

Dealing with Tyrants, 2

God and Government

By Bob Vincent

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Help me, Lord, again from this passage to extract the truth you have for us, practical truth, truth applicable to everyday life, truth that encourages, truth that inspires, truth that makes us have awe before you and your holy word. Help me, O Lord, your very fallible, very finite, very fallen servant. In spite of myself, Lord, speak the words of Jesus to each of us. For Jesus' sake. Amen.

As we continue this passage of scripture and the title again is “Dealing with Tyrants,” you may recall that two weeks ago we looked at the nature of government from God’s perspective. When Israel chose to have a king, she rejected the loose confederacy of representative government with no standing army but an army that God would raise up *ad hoc* for the moment to defend his people and they said, “No, we want to have a king. We want to be like everybody else.”

And you may recall there in 1 Samuel 8 as I went through what God told Samuel to tell the people that a king would do. He would tax them terribly. He would make them slaves. He would have a standing army to enforce his desires on the people. And so, Israel disobeyed, and God said to Samuel, “Don’t you worry about it, Samuel, they haven’t rejected you, they have rejected me.” (1 Samuel 8:7) God’s ideal form of government is that he is the King, and he rules through the people choosing their leaders, and their leaders then representing the people and defending the people.

So Israel rejected that and Israel chose a king. Then last week we began looking at this and we saw in Nebuchadnezzar a typical politician.

Really? Yeah, I think so. It takes a great ego to decide to run for office. Now, I’m not saying that everybody who runs for office has narcissistic personality disorder. I’m sure some people do not. And sometimes God chooses people to run for office, and as Christian people, we should be open

to what God's will for us might be. But in Nebuchadnezzar we see the quintessence of political ambition and tyranny, and it's amazing that Nebuchadnezzar had this dream about a statue in chapter 2, it's really a stela, and like an obelisk, and instead of the head of gold with the chest of silver and the lower torso of brass and the legs and feet of iron and clay, he decides to make the whole thing out of gold.

"Look at me. I'm somebody," Nebuchadnezzar says, in effect. And so, he's created this giant obelisk out of gold, and he demands that everybody everywhere worship it.

So, when the people whom God had placed in power, that is, the Jewish people under the influence of Daniel, his comrades are placed in authority over the province of Babylon, they get reported. "They don't worship your gods," and, of course, that's where we ended last week, that they said, "We're not going to do that."

You can see that on page 1,375 and he says there in verse 18, "But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up."

Now, I pointed something out as we ended last Lord's Day. They didn't say it like this, "We ain't gonna do it, you worthless bum!" They were respectful.

It's always important to show respect to those who are in authority over us, even if they're a nutcase like Nebuchadnezzar. They showed respect. They respectfully declined to obey. It's kind of like when you have someone testifying in court and they plead the fifth amendment, "I respectfully decline to answer on the grounds that my answer may tend to incriminate me." Fifth amendment.

Well, these true believers respectfully declined to obey because to obey Nebuchadnezzar's decree was to deny God and to break his commandments because he forbids idolatry. So, they did it respectfully and that's a very important thing.

Now, as we continue on, down in verse 19, he's furious and he commands that they be thrown into this furnace of fire. And notice what we see further, we read that in the next sentence of verse 19, "He ordered the furnace heated seven times hotter than usual." That's a way of saying he made sure it was as hot as it could be.

Now notice the next verse, "And commanded some of the strongest soldiers in his army to tie up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and throw them into

the blazing furnace.” So here they are, they’ve respectfully declined to obey, they’re still loyal subjects, but their ultimate authority, the ultra-allegiance they have, is to the King of kings and Lord of lords.

So, they’re thrown in and we read then in verse 21, “So these men, wearing their robes, trousers, turbans and other clothes, were bound and thrown into the blazing furnace.”

Look at verse 23. The king’s command was so urgent and the furnace so hot that the flames of fire killed the soldiers who took up Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

I want to ponder that with you for a moment. Turn with me, if you will, we’ll come back here in a minute, over to Ephesians 1. Ephesians 1 and we want to look at verse 22 just for a quick second. Ephesians 1:22, page 1,818, and this is about the Lord Jesus after his victory over Satan and sin and death, his resurrection and ascension to heaven. We read in verse 22, “And God placed all things under his,” (that is, under Jesus’) “feet and appointed him to be head over everything.” Now, notice the last phrase: “For the church.” For the church.

