FAVOURITE PSALMS: VOLUME 3

by Joel James

PSALM 145:1-7

YAHWEH'S GOOD GOVERNMENT

*A Psalm of Praise, of David. I will extol You, my God, O King, and I will bless Your name forever and ever. 2 Every day I will bless You, and I will praise Your name forever and ever. 3 Great is the LORD, and highly to be praised, and His greatness is unsearchable. 4 One generation shall praise Your works to another, and shall declare Your mighty acts. 5 On the glorious splendor of Your majesty and on Your wonderful works, I will meditate. 6 Men shall speak of the power of Your awesome acts, and I will tell of Your greatness. 7 They shall eagerly utter the memory of Your abundant goodness and will shout joyfully of Your righteousness.* (Psalm 145:1-7 NASB)

**OUTLINE**

Four responses to Yahweh's government

Personal praise (vv. 1-3)

Generational praise (v. 4)

Personal meditation (v. 5)

Public proclamation (vv. 6-7)

**SETUP**

Psalm 145 is a song about government. In fact, it is a song written by a king, to a King. It is by David, the king of Israel, and in it he addresses Yahweh, the King of the universe, eulogising Yahweh's incomparably good government: "I will extol You, my God, O King, and I will bless Your name forever and ever" (Ps 145:1). In light of that, let me set up our study of Psalm 145 with some thoughts about our duties to human government.

The New Testament's instructions regarding a Christian response to human government can be summed up in three commands: *Pray earnestly*, *Fund faithfully*, and *Submit respectfully*.

PRAY EARNESTLY

A Christian's first duty toward human government can be capsulized in the command, *Pray* *earnestly*.

*First of all, then, I urge that entreaties and prayers, petitions and thanksgivings, be made on behalf of all men, for kings and all who are in authority, so that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity.* (1 Timothy 2:1-2)

The Roman government of Paul's day was far from perfect. It was morally corrupt, fiscally irresponsible, and, at times, violent and unjust. However, Paul exhorted Timothy to teach his congregation to pray for their government officials, in spite of the obvious inadequacies and faults of Roman imperial rule.

Why did the Holy Spirit move Paul to write that command? Because anarchy is an ugly thing. In fact, even bad government is superior to anarchy. When the king named Anarchy ascends the throne, his ministers, Fear and Death, always take their stand beside him, and the results are awful. Might makes right. Crime skyrockets. Basic services such as water, power, sanitation, and the delivery of food collapse. Famine and health catastrophes quickly follow. This is why conquering armies cannot rest on their laurels once victory has been accomplished. The greatest threat to a hard-won peace is not guerilla forces lurking in jungle hideaways; in fact, it is millions of ordinary citizens without basic services and normal civil restraints. If a victorious army has a glimmer of common sense and compassion, following victory, it immediately transitions from blowing up tanks and shooting down planes to policing neighbourhoods, rebuilding bombed bridges, repairing broken water mains, and restocking empty shelves with food and medicine. War is dreadful, but the hard truth is, peace without functioning government isn't much better.

That's why Christians deeply value the peace and stability brought by good, mediocre, or—at times—even bad government. As Christians, we simply want to get on with our lives. We want to work hard, raise our families, preach Christ, and glorify God in this world. "Make it your ambition," wrote Paul, "to lead a quiet life and attend to your own business and work with your hands, just as we commanded you" (1 Thess 4:11). Even a government that limps along at marginal levels of effectiveness and integrity allows us to do that. Therefore, as Christians, we *pray* *faithfully* for the government: for the conversion of our leaders, for the wisdom and morality of their decisions, and for the integrity of their administrative arrangements.

FUND FAITHFULLY

After praying earnestly, a second command that shapes our response to the government is *Fund* *faithfully*. In Romans 13:7, Paul said, "Render to all what is due them: tax to whom tax, custom to whom custom." And, of course, that was simply an echo of our Lord's instruction when He was asked by the Pharisees about the legitimacy of paying taxes: "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's" (Matt 22:21). Thankfully, most of us live in countries in which we are free to question the policies and plans of our governments, as long as we do that in ways that are legal under our nation's constitution, and as long as we do so in a fashion that is commensurate with Christian self-control and honour. However, the New Testament makes it clear that ceasing to pay taxes when we are disgruntled with our government is not an option.

