldview subjected them to oppression at the hands of an unsympathetic government.

Whatever persecution came their way, those early Christians endured it. There is scant record of anything resembling early Christian resistance to institutional persecution.

But during World War II, Christians were among the boldest defenders of another oppressed people

group. Devout believers played a major role in organizations such as the Dutch resistance and the French underground that opposed Nazi aggression.

Most of these heroic resisters used peaceful means of protest. Some, however, engaged in acts of violence. The Lutheran pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer was executed by the Nazis for his part in the plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler.

A few years later, another Christian at odds with certain aspects of his government took a path that he called nonviolent direct action. In his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote: “There are two types of laws: just and unjust. . . . One has . . . a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws.”<sup>1</sup>

📖 **Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.** wrote his “Letter from Birmingham Jail” in April 1963 after being arrested for demonstrating without a permit. He spent eleven days in jail for that “offense.” Dr. King and others called Birmingham, Alabama, “the most segregated city in the United States” for its systematic mistreatment of African-Americans.

As long as we have had human government, there have been citizens who disagreed with the policies, decisions, and activities of those governments. Such dissent can escalate into a crisis. It is then that national leaders must make a crucial decision. Should the government use the sword to force compliance? If they do, will it be for the legitimate good of the people? Or will it be for the government’s own self-advancement?

On the other hand, citizens must decide: Should

they take the risks of protest on behalf of a just cause? Or do they owe the government the discipline of due process, patience, and respect for authority? Where should the line be drawn?

We must find a balance. We must temper our need for social accountability and law enforcement with an awareness that governments—like all human institutions—will fall short of the purposes for which they were established.

Followers of Christ can take advantage of the historical perspectives and wisdom of the Bible. Two familiar statements from the New Testament comprise the scales on which our considerations of faith and state must be weighed:

*Jesus said to them, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s”*  
(MARK 12:17).

*Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God*  
(ROMANS 13:1 NASB).

These words from Christ and the apostle Paul are the twin pillars that uphold the overarching truth of our dual citizenship.

1. *We must know what belongs to God.*
2. *We must know what God has entrusted to the state.*

We are citizens of the kingdom of God as well as the nation or state in which we live. Here is our challenge: Do we have a moral duty to comply with

the authority of human government? How can we make sure that we are not giving to the state something that belongs only to God—and to God what He has entrusted to Caesar?





two

## Kingdom Principles

**F**or a moment, let's try to walk in the footsteps of Jesus's disciples. These men had been invited into the inner circle of the future King of Israel. What must they have thought as they lived out the dream their ancestors had prayed for?

As they walked the lakeshore of Galilee, the disciples were gradually learning to embrace the principles of the kingdom of God. They began to sense that their miracle-working Teacher was fulfilling the prediction of the prophet Isaiah, who said:

*For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given;  
and the government will be upon His shoulder;  
and His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor,*

*Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of His government and peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David and over His kingdom, to order it and establish it with judgment and justice from that time forward, even forever (ISAIAH 9:6–7).*

Could it be that Jesus was about to fulfill the words of the prophet? Could He be the long-awaited Messiah?

With anticipation of a divine takeover of the world, imagine the disciples' wonder—and confusion—when this King told them that they owed a pagan emperor their money and respect! Yet in the days just prior to Jesus's execution on a cross, that's exactly what the disciples heard Him say.

The disciples anticipated political liberation. Shockingly, Jesus taught His followers to respect even a pagan ruler.

When Paul wrote to followers of Christ in Rome, he began by declaring Jesus to be LORD (ROMANS 1:1–4). Roman officials might have interpreted that as a subversive challenge to the authority of Caesar. But in the same letter, he wrote:

*Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. (ROMANS 13:1)*

Paul lived in the shadow of the reigning Caesar. Was he asking Christ-followers to give Caesar the honor that belongs to God alone?

In emphasizing our duty to government, Paul twice used the words “be subject” (ROMANS 13:1,5). Amazingly, Paul urged his audience to recognize the God-given authority of a head of state who

required worship of himself! The apostle's intent was to encourage us to honor leaders, secular or pagan, who deserve the kind of law-abiding compliance that God-given authority merits.

Paul didn't tell us to honor our leaders because we agree with their personal character or public policies. He explained that God instituted government to restrain lawlessness.

