

GOD RULES

Introduction

When Elijah contended with the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel, he mocked them and their god. No answer came from their god perhaps because “he is musing, or he has gone aside, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened.” While we would not say any of that about our God, sometimes Christians in their weakness may wonder 'why this is happening to me?!' Though we know our God is all-knowing and all powerful, the thought may cross the mind 'how long must I endure before He acts?' At times both God's and the devil's work proceeds at the same time, but it is to vastly different ends and purposes. Think of the case of Job.

In this study we consider how God rules over all and nothing escapes His view. His eyes roam to and fro throughout all the earth. And He acts according to His will, the whole of which we do not know. But we know our God who is love. Our Lord rules this world in the interest of His church. “I will build My church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” Mt. 16:18 We are not considering how He uses His angels to accomplish His will in ruling over all, though they may well be involved unseen to us. We also are not considering how He uses His followers to advance His kingdom of grace. In this overview of His rule in time we draw comfort and encouragement to see how He is involved not just over the world, but in the world.

The Psalms

Our God is not a disaffected, distant God. He did not just create and start everything and then go off somewhere and not be involved in upholding all things and operating throughout His creation. He is not a God of only the mountains and not the valleys, but His rule is everywhere. He is not a God far off and not near. He knows the very hairs of our head and the falling of a sparrow. From heaven He has a vastly different perspective than we have from our little place upon this earth.

The Old Testament hymnbook proclaims vibrantly just who He is and His perspective. He sits in rule in the heavens and laughs at the foolish antics of the kings and nations who cannot stand against His will. From heaven He thunders and judgments fall accordingly. His glory from heaven is over all the earth. The kingdoms and rulers of this earth ought to praise Him who rules from the heavens. From His throne in heaven He is high above all nations and sees, and knows and acts. From the heavens He does whatever he pleases. What a Lord we have enthroned in the heavens, knowing all, forgetting nothing and acting in your best interest, as His child and heir of eternal life! (Ps. 2:4, 18:13, 57:5, 68:33, 103:19, 113:4, 115:3, 123:1)

Isaiah

The longest of the recorded prophets has a lot to say about His rule. He gives us a historical perspective of how God rules among the nations going over ten of them. Isaiah has been called the 'Gospel' of Isaiah because there is so much Good News of salvation in the King and His gracious rule among His people. It is profound and plentiful in the book. And this is against a backdrop of how God rules the nations who would thwart His will. God's people would be preserved that the Messiah could be brought forth from them in the fullness of the time.

- Babylon – Is. 13:1-14:23 – There would be destruction like that of Sodom and Gomorrah. The wonder of the world would become a haunt of jackals.
- Assyria – 14:24-27 – No matter how fierce or aggressive they could be, God's purpose would stand against them. At the time of Jonah the capital, mighty Nineveh repented, but later at the

time of Nahum they were back to their old ways and faced destruction.

- Philistia – 14:29-32 – This ancient foe of God's people so well known in the time of the Judges and the United Kingdom would be helpless before Him as He sends them defeat.
- Moab – 15-16 – The gods of Moab would fail the people and devastation, ruin and mourning would overtake them.
- Damascus(Syria) – 17:1-3 – They would be cut off and become a heap of ruins.
- Ethiopia – 18:1-7 – They will be subject to the Lord. He raises up and He brings low.
- Egypt – 19-20 - We think back to Joseph's time and remember God's rule as well as the four hundred years later with Moses. This mighty empire is doomed and faces economic decline and military defeat. As God uses one nation to conquer another, so He sends Assyria against Egypt. He is in charge.
- Edom – 21:11-12 While Esau would forgive his brother Jacob, the nation spawned by Esau would be an enemy of God's people and face devastation.
- Arabia – 21:13-17 – Its glory would end as does that of all nations who oppose the one true God.
- Tyre – 23 – No matter how great in trade and power a nation becomes without the Lord it faces conquest and destruction.

