

Scripture Deuteronomy 27:1-8

Hymns 21, 422

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God's Plan for Society

Part 2: Divine Nation-building

SYNOPSIS

The recent crisis in Afghanistan has led many to question the wisdom of attempts at nation building. In part 2 of the miniseries "God's Plan for Society", we will examine what God did in His nation-building program to establish OT Israel, and why, despite having God on their side, that nation ultimately failed, and why all human-driven attempts to create the perfect society are doomed to fail. American listeners will find the narrative strangely familiar.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past couple of weeks all eyes in the American media and among world leaders have been on Afghanistan and the withdrawal of our military from that nation. Our hearts especially go out to those who have lost loved ones in the terrorist attack this week. What began as an effort to avenge the terrorist attacks of 20 years ago and to inhibit the development of terrorism in the region gradually became an exercise in nation building. We tried to make a nation with very different values and customs into a liberal western democracy. If the images and reports of the past few days tell us anything, it is that those efforts failed. In light of this, I think Americans have forgotten two things about America. For one, I think we have forgotten the context in which America became a nation. This nation grew up near the close of the years of papal persecution and domination of the nations of Western Europe, and our founders were anxious to set up a society in which such atrocities would never be repeated. Afghanistan does not have that national heritage. But second, and more importantly, I think we have forgotten that this nation is called out in Bible prophecy initially as a refuge for the oppressed. In other words, we are what we are because God ordained it to be so. If we remember these two

things, we might understand why the liberties we enjoy here and the system of government that has served us so well has not been so easy to replicate around the world. It is not a mere commodity that can be exported. This is what we mean by American Exceptionalism. The reality is that freedom is not some sort of inevitable destination for earthly societies. It is the exception, not the rule. The fact is that societies tend toward tyranny, not toward liberty.

Having said all that, I want to remind you why I am giving this series of messages. Perhaps some of you think that I am seeking to make some sort of political statement. If you thought that, you guessed wrong. On the contrary - what I am seeking to do is to strip away all confidence in what can be accomplished in any earthly society, by any set of politicians. Of course, many of us are deeply disturbed by what is happening in our country and in our world. There is no question that our God-given rights and liberties are being trampled upon. I have news for you, friends - things are going to get worse. And there is nothing any Democrat or Republican can do to heal the division in our nation, or to make the American experiment ultimately succeed. The painful truth is that it will ultimately fail. Our only hope is in the soon return of Jesus Christ! But even Jesus will not engage in nation building when He comes the second time; rather will utterly destroy the nations of the world, symbolized by the stone striking the feet of the image of Daniel 2. Jesus will deliver us from the tyranny of earth and take us away from it to heaven where we will reign with Him for a thousand years. Why will Jesus not rework society and sit as monarch over the nations? Very simple - He has already demonstrated that this sort of nation-building in this present age will not ultimately work. How can I say that so confidently? Very simple. We have the record of its failure in the history of ancient Israel.

Now before I launch into the main course of the sermon, let me point out that I believe that we must read the Bible in a more practical and discerning way than we have been used to doing. We need the Holy Spirit to guide us in our reading, or we will miss the message. Too often we make the Bible merely esoteric, a collection of beautiful stories, but we generally fail to make the application for our lives today. This is especially true when we read the OT. Because the OT chronicles a people separated from us by time and customs, we often make the mistake of thinking that its message has little or nothing to teach people that live in the 21st century. Nothing could be further from the truth. The fact of the matter is that the message of the OT is equally important for us as is that of the NT. It is in the OT that we really learn who and what man is, and why even a divine effort at nation building failed. I say it failed, not because God failed, but because the people with whom He was working

failed Him - they did not stick to His plan. But before we get to this conclusion, we need to observe just how wise God's plan to build a nation really was!