A Christian might be legitimately displeased with his government's policies or genuinely concerned about its high rates of wastage and embezzlement. Indeed, as citizens, we should try to correct those problems. Christian citizens have the same obligation as all other citizens to encourage good government at every level of society. However, as we do so, Christians are to be faithful, cheerful taxpayers, understanding that, as bad as imprudent and corrupt government is, it is still better than anarchy.

SUBMIT RESPECTFULLY

A third New Testament instruction regarding a Christian's duty to human government is *Submit respectfully*.

*Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether to a king as the one in authority,or to governors as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do right.For such is the will of God that by doing right you may silence the ignorance of foolish men* …. *honour the king.* (1 Peter 2:13-15, 17)

The book of Judges is painful to read. In Judges, the behaviour of Israel and its leaders oscillates between the inane and the repulsive. The conduct of God's people is morally and theologically abhorrent; their actions are brutally violent and bewilderingly self-destructive. Why? The rickety and worm-ridden institutions of Israel's tribal government had collapsed, and with a complete absence of respect for Yahweh's divine rule, and with no central human government to impose a veneer of order and restraint, every Israelite did what was right in his own eyes (Judges 17:6: 18:1; 19:1; 21:25). In a word, it was theological and political *anarchy*.

Christians want nothing to do with the moral and civil chaos of the book of Judges. Anarchy of that type reflects the kind of social (dis)order that Satan prefers, not God. Imitating Christ's submission to His Father, we gladly submit to legitimate authorities, rather than championing self-serving autonomy and its painful fruits. Unless the government directs us to sin in a way specifically condemned by God in the Bible (e.g., Acts 4:18-20; 5:29), we are glad to submit graciously to the government, even though we may, at times, strongly disagree with the plans and policies promoted by that government.

And, of course, our submission becomes more than superficial and exudes credibility when it is undergirded by a respectful attitude: "Honor the king," instructed the apostle Peter (1 Peter 2:17). He gave his readers that mandate even though the king when Peter wrote was Emperor Nero, a man whose morality was unspeakable and whose character was marked by absurd vanity and petty cruelty. This fact helps us understand that, while a person holding office might not be worthy of respect in regard to his or her *person* (due to character flaws and moral failings), and while a leader's policies might be based on self-serving agendas or fairy-tale ideals rather than solid economic and political sense, the value and importance of the *position* he or she holds can never be diminished. Therefore, as commanded by the apostle, Christians treat those in authority with respect and honour (see also Rom 13:1-5). That means that we must be respectful with our words when we speak to our governmental leaders face to face *and* when we converse about them on the internet or in private conversations with our friends and family.

ALTERNATE COMMANDS

Unfortunately, many Christians have replaced God's instruction to honour those in authority with a worldly alternative, which can be summarised by the mock command, *Grumble incessantly*. Ironically, it was election week in South Africa when I first preached Psalm 145 (by no scheduling foresight of my own, I must say). South Africa is a wonderful place to live, but it has its fair share of political and civil problems. Therefore, in the months leading up to the elections, grumbling against the government had escalated to the point that complaining had nudged out rugby and soccer as the country's most popular sport. While withering cynicism and angry finger-pointing may have felt justified at times, as Christians, we knew that heated tirades against the government weren't godly. Unleashing a spate of rancor, bitterness, and peevish griping regarding our civil leaders every time we have a conversation with friends and family is clearly not Christ-like. Therefore, our question as we approached this psalm was, "What should we do instead?"

Blithe optimism is not a valid alternative. It would be naïve and shortsighted to pretend that the government of South Africa (or of any other country) has no weaknesses and failings. Nor does the Bible encourage a childish credulity regarding the efficiency and integrity of government institutions and leaders. *Hope* *blindly* is not a command the Bible gives to guide our response to human government. In fact, it is perfectly clear in the Bible that, while believers are to be respectful and obedient toward the government, they are never to put their ultimate hope in such ephemeral things as the charisma, integrity, and policies of men. For example, when the nation of Israel (discouraged by the chaos of the era of the Judges) placed their hope in a human king, they got Saul. Catastrophic disappointment. David was light years ahead of Saul, but he was also far from perfect. Solomon married foreign wives, opening wide the door to idolatry. Rehoboam was next: playing the tyrant, he split the kingdom, immaturely aspiring to prove that he was more formidable than his father, Solomon.

