

How Does God View Political Entities?

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[0 : 00] Hello, hello, hello. Welcome to the Providence Podcast. My name is Chris Oswald, Senior Pastor at Providence Community Church. Today we are going to talk about, loosely, God's political purposes in the Bible, specifically God's political purposes in the book of Exodus.

Now, there's a funny story about how all this came to be. I posted on Basecamp Monday morning to all the men, hey, I'll give you a choice on what sermon you'd like to hear for Father's Day. I've got two ready. One is on the political purposes of God in the book of Exodus, and the other is on something about how to have a very full life without forgetting God, or is busyness bad, or is busyness always bad, and so on and so forth. And I, being the obvious advocate to save our democracy, trademark pending, I posted just, hey, guys, just vote. Just tell me which one you'd like to hear as a sermon, and then the one that you don't vote for, I will record a podcast for. And the vote was pretty close, but the busyness sermon won over the political sermon. And so here I am on Wednesday afternoon, as promised to those men, preparing a podcast for them to hear about God's political purposes, and so on and so forth. Now, I got started on this because of where we are in Exodus, but it's really tying into a number of other issues we've been discussing, and a number of other issues that are sort of in the popular zeitgeist at the moment. So let's just go ahead and jump in. And first, I want to share something

I found in an article that quotes from C.S. Lewis in a letter that C.S. Lewis wrote to a friend in Chicago. And he says this, A hundred years ago, we all thought the democracy was it. Neither you nor I probably think so now.

It neither allows the ordinary man to control legislation, nor qualifies him to do so. The real questions are imaginary issues. And this is all the easier because democracy always in the end destroys education. It did so for you some time ago and is doing so for now us. Doing so for us, see a speech of screw tapes, which will soon appear in the Saturday Evening Post.

I am, you see, at my wit's end on such matters. Only a higher power than man's can really find a way out. Odd to compare humanity's political inefficiency with his wonderful success in the arts.

[3 : 08] And I pulled that screw tape section up that he's referencing just so you would hear this as well. This is actually what I was looking for when I found the other thing. What I want you to fix your attention on is the vast overall movement toward the discrediting and finally elimination of every kind of human excellence, moral, cultural, social, or intellectual.

And it is not pretty to notice how democracy, and is it not pretty to notice how democracy is now doing for us the work that was once done by ancient dictatorships and by the same methods? Allow no preeminence among your subjects. Let no man live who is wiser or better or more famous or even handsomer than the mass. Cut them down to a level, all slaves, all ciphers, all nobodies, all equals.

Thus, tyrants could practice, in a sense, democracy. But now democracy can do the same work without any other tyranny than her own. Now, these quotations are just extremely relevant for a number of discussions happening in the Christian political world. That shows you that, again, we once again find C.S. Lewis ahead of his time, questioning whether democracy is quote-unquote it, and revisiting a number of the issues related to this. And this citation from Screwtape, well, my goodness, I wish Carl Truman had read this before he had brought up his Nietzschean allegations recently in First Things. Screwtape is actually just echoing some of the better things that Nietzsche had to say. All right, so Lewis is confused, as we all are, perhaps. Is democracy it? Now, many of us have mocked the socialists for years for their insistence that socialism really does work so long as it is done properly. And that all the examples that we would cite to show that millions of people starving to death is an example of socialism not working. Well, they would say in each one of those instances, socialism simply wasn't done properly. And, you know, these folks deserve to be mocked

a little bit for doing that. But let's make sure we pull the plank out of our own eye, especially if we are very firmly ensconched and assuming that democracy is amazing. Because if I were to say, democracy has resulted in the institutionalization of child sacrifice at a scale heretofore unrecognizable in human history, the ardent democracy defender might say, well, that's just because they're not doing democracy right, which probably sounds familiar, right? If I were to point to slavery, for instance, in America and suggest that slavery only ended because democracy was effectively suspended, what would you say about that? I'm not arguing for that. I'm simply pointing out that, as Lewis points out, this is all just a bit of a mess. I'm simply suggesting not that we take the time here to criticize democracy or elevate some other form of government, but rather that I think we need to move down into closer to first principles and stop arguing about the form of a government and start recovering what it is we expect the government to do.