A PERFECT CONSTITUTION

The founding of ancient Israel could not have been more auspicious. Think of the promise of a new nation, conceived in the liberty of the gospel - a nation to which God was speaking through His prophets. Surely if nation building could ever succeed, it would be successful now. Our Scripture reading - Deuteronomy 27:1-8 - pictures the scene for us.

Deut. 27:1 Now Moses, with the elders of Israel, commanded the people, saying: "Keep all the commandments which I command you today.

Deut. 27:2 And it shall be, on the day when you cross over the Jordan to the land which the LORD your God is giving you, that you shall set up for yourselves large stones, and whitewash them with lime.

Deut. 27:3 You shall write on them all the words of this law, when you have crossed over, that you may enter the land which the LORD your God is giving you, "a land flowing with milk and honey," just as the LORD God of your fathers promised you.

Deut. 27:4 Therefore it shall be, when you have crossed over the Jordan, that on Mount Ebal you shall set up these stones, which I command you today, and you shall whitewash them with lime.

Deut. 27:5 And there you shall build an altar to the LORD your God, an altar of stones; you shall not use an iron tool on them.

Deut. 27:6 You shall build with whole stones the altar of the LORD your God, and offer burnt offerings on it to the LORD your God.

Deut. 27:7 You shall offer peace offerings, and shall eat there, and rejoice before the LORD your God.

Deut. 27:8 And you shall write very plainly on the stones all the words of this law."

Here we have the affirmation of the constitution of the nation of Israel. God had given them the essentials at Mt. Sinai, but now they were to set up a large monument of stones whitewashed with lime. The entire body of the law of Moses was to be written on the stones. This was to keep the principles of God's word in the minds of the Israelites. And, travelers coming and going would see these stones and be able to read exactly what this nation was all about. But there was also something to be constructed

in this place - did you catch it? There was to be an altar of sacrifice there. In other words, this place was designed to proclaim, constantly, day by day, the law and the gospel. These were to be the founding principles of the nation of Israel. They were given by divine inspiration. What could go wrong, right?

A GOVERNMENT OF THE PEOPLE

Deut. 1:10 The LORD your God has multiplied you, and here you *are* today, as the stars of heaven in multitude.

Deut. 1:11 May the LORD God of your fathers make you a thousand times more numerous than you are, and bless you as He has promised you!

Deut. 1:12 How can I alone bear your problems and your burdens and your complaints?

Deut. 1:13 Choose wise, understanding, and knowledgeable men from among your tribes, and I will make them heads over you.'

Deut. 1:14 And you answered me and said, "The thing which you have told *us* to do *is* good.'

Deut. 1:15 So I took the heads of your tribes, wise and knowledgeable men, and made them heads over you, leaders of thousands, leaders of hundreds, leaders of fifties, leaders of tens, and officers for your tribes.

Here is another principle that should give us encouragement for this great, ancient experiment in freedom and liberty. Many actually misunderstand the governmental principles of ancient Israel, though. We are accustomed to calling Israel a theocracy. Many people call it that, and there is a sense in which that is true, but as we note in this passage, Israel's government also had structure on the human level. It was not that God told them audibly and explicitly what to do in every particular situation. They had the words of the covenant as we pointed out a few minutes ago, but they also had a self-appointed leadership structure that was sanctioned by the prophet. In other words, they had a government OF THE PEOPLE. You see, unlike the other nations around them, there was no ruling class in Israel. There was no elite group that felt entitled to positions of leadership. Anyone who was committed to God and had sufficient wisdom, life-experience, and right moral character could be chosen to be a leader of his brethren. Would to God that we would select leaders today based upon these same principles! And, because there was no strong central government structure, the leaders of the people could always be held accountable by their local constituents and could be replaced if they

were found to be covetous, self-interested charlatans. Now I think we would all agree that this plan would tend to produce a government with minimal corruption, a government that truly represented the interests of its people, and a government that would be anything but oppressive. In fact, it was not until Israel chose to have a king rule over them that they experienced the infringement of their freedoms. But early in their history, they were exceptional in the world - a nation without a king!

