

ILLINOIS LUTHERAN CONFERENCE

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As we begin a New Year in which we see continued turmoil among the nations of the world {despite the common cry of “Peace, peace; when *there is no peace*” (Jeremiah 8:11)} the question to be considered in this month’s topical bulletin is: ***Does God use civil rulers – even wicked civil rulers – to punish and/or chasten people?***

That which we are to accept and believe on any subject must be found in the Holy Bible, the inerrant Word of God, for “All scripture *is* given by inspiration of God, and *is* profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, throughly furnished unto all good works.” (2 Timothy 3:16-17)

Comment: Our own thoughts and opinions are to be put away as we surrender to the dictates and doctrines of Holy Scripture which is a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path (cf. Psalm 119:105).

The basic principals regarding our relationship to civil government and authority are put forth in Romans 13:1-7, where we read, “Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation. For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same: For he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to *execute* wrath upon him that doeth evil. Wherefore *ye* must needs be subject, not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake. For for this cause pay ye tribute also: for they are God’s ministers, attending continually upon this very thing. Render therefore to all their dues: tribute to whom tribute *is due*; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor.”

*Comment: Note well that “the powers that be are ordained of God”; the phrase “that be” is a present tense participle in the original Greek. “For... they are God’s ministers”; the phrase “they are” is plural present tense indicative in the original Greek. Hence, whatever form of civil government and officials we find ourselves under are in place by God’s permission and will. For example, if we had been born citizens under the rule of Adolph Hitler in Nazi Germany, or under communist rule in Russia or China, we would still be obligated to honor those civil authorities and be subject to them. We Christians may not always agree with the policies our civil authorities put forth, but we are to be obedient, tax-paying, good citizens— that is God’s directive as the foregoing Scripture passage makes abundantly clear. The **ONLY** time we are to disobey civil government is when it clearly commands that which is against God’s Word, for then “We ought to obey God rather than men.” (Acts 5:29)*

“Forasmuch as *there is* none like unto thee, O LORD; thou *art* great, and thy name *is* great in might. Who would not fear thee, O King of nations? for to thee doth it appertain: forasmuch as among all the wise *men* of the nations, and in all their kingdoms, *there is* none like unto thee.” (Jeremiah 10:6-7)

Comment: Observe that the LORD IS KING OF NATIONS! The Lord is the absolute highest Ruler of all

people whether people recognize the fact or not.

“Who hath measured the waters in the hollow of his hand, and meted out heaven with the span, and comprehended the dust of the earth in a measure, and weighed the mountains in scales, and the hills in a balance? Who hath directed the Spirit of the LORD, or *being* his counselor hath taught him? With whom took he counsel, and *who* instructed him, and taught him in the path of judgment, and taught him knowledge, and shewed to him the way of understanding? Behold, the nations *are* as a drop of a bucket, and are counted as the small dust of the balance: behold, he taketh up the isles as a very little thing. And Lebanon *is* not sufficient to burn, nor the beasts thereof sufficient for a burnt offering. All nations before him *are* as nothing; and they are counted to him less than nothing, and vanity.” (Isaiah 40:12-17)

*Comment: Consider what the foregoing Scripture passage teaches us concerning the Lord God in comparison with the nations of this world: “the nations are as a drop of a bucket, and are counted as the small dust of the balance. ...All nations before him are as nothing; and they are counted to him less than nothing, and vanity.” Thus, God can and does certainly use nations and their leaders as He sees fit to achieve His purposes among people in this world, for we read in Psalm 75:4-7, “I said unto the fools, Deal not foolishly: and to the wicked, Lift not up the horn: Lift not up your horn on high: speak *not with* a stiff neck. For promotion *cometh* neither from the east, nor from the west, nor from the south. But God is the judge: he putteth down one, and setteth up another.” And, 1 Samuel 2:7-8 informs us: “The LORD maketh poor, and maketh rich: he bringeth low, and lifteth up. He raiseth up the poor out of the dust, and lifteth up the beggar from the dunghill, to set *them* among princes, and to make them inherit the throne of glory: for the pillars of the earth *are* the LORD’S, and he hath set the world upon them.”*
Accordingly, it is a fact that God certainly can and does use nations and their leaders as He sees fit to achieve His purposes among people in this world.

Consider the following example of a heathen civil ruler being used by God to punish the children of Israel who had turned against the Lord, and to punish Israel’s neighboring nations as well.

