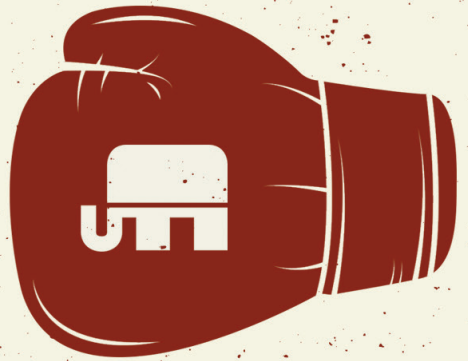


# Politics and the Bible



## A 10-SESSION SMALL GROUP GUIDE THROUGH SCRIPTURE

The following small group lessons have been written by Jonathan Leeman to accompany his book *How the Nations Rage: Rethinking Faith and Politics in a Divided Age*. Yet these ten meditations on Scripture each stand independently and in no way require someone to have read the book. Read each study out loud, and then discuss the questions as a group.

# STUDY 1

## The Son's Exaltation, the Nations Rage

### — PSALM 2 —

People love superhero movies. Some bad guy threatens the world. The superhero nobody knows about reveals himself just in time. He proves smarter and stronger and wins the big fight. We, the viewing audience, enjoy the victory as if it were ours.

How strange, then, that Psalm 2 identifies our nation and every nation with the bad guy:

Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain?

The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together,

against the Lord and against his Anointed, saying,

"Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us."

(vv. 1-3)

The Psalmist doesn't just indict ancient Rome or Nazi Germany. He indicts all nations. All nations rage against God and his "Anointed," the Old Testament word for Messiah. They plot against Jesus himself.

Our nations and their governments, just like every one of us in the flesh, desire their own glory. Since God calls nations to worship him, they oppose him.



Yet God sends his Son as the undefeatable superhero. He shows up at just the right time. The psalm continues:

He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision.  
Then he will speak to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury,  
saying,

"As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill."

I will tell of the decree: The Lord said to me,

"You are my Son; today I have begotten you.

Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage,  
and the ends of the earth your possession.

You shall break them with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces  
like a potter's vessel. (vv. 4-9)

God doesn't care how big our economy or army is. He's not threatened by those who deny him. He laughs, like we laugh at the puny man who thinks he can defeat Superman. Think you're going to defeat *God*? And his *Son*? Really?

The Psalm concludes with the lesson for us, our nation, and our government—every voter and officeholder:

Now therefore, O kings, be wise; be warned, O rulers of the earth.

Serve the Lord with fear, and rejoice with trembling.

Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way,  
for his wrath is quickly kindled.

Blessed are all who take refuge in him.

Can you picture the day when the leaders of all nations will bow before Christ as defeated enemies or as dutiful servants? The day is coming. Be warned. Worship. And take refuge in him.

**WHAT WE LEARN ABOUT GOD:**

God will exalt his Son above the nations—even ours.

**THE LESSON FOR US:**

Be warned, worship, and take refuge in Christ.

Questions for discussion:

- 1.** Look at the text (vv. 1-3): Which nations rage against the Lord and his Anointed? Which don't? Who is the Anointed? Who specifically within a nation rages against the Lord and his Anointed?
- 2.** Application: Who in our nation rages today? What form does that rage take? Are any nations neutral toward God and his messiah?
- 3.** Look at the text (vv. 4-6): What is God's response to the rage?
- 4.** Meditation: Can you think of biblical illustrations of the Lord holding a nation or the nations in derision?
- 5.** Look at the text (vv. 7-9): What is the Lord's plan for the nations?
- 6.** Application: Christians, like all people, can fear the outcome of the next election, and so participate in that rage. How do verses 7 to 9 calm both our fears and our rage?
- 7.** Look at the text (vv. 10-12): Who is the Psalmist addressing in these verses, and what is his message?
- 8.** Application: What do these verses teach us as Christians our political posture should be as we engage the world?
- 9.** Application: What does this psalm teach us about the relationship between our national citizenship and our Christian citizenship? What is the proper place for each in our commitments and affections, and how do we keep each in their proper place?



# **STUDY 2**

## God's Requirements, Our Responsibility

### — GENESIS 9:5-6 —

When you were young, did you ever have a babysitter? Your parents would go out for the evening. A stranger shows up. And suddenly she acts like she's the parent.