Back in St. Louis, where I lived for 20 years, the John Sullivan building is there, and John Sullivan was a famous architect, and he's known for coining the phrase form after function. Form follows function.

[6 : 58] And I think that we could make more traction in our political conversations if we just kept going back to the first principles of what is it that a government is supposed to do, rather than argue whether it's capitalism or communism or socialism or democracy or, you know, these sorts of things. So let's move a little bit closer to first principles and just remind ourselves, what is it that a government is supposed to do? And then perhaps we would have more clarity about the form that should follow that function. So what is it that God says a government is intended to do? Well, in Romans 13 and in 1 Peter 2, you've got two passages that say basically the same thing, and that is that the government exists to function as a punisher of the evil and appraiser of those who are righteous or appraiser of those who do well. Punisher of those who do evil, appraiser of those who do well. And so that's a better way to think about government, in my opinion, let the function be recovered and then establish the form that allows us in this particular moment with these particular people, so on and so forth, to exercise those functions.

You know, how many ways can you make a chair? How many different forms can a chair take? A chair can take many forms, and yet it ceases to be a chair if someone can't sit on it, right? So that's the idea of following function. So Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2 give us some basic outlines of function, but I was reminded, I guess it was this week or the week before, about an earlier passage, a much earlier passage that gives us great clarity into the general sort of project of government and just the project of any kind of organized peoples anywhere. And that would be in Genesis chapter 12, verses 2 through 3, where God promises to Abraham, I will make you of a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great so that you will be a blessing.

I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed. So the first thing we need to do to make sure that we understand this passage is to get rid of any kind of dispensational error that would be clouding or creating category confusions. So this is God's promise to Abraham and his descendants, I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you. Who are the descendants of Abraham?

What does the Bible teach us? Well, Galatians 3, verse 7 in particular, says this, Romans 9, 6 through 8, So who are the descendants of Abraham? And the New Testament answer is those who are in Christ.

Those who have put their faith in Jesus, as Abraham did, are those who are the sons of Abraham. Abraham. So now I'd like to argue that if we really wanted to understand sort of the basic function of a government, basic function of a government would be to be blessed, to prosper, to succeed, and in particular, to win God's favor, I guess you might say. They are the deacon of the Lord, we see in the New Testament. So how does a government succeed? How does it win God's favor?

[10 : 55] Well, it does that by being a blessing to God's people. So I would argue that just beyond all the discussions of form, what we would really want a government to do is to be a blessing to God's people. And we wouldn't want that simply because as God's people, we have a nice government. But we see that God promises that those who bless God's people will be blessed. Now, I think America stands out as clear evidence that this kind of thing is true. We are truly the most blessed nation in the history of the world. Why? Well, here, you know, the democracy lovers need to be careful, because it would be very foolish, very easy, but very foolish to credit America's success to its form. But that's not really a coherent explanation. The form has merely followed a function, a specific function, in which America was founded, you know, to begin with, to do. And that

function is to be a blessing to God's people. In fact, just to be a worship, a sanctuary of worship for God's people. We are the most blessed nation in the world, not because we, you know, cracked a code and constructed an ideal governmental algorithm that we now call democracy. There have been other democracies before, nor it's because of our natural resources or because of capitalism. We are the most blessed nation in the world simply because of this. Our nation was uniquely established to be a blessing to God's people. And God is simply being faithful to the word he gave in Genesis 12, 3, that when people, whether they be families or nations, whatever, whatever divisible unit you'd like to pick is good to God's people, when they are good to God's people, God blesses them. Now, at this point, and by the way, none of this is actually the main point of this podcast, but I just wanted to maybe touch on some of the controversy of the day by just reminding you of this sort of form versus function issue. So I think that like the best thing a government could ever do is to just be good to

God's people. Now, I can imagine a non-believer feeling really squeamish about this and saying, well, it seems really unfair that a government would give favor to one particular group of people over another. But, you know, it turns out that Christians are terrible at hoarding the favor they receive. They're terrible at it. Every time someone is good to a Christian, they look to their non-Christian neighbor and say, well, be good to them as well. I think this is extremely unique. to Christians compared to Jews or Muslims or whatever. And that is, is that Christians are bound by their God to love their unbelieving neighbor as themselves.