The Old Testament book of Judges is a sordid account of assassinations, genocide, power grabs, sexual abuse, and shattered families—the tragic result of insufficient government. As a result of this vacuum of restraint, the book grimly concludes, “In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (JUDGES 21:25).<sup>1</sup>

↪ Throughout its history, **the nation of Israel** has been subjected to rule by another nation. When Jesus walked with His disciples, it was controlled by the Roman Empire, who conquered Israel in 68 BC. There were groups ready to rebel, even with violence (MARK 15:7; LUKE 23:19).

Romans 13:4–5 counters such a dangerous approach by showing that civil authority acts on God's behalf to maintain order, uphold justice, punish wrongdoing, and restrict violence. Laws against murder, rape, robbery, vandalism, bribery, and fraud reflect God's value on human life and personal property rights.

The apostle Peter joined Paul in emphasizing that the Caesars of the world are part of God's provision to protect the public interest. He noted that by living

a law-abiding life, followers of Christ reflect well upon God and show that they are not using religion as a cover for scandal (1 PETER 2:13–17). Peter encouraged his readers to represent Christ well when he wrote, “Honor all people. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the king” (v. 17).

We may think it is possible to honor the office of a government official without respecting the person who fills it. But is that the intent of Jesus and the apostles? Do they urge us to respect and honor positions of authority and not individuals?

Again, we must keep in mind that Paul and Peter wrote to people living under the authority of the emperors. Roman law may have been admirable in the pluralistic freedoms and semiautonomy extended to those under its control and occupation, but it was also under Roman rule that Christians suffered for their refusal to give Caesar the honor that they believed was due only to God. 🐦

🐦 *Paul’s exhortation to Roman believers to **be subject to government rulers** is no small request, especially in light of the likely date of the writing of Romans in AD 57. Less than 10 years before, in AD 49, Christians were expelled from Rome by the government. And only a few years later, in AD 64, under Nero, government sanctioned persecution of Christians would begin.*

Paul knew what it meant to face leaders who unfairly exercised religious and civil authority (ACTS 22:30–23:5). In fact, when he wrote his letter to Titus, Paul had been wrongfully imprisoned for his

faith. Yet despite this deep personal injustice, he firmly upheld the principle that leaders should be respected. He instructed Titus to remind believers “to be subject to rulers and authorities, to obey, to be ready for every good work” (3:1).

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What if the government tells us to renounce our faith, abort our children, or serve in a military waging an unjust war?

The Scriptures make it clear that respect for leaders does not mean unqualified compliance. The New Testament apostles showed us that there are times to appeal to a higher authority. When the Jewish rulers forbade Peter and John from talking about the resurrection of Jesus, the apostles responded, “Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than to God, you judge. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard” (ACTS 4:19–20; SEE ALSO 5:29).

Peter and John’s challenge to authority must be understood in the context of the events that led to this confrontation. The truth of what they knew compelled them to resist orders. They had seen Jesus heal the sick and raise the dead. They had seen Him voluntarily suffer and die before rising bodily from the dead three days later. In the days that followed, they had seen additional, unmistakable acts of God (ACTS 3:1–12) that helped others believe their account of the resurrection of Jesus.

These apostles were not criminals. Rather, they were living in the spirit of Daniel, who centuries

earlier had refused to comply with government-enforced idolatry. For his courage, Daniel was thrown into a lions' den. His brave but gracious response to this injustice clearly shows that he did not have issues with authority. When he emerged unscathed from the lions' den, he said to the king:

*O king, live forever! My God sent His angel and shut the lions' mouths, so that they have not hurt me, because I was found innocent before Him; and also, O king, I have done no wrong before you (DANIEL 6:21–22).*

When we have issues with our government, we do well to consider the way Daniel respectfully resisted King Darius.

David provides us with another example of courageous and respectful dissent. When he fled from an envious and raging King Saul, he chose to respect “the LORD’s anointed” (1 SAMUEL 24:10) even when it meant jeopardizing his own safety (19:9–10). As Saul pursued David with his armed men, David had the opportunity to kill the king but chose not to do so (24:3–4; 26:5–25). His respectful restraint ultimately caused his enemy Saul to bless him (26:25).

The courage to comply with God’s Word rather than obeying human leaders who make sinful decisions is one thing. Dishonoring those leaders is another. Daniel and David chose to show honor while respectfully dissenting and disagreeing.

***At worst, our governors are unwitting servants of God.***

Paul wrote, “Whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God” (ROMANS 13:2).

Why would Paul say such a thing? Perhaps because

even pluralistic, pagan systems provide important infrastructure and social order. Even tyranny can be better than no law at all.