I want you to think about something. We look at history, we look at the great people of history, and we think, “Huh, wow, those are really something!” But you need to understand something: From the perspective of God, the great leaders of this world are simply the backdrop on the drama of redemption.

The real drama of redemption involves his Son, and the people his Son has purchased for himself. In other words, we may look at a Nebuchadnezzar, or we may look at King Sennacherib, or Julius Caesar, or any of these others, other great people in history and may think, “Wow, look at those folks!” But you need to understand they’re not really important. They’re not really important.

Who is important to God? Who is important to God is God’s own people, and that means you and me. We’re important to God and politicians, world leaders, presidents, kings, premiers, prime ministers, they’re only the backdrop of the stage. The drama of redemption is carried out here but back there in the background are all these actors that we think are great people. They’re really not great people because Jesus is head over all things for the sake of his church. You are important. You are important. You are important and who’s president, who’s king, who’s prime minister, who’s governor, who’s mayor, unless they’re born again, they’re just part of the backdrop on the stage. It’s like looking at a piece of black velvet and in front of the black

velvet is a beautiful diamond wonderfully cut, and as the light catches it, we focus on the diamond, not on the black velvet in the background.

And so, Nebuchadnezzar, and particularly these soldiers of Nebuchadnezzar, are part of the backdrop of the drama of redemption. They're not really important. And I want you to see something else while we're in the New Testament.

Turn back to the gospel of Luke 3. Luke 3 and these are the words of John the Baptist. He's been preaching and as John the Baptist has been preaching, he's created quite a crowd and people are convicted. Luke 3:14, and we see there on page 1,593, "Then some soldiers asked him, 'And what should we do?'"

Here's a question you have to ask yourself: Should a believer be in the military? There's nothing wrong about being in the military. Were those soldiers who were serving Nebuchadnezzar guilty of wrongdoing? Not in and of itself. It's legitimate to serve in the military.

"What should we do?" Notice what he says, he says, "Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely—be content with your pay." What he's pointing out is that even a Roman soldier serving tyrants, for remember, in those days Tiberius, who was a wicked, perverted, sadistic man, Tiberius, the Roman emperor, was a tyrant, and what does God's last prophet of the Old Testament tell them? Does he say, "Get out of the army. Get out now. Run away." No, he doesn't do that, right Iona, who was paying attention right then and there? My youngest member.

And so, he doesn't tell them, "Get out of the army." He says, "Don't use your position in an evil way to get money out of people, to accuse people falsely and be content with your pay."

But what I want you to see is something as we go back to Daniel 3. In Daniel 3, I'm struck that in verse 20, page 1,375, the king's soldiers, his mightiest men, are consumed. That's verse 20, "And [he] commanded some of the strongest soldiers in his army to tie up Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego and throw them into the blazing furnace."

And as we read down further, it says in verse 22, "The king's command was so urgent and the furnace so hot that the flames of the fire killed the soldiers who took up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego."

I want to think about those soldiers for a moment. When you become a member of the military, whether you're serving in the army of the United

States, Russia, Ukraine, Germany, China, you have to remember several things.

You never park your conscience at the door. One of the things that came out of the Nuremberg Trials following World War II, and it's part of our Uniform Code of Military Justice, is this: It is the duty of every soldier to disobey an unlawful order. That's part of the American Uniform Code of Military Justice. That came out of the Nuremberg Trials where people said, "I was just following orders."

So, what do you do if you're a soldier in the United States Marines? What do you do if you're a soldier in the army of Russia? In the army of Ukraine? In Nazi Germany? You serve but you never park your conscience at the door. You serve realizing that you owe ultimate allegiance to the King of kings and the Lord of lords.

So, this removes a lot of speculation out of our minds. Which government is legitimate? Which government exists? That's the answer of Paul in Romans 13 that we'll look at in a few weeks.

So, you serve. What should these soldiers of Nebuchadnezzar have done? They should have respectfully refused to obey the king. You say, "But he would have killed them."

Well, they died anyhow, and the difference in their death is that they ended up in hell. Revelation 20:15 says, "And whosoever's name was not written in the book of life was cast into hell."