"Time for bed."

"What?! You're not the boss of me!"

"In fact, your parents left me in charge."

You wanted to argue, but you couldn't. If you defied her, mom or dad would have words for you when they got home. To disobey the babysitter was to disobey the ones who gave authority to the babysitter.

So it is with every human authority—parents, pastors, policemen, presidents. No human just *has* authority. God establishes it. Which means, disobeying a God-established authority is disobeying God.

God specifically talks this way about human governments. Immediately after Noah's flood, he repeats the dominion mandate given to Adam: "Be fruitful and multiply" (Gen. 9:1,7). Yet because he's repeating this after the Fall, God gives all humanity a justice mechanism. He authorizes us to establish governments which wield the sword, punishing (or preventing) anything that harms another human being:

And for your lifeblood I will require a reckoning:

from every beast I will require it and from man.

From his fellow man I will require a reckoning for the life of man. Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image. (vv. 5-6).

Notice four things about these verses. First, behind all government authority is God's *requirement*. Three times he says he "requires" a reckoning. Why do governments levy taxes, employ police, protect borders? Because God requires justice.

Second, God is a just God. He doesn't say, "Life for stealing a horse" or "Life in prison for a loaf of bread." He says that one equals one. Justice works by parity.

Third, the fact that we're made in God's image protects us. The homeless man, the Muslim woman, the immigrant, the unborn child—all of them are royal God-imagers. They deserve the honor and dignity of one who reflects God.

Fourth, God makes all of us responsible for the work of government. These words to Noah are words to everyone. Whether we are voting for Congress or voting in Congress, we should use every vote—every act of governing authority we possess—to work for fairness and justice. We do it for God, and for those made in God's image.

Do you take your political stewardships that seriously? Did you know that it is *God* who requires you to pursue justice? Do you love the image of God in others that much?



**WHAT WE LEARN ABOUT GOD:**

God affirms the value of all those made in his image and means to protect them.

**THE LESSON FOR US:**

God makes us responsible to honor everyone made in God's image by upholding the standards of justice.

Questions for discussion:

- 1.** Look at the text: Historically speaking, it may be true in a democratic nation that human beings give their consent in order to form a government, as the Declaration of Independence states. Yet what does the word "require" in verse 5 suggest about where a government gets its moral authority to exercise force from? (See also Romans 13:1-4).
- 2.** Look at the text: Can a government use its coercive authority indiscriminately or however it pleases, according to the first half of verse 6? That is, how does this verse constrain a government?
- 3.** Meditation: Are there any governments in the history of the world to whom these verses do not apply? To put it another way: should any president, king, or dictator ever assume he is above the requirements of this verse? If not, what comfort does this verse offer for those who might fear an unjust government?
- 4.** Look at the text: What is the standard of justice, according to the last phrase in verse 6?
- 5.** Application: What does this standard teach us about the work of government, whether we're discussing the executive, legislative, or judicial branches? Is this the standard of justice only for nations in which the citizens believe the Bible? If not, for whom is it the standard?
- 6.** Application: What do these verses teach us about whom we should vote for?

# **STUDY 3**

## God's Wisdom, Our Need

**1 KINGS 3:28**

**PROVERBS 8:15-17**

The way people talk on social media today you would think that good government is simple. Everyone has such a strong opinion!

Yet if you have ever sat in the leader's chair, you know how difficult good decision-making is. That's true for parents, school principals, certainly those who lead a city or country.

Think of King Solomon confronted by two prostitutes, one living baby, and one dead one. Both mothers claimed the live baby was hers. No evidence could be marshalled to indicate who was telling the truth. The lives of two women and a child lay in the balance. How would the king know what to do?

He asked for someone to bring a sword, and then recommended cutting the baby in half. The real mother quickly relinquished her claim and insisted the false mother could take the baby. Solomon, of course, now knew who the real mother was and gave her the baby (1 Kings 3:16-27).

The author of 1 Kings then summarized the nation's response: "And all Israel heard of the judgment that the king had rendered, and they stood in awe of the king, because they perceived that the wisdom of God was in him to do justice" (1 Kings 3:28).



That, in a nutshell, is the political philosophy of the Bible. We need *wisdom*. We need the wisdom *of God*. We need the wisdom of God *to do justice*.