With such wise considerations in mind, Paul said to citizens of the Roman Empire, “Therefore you must be subject, not only because of wrath but also for conscience’ sake” (13:5). The word *wrath* here speaks of the potential for the government to wield power against its citizens. Paul’s point is that when weighing whether or not to resist the government for the sake of our conscience, we must also consider how we are to respond to an institution ordained by God. It is an exercise in balance and perspective, requiring careful wisdom.

***Respect for governors means having a healthy fear of their power.*** Paul reminded us that rulers carry a sword for the purpose of establishing order and enforcing the law (ROMANS 13:3–4,7). Describing the power of those entrusted with governmental authority, he wrote, “If you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God’s minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil” (v. 4).

Before resisting “the powers that be,” we must be sure that our cause is worth our imprisonment or death. 🐦

🐦 *The earliest known **capital punishment laws** are found in the Code of Hammurabi, which was written in the 1700s BC. The crimes punishable by death have varied throughout history, including everything from murder to adultery to disturbing the peace.*

***If we must resist, we need to do so with respect for the people who govern.*** In some cases, followers of Christ have had reason to see their government as an enemy of the gospel. Under these circumstances, we must remember that such officials will give account to God for the authority entrusted to them. In the same manner, we also will be held accountable to God—the highest authority—for how we respond to government officials. Therefore, we must ponder how a cavalier or hostile attitude toward our government leaders will reflect on Christ.

If we decide that for Christ's sake we need to take matters into our own hands, we do well to remember the wisdom of Martin Luther King Jr., who quoted Thomas Aquinas: "An unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal law and natural law." Dr. King rightly saw some of the racist policies of his government as unjust. Yet King also said in the same letter: "In no sense do I advocate evading or defying the law. . . . That would lead to anarchy. One who breaks an unjust law must do so openly, lovingly, and with a willingness to accept the penalty."

So, if we are compelled to resist our government, we must ask ourselves three vital questions:

- 1. Will a watching world see our resistance as a self-serving effort to protect our own rights?*
- 2. Are we protesting in order to protect the interests of others and fight for a higher sense of justice?*
- 3. Are we prepared to accept the penalty?*





*three*

## Government Rights

**S**ome people question whether the government has a right to collect taxes. Others wonder whether we should pay taxes if we don't like the way the public treasury is being spent. Still others feel that giving money to a government that supports war, nuclear arms, deficit spending, abortion, religious pluralism, atheism, or a lack of good land and resource management is the same as directly supporting those practices.

The first-century Christian and Jewish communities from Rome to Jerusalem had similar problems. Taxation was a sensitive issue in Roman-occupied Judea. The matter involved not only the burden of taxation but also the question of whether

it was right to use Jewish money to support a pagan Roman Caesar.

It is in this context that the religious leaders asked Jesus, “Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?” (MARK 12:14).

What makes the question even more intriguing is that it came from representatives of two opposing groups who had come together to test Jesus. The Pharisees were champions of Jewish religious tradition and resented Roman rule with its paganism and confession of Caesar as lord. They also resented the idolatrous inscriptions on Roman coinage. One side ascribed divinity to the ruler; the flip side called the emperor “highest priest.”

So when the Pharisees asked Jesus whether it was lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, they had a mutual agenda against Christ. If He said that Jews should pay taxes to a Caesar who was the focus of the Imperial cult, they would accuse Him of supporting Roman values and blasphemy.

The Herodians brought another angle to the question. They focused on the political issues rather than the spiritual implications. They felt that the Jewish people should support the Roman-appointed, largely non-Jewish Herodian dynasty, which ruled over the Israelites at the pleasure of Rome. The Herodians, therefore, would accuse Jesus of treason if He said that Jews should not pay taxes.

The teacher from Nazareth, however, displayed wisdom that put both sides off balance. “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s,” He said, “and to God the things that are God’s” (MARK 12:17).

Jesus showed how the people of God can live out their dual citizenship. Instead of choosing between God and Caesar, He acknowledged Caesar's rightful role as governor under the higher rule of God. Caesar therefore was owed taxes. But God alone deserved worship and ultimate loyalty.