Our God does not grow old and weary with His ruling. Isaiah prophecies of a certain Cyrus, 44:28,45:1. This was around one hundred years before he arrived on the scene at the end of Daniel's day. This unbeliever, Cyrus, God used to send His people back from exile. God rules.

Daniel

If there is one book that goes into the most detail of God ruling unbelieving earthly rulers, it is Daniel. In 2:31-35 there is Nebuchadnezzar's dream and in 7:1-7 the four beasts. In each the empires of Babylon, Persia, Greece and Rome are represented. These came into existence as God allowed and used them for His purposes. In 2:35 then there is the “great mountain, filled the whole earth.” This is God's kingdom that succeeds the earthly kingdoms and overrules them.

Listen to the earthly and unbelieving ruler acknowledge THE Ruler, 4:34-35 “At the end of the days I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven, and my reason returned to me, and I blessed the Most high, and praised and honored him who lives for ever; for his dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom endures from generation to generation; all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing; and he does according to his will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, 'What doest thou?'" Being turned from a proud king to a beast of the field and restored again brought forth such words.

Yet another testimony from the unbelieving yet knowing, 6:25-27 “Then King Darius wrote to all the peoples, nations, and languages that dwell in all the earth: 'Peace be multiplied to you. I make a decree, that in all my royal dominion men tremble and fear before the God of Daniel, for he is the living God, enduring for ever; his kingdom shall never be destroyed, and his dominion shall be to the end. He delivers and rescues, he works signs and wonders in heaven and on earth, he who has saved Daniel from the power of the lions.'”

For another earthly ruler of Daniel's day the handwriting was on the wall and his doom could not be averted. The very night he was notified the time was up he was slain. Chapter 5/ Belshazzar How visibly God intervenes in the affairs of men and carries out His divine will no matter the opposition.

The Two Swords

The teaching of the 'two swords' was restored to God's church on earth through the Lutheran Reformation. That God rules cannot be denied. The papacy put itself in between God and men both in the church and in worldly affairs, such is the vaunted audacity of the antichrist. But through the Reformation the teaching of the Word was restored that God's rules His people directly through His Word and Spirit. The universal priesthood of all believers means that each of us have free access to our God through the one Mediator, Jesus the Christ, not through any man. God operates in His church, the Kingdom of Grace, with the Sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God. Eph. 6:17, Heb. 4:12

And then there is the other 'sword'. God rules over all the world in the kingdom of His power not dependent on any human or organization. Governing authorities in any age and any clime are subject to His working and will. He sets up and He removes according to His plans not man's. Rom. 13:1-4 "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore he who resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of him 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; he is the servant of God to execute his wrath on the wrongdoer."

It does not matter if the ruling authorities are pagan, Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist or of any other stripe, God rules over them. He accomplishes His purposes. From the time that Paul wrote this the ruling authorities of the Roman Empire would launch, until the Emperor Constantine became a Christian, ten terrible persecutions. Some of these were empire wide while others were concentrated in certain areas of the empire. God was still ruling in the interest of His church. While we cannot know all the will of God, we do see that the church became strong through the persecutions even culminating in finally the emperor becoming a Christian. "...How unsearchable are His judgments and how inscrutable are His ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord..." Rom. 11:33-34

Peter echoes Paul words, "Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right..." 1 Pet. 2:13-17 And tradition tells us that both Peter and Paul were executed by the Roman authorities. Their time of grace and service on earth were done and they received the blessing of death in Christ.

God Rules in the Interest of His Church

Because we have thirteen of Paul's epistles and Acts 13-28 deals mainly with the work of Paul and his co-workers we have some insights personally into how God operates among the unbelievers in the interest of His church, in this case in the interest of God's work through Paul. Here are three names to remember: Gallio, Lysias, Julius. None of them were believers. All of them were officials of the ruling empire of Rome bound to carry out what the Roman authorities wanted. But above them and through them God ruled. As we peruse these three individuals in connection with Paul, let's remember that God does not change. As He operated in Old Testament times, so He operates in New Testament times. As He operated as it is recorded in Scripture, so He operates among us today and until the last day.