Proverbs says the same thing. Personifying wisdom as a woman, wisdom cries out,

By me kings reign, and rulers decree what is just;  
by me princes rule, and nobles, all who govern justly.  
I love those who love me, and those who seek me diligently find me.  
(Prov. 8:15-17)

Notice the “all.” All who govern justly do so by God’s wisdom. That’s true among those who believe in God and those who deny him.

God is all-wise. “Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God,” observes Paul (Rom. 11:33). God created the world by his wisdom. He knows how the world works, and how we work. There is not some other source of wisdom out there besides God. Non-Christians can be wise only insofar as their wisdom conforms to God’s.

The lesson for us is simple: if you would be just, get wisdom—God’s wisdom. Pursue it like gold or silver. Reach for it. Study what Scripture says about wisdom, especially the one who fulfills all wisdom, Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 1:24,30). Study also your domains of responsibility. Are you a school teacher, an office manager, a voter, a parent, a church elder? Read books. Talk to people. Ask questions. Ask the Lord to make you a humble learner with stewardship he has given you.

Such humility and the wisdom it begets will pay dividends in every position of power you possess. Through Christ’s wisdom, you will be just, and you will bless others.

**WHAT WE LEARN ABOUT GOD:**

Good governors love wisdom because God loves wisdom.

**THE LESSON FOR US:**

If you would be just, get wisdom.

Questions for discussion:

- 1.** Look at the Text: How did the people of Israel respond to Solomon's wisdom in 1 Kings 3:28? What did "wisdom" enable Solomon to "do" in this passage? What similarities do you notice between this passage and Proverbs 8:15–17.
- 2.** Meditation: According to Scripture, how do we pursue wisdom?
- 3.** Meditation: Where does Scripture connect the pursuit of wisdom with our relationship with God? What heart posture do we need, according to Scripture, to get wisdom?
- 4.** Application: Criticizing government officials is easy, but these passages show that using authority is often challenging. In what ways can you pray for government officials so that they would have more wisdom to rule justly?
- 5.** Application: Consider your domains of responsibility. Where do you feel like you are lacking wisdom? How can you pursue God's wisdom for those areas so that you act justly?



# **STUDY 4**

## God's Justice, Our Flourishing

### — PSALM 72 —

What do the words “God’s justice” make you think about? Something stern and ominous? The final punishment of unrepentant sinners? Justice in Scripture includes this. But there’s much more. Picture also flowing waves of grain and the flourishing of the oppressed.

If you have the time now, read all of Psalm 72. If not, start with the first four verses.

Give the king your justice, O God,  
and your righteousness to the royal son!  
May he judge your people with righteousness,  
and your poor with justice!  
Let the mountains bear prosperity for the people,  
and the hills, in righteousness!  
May he defend the cause of the poor of the people,  
give deliverance to the children of the needy,  
and crush the oppressor!

Notice that the justice of this king will both lift up the downcast and crush the oppressor. How different than the political parties of our day, who typically emphasize one or the other.

This king’s justice also brings flourishing. He is “like rain that falls on the

mown grass like showers that water the earth” and through his leadership “the righteous flourish, and peace abound[s]” (vv. 6-7). The psalm even says that he will bring a harvest of food to the hard-to-grow areas, like mountain tops.

May there be abundance of grain in the land;  
on the tops of the mountains may it wave (v. 16).

You might think of those “broken spell” moments in a Disney princess movie, where the wicked witch’s spell is broken, thorns dry up, blue skies return, and flowers grow. This king of justice will usher in the Bible’s broken-spell moment.

Who is this king? He is the one who will rule “through all generations” and “from sea to sea.” All other kings will bow before him (vv. 5,8,11). He is none other than Jesus Christ.

What are the lessons for us? First, God is a God of justice. It is the foundation of his throne (Ps. 89:15). Worship God for his justice. Second, God shows himself most just in the person of Jesus Christ. If you would be just, seek Christ and adore Christ. Third, we do justice by opposing the unjust and by lifting up the downcast. To this end we evangelize and do good to others. Fourth, frame your thinking about politics around the idea of justice. Your first political passion should not be free markets or a rising tide of prosperity or equal rights or even liberty. It should be justice. You want a just prosperity and a just liberty. Governments exist not primarily for wealth creation or freedom, but for justice.

Repent of your self-rule and trust in Christ today. He brings justice.