EQUAL APPLICATION OF THE LAW

But if we read on in Deuteronomy 1, we will see another important element of divine plan for nation-building.

Deut. 1:16 ¶ “Then I commanded your judges at that time, saying, ‘Hear *the* cases between your brethren, and judge righteously between a man and his brother or the stranger who is with him.

Deut. 1:17 You shall not show partiality in judgment; you shall hear the small as well as the great; you shall not be afraid in any man’s presence, for the judgment is God’s. The case that is too hard for you, bring to me, and I will hear it.’

Deut. 1:18 And I commanded you at that time all the things which you should do.

Clearly the nation of Israel had a judicial system. Many nations had this. But what made the judicial system of Israel exceptional was not its existence, but the fact that it was to equally apply the laws to every citizen. In every verdict handed down from a Hebrew judge, the participants in the trial were to see a reflection of that great day when we will all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. Judgment was to be righteous, according to verse 16 - in other words, it was to be done in accordance with God’s righteous and holy law. Even the process of judgment was to be carried out in a manner that was in harmony with God’s character of love. But beyond this, the Hebrews were explicitly warned not to favor anyone in judgment, regardless of their person, position or status in life. The modern ideas of diversity, equity, and inclusion would have had no bearing on any case in ancient Israel. Rather each case would be judged on its merits. No consideration was to be given to the identity or the rank of anyone involved. We refer to this principle in our modern American constitution as the “equal protection” clause. This is defined as the right of all persons to have the same access to the law and courts and to be treated equally by the law and courts, both in procedures and in the substance of the law. But, as you can see, this principle was not new when it was incorporated into our American constitution, but rather existed in Holy Scripture from its very first pages, and in the heart of God from all eternity. God is no respecter of persons - His judgment is always just. So it was to be in ancient Israel. God still desires it to be so everywhere today.

WISE FISCAL POLICY

Now I've saved one of the most interesting aspects of God's nation building exercise for last, and that is the fiscal policy of ancient Israel. It's an aspect of God's plan upon which we don't often reflect, but we should. We could learn a lot that would be a blessing to ourselves and to the church.

Conspicuously absent from God's directions for ancient Israel was any sort of taxation plan. Yes, they were to return tithes and give various freewill offerings as part of their religious duty to support the priests and Levites in their spiritual work, and to support the upkeep of the tabernacle, but beyond this, we read of no income tax, no property tax, no sales tax, certainly no wealth tax. Taxation didn't occur until Israel demanded a king. You remember that Samuel warned the people about it beforehand. When the monarchy came, the size of the government grew, and thus required the taxation of the citizens to support it. Sound familiar?

There were also laws that would tend to discourage the acquiring of debt. Deuteronomy 15:1-10 speaks of this: **Deut. 15:1** "At the end of every seven years you shall grant a release of debts.

Deut. 15:2 And this is the form of the release: Every creditor who has lent *anything* to his neighbor shall release *it*; he shall not require *it* of his neighbor or his brother, because it is called the LORD'S release.

Deut. 15:3 Of a foreigner you may require *it*; but you shall give up your claim to what is owed by your brother,

Deut. 15:4 except when there may be no poor among you; for the LORD will greatly bless you in the land which the LORD your God is giving you to possess as an inheritance—

Deut. 15:5 only if you carefully obey the voice of the LORD your God, to observe with care all these commandments which I command you today.

Deut. 15:6 For the LORD your God will bless you just as He promised you; you shall lend to many nations, but you shall not borrow; you shall reign over many nations, but they shall not reign over you.

Deut. 15:7 ¶ "If there is among you a poor man of your brethren, within any of the gates in your land which the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart nor shut your hand from your poor brother,

Deut. 15:8 but you shall open your hand wide to him and willingly lend him sufficient for his need, whatever he needs.