***Should we pay taxes even if the government uses the money for unjust or immoral causes?*** In his book *God & Caesar*, law professor John Eidsmore stated:

*The Roman government of Paul's day deified Nero, ran a welfare state, and sponsored many pagan practices. Rome certainly did not use its tax money as Christians would desire. The tax collectors of Jesus's time, who usually were paid no salary but rather became rich by overcharging and cheating people, certainly did not employ fair methods of taxation. Yet Jesus and Paul both spoke very clearly on the subject: the Christian ought to pay his taxes (p. 37).*

The apostle Paul left little doubt about our responsibility to pay taxes. He wrote: "Because of this you also pay taxes, for they are God's ministers attending continually to this very thing. Render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes are due, customs to whom customs, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor" (ROMANS 13:6-7).

Some dissidents put forth arguments for withholding taxes that sound patriotic or even spiritual. But there are far stronger reasons for followers of Christ to pay what the government requires. The Bible cannot be rightly used to support a tax revolt any more than it can be used to promote anarchy or disrespect for political leaders who do not support our beliefs or values. 🐦

🔗 ***“The Roman government of Paul’s day made a god of Nero, ran a welfare state, and sponsored pagan practices . . . Yet Jesus and Paul both spoke very clearly on the subject that the Christian ought to pay his taxes”*** (JOHN EIDSMORE IN *GOD AND CAESAR* (P. 37)).

### ***Can we make our country a God-centered nation?***

No matter how many Christians may live in a country, it is not the present-day equivalent of ancient Israel. Nor has the church been entrusted with providing law and order for society. Our calling is to be a unified body that provides salt and light in every nation (MATTHEW 5:13–16). Our mission is to influence society rather than control it.

When Jesus said, “My kingdom is not of this world” (JOHN 18:36), He acknowledged that He is a king (v. 37). But He also taught that until He comes back again, His kingdom will not be a visible institution. Rather, it is the invisible rule of God in the hearts of those who willingly submit to Him (LUKE 17:20–21). Upon His return, He will establish a visible kingdom (MATTHEW 24:30–35; 25:31–46; 26:29–64), but for now, He calls people of all nations to give Him the throne and rule of their hearts (28:18–20).


We are not called to make the law of God the law of the land by forging moral voting blocs or political coalitions. Rather, we are to influence our society by our radical love, authentic example, and advocacy for those who need help.

The spirituality that Christ calls us to cannot be compelled at the point of a sword or by the weight

of combined votes. The social morality of Christ can only grow voluntarily one heart at a time, as each individual gratefully learns that we owe Him our hearts. This is best accomplished as we demonstrate the characteristics of salt and light in our day-to-day behavior.

Both the Old and New Testaments give us examples of how the people of God influenced the pagan governments of their day.

- Joseph rose to a position of great power in Egypt (GENESIS 39–50). Without changing the religious policy or idolatry of the land, God used him to save many lives during a severe famine (50:20).
- Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego, exiles from Judea, rose to prominence in the Babylonian empire. Yet they refused to bow and worship Nebuchadnezzar's golden image (DANIEL 3).
- Daniel, an exiled Jew, gained respect as a wise administrator and a man of unshakable character during the reigns of several kings. He was not afraid to speak out on God's behalf (4:27).
- Nehemiah, cupbearer to King Artaxerxes of Persia (464–424 BC), gained the king's help to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem (NEHEMIAH 1–6).
- The apostle Paul appealed to Roman law for protection when he was unjustly whipped and imprisoned without a trial, though he was a Roman citizen (ACTS 22:22–30).

In each of these examples, we see people who were clearly involved with their earthly governments, 

some in very significant ways. But in each case their earthly allegiances were secondary to their heavenly allegiance.

➤ *No **earthly government** is perfect. Christians dishonor the mandates of our Lord when we want to accept only the perks of citizenship without embracing the responsibilities that citizenship carries with it.*

***Should followers of Christ support their own country at the expense of other nations?*** As we have seen, the Bible teaches that we have dual citizenship. We serve our earthly leaders with honor and respect even as we give our allegiance to the King of kings.

By giving to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God, we affirm the rightful authority and rule of both earthly governments and Christ's kingdom at the same time. No one could legitimately accuse Joseph of being an idolater, because he was loyal to the Pharaoh and the Egyptian government (GENESIS 39–50). Daniel faithfully served in the administrations of the powerful Babylonian and Persian empires, yet he carefully abstained from any false worship.

But, some ask, what about the issues of war? Should a follower of Christ be a pacifist or a conscientious objector to war? A few basic principles form our starting point for determining what it means to follow Christ in times of armed conflict.

Followers of Christ have generally held one of two positions when it comes to participation in governmental armed conflict: just war theory<sup>➤</sup> and pacifism.