In short, the commands, *Grumble incessantly* and *Hope blindly*, are bogus commands. They have no place on a list of Christian responses to the government. But what do we replace sinful complaining and naïve optimism with? We must have something to say when our friends and family relentlessly disparage the government. Nor can we live entirely without hope. By God's design, government plays too big a role in our lives for us to abandon optimism entirely. Psalm 145 offers the biblical alternative.

BOAST ENTHUSIASTICALLY

In Psalm 145, David exemplifies a refreshing alternative to the sinful habit of constantly carping about the government, and at the same time, provides a legitimate alternative to a naïve faith in human institutions and leaders. In fact, based on David's example in this song, I believe that we must add a fourth command to our list of Christian responses to government: *Boast enthusiastically*. "What?" you exclaim. "Does Psalm 145 teach that I am supposed to be boasting about the government?" Yes, but not about *human* government. To cleanse your palate of the garlicy aftertaste of grumbling and to protect against the disappointment of placing undue hope in men, David instructs you to boast enthusiastically about *Yahweh's* government. In short, eulogising God's incomparably good government is a stimulating replacement for petulant complaining about or unfounded optimism in human government:

*I will extol You, my God, O King, and I will bless Your name forever and ever* …. *Your godly ones shall bless You. They shall speak of the glory of Your kingdom and talk of Your power; to make known to the sons of men Your mighty acts and the glory of the majesty of Your kingdom.* (Ps 145:1, 11-12).

No list of Christian responses to government can be complete without the command, *Boast enthusiastically*. Of course, boasting about the soap bubble called human government is sure to lead to disappointment. David was a king himself: he was well aware of the limitations of civil institutions and of the men and women who lead them. Therefore, he didn't waste a syllable extolling human government in Psalm 145. Instead, he joyously celebrated Yahweh's perfect government.

God's rule is a form of government that we might be inclined to overlook when we open the morning newspaper; however, that is a colossal mistake. Yahweh's rule and reign over both the grand affairs of this world and over the paltry affairs of our daily lives is imperceptible, but real. And what a refreshing change it will be to boast about His rule, rather than to grumble about man's! That is the lesson of Psalm 145. In the face of municipal, provincial, national, and international crises, one of the duties of God's people is to boast about God's kingdom: its praiseworthy Ruler, its incalculable glory, its invincible power, its mighty interventions on behalf of its citizens, and its incomparable majesty.

Before he begins to describe God's rule in detail, David spends seven verses laying out his aims or goals for this song. There are four aims: he hopes to incite personal praise, generational praise, personal meditation, and public proclamation regarding the goodness of Yahweh's government. Let's see if he succeeds.

**COMMENTARY AND APPLICATION**

PERSONAL PRAISE

*1 A Psalm of Praise, of David. I will extol You, my God, O King, and I will bless Your name forever and ever. 2 Every day I will bless You, and I will praise Your name forever and ever.*

I find it instructive that, although he was a king himself, David celebrated Yahweh's rule, not man's. Years of suffering under King Saul's capricious and ineffective reign and a humble awareness of his own weaknesses and failures had led David to the inescapable conclusion that God's reign was mankind's only hope for enduringly good government. As a result, the song on David's lips was not a hymn of praise regarding the glories of dynastic succession, written constitutions, freely elected parliaments, or multi-party politics. Instead, David boasted *every day* about Yahweh: *My God, O King* … *every day I will bless You*.

*3 Great is the LORD, and highly to be praised, and His greatness is unsearchable.*

Yahweh is *great*. In fact, so surpassing is His immensity that *His greatness is unsearchable*. Therefore, failing to acknowledge the ascendency of God over all human governments is a form of insanity. That's a strong statement, but I think I can defend it from the account of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon in Daniel 4.