And because they are now, because they're people that, you know, they're sinners, Christians are still imperfect. We can find plenty of evidence of them failing to do this, but I won't get into it here, but the historical evidence of this unique redistribution of blessings onto those who are not God's people at the time, it's, it's profound. It's just absolutely profound. Christians are terrible at hoarding God's blessings. They, they, if, if a nation were to show favored status to Christians in a relatively short period of time, those same Christians or those Christians kids would be like, well, yeah, but you know, you got to help my neighbor. I mean, I know he's not a Christian, but you should be nice to him too. My point is, is that, uh, I think that the essential form of government or some essential function of government is to be good to God's people. And, um, I think that what, what, what that could do for us as we discuss the questions of form is if we understand being good to God's people as the function, well, then, you know, you begin to look through sort of what are our options, uh, in terms of governmental form and sort out, uh, you know, well, this, this, this one seems to do the function best in this particular environment. A chair in, a chair outside is going to have a different form than a chair that's made for the inside and a chair that's made to relax in a, in a, in a reading kind of posture is going to be built differently. It's going to have a different form than a chair meant for, uh, being, uh, an eating type chair, a chair you, you eat on, um, form can vary wildly depending on the particular people who are using the thing, the context in which it is used, the resources available to build the thing and so on and so forth. I think that form is not the main point. I think that there are probably a lot of ways to govern people that are reasonably good at doing the function, that function being to be good to God's people.

Now, I, I, again, I, I didn't actually want to do this podcast talking about this stuff, but I thought, well, let me just introduce some of those thoughts, let them percolate a little bit in your head and we can talk about them, um, in some of our, you know, in-person gatherings, whether it be around fire pit or wherever. What I really set out to do was to use this same line of thinking to explain what God is doing in Egypt. I started thinking about all this because, you know, friend of Providence, Logan Thune has been here a number of times to preach from, from up in Emmaus road in Sioux Falls. [17:01] He passed on an article to me from Joe Rigney going back to 2013. And in that article, Rigney cites something that Peter Lighthouse, the theologian had written, uh, related to the way that God views nations. And I want to talk about that as I, as we walk through Exodus, because I think it gives us some clarity there as well. Theologian, uh, Peter Lighthouse puts it like this. The key question for scripture is how does the political entity treat the people of God? That's Genesis 12, three. And in this regard, Lighthouse says that there are three kinds of nations in the scriptures. There are guardians.

These are governments that may or may not be explicitly Christian, but they are in general friendly toward and protective toward God's people. And here you could say this was Egypt in the time of Joseph. Thanks in large part to Joseph. And from guardians, you have Babels. Uh, uh, a, a Babel-like empire is a religious project. The, this is Lighthouse, the political form of an aspiration to

divinity.

A Babel-like empire is not interested in God. It's interested in being God. It's an evil empire, but it is generically evil. It is not, uh, it is not specifically antagonistic toward the people of God. And so in Egypt, this would have been Egypt before Joseph. And this would be Egypt, you know, after the death of Joseph going all the way up to the beginning of Exodus. So you've got guardians and Babels. And then the third empire that Lighthouse identifies in scripture is the beast, the bestial, uh, empire. And these are those that demonstrate violent hostility to the people of God. Babels become beasts basically. When instead of just being generically evil, they single out the people of God for persecution or their generic evil accidentally hems in on the people of God.

And this would be Egypt in the time of Moses. I think this is important. You know, yes, the Exodus is the story of God. It's the story of the people being freed. It's the story of Moses. It's actually also the story of Egypt's judgment. And that judgment is predicated on them turning from a Babel in which they are just this, uh, you know, this generically evil empire consumed with the worship of false gods and so on and so forth. They transition from Babel to a beast where the people of Israel grow too big and Pharaoh sets out to consume them in particular. So in chapter one, you, he moves from, you know, enslavement and hard labor that doesn't work. They'd be, they're still being fruitful. Um, he then orders the midwives to kill the babies that doesn't work. And then he orders all the baby boys to be thrown into the Nile. The thing to understand from this, this view that Lighthouse is commending is that at some point Egypt crossed a line and it entered into, uh, it had gone from being a generically evil state to a place that was singling out the people of God to hurt them. And so God springs into Genesis 12, three action. I will bless those who bless you and those who dishonor you. I will curse. So God is provoked. This is the way that the book, this is the way Exodus begins.