#### **WHAT WE LEARN ABOUT GOD:**

God is just, and all justice comes from him.

#### **THE LESSON FOR US:**

Pursue God’s justice by repenting of sin and trusting in Christ.



## Questions for discussion:

- 1.** Look at the Text: In Psalm 72:1–4, what does the Psalmist ask that God give to the king? In response, what does the king do with this gift from God? How does it shape his rule?
- 2.** Meditation: God is the source of all justice. Where else in Scripture do you find descriptions or examples of God's justice?
- 3.** Meditation: Psalm 72 is ultimately fulfilled in Jesus Christ. In what ways do the gospels portray Christ as fulfilling this text? What stories in the gospel showcase Christ's justice? Where do we see Christ caring for the poor or the oppressed?
- 4.** Application: Do you regularly worship God for his justice? If not, what steps can you take to meditate more regularly on God's righteous character?
- 5.** Application: In what ways are you opposing injustice or lifting up the downcast? Are there any steps you might take to more fully express a commitment to the type of justice that reflects Christ's kingly rule?

# **STUDY 5**

## Today's Tasks, Tomorrow's Graduation

### — **MATTHEW 17:24-27** —

Have you heard of senior-itis? It's a "disease" that afflicts high school seniors in their final semester, especially when they've been accepted into college. When you have senior-itis, you no longer feel the pressure to get top grades because your next step has been settled. A college has accepted you. Now you're biding your time and tempted to get lazy. To be complacent. To skip class and throw the Frisbee with friends as the spring weather turns warm.

Living as a Christian before the government and systems of this present era can be like living with senior-itis. Our next step is settled. We don't pin our hopes on those systems or rulers. Our identity depends upon something more ultimate and profound than anything they can accomplish. So we might be tempted to ignore them and grow complacent. Yet we should resist the disease of senior-itis. Even as we identify with the next age, we must willingly submit to the rulers of this age. God established our present rulers, and he accomplishes his purposes through them. But don't worry: the present constraints and frustrations will pass.

Listen to how Jesus describes our situation in Matthew 17:

When they came to Capernaum, the collectors of the two-drach-



ma tax went up to Peter and said, "Does your teacher not pay the tax?" He said, "Yes." And when he came into the house, Jesus spoke to him first, saying, "What do you think, Simon? From whom do kings of the earth take toll or tax? From their sons or from others?" And when he said, "From others," Jesus said to him, "Then the sons are free. However, not to give offense to them, go to the sea and cast a hook and take the first fish that comes up, and when you open its mouth you will find a shekel. Take that and give it to them for me and for yourself. (vv. 24-27)

If you have repented of your sins and trusted in Christ, you are a son or daughter of the divine king. You are not ultimately subject to any of the "kings of the earth." Yes, you are subject to them for a time, but eternity will ultimately prove that you are free from their judgments. They don't determine your destiny. It's like you've been accepted to a college, and one day that will be evident to all.

To extend the point, you are not finally subject to the judgment of any human being, not job review panels, not your professional societies, not the cool kids at school, not your pastors. No ruler or system finally holds power over your identity, your worth or value, your eternity and hope. You're a son or daughter of the king of kings. And one day soon you'll enjoy all the prerogatives and privileges of royalty. Amazing, no?

Therefore, honor governments and other earthly-institutions now. Obey where you can. But don't give them an outsized importance in your mind or heart. Their time will soon pass. Classes will soon end and graduation will be here. You belong to God!

#### **WHAT WE LEARN ABOUT GOD:**

He has made us sons and daughters,  
yet he has given us governments for the time being.

**THE LESSON FOR US:**

Honor governments, but live in the assurance of who you are before him.

Questions for discussion:

- 1.** Look at the Text: What do the tax collectors ask Peter? What question does Jesus ask Peter? What lesson does Jesus teach Peter in response to his question? What miracle does Jesus perform?
- 2.** Meditation: Jesus says that Peter belongs to a higher kingdom and is a "son" in the kingdom. Where else does Scripture discuss Jesus ultimate authority over earthly government?
- 3.** Meditation: We are sons and daughters in the kingdom of God. What other passages of Scripture mention this point? What implications do those passages draw out for how we should live?
- 4.** Application: Are you seeking your identity in an earthly tribe or community? How can you repent of seeking an identity outside of Christ? What practical implications would that have on your life?
- 5.** Application: Even though we are sons and daughters in the kingdom, Jesus calls us to submit to earthly institutions. What are earthly institutions to which you struggle to submit? How can you submit to them as an act devotion to Jesus who calls you to honor earthly authorities?