Deut. 15:9 Beware lest there be a wicked thought in your heart, saying, "The seventh year, the year of release, is at hand," and your eye be evil against your poor brother and you give him nothing, and he cry out to the LORD against you, and it become sin among you.

Deut. 15:10 You shall surely give to him, and your heart should not be grieved when you give to him, because for this thing the LORD your God will bless you in all your works and in all to which you put your hand.

(Deuteronomy 15:1-10 NKJV)

We get the distinct impression when we read this that the norm in Israel was to be debt free. As an Israelite, you only went into debt if you experienced some misfortune - the death of a breadwinner, crop failure, or something like that. They were not to become a nation of debtors. Also, you will notice that the longest period that anyone could remain in debt was seven years. Of course this plan was predicated on the honesty and integrity of both the borrower and the lender. There was to be no "working the system." That would have been considered theft. The borrower was to do all he could to faithfully pay off the loan and the lender was to recognize that everything he had was the Lord's anyway and to render assistance when it was needed. Another thing that the Israelites were not allowed to do was to charge interest on loans to their own people. They could charge interest to foreigners, but not to their fellow Hebrews. Leviticus 25:36 speaks of this. The elite of Israelite society were rebuked by Nehemiah for doing this very thing.

Another interesting aspect of Israel's divinely ordained fiscal policy was the treatment of the land itself. Note these words from Leviticus 25:23,24: Lev. 25:23 ¶ "The land shall not be sold permanently, for the land is Mine; for you are strangers and sojourners with Me. Lev. 25:24 And in all the land of your possession you shall grant redemption of the land." God ordained that His people would be possessors of land, not tenants. In Egypt, the working class, of which the Hebrews formed a significant part, were tenants. They did not own their land or their dwellings. We know this because at the time of Joseph all lands were bought by the crown in exchange for food during the seven years of famine. That situation was subsequently exploited by the Pharaoh who did not know Joseph. God would not allow such a situation to exist in Israel, so He outlawed the permanent sale of land. This is what got Naboth killed - he refused, on the basis of this law, to sell his vineyard to King Ahab, because Ahab

wanted to hold it permanently. So if any Israelite sold a piece of land, he had the option to buy it back at any time. If he couldn't buy it back, one of his relatives could do it, such as happened in the story of Boaz and Ruth. And if no one could buy it back, in the year of Jubilee - which happened every 50th year - the land was given back to the family from which it had been sold off.

WHY DID IT FAIL?

So, given all that we have examined in relation to OT Israel - its divinely inspired constitution and laws, its government of the people, its just legal system modeled after God's own judgment, and its sound fiscal policy, the question immediately comes to mind - how did such a nation ever fail to become the greatest nation in history? All God's wisdom, all God's promises that they would be the head and not the tail, all God's intervention in their battles, it seems that all that wasn't enough to prevent this potentially great nation from failing to live up to that potential. Now if this was the case when God was the nation builder, what makes us think that any nation today, or any set of people could succeed in creating a utopia where God could not. Our progressive friends think they can do it. I think we will have to wait until heaven. What do you think?

The answer to this perplexing problem is clear when we read the OT. The answer lies in verses like this one – Psalm 78:8 - **Psa. 78:8** And may not be like their fathers, A stubborn and rebellious generation, A generation *that* did not set its heart aright, And whose spirit was not faithful to God." Would you like to know why this great nation of Israel failed? The answer is simple - it was because of their own selfish, iniquitous hearts. In one sense it is the pride of man that seeks to do things any other way than how God says things ought to be done. If you want to understand what the big message in all this is, this is it. Is this not the reason why businesses often fail, why marriages fail, why nations are brought to ruin? Is it not the pride, the selfishness, the stubbornness of man? What is it that brought mankind down from his exalted position in creation? It was the exploration of this very thing, wasn't it? Do it your own way, Eve! And every one of us is tempted to ignore God's counsel and will for our lives in this very same way, aren't we? What will you do, friend? What will you do with the lesson of this ancient people?