

# CAN WE TRUST GOVERNMENT?

by Ray C. Stedman

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The passage to which we come today, in Chapter 8 of the book of Ecclesiastes, deals directly with a current phenomenon, and that is, the growing resistance to governmental control of individual lives, especially as that control includes the right to draft young men for war. You may not have realized that this ancient book deals with that very current problem, but it does. As we look at the passage we hope to get some light on who is right, those who say, "Hell no! We won't go," or those who say, "It's not whacky to wear khaki!"

The Searcher's comment on this emerges from a section which deals with the question of how rightly to view good and evil. We have already seen that prosperity is not always good, nor is adversity always evil. In Chapter 7 we saw that despite the phony righteousness which abounds in religious circles in our day, there is a true wisdom that can be found.

Today, in Chapter 8, beginning with Verse 2, we will see that, despite injustice in government, nevertheless, there are proper powers which government wields. Many of you will recognize immediately that this is exactly in line with the Apostle Paul's word in Romans 13 about the powers of government. I commend that parallel passage, the first seven verses of Romans 13, for your own study.

Chapter 8, Verse 2:

**Keep the king's command, and because of your sacred oath be not dismayed; go from his presence, do not delay when the matter is unpleasant, for he does whatever he pleases. For the word of the king is supreme, and who may say to him, "What are you doing?" He who obeys a command will meet no harm, and the mind of a wise man will know the time and way.**  
{Ecc1 8:2-5 RSV}

In that very remarkable passage, the Searcher, King Solomon himself, head of state of the nation of Israel, is teaching us three great Scriptural reasons why we should obey government. The first of these reasons he sets forth in Verse 2: obey because you are a citizen of that government. This is what he means by, "because of your sacred oath." Every citizen of the United States has taken, in some form or another, an oath of allegiance to support the government of the United States. If you are a naturalized citizen you actually took an oath like that when you became a citizen. If you are a natural-born citizen, as most of us are, you reflected that oath whenever you said the Pledge of Allegiance:

I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America  
and to the Republic for which it stands...

This is what is referred to in Chapter 8 as a "sacred oath." One translation puts this, "Keep the king's command as though it were an oath unto God." This underscores the seriousness of citizenship, that, by virtue of sharing the blessings of government in a nation such as ours, we are also responsible to obey the proper powers and laws of that government. There is the first reason this passage teaches why we should obey government.

There is a clear suggestion here that this is not always going to be pleasant. Verse 2 says, "because of your sacred oath be not dismayed." That is, there will be times when obeying the government will not be very convenient, when it will interfere with other things you want to do. For instance, to be summoned for jury duty just as you are leaving for vacation is not very convenient. If you are hit by a zoning restriction in regard to some change you want to make in your home, or some building you want to erect, that is not very pleasant either; nor is paying your taxes when you feel that they are a heavy burden.

This is a recognition that, to the ordinary citizen, obedience is not based upon convenience, but rather it is a responsibility we owe because, as Paul says in Romans 13, government is "ordained of God" {Rom 13:1 KJV}. Granted, sometimes this can be very unpleasant. Although there are times when we all would agree with Will Rogers, when he said, "We ought to be grateful that we don't have as much government as we've paid for!" Nevertheless, the theory and principle of government is clearly established in Scripture.

A second reason why we should obey government appears in Verses 3-4: We are to obey the government because it has power to compel us to do so.

**go from his [the king's] presence, do not delay when the matter is unpleasant, for he does whatever he pleases. For the word of the king is supreme, and who may say to him, "What are you doing?"** {Ecc1 8:3-4 RSV}

We do not have a king in the United States -- at least we do not call him that -- but we do have a Head of State, and he represents the power and the authority of government. Here is a recognition that the government does have the right to compel, the right of force. Again, Paul reflects this in Romans 13: The government "does not bear the sword in vain," {Rom 13:4 RSV}. The Head of State has a right to do this.

No more eloquent or adequate statement of this right has ever been made than that contained in the words of the great documents that underlie our American liberty, the Constitution of the United States, and the Declaration of Independence. Do you remember how the Constitution begins? I hope you have memorized these words:

We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquillity, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

The closing words of the Declaration of Independence are likewise filled with references to the purpose and function of government:

... and that, as free and independent states, they have full power to levy war, conclude peace, contract alliances, establish commerce, and to do all other acts and things which independent states may of right do. And, for the support of this declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor.