# STUDY 6

## Rendering to God, Rendering to Caesar

### — MATTHEW 22:15-22 —

If you asked most people what Jesus says about politics, the majority would probably point to the passage about “rendering to Caesar.” Do you remember the story? The Pharisees and those loyal to Herod ask Jesus, “Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?” Jesus knows they are trying to trap him. If he says, “No,” the representatives of Rome would regard him as a rebel. If he said, “Yes,” many Jews would regard him as a traitor to Israel. They believed that Rome’s rule was illegitimate, and they wanted a wholly Jewish government.

Jesus replied to those questioning him, “Show me the coin for the tax.” When they brought him a denarius, he continued, “Whose likeness and inscription is this?”

They said, “Caesar’s.”

Jesus then answered with that famous phrase, beloved by many Christian Americans, “Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (see Matt. 22:15-22).

In a quick read, it sounds as if Jesus is saying we have the domain of government and politics in one circle and the domain of God and church and religion in another circle. It’s true that Jesus was telling these Jews under Roman rule to respect their Roman ruler. The Old Testament church/state arrangement was coming to an end. No longer would God conduct

his plan of redemption through an earthly kingdom. Churches didn't exist when he said this, but he was laying the groundwork for the separation of church and state.

Still, slow down and look at the passage more carefully. Jesus looked at a coin and asked whose "likeness" was on it. Answer: Caesar's. Okay, but in whose "likeness" was Caesar? Every first-century Jew, recalling the fact that Adam and Eve were created in God's "likeness" (Gen. 1:26), would have known the answer to Jesus' question: Caesar was created in God's likeness. Which would mean, giving to God what is God's includes Caesar!

Jesus didn't envision two separate circles. Instead, he envisioned a little one for Caesar's stuff inside set inside a bigger circle for God's stuff, which includes everything.

Three lessons for us follow. First, God establishes different institutions or authorities. He gives the state one kind of authority, parents another, pastors another, and churches another. Second, we should render to each authority whatever belongs to it—what falls inside its jurisdiction. Paying taxes falls into Caesar's jurisdiction, so we should pay them. By implication, we should not render to Caesar what's not Caesar's. He doesn't have the authority to tell you who you must marry, or that stealing is okay, or where you must worship. Caesar, too, must drive within the lines God draws for him. He's *under* Jesus. Third, Christians, whether *in* government or *under* it, must always submit to Jesus. He possesses all authority in heaven and on earth (Matt. 28:18). He is over nations and their governments. They exist by his permission, not the other way around (John 19:11; Rev. 1:5; 6:15–17). That doesn't mean we try to 'impose' the whole of the Bible on non-Christians if we happen to have a say in government. It does mean we work for those things that the Bible says falls within the government's jurisdiction, such as justice and protecting life. Never forget: Caesar belongs to God.

### **WHAT WE LEARN ABOUT GOD:**

God establishes different authorities.



**THE LESSON FOR US:**

Honor God's authorities.

Questions for discussion:

- 1.** Look at the text (vv. 15–17): What are the Pharisees trying to do to Jesus in this passage? What question do they devise to trap Jesus? Why is this question a potential trap?
- 2.** Look at the text (vv. 18–22): How does Jesus avoid the trap set by the Pharisees? What Old Testament passages stand behind Jesus's comments about the Denarius?
- 3.** Meditation: Jesus asserts God's ultimate authority over all creation, including human governments. What other passages of Scripture teach this same point?
- 4.** Application: How does the fact that God establishes government authorities affect your posture toward your own government? What implications might it have for your own relationship to government authority?
- 5.** Application: How does the fact that "Caesar belongs to God" increase your trust in God? What comfort or hope can you derive from Jesus's teaching when the government acts in ways that you dislike or find offensive or harmful?

# **STUDY 7**

## God's Servant, Our Obedience

### **— ROMANS 13:1-8 —**

How easy it is to complain about the government. Think of the typical gut response to speed limits, tax codes, construction permits, and other laws. We don't like them! They interfere with our plans. They're financially costly and slow us down. Sometimes they're unjust.