➤ **Just war theory** has a long history, dating back to the Ancient Greeks and Romans. Christianity, through such men as Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, has had a strong influence on the development of just war theory. “True religion looks upon as peaceful those wars that are waged not for motives of aggrandizement, or cruelty, but with the object of securing peace, of punishing evil-doers, and of uplifting the good,” wrote Augustine.

Just war theory focuses on the moral aspects that determine when it is justified for a follower of Christ to participate in armed hostilities when their lawful civil authority compels them to do so. Historically, just war theory demanded that certain conditions be met in order for a war effort to be considered the proper course of action.

- 1. Just cause.** *Is this particular conflict for a righteous cause?*
- 2. Right intention.** *What does the government wish to achieve through its actions?*
- 3. Proper authority and public declaration.** *Does the government have the authority to declare war in this situation, and has it made its course of action and reasons known to the public?*
- 4. Last resort.** *Are there any other options available that will preserve and uphold human life?*
- 5. Probability of success.** *A lost cause would be a needless waste of human life and valuable resources.*
- 6. Proportionality.** *Does an armed response make*

*sense in view of what is being defended or protected with violence?*

Pacifism focuses on Jesus's teachings on peace as applied to the lives of individual believers. It asserts that, in light of Jesus's teachings, believers should always abstain from involvement in violent activity as a means of peacemaking or peacekeeping (MATTHEW 5:9,38–42; SEE ALSO LUKE 6:27–36; JOHN 13:34).

Both sides agree that ***war is never an ideal situation***. In a perfect world, there would never be a cause worthy of war. But we live in a fallen world. War is an inevitable symptom and consequence of human greed and self-centeredness. And we must not assume that the absence of violence equals the presence of peace.

The Bible indicates that there are times for nations to take military steps as part of their responsibility to “bear the sword.” This should be done to resist aggression and protect its people (ROMANS 13:4). But the ideal of Scripture is to work hard for peace between both individuals and governments (MATTHEW 5:9; ROMANS 12:17–21).

With logical arguments on both sides, how can we know what to do? We must also recognize that just war theory and pacifism are fundamentally different philosophies. Just war theory is a philosophy for peacemaking and peacekeeping in a fallen world where war, unrest, and oppression are the norm. Pacifism is a way of life that chooses to identify with and provide protection for the suffering in a nonviolent way. Ultimately, believers must



be careful not to war with each other over their honest disagreements.

***Are human governments the tools of spiritual warfare?***

The Bible describes Satan as “the god of this world.” It was in Jesus’s presence that Satan claimed to have control of the kingdoms of the world (MATTHEW 4:8–9). The devil told Him he would give Christ the kingdoms of this world in exchange for His worship (v. 9). Significantly, the Lord did not contradict him.

Whether the devil was claiming to have control of human governments or that he would give all of them to Jesus without an additional fight is not clear. But what is plain is that governments, like individuals, can promote or resist the purposes of God. In that light, each of us must decide what belongs to God and what we owe to Caesar.



*four*

## Prayer

**T**he world seems to be moving increasingly toward the kind of perilous conditions the Bible predicts for the last days (2 TIMOTHY 3:1–5). Human responses vary. Some take a fatalistic attitude. Others complain, run to the desert, or threaten to start a revolution. What is an approach that could honor our God?

Paul believed God's answers to prayer could shape governments as well as our own individual lives. So he wrote:

*I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men, for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence. For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth (1 TIMOTHY 2:1–4).*

**Why should we pray for our leaders?** Paul said that the goal of our praying should be that we may live “quiet and peaceable” lives. His words parallel the counsel given by the prophet Jeremiah to the Jews living in exile under the foreign and pagan government of Babylon (JEREMIAH 29:4-7). Under the kind of government that Jewish people could have found so wrong, Jeremiah shared the very words of the Lord:

*Seek the peace of the city where I have caused you to be carried away captive, and pray to the LORD for it; for in its peace you will have peace (v. 7).*

Significantly, centuries apart in Babylon and in Rome, Jeremiah and Paul both urged God’s people to pray for those in positions of national authority so that they might have peace.

**What kind of prayers should we offer for those in government?** In 1 Timothy 2:1, Paul used four different ways to describe the kinds of prayers we should offer on behalf of our governments: supplications, prayers, intercessions, and the giving of thanks. Although the first three words have similar definitions, it is likely that Paul intended to emphasize the different ingredients that should be part of our prayer life.