[20 : 44] God is now provoked in a unique way. One way to think about it. This was, God hates the shedding of innocent blood in general, and he will eventually avenge them.

But when a nation begins to explicitly hurt the people of God, Rigney says it this way, the blood of the saints fills up the cup of God's wrath more quickly than any other evil the state could or does commit.

Why does this matter? Well, I mean, you know, it matters for a lot of reasons. Number one, if you want to understand your particular times, you could use this matrix and say, well, you know, the government can be one of three things. It can be a guardian for God's people.

It could be a Babel or it can be a beast. And by the way, this maps on really well onto Aaron Wren's, you know, three worlds model. You've got positive world, neutral world and negative world.

Okay. So if you want to understand your times, you might start just looking around for this crucial pivot from Babel to beast or from Babel back to guardian status.

[21 : 55] Say what you want about Christian nationalism and so on and so forth. And whether you think that's the appropriate form for our government, say what you want about that.

But I do suspect there are some within that movement who have a sense that the Babel is about to become something else.

And if it, it can either go back into a guardianship type status or it will go into the bestial mode. So if you want to understand your times, you need to maybe just understand, is this nation moving in the direction toward bestial status where they are going to be in particular hard on Christians?

And if so, then I would expect the fall to go quickly. And I'll maybe support that here in a moment.

The second reason I thought this would be helpful is it just helps you to understand God's work amongst the nations more clearly. This harmonizes really as far as I can understand most of what I know about God's dealings with the nations.

[23 : 11] This seems to work. For instance, why would God use a nation like Babylon to discipline his people? Well, I think he's doing two things there. As best as I understand the biblical data, on the one hand, he's rebuking his own people.

He's disciplining them. But he's also allowing Babylon to become bestial so that he can judge them into extinction. Another interesting place to look at is the Herods.

So from the beginning of the Gospels up to Acts 12, we have three Herods ruling. And we have Herod the Great who enters his bestial mode when he kills the baby boys in Bethlehem.

And shortly thereafter, that Herod dies, literally, guys, of gangrene of the groin. Gangrene of the groin. From there, we have Herod Antipas.

This is the one who beheaded John the Baptist and played a crucial role in the crucifixion of Jesus. We don't know how he died, but he died at 39 years old and he was in exile. Herod Agrippa.

[24 : 12] This is the Herod that killed James and Peter. And we know from Acts and also the accounts of Josephus how Herod Agrippa died after reigning less than three years.

He developed extreme stomach pain, which was probably for parasites. And he died. This also explains why God judged Jerusalem in 70 AD. The rulers of the city had gone from just being sort of wayward and stubborn and money changers in the temple and all that kind of stuff into beasts. They had consumed Christ. They had consumed Stephen. So I think understanding this threefold pattern helps you understand the scriptures in general in the sense of how God actually interacts with the nations.

Finally, I think this is also going to help us understand Moses' mission, which is a twofold mission. Yes, Moses is sent as an instrument of redemption for his people, but he's also sent as an instrument of judgment upon Pharaoh and the bestial government of Egypt.

And we see that in chapter 4 of Exodus. In verse 21, And the Lord said to Moses, When do you go back to Egypt? See that you do before Pharaoh all the miracles that I have put in your power, but I will harden his heart so that he will not let the people go.

[25 : 33] Then you shall say to Pharaoh, Thus says the Lord, Israel is my firstborn son. I say to you, let my son go, that he may serve me. If you refuse to let him go, behold, I will kill your firstborn son.

And God says this over and over and over again. That he will harden Pharaoh's heart. Exodus 7.13, verse 22. Exodus 8.15, and 32, and 9.12, and 35, and 10.1, and 14.8.