Yet consider the challenge of Paul's words in Romans 13: "For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed" (vv. 1b-2a). Whether a government gains power through military conquest, inheritance, or an election, its moral authority comes from God. Our obligation to obey comes from him. Our complaints are complaints against him.

How often do you acknowledge that God instituted your government, and then thank him for it?

The passage continues:

those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on



the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed. (vv. 2b-7)

Twice Paul calls the government God's "servant," once his "avenger." It exists to do his bidding—reward the good and punish the bad.

Imagine instead a world in which God had not established governments. The Cains would slaughter the Abels without hindrance. People could steal without threat of reprisal. Every man and woman would live in the permanent state of protecting themselves and their property. The lesson is clear: governments exist to do justice and make life livable.

Does Romans 13 give governments unlimited authority? No. It doesn't say God supports injustice. It doesn't authorize governments to redefine "good" and "bad" or abuse their citizens. Remember Genesis 9:6: "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed" since everyone is made in God's image. No government stands *above* this warning.

Still, God has instituted governments for our good. Therefore, we must "be subject to the governing authorities" (v. 1a). That should be our ordinary or typical posture.

We do this, finally, for the sake of love. The next verse reads, "Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law" (v. 8). If a world without governments is a world of permanent war of all against all, love of God and neighbor leads us to work for a good government and to obey it.

### **WHAT WE LEARN ABOUT GOD:**

God establishes governments.

**THE LESSON FOR US:**

Obey and honor the government.

Questions for discussion:

- 1.** Look at the text (vv. 1–3): Why does Paul say that we must be subject to governing authorities? What does Paul say the government should do? How does Paul describe the government?
- 2.** Meditation: Where does the Bible describe the duties and role of the government?
- 3.** Meditation: Paul calls the government God’s “servant” and “avenger.” Why does Paul make those claims? What does the government do to justify using that terminology?
- 4.** Application: If the government is established by God, how should Christians generally respond to government authority?
- 5.** Application: Paul lists a number of social goods provided by the government. What are some ways you are thankful for government authority? How can you cultivate a spirit of thankfulness about positive aspects of the government?
- 6.** Look at the Text (4–6): Why does Paul say we should be afraid if we “do wrong”? What authority does Paul indicate that God has given to the government? What does love have to do with obeying the government?
- 7.** Meditation: Paul teaches here that government is established for our good. What are some other places in Scripture that make this same point? Can you think of any places in the Bible where we are commanded to pray for the government? Can you think of any biblical figures who modeled submission to government authority even when it was hard?



# **STUDY 8**

## Christ's Power, Our Citizenship

### **PHILIPPIANS 3:20-21**

Have you ever travelled to another country? If so, you probably agree the experience of being in a foreign culture can be both fun and challenging. Go to France, and friends will greet you with a kiss on both cheeks. Travel to a Muslim country, and be careful not to try and shake a woman's hand if you're a man. Head to Singapore, and be sure to keep your chewing gum in your mouth or deposit it directly into a garbage can.

No matter how much you enjoy spending time in a foreign country, or even living there, you never feel fully at home. You're not one of them, not entirely.

So it should be with every Christian in this world. You might love your home nation. You might feel nostalgic about its flag, national anthem, cuisine, aspects of its history. That's all fine. But if you're a Christian, you are a citizen of heaven first and foremost. You will walk around your home town and—somehow—possess that faint sense you're from somewhere else. Your home nation, ironically, becomes a little bit like a foreign nation.

Peter calls Christians "exiles" (1 Peter 1:2). Hebrews says those who live by faith await a better country and city (11:16). And Paul speaks about an altogether different citizenship:

But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his

glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself. (Phil. 3:20-21).

Notice a few things in these verses, starting at the end. First, the Lord Jesus Christ will subject all things to himself—all presidents and prime ministers, all currency exchanges and stock markets, all army generals and Olympic athletes. He possesses all authority in heaven and on earth. None can stay his hand, or say to him, “What have you done?”

Second, this same Lord promises to transform our lowly bodies to be like his glorious body. Your pains and sicknesses will be gone. Your mortal flesh will give way to immortal. Right now, creation’s curse means your body is subject to nature. One day, nature will be your servant, its resources catering to your beck and call.