Thus our Founding Fathers recognized what the Scriptures so clearly state, that government is ordained of God; it has power to function as such, and the citizen is responsible to obey, not only because of his oath of allegiance, but also because the government has power to compel.

The third reason, then, flows out of that:

**He who obeys a command will meet no harm, and the mind of a wise man will know the time and way. {Eccl 8:5 RSV}**

It is a very wise thing to obey the government. Obedience is to be taken for granted. How and when is another matter. (We will look into that in just a moment.) But another reason for obedience is that we will thus escape additional harassment from the governing powers. I have a friend who recently got a ticket for speeding. She ignored it, thinking that the matter would never come up again. (I find that many people today ignore such tickets.) The original fine for speeding was \$25, but because she ignored it, some months later she got an additional notice, saying that the fine had now advanced to \$145, with the clear implication that the longer she waited the larger the fine would grow. That is what this verse is talking about. My friend learned a very necessary lesson: the government has the power to compel; and the way to escape that harassment is to obey the government and pay the fine. So the right of government to compel is clearly established here; obedience is required as unto God.

What is left up to us, the time and the way, is developed in Verses 5-6:

**... the mind of a wise man will know the time and way. For every matter has its time and way, although man's trouble lies heavy upon him. {Eccl 8:5b-6 RSV}**

That takes us back to that wonderful passage in Chapter 3, where we are told that there is a time and a place for everything, that in God's great overall plan for every individual life there is provision made for sorrow and for rejoicing, for tears and for laughter, for war and for peace. Here we are reminded of that: "Every matter has its time and its way."

But we are given certain freedom in this as to the time and the way we obey. The words, "man's trouble," seem to suggest that it is not always easy to know how to obey, or when one should obey. There are many factors that would influence that, especially in this matter that we are facing more and more, the matter of the draft. When and how this should be carried out.

The fact that it is difficult is also part of God's program. As believers, we ought to understand that it is not always easy to know what God wants. He does not want it to be easy. We are not robots, given orders to go here or there, having no choice at all in the matter. God clearly does not want those kinds of sons and daughters; he tells us that. Yet that is really what we are asking for when we say to God, "Show me what you want me to do and I'll do it." In other words, "Compel me; give me orders and I'll carry them out." God does not do that. We often struggle, evaluate, weigh, think and puzzle over what we should do. God wants it that way; that is part of his plan.

The time is not always left up to us. Sometimes the law requires a certain time schedule. If you have to register for the draft, you have a certain length of time in which you must do it; if you have to pay your taxes, you have a certain deadline. But the Searcher says that a way can be found by "the wise man." Though it is not wrong to take advantage of provisions for hardship release, such

as might be included in a draft law, for instance, nevertheless, the way to obey can be found in every individual circumstance if one is walking in the wisdom of God.

Another factor which influences us is found in Verse 7:

**For he does not know what is to be, for who can tell him how it will be? {Eccl 8:7 RSV}**

That raises the matter of uncertainty as to the results of obedience to government. One of the reasons we are not left up to our own devices as to whether we are going to obey the government or not is that we do not always know what God intends to work out by means of our obedience. He may have blessings for us that will come out of that relationship of obedience that we could not foresee.

As a young man in my twenties during World War II, I remember being faced with the very question of registration for the draft. At the time I was working for the railroad industry, which by its very nature allowed me to be deferred because that industry was essential to the conduct of the war. But as the war went on and I saw that my friends and all other young men of my age were enlisting in the service, I found myself growing more and more uncomfortable at that deferment.

Eventually I joined the Navy. Although I was unsure whether I was doing the right thing or not, I felt I ought to join. What I did not understand or realize was that the action I took would open a door which gave me what was perhaps the greatest opportunity I have ever had to teach the Scriptures to those who were in desperate need of such teaching. I was stationed at Pearl Harbor, and through that great port there passed from time to time all the sailors of the Pacific Fleet, many of them Christian young men who had won others to Christ aboard their ships. Along with others, I had the opportunity to have great Bible classes, with hundreds of sailors involved. All this was opened up to me because I was a member of the United States Navy myself.

Furthermore, I did not know that at the end of the war I would be granted the GI Bill of Rights, which would give me enough money to pay for my seminary training. In fact, it was rather remarkable that the time I had served in the Navy provided me with exactly the right amount to go through four years of seminary training; the month that I graduated from seminary the GI Bill ceased for me. I could not foresee all that, but God did. So it is possible that unexpected results will follow from obedience to what God has set before us to do with regard to government.