On Paul's second missionary journey he spent a good deal of time in Corinth, eighteen months. God assured him that He had much work for him in this city and many would be brought to faith. The opposition in the form of hateful and jealous Jews began to mobilize. They thought that if they could

convince the Roman authorities they would be able to silence this pesky Paul. "But when Gallio was

proconsul of Achaia, the Jews made a united attack upon Paul and brought him before the tribunal, saying, 'This man is persuading men to worship God contrary to the law.' But when Paul was about to open his mouth, Gallio said to the Jews, 'If it were a matter of wrongdoing or vicious crime, I should have reason to bear with you, O Jews; but since it is a matter of questions about words and names and your own law, see to it yourselves; I refuse to be a judge of these things.; And he drove them from the tribunal. And they all seized Sosthenes, the ruler of the synagogue, and beat him in front of the tribunal. But Gallio paid no attention to this.' Acts. 18:12-17 Paul still had work to do for the Lord in an environment of freedom of travel. There is no evidence that Gallio was a believer; far from it he was a loyal servant of the emperor. Here is God ruling Gallio, though Gallio knows nothing about it. Paul is free to move on to his third missionary journey and beyond.

The plan by James to prevent Paul being taken in Jerusalem was a failure. Strong was the opposition. But even stronger is our God who rules. Having appeared before the ruling Jewish Sanhedrin Paul was about to face a deadly onslaught of forty Jews who took an "oath to taste no food till we have killed Paul." Acts 23:14 They were to become mighty hungry. Paul's nephew brought news of this to the Tribune Lysias. Lysias 'orders to two centurions follows, "At the third hour of the night get ready two hundred soldiers with seventy horsemen and two hundred spearmen to go as far as Caesarea. Also provide mounts for Paul to ride, and bring him safely to Felix the governor." Acts 23:23-24 Lysias upheld the law of Rome, not of God. In his actions we see God's invisible hand. No believer but a loyal servant of Rome, he does what God wants, unbeknown to him. Notice that there would be nearly twelve of Rome's men for every Jewish plotter. Not very good odds for men whose hunger gnawed at them. And in case there would be some snafu, Paul is on horseback to ride away from the assassins. God had more work for Paul to do testifying even in Rome itself.

After Paul's imprisonment time in Caesarea, during which he was able to testify to King Agrippa and Governors Felix and Festus, he boards a ship bound for Rome. The Centurion Julius who is in charge of the soldiers guarding the group of prisoners headed for Rome, treats Paul kindly. There is much more to the story than that when we consider how God intervenes using such unknowing instruments as Julius. A storm overtook the ship and a shipwreck was imminent. "The soldiers' plan was to kill the prisoners, lest any should swim away and escape; but the centurion, wishing to save Paul, kept them from carrying out their purpose. He ordered those who could swim to throw themselves overboard first and make for the land, and the rest on planks or pieces of the ship. And so it was that all escaped to land." Acts. 27:42-44 Yet again God's rule is carried out by an instrument of the Roman authority, Centurion Julius. God had work for Paul to do in Rome while under house arrest for two years. After that he was released and worked more for Him. Only at Paul's second imprisonment in Rome was his work done and he was called home.

The Four Horsemen are Still Going Forth

God is in charge of all the world despite appearances at times. He is over all accomplishing His will ultimately, whether in the life of an individual or in the course of nations. Revelation reminds us that God sends judgments on this earth to bring people to repentance. As they see the judgment fall, it should remind them of a final day of reckoning. God does want all men to repent and come to the knowledge of the truth and that none be lost. 2 Pet. 3:9 As we view the vision of John of the "seven plagues, which are the last." Rev. 15:1, we also note man's response, "they cursed the name of God who had power over these plagues, and they did not repent and give Him glory," 16:9 "and cursed the God of heaven for their pain and sores, and did not repent of their deeds." 16:11 Our God has the ruling power from His vantage point as the God of the heavens.