Third, our citizenship belongs in heaven. And a citizen, by the way, is an office holder. That’s the difference between a citizen and a subject. A subject is entirely subject to the will of another, like a rock is subject to your hand once picked up. A citizen, on the other hand, shares in rule. He or she has a vote. The saints—believe it or not—will share in the rule of heaven. We will “reign with” Christ (2 Tim. 2:12).

The culture of heaven is our “home” culture. Heaven’s songs and food and history and habits and manner of greetings (handshake? kiss? hug?) become ours. The Christian life, therefore, will always seem a little strange to those with whom we now live, work, and play.

Fourth and finally, the Christian life is a life of waiting. We await our Savior and Lord. We await the expression and demonstration and vindication of his power.

Are you trying to build your kingdom now, or awaiting a better one?

### **WHAT WE LEARN ABOUT GOD:**

God has made us citizens of heaven and invited us to share his rule.



**THE LESSON FOR US:**

Our best life is later, and we wait for it.

Questions for discussion:

- 1.** Look at the text: Where is a Christian's citizenship, and what does that require of Christians?
- 2.** Meditation: What does it mean to say our citizenship is in heaven? How does that relate to our present earthly citizenships?
- 3.** Look at the text: What two titles do these verses give to Jesus? How are those titles relevant to the promises given in these verses?
- 4.** Meditation: Look at the two verbs "transform" and "subject." What do these words teach us about Christ's power? What do they teach us about properly adjusting our expectations for this life, and how to they give us patience in the here and now?
- 5.** Meditation: To be a citizen is to participate in rule. How do you think Christians will participate in ruling in the new heavens and earth (hint: think back to Genesis 1:28)?
- 6.** Application: If Christ is our Savior and Lord, making us his citizens even more than we are citizens of any earthly nations, what duties does our heavenly citizenship yield in our earthly citizenships?
- 7.** Application: How should the promises of these verses impact our political engagement now? How might our engagement be both similar to that of non-Christians and different?

# **STUDY 9**

## God's Desire, Our Prayers

### — 1 TIMOTHY 2:1-4 —

Don't put too much hope in government, Christian. But don't give up on it either. Churches need good governments. In fact, God gave the world governments so that churches can do their work in peace. Genesis 9, which establishes the authority of governments, comes before the call to Abraham in Genesis 12 for a reason. Governments provide a stage for the drama of redemption.

The government's work is a prerequisite to the church's work, just as learning to read is a prerequisite to reading the Bible.

Paul, likewise, observes that God determines the borders of nations and the dates of their duration so that people might seek him (Acts 17:26–27). People need to be able to walk to church without getting mauled by marauders. They cannot get saved if they are dead. The work of government provides a platform for the work of the saints.

This is why Paul instructs us to pray for our government.

First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. (1 Tim. 2:1-4)



Notice the flow of the argument. Pray for kings and all in high positions. Why? So that we may lead peaceful and quiet lives. Again, why? Because God desires all people to be saved. In other words, we pray for our government so that there's peace and people can hear the gospel and get saved. It's hard to share the gospel when you're fighting for your life.

A culture and its political institutions might turn against Christianity, but Christians should strive to make an impact as long as they have opportunity. Things can get worse. Just ask the Christians in China or Iran.

The takeaway lesson for us is pretty clear: pray! Pray for the president. Pray for congress and the courts. Pray for your governor and mayor and city council and school board. Pray for those with authority over industry and interest rates, the environment and entertainment.

Specifically pray that they would respect the rights of Christians to gather and then scatter, free to worship God in all of our lives. Pray that schools and governments wouldn't hinder evangelism. Pray also that governments would treat people as made in God's image, rewarding the good and punishing the bad. Pray they wouldn't squander resources or exploit the poor and hurting, but provide opportunity for all. Pray against corruption and bribery, and for peace and order. Pray your nation would flourish under the government's rule.

As you have opportunity, also, thank those who work in government, whether politicians or policemen. It might feel futile at times, but they're building a stage for the drama of redemption, whether they mean to or not.

**WHAT WE LEARN ABOUT GOD:**

God desires all to be saved and establishes governments for this purpose.

**THE LESSON FOR US:**

Pursue politics for the sake of the now and the eternal.

