
Exegesis 6: Christians and Ungodly Rulers

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Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers you too will prosper.
Jeremiah 29:7

These exegetical comments are all the more interesting as they are written by a white, Scottish theologian who has worked in South Africa for 28 years.

The message of Jeremiah in the above passage must have been upsetting to the original recipients. They had been exiled, moved from their home in Judea to a conquering country Babylon. These words appeared to encourage disloyalty to their own land and people. Not only so, the Babylonians were a wicked, idolatrous nation compared with Israel. This is well illustrated by the protest of Habakkuk when told of the use of Babylon to chastise Israel, 'O Lord, you have appointed *them* to execute judgment; O Rock you have ordained *them* to punish' (Hab 1:12). Their shocked amazement would have been increased by the prophecy of Jeremiah.

But Israel was God's peculiar people whom he had chosen for himself and protected and preserved ever since he formed them into a nation. They belonged to God in a unique sense. He had plans for them; they were his witnesses and from them the long promised Messiah was destined to come. How could the prophet thus call on them to settle in Babylon and to accept an insignificant role in a pagan land?

Further, what Jeremiah said contradicted what other 'prophets' were saying. They prophesied a short captivity and early restoration for Israel. These prophets predicted prosperity without chastisement or repentance (Jer 23:17). People liked messages of this nature and on the basis of them rationalised their own desire. Jeremiah said they were not to listen to such prophets (Jer 23:16-18 and 27:9,10). He must have seemed gloomy compared to those who prophesied peace and soon-coming prosperity. He told the Israelites not only to accept a trying situation but to seek the **welfare**, SHALOM, of their captors. What he said might even imply that they, the people of God, were to lose their distinctive identity and be absorbed into a godless culture.

But what Jeremiah said was based on the sovereign will of a holy God. God, even in the time of Moses, had warned that Israel would suffer punishment if they forsook God and his ways (Deut 27:15-26). God had threatened them with captivity if they forsook him; indeed by forsaking God they had already behaved like all the other nations and were now experiencing the just punishment for that. It was what Paul later meant when he said, 'God gave

them over' (Rom 1:24, 26, 28). Israel forsook God and now had to live where society was anti-God.

This was God's ordering of things. All nations were to serve the king of Babylon (Jer 27:7). The king Zedekiah had to accept this (27:12ff) and yield to him. Nebuchadnezzar was God's servant, his instrument of chastisement and he and the chastisement had to be accepted as such. Those who remained in Judea had to surrender to him and those already in captivity had to recognise the situation. God is the sovereign Lord of all the earth. He had ordained a situation and who can question the rightness of it? Jeremiah, who had the Lord's message, told the captives to accept God's will and learn from it. Chapter 24 shows that it was the captives in Babylon who were fulfilling God's plan rather than those still in Jerusalem.

Many Israelites did in fact follow Jeremiah's word and men like Mordecai and Daniel accepted high office in Babylon without compromising their worship of the Lord. Daniel and his companions were notable in their loyalty to God *and* their faithful service to Babylon. An earlier example of this outlook was the conduct of Joseph co-operating with the Egyptians and such men teach us we must not be selective in our obedience to government. Governmental powers are **appointed by God**.

Teaching of this nature is found throughout all Scripture. 1 Peter 2:13-17 tells us to submit to every authority instituted among men. 1 Tim 2:1,2 teaches us to seek the welfare of rulers by praying for them. Matt 5:41 shows us we must even co-operate with oppressive rulers by carrying the load an extra stage of the journey. Matt 22:21 enjoins, 'Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's.' Loyalty to God does not necessarily mean disloyalty to Caesar. The best known chapter in this regard is Romans 13. This chapter asserts the sovereignty of God who appoints rulers who have to be obeyed and to whom taxes have to be paid. The cause of God is not in rivalry to government as such. It is distinct, not of this world (John 18:36) and hence no earthly fighting to gain power is part of our Lord's plan for his kingdom. The man of God is not an anarchist. Anarchy is disastrous; even tyrannical rule is better than that.

Jeremiah's hard message was not the end of the matter. He also promised a return after 70 years (29:10ff). There was to be repentance and deliverance. We see in Daniel 9 this is precisely what happened. The true prophets did not merely promise restoration. They promised restoration only when the people repented. A repentant, godly people was more important than their restoration to Jerusalem. God's promise was to be fulfilled in Israel but only in a godly Israel and even then it would not be Israel as a whole but only a godly remnant within it who would enjoy the fulfilment.

The message of this verse is most relevant. Our world also has Christians in exile. Is it too much to ask them to accept their lot? Church history gives many examples of Christians who were cruelly carried captive to foreign lands and who there became instruments for Gospel progress. If we were ever in such a situation surely the word of Jeremiah, if followed, would make us more likely

to win our captors than if we refused to co-operate with them. Our main duty is to witness for God, not to be nationally loyal.

Further, have we any right to demand that Christians in some countries, say Soviet Russia, should be disloyal to their nation as a matter of Christian principle? Russia may be atheistic in policy but do believers accomplish any worthwhile Christian work merely by being rebels? They will do far better by being loyal citizens and being rebels only when a distinctive Christian principle is involved. Several incidents of this nature are found in the book of Daniel. Daniel and his companions were loyal to Babylon and only made exceptions when the cause of God was in jeopardy. Notice also the limited areas of disobedience by the Apostles (Acts 4:18-20 and 5:29-32). They disobeyed when rulers went beyond their legitimate sphere and tried to hinder the work of God in the world. Legitimate reasons for **disobedience** to civil powers would be:

When told to sin, as in the case of Joseph (Gen 39:6-12).

When told to be idolatrous, as in the case of Daniel and his companions (Dan 3:18).

When told not to preach the Gospel, as in the case of the Apostles (Acts 4:18-20).

In these cases rulers exceed their authority delegated to them by God and they forfeit their right to our obedience. But when we thus act we must also be prepared to take the consequences (Dan 3:16-18). What we must not do is to adopt rebellion as such to protect or further the cause of God. On the contrary, we have a duty to seek the welfare even of hostile rulers. Jeremiah clearly shows that there is a sense in which the prosperity of God's people is dependent upon the prosperity of the secular society in which we live.

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The charge of biblical docetism has been levelled against advocates of inerrancy, most notably by Karl Barth. He accuses us of holding a view of inspiration in which the true humanity of the biblical writers is cancelled out by the intrusion of the divine characteristics of infallibility. For Barth it is fundamental to our humanity that we are liable to error. We reply that though it is true that a common characteristic of mankind is to err, it does not follow that men always err or that error is necessary for humanity. If such were the case...then we must ascribe such error to Adam before the fall and to glorified Christians in heaven. We would also have to apply this to the incarnate Christ.

Even apart from inspiration, it is not necessary for a human being to err in order to be human. So if it is possible for an uninspired person to speak the truth without error, how much more will it be the case for one who is under the influence of inspiration.

Finitude implies a necessary limitation of knowledge but not necessarily a distortion of knowledge. The trustworthy character of the biblical text should not be denied on the ground of man's finitude.

R C Sproul