As you recall, Nebuchadnezzar fulfilled the command, *Boast enthusiastically*, with appalling zeal when he crowed, "Is this not Babylon the great, which I myself have built as a royal residence by the might of my power and for the glory of my majesty?" (Dan 4:30). Nebuchadnezzar had the right tactic, but the wrong target. In fact, his implicit denial of the priority of God's rule and reign was not merely rebellion, it was a form of insanity. The best definition of sanity that I know of is "thinking God's thoughts after Him." If that is the case, then Nebuchadnezzar wasn't just headed toward the proverbial bend in the road; he was around it and accelerating away into the distance.

Unfortunately, when we think of Nebuchadnezzar's lunacy, we typically focus on his disgraceful neglect of personal grooming (hair like eagles' feathers, nails like birds' claws) and on his bovine diet (browsing in the palace gardens like an ox, Dan 4:32-33). However, being distracted by Nebuchadnezzar's eccentric appearance and behaviour is a mistake. Bizarre conduct of that nature would undoubtedly cause the director of any mental institution to rub his hands together in anticipation of the range of treatments to be experimented with and the size of the fee to be charged. However, Nebuchadnezzar's insanity was actually manifested most acutely by something else altogether: his brazen denial of Yahweh's rule.

The fact of the matter is, when his rational faculties were restored by God, Nebuchadnezzar didn't first shampoo his hair and clip his toenails; rather, he immediately redirected his enthusiastic boasting to the right target.

*But at the end of that period, I, Nebuchadnezzar, raised my eyes toward heaven and my reason returned to me, and I blessed the Most High and praised and honored Him who lives forever; for His dominion is an everlasting dominion, and His kingdom endures from generation to generation.At that time my reason returned to me* ….*Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise, exalt and honor the King of heaven* … (Daniel 4:34, 36-37)

Or, to use David's words in Psalm 145:

*I will extol You, my God, O King, and I will bless Your name forever and ever.Every day I will bless You, and I will praise Your name forever and ever. Great is the LORD, and highly to be praised, and His greatness is unsearchable.* (Psalm 145:1-3)

If speaking frequently and enthusiastically about God's government is sanity, then you have probably slipped across the line into insanity from time to time in discussions with your friends and family. The dreadlocks and eagles' talons are incidental. The real sign that you have lost touch with reality is failing to extol *my God, O King*. To *extol* means to lift God up to the pinnacle of praise. David did that daily: *Every day I will bless You*. Moreover, he did it enduringly: *I will bless you* *forever and beyond* (my translation).

GENERATIONAL PRAISE

*4 One generation shall praise Your works to another, and shall declare Your mighty acts.*

Generational praise happens every time an older believer boasts to someone younger about God's rule and reign, intentionally shaping the moist clay of the attitudes of the younger generation by admiring God's good government. God especially assigns to parents the responsibility to shape their children's thinking (Deut 6:5-9), but any older person can engage in generational praise. In fact, I find it especially distressing when older couples look at their grandchildren and chortle, "Our job is to spoil them!" Besides smacking of a barely veiled revenge against their adult children ("We're going to make your kids as unbearable as you were at that age!"), the short-sighted notion that the powerful influence of your venerable years should be wasted on trivialities like an endless cascade of toys and sweeties is a tragic mistake. It totally misses the nobility and significance of the responsibility that David identifies here: *One generation shall praise Your works to another*. Grandparents, take heed!

At the proper point in their mental development, a frank discussion with your children about the successes, failures, and challenges of your local or national government is appropriate. Ostriches need not apply: we don't need to bury our heads in the sand when it comes to imprudent governmental policies or appalling acts of corruption. Neither should we be reticent to praise our government's legitimate achievements to our children and to others. However, while a frank discussion about the challenges of governing is one thing, a steady diet of scathing denunciations or of inane conspiracy theories is quite another. It is true that the works of politicians sometimes leave us little to celebrate, little to praise. In contrast, David points out that Yahweh's *mighty acts*—both in biblical history and in our personal lives—give us much to boast about. In short, don't become so wrapped up in the works of men that you forget your generational duty to extol the works of God: "One generation shall praise Your works to another" (Ps 145:4).