“In the beginning of the reign of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah king of Judah came this word unto Jeremiah from the LORD, saying, Thus saith the LORD to me; Make thee bonds and yokes, and put them upon thy neck, And send them to the king of Edom, and to the king of Moab, and to the king of the Ammonites, and to the king of Tyrus, and to the king of Zidon, by the hand of the messengers which come to Jerusalem unto Zedekiah king of Judah; And command them to say unto their masters, Thus saith the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel; Thus shall ye say unto your masters; I have made the earth, the man and the beast that *are* upon the ground, by my great power and by my outstretched arm, and have given it unto whom it seemed meet unto me. And now have I given all these lands into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, my servant; and the beasts of the field have I given him also to serve him. And all nations shall serve him, and his son, and his son’s son, until the very time of his land come: and then many nations and great kings shall serve themselves of him. And it shall come to pass, *that* the nation and kingdom which will not serve the same Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, and that will not put their neck under the yoke of the king of Babylon, that nation will I punish, saith the LORD, with the sword, and with the famine, and with the pestilence, until I have consumed them by his hand. Therefore hearken not ye to your prophets, nor to your diviners, nor to your dreamers, nor to your enchanters, nor to your sorcerers, which speak unto you, saying, Ye shall not serve the king of

Babylon: For they prophesy a lie unto you, to remove you far from your land; and that I should drive you out, and ye should perish. But the nations that bring their neck under the yoke of the king of Babylon, and serve him, those will I let remain still in their own land, saith the LORD; and they shall till it, and dwell therein." (Jeremiah 27:1-11)

Comment: In the foregoing Scripture passage the Lord calls the heathen king Nebuchadnezzar His "servant" despite the fact the man was a pagan. The Lord God obviously used Nebuchadnezzar as His "sword" to achieve His purposes among Israel and the other nations in the world at that time. Nevertheless, Nebuchadnezzar was wicked in that he was an idolater, for we read in Ezra 1:7, that subsequent to Nebuchadnezzar's reign, "Also Cyrus the king brought forth the vessels of the house of the LORD, which Nebuchadnezzar had brought forth out of Jerusalem, and had put them in the house of his gods." Hence, Nebuchadnezzar was an idolater who worshiped many false gods.

For example, consider the case reported in the third chapter of the book of Daniel: "Nebuchadnezzar the king made an image of gold, whose height was threescore cubits, and the breadth thereof six cubits: he set it up in the plain of Dura, in the province of Babylon. Then Nebuchadnezzar the king sent to gather together the princes, the governors, and the captains, the judges, the treasurers, the counselors, the sheriffs, and all the rulers of the provinces, to come to the dedication of the image which Nebuchadnezzar the king had set up. Then the princes, the governors, and captains, the judges, the treasurers, the counselors, the sheriffs, and all the rulers of the provinces, were gathered together unto the dedication of the image that Nebuchadnezzar the king had set up; and they stood before the image that Nebuchadnezzar had set up. Then an herald cried aloud, To you it is commanded, O people, nations, and languages, That at what time ye hear the sound of the cornet, flute, harp, sackbut, psaltery, dulcimer, and all kinds of musick, ye fall down and worship the golden image that Nebuchadnezzar the king hath set up: And whoso falleth not down and worshippeth shall the same hour be cast into the midst of a burning fiery furnace." (Daniel 3:1-6)

Recall what happened when certain believing Jews named Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego obeyed the true God rather than men, for "Nebuchadnezzar spake and said unto them, Is it true, O Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, do not ye serve my gods, nor worship the golden image which I have set up? Now if ye be ready that at what time ye hear the sound of the cornet, flute, harp, sackbut, psaltery, and dulcimer, and all kinds of musick, ye fall down and worship the image which I have made; well: but if ye worship not, ye shall be cast the same hour into the midst of a burning fiery furnace; and who is that God that shall deliver you out of my hands? Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, answered and said to the king, O Nebuchadnezzar, we are not careful to answer thee in this matter. If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of thine hand, O king. But if not, be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up." (Daniel 3:14-18) Nebuchadnezzar – in saying, "who is that God that shall deliver you out of my hands?" – had sarcastically and boastfully insulted the true God by holding that he as king had more power than the true God!

Well, the true God indeed delivered Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and thereby taught Nebuchadnezzar a lesson, for "Nebuchadnezzar came near to the mouth of the burning fiery furnace, and spake, and said, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, ye servants of the most high God, come forth, and come hither. Then Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, came forth of the midst of the fire. And the

princes, governors, and captains, and the king's counselors, being gathered together, saw these men, upon whose bodies the fire had no power, nor was an hair of their head singed, neither were their coats changed, nor the smell of fire had passed on them. *Then* Nebuchadnezzar spake, and said, Blessed *be* the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who hath sent his angel, and delivered his servants that trusted in him, and have changed the king's word, and yielded their bodies, that they might not serve nor worship any god, except their own God. Therefore I make a decree, That every people, nation, and language, which speak any thing amiss against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, shall be cut in pieces, and their houses shall be made a dunghill: because there is no other God that can deliver after this sort. Then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, in the province of Babylon." (Daniel 3:26-30)