**Supplications** are those requests that spring from a sense of need in a specific situation. When applied to our requests for government, supplications are appeals to God that those charged with the responsibility of making and enforcing the laws of the land would exercise fairness as they perform their tasks.

**Prayers** can be any sort of request made to God. In the New Testament, this term refers in a general sense to communion with God. Bible commentator William Hendriksen, however, suggests that in the context of 1 Timothy 2 this term refers to the ongoing general needs in government, like the need for wisdom and justice.

**Intercessions** are those prayers during which we come close to God and speak to Him on behalf of the best interests of other people. In regard to government, then, these could be prayers for specific leaders and the situations and challenges that confront them through their office or position.

**Giving of thanks** refers to expressing gratitude. In relation to government, we are to be thankful for the good that is happening in our country, our political system, and our leadership. Instead of always concentrating on what is wrong or in need of improvement, we can take time to thank God for all the good things that we have in our particular country.

Taken together, Paul's call for such prayers reminds us that God wants us to use our prayers to express our confidence in the higher authority and power that are His alone. The activities of the governments of the world are a part of the spiritual battle that will end when Christ returns to set up His kingdom. In the meantime, God hears our prayers, and we have this great promise: "If we ask anything according to His will, He hears us" (1 JOHN 5:14).



*five*

## A History Of High Hopes

**O**ne of the central stories of the Bible is about a family-nation chosen by God to live under His direct rule and leadership. The people of Israel were divinely selected to be citizens of God's kingdom. He was to be their Lord and King. But during difficult times, the chosen people chose to risk the downside of a leader they could see rather than be at the mercy of an invisible King.

Even though Israel had seen God miraculously rescue them from Egypt, and even though they had seen Him provide for and protect them as they made

their way to the Promised Land, they concluded that they needed a change in leadership.

After four hundred years marked by violence, enemy invasions, and societal anarchy, the Bible says, “In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (JUDGES 21:25).

Rather than turn to the Lord, Israel asked the prophet Samuel for a king. But they went beyond that and insisted that this leader should be like the rulers of “all the nations” around them (1 SAMUEL 8:5, 20). They wanted someone who would hear their requests, lead their battles, and give them security in the presence of their enemies.

Through Samuel, the Lord warned His people that putting their trust in a human sovereign would lead to disappointment. He specifically warned them that a king would tax the work of their hands and conscript their sons and daughters for his own service (vv. 10–18).

Yet Israel insisted on a king. So God gave them their request—the impressive-looking but ultimately disappointing King Saul. What Israel learned the hard way is what every generation since has found. As Lord Acton said, “Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely.”

By contrast, the Bible offers a Messiah and King who has the uncorrupted power and authority to give what no other leader could ever provide.

***Protection and Provision.*** Nations spend enormous sums of money building military forces and defense systems to protect their borders and interests. But no

human defense is impenetrable. History tells of the rise and fall of nations and empires who once felt they were immortal.

The only reliable defense is found in the King anticipated by the prophet Isaiah. Recall his words:

*Of the increase of His government and peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David and over His kingdom, to order it and establish it with judgment and justice from that time forward, even forever*  
(ISAIAH 9:7).

As the story of the Bible unfolds, this Messiah-Savior turns out to be the same one who stood before a governor named Pilate and said that He was a king. According to the gospel of Matthew, “The governor asked Him, saying, ‘Are You the King of the Jews?’ Jesus said to him, ‘It is as you say’” (MATTHEW 27:11).

In the hours that followed that profound statement, this King did what no mere governor could ever do. Jesus voluntarily allowed Himself to be tortured and crucified for our sins. Then, according to the New Testament witnesses, three days later He turned that terrible tragedy into the foundation for the security, satisfaction, and significance that our hearts long for. With His resurrection, Jesus conquered death itself.

***Life, Liberty, and Happiness.*** The United States’ Declaration of Independence declares that all people “are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” The vision of those

founding fathers was that government should uphold and protect those rights.

Even these lofty and noble goals, however, fall short of what our hearts ultimately yearn for. Jesus told His disciples:

*You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many (MATTHEW 20:25–28).*

Think of it! This King of kings “did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.”

Since Jesus’s day, kings, governments, and empires have come and gone. But the King who set Himself apart from all other kings by dying in our place remains. Jesus is the only One with the power and authority to meet our deepest needs. He alone can provide the protection and liberty that satisfies us both now and forever. He alone has the ability to fulfill our highest hopes.





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