There are things worse than getting burned up in a furnace by an angry, tyrannical king, and that is that the fire never ends, the fire is not quenched, the worm never dies (Mark 9:48). So, I want you to realize that these soldiers who obeyed Nebuchadnezzar were burned up and killed in the fire, and yet their souls continued on, and they are still burning today.

Wow, that's a sobering thought. So, when you serve in the Army or the Navy or the Marines or the Air Force, whatever country you serve under, you never park your conscience at the door. You serve the Lord Jesus Christ, and that means when you're given an unlawful order, you must respectfully decline to obey. They did not. They were killed in the process of obeying Nebuchadnezzar.

Now, I want you to see something else as we look here, we look and see something absolutely amazing. Verse 24, well, read verse 23, "and these three men, firmly tied, fell into the blazing furnace." Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are thrown and then they fall down.

Now, notice something verse 24, this is such an amazing statement, “Then King Nebuchadnezzar leaped to his feet in amazement and asked his advisers, ‘Weren’t there three men that we tied up and threw into the fire?’

“They replied, ‘Certainly, O king.’”

Look at verse 25, “He said, ‘Look! I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed, and the fourth looks like a son of the gods.’”

Isn’t that something? Think about it. Nebuchadnezzar is still thinking as a pagan, “One of them looks like a son of the gods.”

What did he see? Did he see an angel? Could be. Did he see the Lord Jesus Christ? Could be. I tend to think he saw the Lord Jesus. That’s an amazing thing.

Look at these three loyal servants of the Lord God, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, what are they? They’re unbound. What did the fire do? It burned the ropes that had them tied. Unbound and unharmed.

In fact, as you read down further and look there at the second sentence of verse 27, “They saw that the fire had not harmed their bodies, nor was a hair of their heads singed; their robes were not scorched, and there was no smell of fire on them.”

What happened here? What happened here is that they went into a realm where this universe, where the laws of physics of our world don’t apply. You know, we are so accustomed to following the physics of Newton, Isaac Newton, because he had an apple fall on his head. I don’t know about that, but we need to understand something, that in the 20th century scientists have demonstrated that there are parallels to our universe, and what I want to propose to you is that they’re thrown into a burning fiery furnace but the moment that they are cast there they actually enter a different universe. That’s a funny way to put it. They’re in a place where the laws of physics don’t apply. They didn’t even have smoke smell on them.

Have you ever gone to a barbecue place and when you walk out, especially when it’s cold weather and you’ve had a jacket on, your coat smells like barbecue for three days? Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego’s clothes didn’t even smell of fire. There’s no smoke smell on it. The only thing that happened is their ropes were burned up.

The things that had bound them were binding them no more, binding them no more, and there’s a fourth person there, and that fourth person—in the eyes of Nebuchadnezzar given his views of reality—looks like a son of the

gods. In other words, he sees a supernatural being there, and this is something I want you to reflect on: When you obey God, when you determine respectfully to disobey authority—respectfully always do it—when you determine respectfully to disobey, God will take care of you. God will take care of you. You're never in it alone. "I will never leave you or forsake you," the Lord said. "I'll be with you." (Hebrews 13:5)

You know, I think about that hymn, "When through fiery trials." I thought about that as I was looking at the hymns. "When fiery trials, I cause thee to go, the flames will not hurt thee. I only desire thy dross to consume and thy gold to refine." Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego came out of that place better than they went into it. And this is a great truth we need never to forget and that is this: God is in control of the world and however God did it, whether it was in quantum mechanics a way of saying that there's a wormhole, and they simply in passing into the fiery furnace, passed through a wormhole into another dimension, into a parallel universe, where the laws of Newtonian physics don't apply, where fire doesn't burn up your clothes, it only burns up cords, where the smoke doesn't get in your clothes and where God himself is waiting for us, whether it's like that, I think that's a useful analogy. Quantum mechanics: It's demonstrated to be true in the 20th century. Is that it?

And think about this as we turn to Hebrews 12, think about this: we've gathered here today in this place on Robeson Road, and where are we really?

This is where we really are, page 1,878, Hebrews 12:22. The writer of Hebrews, who may have been Paul, is writing to his fellow Jewish believers who've been tempted to go back to Judaism even though the temple of God is about to be destroyed, and it no longer exists in the purpose of God. And they're afraid, and he tells them beginning in verse 18, "You have not come to Mount Sinai," and he takes them back to the scene in Exodus, "to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire," and so on.