PERSONAL MEDITATION

Imagine your morning routine. For me, after breakfast and Bible reading with my wife, I walk across the house to my study and click on my computer. While my emails are downloading, I usually take a moment to check the world news in order to assess the damage caused in the last twenty-four hours by the forces of nature and, worse yet, by the forces of human foolishness and evil. Many days, my browsing of the headlines can be very discouraging. David offers this remedy to consternation and pessimism:

*5 On the glorious splendor of Your majesty and on Your wonderful works, I will meditate.*

Is meditating on God's *majesty* and *works* your typical response to a quick glance at the headlines? Probably not. But maybe it should be. A short pause to *meditate* on God's good government and to rejoice in *the glorious splendor of* *Your* *majesty* will recalibrate your thinking. It is exactly the spiritual dousing you need to cleanse yourself of the worry and cynicism spawned by the moral filth, political slanging, and horrific crimes described in the articles you just skimmed.

After reading the White House's latest briefing or groaning over the tragic comedy of yet another misappropriation of funds by some minister of parliament, a visit to the throne room of God to be reminded of the *majesty* of Yahweh's rule and reign is a potent restorative.

*I kept looking until thrones were set up, and the Ancient of Days took His seat; His vesture was like white snow and the hair of His head like pure wool. His throne was ablaze with flames, its wheels were a burning fire.A river of fire was flowing and coming out from before Him; thousands upon thousands were attending Him, and myriads upon myriads were standing before Him* ... (Daniel 7:9-10)

… *Behold, a throne was standing in heaven, and One sitting on the throne.* *And He who was sitting was like a jasper stone and a sardius in appearance; and there was a rainbow around the throne, like an emerald in appearance.*  (Revelation 4:2-3)

*Then the seventh angel sounded; and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ; and He will reign forever and ever."And the twenty-four elders, who sit on their thrones before God, fell on their faces and worshiped God,saying, "We give You thanks, O Lord God, the Almighty, who are and who were, because You have taken Your great power and have begun to reign.* (Revelation 11:15-17)

You can't praise God's good government if you aren't thinking about it. Therefore, I encourage you to embrace David's mandate for personal meditation: "On the glorious splendor of Your majesty and on Your wonderful works, I will meditate." When you read the news, you need a quick reminder from passages like those above or from Psalm 145 of the splendour of Yahweh's rule and reign.

PUBLIC PROCLAMATION

*6 Men shall speak of the power of Your awesome acts, and I will tell of Your greatness.  7 They shall eagerly utter the memory of Your abundant goodness and will shout joyfully of Your righteousness.*

As always, David intended that his private convictions shape Israel's public worship. His commitment, *I will tell of Your greatness*, was to engender a community response:  *They shall eagerly utter the memory of Your abundant goodness*. Transferring that to today, you can take David's role, telling of God's greatness. If you don't, who will? An enthusiastic panel discussion on *the power of* [Yahweh's] *awesome acts* is not something that you are likely to hear when you turn on your local talk-radio station. In the same way, you will search in vain to find a website detailing a hush-hush, deep-state conspiracy whose covert goal is to *utter* *the memory of* [Yahweh's] *abundant goodness*. And certainly few people in your office are going to *shout joyfully of* [Yahweh's] *righteousness* in the breakroom.

That's a gap that only Christians can fill. Let others grumble about the corruption and incompetence of human government. We will, on occasion, have to comment on those subjects: "Hope blindly" is not a biblical motto. However, our duty is to *shout joyfully* *of Your* *righteousness*. Yahweh's righteousness means that He is a King who always follows the rules. With Him, there are no inexplicable cost overruns on construction projects, no "buddy" hires. No contracts are tendered to a business consortium whose majority owner just happens to be a favourite cousin, nor does Yahweh pad His expense claims with a host of dubious and extravagant expenditures. Unlike most human rulers, Yahweh is righteous.

In other words, David encourages you to refuse to join the ruck of worldly grumbling when some self-appointed orator engages in yet another public rant against the government. The godly alternative to cynical grumbling is not blind optimism. Instead, it is a bold, gracious statement of the fact that, whoever is king, president, or prime minister of your earthly country, Yahweh is our divine King, and He rules over all the governments of men: "The LORD Most High is to be feared, a great King over all the earth" (Psalm 47:2).