Why has God set his heart to judge Pharaoh? Because Egypt crossed the line. They went from being a generically evil empire to one that specifically was feeding on the blood of the saints.

This is all tying in. You know, in Luke 18, Jesus says, This is in the parable of the insistent widow. He says, And will not God give justice to his elect who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily.

[26 : 38] You got to remember how God sees an attack on his people. The most famous example that shows you how God sees an attack on his people is when he stops Saul on the road to Damascus.

And what does he say? Why do you persecute me? So God has a very intimate connection with his people. He identifies with them. And so when someone, when a government, when a leader, when someone attacks his people, he sees it as an attack on himself.

He immediately, you know, like Joe Rigney said, the cup of wrath gets filled rather quickly. So as we progress into the next several chapters of Exodus, we're going to see wave after wave of God's wrath poured out on Egypt.

And you got to remember what's going on here. God is provoked by their cruelty to his people. And here we are touching, by the way, just on the very nature of God, because he's both a redeemer and an avenger.

Eventually, we will get to chapter 34, where God appears to Moses in a cloud and proclaims, The Lord passed before him and proclaimed, The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and sin and transgression, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children to the third and fourth generation.

[28 : 10] By the way, that's the gospel. That's the whole gospel. This is who God is. This is the God of the Psalms. You know, when we read the Psalms, we tend to go in for all the stuff about God abounding in steadfast love, but you'll rarely find a Psalm that does not also include something about the wrath and vengeance of God.

And we tend to get, you know, kind of embarrassed by those sections, but they're just as true representations of the nature of God than the other thing. Psalm 37 is one of those Psalms that just really clearly alternates between his care for his people and his judgment on the wicked.

Verse 12, the wicked plots against the righteous and gnashes his teeth at him, but the Lord laughs at the wicked for he sees that his day is coming.

There's another personal application to make with all this, and that would be that when you go into the world sharing the gospel, you are fulfilling those two purposes, not just one. God aims to save those he wants to save and condemn those he wants to condemn.

And this is also, by the way, like a really clear explanation behind what's going on with persecution. Why does God allow persecution? Well, if God has already decided to destroy a nation, one way he could choose to do that is by allowing them to go into beast mode.

[29 : 30] Remember, God himself is the blessing and the cursing of Genesis 12.3. When Paul, you know, when Paul goes out into evangelism, he says he smells like life to some and death to others.

Why? Because he is. So when Moses goes to Pharaoh and demands that he let the people go, and Pharaoh responds by making the people's lives much worse, because, you know, he essentially in chapter 5 multiplies their miseries, why did Pharaoh act that way?

Because God had already determined to destroy Pharaoh, and every drop of Hebrew blood shed is quickening the end of Pharaoh. And so now we're kind of, you know, going into stuff we talked about last Sunday during the sermon, how God's revelatory purposes are at work in the book of Exodus.

He means to teach the nations about his nature and his superiority and sovereignty over all other gods. He's showing that he's a unique God at a time when he wouldn't have been thought of that way.

He would have been thought of as a regional God, if anything at all. And so what is God doing in the Exodus? Both by saving his people and by destroying Pharaoh, he's showing his uniqueness, his holiness to the world.

[30 : 48] That's in Exodus 9 when he talks about Pharaoh. So, but for this purpose I have raised you up to show you my power so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth. So God's revelatory purposes are at work in both his saving and his condemning.

That's actually what we see, speaking of Bible passages that are in chapter 9 of things. That's what we see in Romans 9 as well. What if God wants to show his mercy?

His revelatory action includes preparing vessels for wrath. So when it's all said and done and Egypt lies in ruins, God says to his people, I showed you, I showed you.

Exodus 19 4. You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now, therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine.

And this is what happens with Jethro. When Jethro is reunited with Moses in chapter 18, he says, I saw what God did for you and against Pharaoh, and now I know that the Lord is greater than all gods.

[32 : 07] Because in this affair, they dealt arrogantly with the people. So this blessing and cursing thing is like all over the place.