Questions for discussion:

- 1.** Look at the text: Who should we pray for and why, both immediately and ultimately?
- 2.** Meditation: Who might we assume is included in the phrase “all who are in high positions”?
- 3.** Meditation: Why is the fact of having “peaceful and quiet lives” crucial for people “being saved” and “coming to the knowledge of a truth”? Explain this connection in real life terms.
- 4.** Meditation: Describe the relationship between the work of government and the work of a church, according to these verses.
- 5.** Look at the text: What exactly does this verse say is “pleasing to God”?
- 6.** Application: In light of your answer to question 4, what activities should a Christian give him or herself to? That is, what would these verses require of us in order to live in a way that is pleasing to God?
- 7.** Meditation: What does a “peaceful and quiet life” look like? Are you living it? How? What does the opposite of a peaceful and quiet life look like?
- 8.** Meditation: Similar to question 4, describe the relationship between a Christian’s work of being a good neighbor and citizen and a Christian’s work of evangelism.
- 9.** Application: How do these verses challenge you personally?



# **STUDY 10**

## Christ's Judgment, Our Repentance

### — **REVELATION 6:15-17** —

Growing up, were you ever sent to the principal's office? Or threatened with being sent? For many school children, this is the ultimate warning a classroom teacher can give. You fear either the principal imposing some in-school consequence, or, unspeakably, calling your parents.

Ultimate authority belongs to whomever possesses final judgment. The state holds the ultimate authority over a nation because it can put people in prison. A principal holds final authority in a school because he or she can expel you. Parents hold final authority in a home because they impose all discipline.

Who then possesses ultimate authority over history, the cosmos, and all of life? It's the one who possesses final judgment. Listen to these words from the Apostle John in the last book of the Bible:

Then the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, calling to the mountains and rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?" (Revelation 6:15-17)

Notice how John lines up the most powerful people in the world: kings, great ones, military leaders, and the rich. Then he includes the whole spectrum of political power: slave and free. The highest and lowest political class, rich and poor, principals and students, parents and children, will be there. No one gets off the hook.

Notice also what everyone fears: the judgment of the one on the throne and the wrath of the Lamb. Apparently, people would prefer to be swallowed up by an avalanche rather than to be exposed to the wrath of King Jesus.

We know the divine Father and Son possess all authority now because all of history and every person will be judged by them then. John observes later in Revelation, “Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it” (20:11). He continues, “I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done” (v. 12).

Jesus possesses authority over what we eat, who we sleep with, our bank accounts, our voting record, and all the decisions we make. God cares about every second of everyone’s lives—every driver and dishwasher, judge and congressman, whether we believe in him or not.

Martin Luther famously said there are two days on his calendar: today and *that* Day. We, too, should measure everything we do today with regard to that Day. Are you?

On that Day, we will all stand convicted by the record of the books. Hope belongs only to those whose names are in the Book of Life, which are those who have repented of sin and trusted in Christ. Have you?

### **WHAT WE LEARN ABOUT GOD:**

Jesus will judge every ruler and ruled alike.



**THE LESSON FOR US:**

Pursue politics in light of God's judgment.

Questions for discussion:

- 1.** Look at the text: Who hides in the caves? Why?
- 2.** Look at the text: How would you describe the categories John uses to describe these people who intend to hide in the caves?
- 3.** Meditation: What do these verses teach us about God's interest in our politics, whether or not we believe in him?
- 4.** Meditation: Notice two things about the people mentioned: (i) the verses mention every political class ("slave and free"); (ii) the verses emphasize the powerful, at least in terms of the number of words used. What two lessons might we take from these two observations?
- 5.** Application: If you have experienced political disadvantages in this life, what should be your greatest fear? If you have experienced political advantages in this life, what should be your greatest fear? How should this impact your relationship with the person in the opposite category as you?
- 6.** Meditation: Why is the phrase "wrath of the lamb" unexpected? What does this teach us about Jesus Christ?
- 7.** Meditation: What does the phrase "and who can stand?" teach us?
- 8.** Application: People often say, "We should not impose the Bible on people who don't believe it." In many respects this is true. We cannot and should not require people to convert at the edge of a sword, as some Christians have done historically and as large swaths of Muslims would today. At the same time, these verses teach the Christ's judgment is coming both for those who believe in him and those who don't. What does this teach us about how we engage in politics? Should we ever support immoral legislation? Why or why not?