He says in verse 22, "But you have come to Mount Zion." Wait a minute, you have come? The Greek tense there is the perfect tense, which talks about a past action with present reality. "You have come and are now present at Mount Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem."

Where is heaven? Well, heaven, I think, is up. Where is heaven? Heaven is in a parallel universe. That's why God can instantly be here, and God can instantly be in a planet in another galaxy of the millions of galaxies that exist, and he can be in this place and that place at the same moment of time

because God is not inside time, he's outside time. Time is God's creation, as matter is God's creation.

I like to visualize it this way. I like to visualize creation as a swirling of galaxies in all places and time, and God dead-center.

God is not his creation. It's vital we understand this distinction between the Creator and his creation. He's outside time and space. But there is God 100,000 years ago, and there is God, one million years in the future. God is not part of time. You know, I can't comprehend that. Can you comprehend that? You know, a lot of times I'm running late, and I sometimes pray, "Lord, would you fold space and time for us?" And do you know that that happens? It's just amazing. When we need to be somewhere, we're going to be there on God's time. God's time. God's time, not my time, or your time.

And what he's saying is that you and I as believers, when we gather together with other believers, we actually go to heaven. He said, "You have come to Mount Zion,"—and are present at Mount Zion--"the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly." Wow, you mean right here on Robeson Road? You mean right here in this place there are thousands upon thousands upon thousands of angels here in this place? How can it be? Because God is God.

He says, verse 23, "To the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven." You know, I remember that movie "Places in the Heart," and in the Communion scene at the end, there's an amazing scene. As she reflects on the people she's loved and known, suddenly you see as they take Communion, they're all over the place. All of the people that were killed, they're there. They're there worshipping. Can it be? Can it be when the church on earth worships, we worship with the heavenly hosts in the heavenly assembly, with the general assembly and church of the firstborn whose names are written in heaven?

He said, "You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect." And the difference in those folks, as I see them out there with you this morning, by the eye of faith, not in reality—I'm not yet needing to be committed—the thing to remember is they're perfect. Orene, our wonderful choir director, I can visualize her right now. Do you think that when we worship on earth, she worships with us? I believe that's what the Bible is saying. Look at what it says. He says, "You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect."

And the difference in Mrs. Orene, and you and me is we're very imperfect. We're fallen, fallible, finite. We still struggle with sin. "If any man say he has no sin, the truth is not in him," says John in 1 John 1:8.

We still struggle with sin and in spite of that we still worship, because we read further in verse 24, "To Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel."

Think about it, what is he saying? Cain killed Abel. He was his brother. He was jealous of him, and he murdered him, and when God comes to confront Cain he says, "The voice, the voice of your brother's blood cries out to me from the earth."

Do you think that blood can cry? I don't know. I learned this a long time ago: The world is far more mysterious than you and I imagine. In the words of the Scottish scientist J. B. S. Haldane, it's queerer or weirder than you're able to imagine, because the universe that really exists, that God created is incredibly beyond our ability to fathom.

That's why Jesus can be with you and me this morning right here in this place. That's why Jesus at one and the same time before he was ever conceived in the womb of the blessed virgin Mary could be in Nebuchadnezzar's fiery furnace, because for God there is no yesterday or tomorrow because God created time, and he's outside of it. Wow, isn't that an amazing thought?

And so, dear ones, as we face the future, I don't know what we face, I don't know what things will happen, but this I know, God has given us clear guidance how to live in this life and how to be prepared to die because for those who die in Christ, death is always gain. Always. Always. Always.

May God comfort you. May he put his arms around you. May you feel his love and support because when you're called to go into the furnace of fire, the only thing you'll lose is your bondage.

May we pray.

Lord, we pray for the comfort of the Holy Spirit who takes the written word of God and writes it on our hearts. We pray, Lord, you would touch each one of us here. If there's anyone here today who has never bowed his or her knees in repentance to the Lord Jesus Christ, would you grant that that would happen today? If there's anyone here today who has never renounced his own self-righteousness and cast himself on your mercy in the Lord Jesus Christ, would you grant that would be today? Because the blood that Jesus shed doesn't cry out for vengeance as Abel's blood, but it cries, "Forgive

him." Lord, we thank you for the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ who loved us and gave himself for us that all our sins would be washed away. For Jesus' sake. Amen.