Now, one would think that Nebuchadnezzar would have learned his lesson well and humbled himself before the true God for the rest of his life; but, that did not happen until the Lord drove Nebuchadnezzar from men and caused him to dwell with the beasts of the field as Nebuchadnezzar had dreamed and God's servant Daniel had interpreted, for "All this came upon the king Nebuchadnezzar. At the end of twelve months he walked in the palace of the kingdom of Babylon. The king spake, and said, Is not this great Babylon, that I have built for the house of the kingdom by the might of my power, and for the honor of my majesty? While the word was in the king's mouth, there fell a voice from heaven, saying, O king Nebuchadnezzar, to thee it is spoken; The kingdom is departed from thee. And they shall drive thee from men, and thy dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field: they shall make thee to eat grass as oxen, and seven times shall pass over thee, until thou know that the most High ruleth in the kingdom of men, and giveth it to whomsoever he will. The same hour was the thing fulfilled upon Nebuchadnezzar: and he was driven from men, and did eat grass as oxen, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven, till his hairs were grown like eagles' feathers, and his nails like birds' claws. And at the end of the days I Nebuchadnezzar lifted up mine eyes unto heaven, and mine understanding returned unto me, and I blessed the most High, and I praised and honored him that liveth for ever, whose dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom is from generation to generation: And all the inhabitants of the earth are reputed as nothing: and he doeth according to his will in the army of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth: and none can stay his hand, or say unto him, What doest thou? At the same time my reason returned unto me; and for the glory of my kingdom, mine honor and brightness returned unto me; and my counselors and my lords sought unto me; and I was established in my kingdom, and excellent majesty was added unto me. Now I Nebuchadnezzar praise and extol and honor the King of heaven, all whose works are truth, and his ways judgment: and those that walk in pride he is able to abase." (Daniel 4:28-37)

Accordingly, it is a fact that God certainly can and does use nations and their civil leaders as He sees fit to achieve His purposes among people in this world. The Lord sets up and puts down who He will as rulers of nations in this world— even using wicked rulers to achieve His goals.

Comment: For a New Testament example, think about the Roman government which ruled during Jesus' visible sojourn on earth and for a number of years after His ascension. The Romans considered their caesars to be "divine" and they worshiped those men, and other idols as well. Thus, the Romans were pagans, with a few exceptions among them— people that came to faith in Jesus Christ, such as the believing centurion of whom Jesus said: "I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel." (Luke 7:9) Nevertheless, the civil ruler of the Romans – the caesar – was heathen, and yet Jesus commanded:

“Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s; and unto God the things that are God’s.” (Matthew 22:21) *Jesus did NOT teach rebellion against civil government even when the civil rulers were wicked. The Roman governor Pontius Pilate was so wicked that he ordered Jesus to be crucified even though he knew Jesus was completely innocent of any wrongdoing, for we read: “And Pilate, when he had called together the chief priests and the rulers and the people, Said unto them, Ye have brought this man unto me, as one that perverteth the people: and, behold, I, having examined him before you, have found no fault in this man touching those things whereof ye accuse him: No, nor yet Herod: for I sent you to him; and, lo, nothing worthy of death is done unto him. I will therefore chastise him, and release him. (For of necessity he must release one unto them at the feast.) And they cried out all at once, saying, Away with this man, and release unto us Barabbas: (Who for a certain sedition made in the city, and for murder, was cast into prison.) Pilate therefore, willing to release Jesus, spake again to them. But they cried, saying, Crucify him, crucify him. And he said unto them the third time, Why, what evil hath he done? I have found no cause of death in him: I will therefore chastise him, and let him go. And they were instant with loud voices, requiring that he might be crucified. And the voices of them and of the chief priests prevailed. And Pilate gave sentence that it should be as they required.” (Luke 23:13-24) Later, in 70 A.D., the Roman army leveled Jerusalem as Jesus had foretold when He said: “the days shall come upon thee, that thine enemies shall cast a trench about thee, and compass thee round, and keep thee in on every side, And shall lay thee even with the ground, and thy children within thee; and they shall not leave in thee one stone upon another; because thou knewest not the time of thy visitation.” (Luke 19:43-44)*

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Some folks wonder why Christians must suffer along with the unbelievers under various wicked civil authorities. We must remember that while the Lord punishes the wicked He also chastens His believing children to make them cling to Jesus Christ more fervently in faith, for Hebrews 12:6-11 declares: “whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth. If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons; for what son is he whom the father chasteneth not? But if ye be without chastisement, whereof all are partakers, then are ye bastards, and not sons. Furthermore we have had fathers of our flesh which corrected us, and we gave them reverence: shall we not much rather be in subjection unto the Father of spirits, and live? For they verily for a few days chastened us after their own pleasure; but he for our profit, that we might be partakers of his holiness. Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby.” Thus, we Christians must do as Proverbs 3:5-6 states: “Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths.”

Realize it is therefore definitely a fact that God certainly can and does use nations and their leaders as He sees fit to achieve His purposes among people in this world, including punishing unbelieving sinners and chastening believing sinners.

Closing comments: Let us Christians ponder the following Scripture quotes and rightly act in accord with them: “I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be

made for all men; For kings, and *for* all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty. For this *is* good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior; Who will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth. For *there is* one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus; Who gave himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time.” (1 Timothy 2:1-6) *Indeed, let us pray regularly for all our fellow human beings, especially our civil rulers since they are God’s ministers and have great responsibilities.*

“The LORD *is* gracious, and full of compassion; slow to anger, and of great mercy. The LORD *is* good to all: and his tender mercies *are* over all his works.” (Psalms 145:8-9) *Fellow Christians, everything that occurs will ultimately be for our good because the LORD is gracious and merciful to us, as He has shown in redeeming us.*

m.e.l.