And it really is, I think, a key insight into understanding God's interactions with the nations. And we could wrap it up there, but let me just say one more thing. We could look at this data at the highest level and understand the purpose of the devil.

He is a vessel of wrath prepared in advance for destruction. But his existence is allowed so that in due time, God can step on him and reveal his superiority above all things.

And of course, you know, what's even crazier is that God's going to use the church to do that. As Jesus tells Peter, upon this rock I will build my church, the gates of hell will not prevail against it. We often miss the offensive language there. The gates of hell. We're at the gates of hell. Romans 16, the God of peace will crush Satan under your feet.

[33 : 23] And then, of course, Revelation 12. And I heard a loud voice in heaven saying, Now the salvation and power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come.

For the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony. For they love not their lives even unto death.

So it just turns out that one key way God destroys, that which he has destined to destroy, is by allowing them to strike the heel of his chosen people so that his chosen people can then now crush what he has already decreed should be crushed.

And of course, this happens most completely at the cross. Colossians 2. And you were dead in your trespasses, in the uncircumcision of your flesh.

God made you alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses by canceling the record of death that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame by triumphing over them

in him.

[34 : 36] And as you know, I'm fond of reminding you that Psalm 119 is the most quoted Old Testament scripture in the New Testament. Did I say Psalm 119 just then?

Psalm 110, just in case. Psalm 110 is the most quoted Old Testament scripture in the New Testament. And that's where we see, the Lord says to my Lord, sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool.

Now, I think there's a lot of reasons why this psalm is the most quoted psalm. But one of those reasons is that it's basically the purpose statement of the New Covenant. The purpose statement of the New Covenant is to turn all the enemies into his footstool.

How does he do that? It's the gospel. It's the redeeming act of the gospel, and it's the condemning act of the gospel. Or you could say this, he turns some of his enemies into his sons, and he uses those sons to crush the serpent so that in the end all of the enemies are handled.

All the enemies will be footstools. Some of them will become footstools by being converted, and some of them will be footstools by being condemned. Now, I want to leave you with this pure conjecture, and I don't have any idea if I'm right at all, but it'll leave you with a good word picture of nothing else.

[35 : 56] So, you know, when God sends Moses in chapter 4 into Egypt, you know, he's got him two signs. The first sign is he turns his staff into a serpent, and then Moses is supposed to grasp it and subdue it, essentially.

And then the second sign is his hand turns a leprous, and then it's healed. Well, I mean, in the end, this is true, that all of God's enemies will be either healed or handled.

He will subdue the serpents. He will heal the sick. Some he will grasp and destroy, and some he will heal of their iniquities and their sins, which is commonly referred to in the Old Testament language as disease.

So in the end, all of God's enemies will be healed or handled. I think that's kind of why Psalm 110 features so prominently, and it's all tying into this basic idea of God blessing and cursing, Genesis 12.3.

And, you know, there's some political stuff in there that is all coherent with the overall message of God's word. That's probably a good place to leave this. It's like, it's all coherent, guys.

[37 : 09] We might not always see its coherence, but it's all coherent. Politics doesn't get some kind of strange, odd exemption to the rest of the Christian life. It all is supposed to work together, like we saw this Sunday when we talked about the advent of monotheism in the Unlikely Companions book that I referenced, where not only in Lewis, but in others have identified the rise of monotheism as preceding the rise of science.

And as Lewis said, you know, we found that there was just one lawgiver, and then we realized that nature was coherent. And then we began to look for the coherent laws in nature.

It's all connected. And God's word, if we're diligent in looking at it, it will show us the connections.

We'll find the connections in there. I think that just understanding the function of a government rather than, you know, straining to do the form conversation, I think this could be helpful to us.

It'll certainly be helpful as we progress into Exodus and understand what is God doing. God has just done with Egypt. Why?

Because they were bad to his kids. I think that's something we can all understand. Praise God that he loves us like that, because we sure don't deserve it, but he's faithful. All right, well, that's the promised podcast on the politics of Exodus.

[38 : 42] Be well this week and look forward to meeting with you this Sunday, worshiping the Lord together. God bless.