In Revelation chapter six the first horse that goes forth 6:1-2 is the Gospel with its blessing of eternal

life. The righteousness of God is for all mankind as the horse goes forth in the four directions over all the earth. How appropriate that this one is first in description. As our Lord said, “And this Gospel of the kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world, as a testimony to all nations; and then the end will come.” Mt. 24:14, “...repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations...” Lk. 24:47

At the same time as the white horse goes forth the other three do also. 6:3-8 God's judgments fall as He rules and overrules. It is the same as our Lord taught in Mt. 24:6-7 “And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars; see that you are not alarmed; for this must take place, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places.”

Modern Examples

While we lived in Nigeria, it was mainly under the rule of the military. The civilians had become so corrupt yet again that the army came out of their Dodan Barracks and took over. These were still the governing authorities even if not elected. Some generals were better than the civilians in ruling. One in particular was not, Gen. Sani Abacha. This man was cruel in the extreme. People would disappear off the street, removed due to being enemies or critics of Abacha. One of the generals who became a critic of Abacha was General Obasanjo. Before too long Obasanjo found himself under arrest and facing execution. But Abacha found himself in the place of a Belshazzar. One night after pleasing himself with his women and surrounded in his palace by his guards, he died. God took his life and as the story goes saved Obasanjo from execution. Those who succeeded Sani Abacha in ruling did not have the stomach to execute a fellow general. Obasanjo while in prison became a devout Christian. Upon his release he campaigned in upcoming elections for President and won. He served two terms as allowed by the constitution. Here is an example of God ruling and advancing His gracious rule in this case in the heart of Gen. Obasanjo.

At the turn of the century between the 19th and 20th Christian missions was thriving in China. Even though there had been wars, revolts assassinations and so forth the Gospel was advancing. As the 20th century developed the leader of the Kuomintang, Gen. Chiang Kai Shek, married a Christian and became a protector of his wife's religion. After the Japanese were defeated his adversaries were the Communists under Mao Tse Tung. In 1949 the disaster took place of Communist victory on the mainland and the exile of the Kuomintang to the island of Formosa. While previously Christianity had been allowed, it was now persecuted. Missionaries were expelled and the church was put under the pressure of the three self patriotic movement to be ruled by the government. Being a closed society for so many years Christians outside of China could not be aware of what was going on. God rules though in spite of the opposition. In 1949 there were perhaps one million Protestant Christians in China. Now there are estimated to be one hundred million. God's Word speeds on and triumphs under His gracious rule.

Of further interest in regard to China with its 1.2 billion people is what else God is doing in ways we could not have fathomed. Some in the Communist government structure have wondered why Europe and America have had such a long and sustained economic development. Studies have been done and they have come up with an answer – Christianity. It has been noised about among influential individuals that due to Christianity the West has had such long and sustained economic growth. Here is God at work yet again. He works through means we could not imagine to advance His rule. Today in China there are places where the persecution is not what it once was. There are yet pockets where

persecution is severe, but an attitude is abroad about Christianity that is positive.

If you go to the fringe areas of China where the tribal groups and minorities are found ,the religious toleration is clear. I once talked with a missionary who had returned to Thailand telling how he had just been to the dedication of a seminary in China. This was set up and allowed where once it would not have been tolerated.

Conclusion

We dare never underestimate our Lord who is King over kings and Lord over lords. He rules from horizon to horizon and beyond. Our faith in Him need never waiver as He is in charge. His promise is – I will never leave you or forsake you. This involves Him also arranging matters outside the church in the interest of the church and His ultimate purpose. He rules His Church Militant still fighting the good fight of faith. He rules His Church Triumphant, those souls with Him in paradise with the angels. And He rules the Kingdom of Power over all the earth. As far as He created, so He rules. Praise His name!