In Verse 8 the Searcher faces a very sticky point: the possibility of losing your life in obeying the government is clearly faced here:

**No man has power to retain the spirit, or authority over the day of death; there is no discharge from war, nor will wickedness deliver those who are given to it. {Eccl 8:8 RSV}**

That is a very remarkable verse. Three things are clearly stated. First, death is wholly in God's hands. He can take someone through the most terrible bombardment and preserve his life even though hundreds around him may fall. Many a soldier or sailor has said to himself, "Why did I survive when all my buddies were killed? What does God have for me that he would allow me to live?" I have had to ask that question myself, as dear Christian friends went down in various ships sunk in the Pacific in World War II. I have had to say to myself, "Why wasn't I on that ship?" Many a soldier has had to face the fact that God is saying to him, "I want to use your life." God is able to preserve it. The verse clearly states that death is wholly in his hands. No man has the power to retain the spirit when God calls it home; no one has authority to choose the day of his death; that is entirely in God's hands. That is one of the great encouraging things that a Christian who is facing military service ought to consider.

The second point that this verse states is that there is no discharge in time of war. War is an all-out effort by a nation to preserve something of integrity and value, and as such it requires the wholehearted commitment of all its citizens; there is no way out.

Last night I watched the moving television film, *The Execution of Private Slovik*, the true story of the only soldier since the Civil War to be executed for desertion. This very likable young man, who had had a rough time in his life, had finally found happiness with his new wife, and then he was drafted and put into battle. He was so shaken by that experience that he refused to fight any longer; he laid down his gun and ran away. Finally, he was arrested and tried for desertion. It was evident in the film that everyone involved from the governmental standpoint was anxious to preserve his life. Yet it became very clear that to allow him to escape would demoralize the whole system and open the door for thousands of others to refuse to face the demands of battle. It was the unanimous decision of court after court that he should be executed. Finally, his life was taken, testimony to what the Scriptures here declare: "there is no discharge from war." When a nation is facing a time of danger it is the duty of every citizen to come to its defense.

Yet the verse goes on to say this does not justify any kind of wicked, military violence: "Nor will wickedness [that is in the context military violence, wicked disobedience of the laws of life] deliver those who are given to it." A soldier can be as guilty of murder as any private citizen; he can disobey the laws of justice while he is wearing a uniform and while he is engaged in combat. This verse recognizes the fact that wicked violence is not justified thereby.

Many, perhaps, are uncomfortable at this point. You are probably asking yourselves, "Does that mean that government is always right? Don't governments do wrong at times?" The Searcher faces that in this next section. Verse 9:

**All this I observed while applying my mind to all that is done under the sun, while man lords it over man to his hurt. {Ecc 8:9 RSV}**

There is an honest recognition of the fact that there is evil in government: "Man lords it over others to his own hurt." John Kenneth Galbraith put this very aptly when he said, "Under capitalism man exploits man; under communism it is exactly the reverse." Thereby he recognized the universality of evil.

All governments are evil, but where does the evil come from? It does not mean that government itself is wrong. Government comes from God, the Scriptures, both Old and New Testament alike, tell us. But evil in government arises from the evil in fallen man, living in a fallen world. Who of us is free of evil? Who of us can claim absolute innocence for all we do? No one. There is none righteous, the Searcher found, there is no one who does not do evil. There is no government, therefore, that does not have evil within it.

He gives two very flagrant examples of this. Verses 10-11:

**Then I saw the wicked buried; they used to go in and out of the holy place, and were praised in the city where they had done such things. This also is vanity. {Ecc 8:10 RSV}**

He had been to a funeral of some prominent government leader, a man whom everybody knew was a wretch and a reprobate, even though outwardly he appeared to be holy and righteous as he went in and out of the temple. But at his funeral he was being praised, exalted and glorified; none of his evil deeds were mentioned. That is evil.

We had a recent example of this in the death of President Brezhnev of the Soviet Union. He personally gave the order for the invasion of Afghanistan, and for the destruction of millions of innocent people in various parts of the world, but none of this was mentioned at his funeral. Rather, he received glowing tributes, and was buried as a Hero of the Soviet Union. We do not need to point the finger at Russia; we do the same thing over here. We have a lot of wretches who are buried in honorable graves, who are remembered as great leaders, yet they were wicked and violent men. I am reminded of the story of the woman who was at the funeral of her husband, who had been a notorious wretch and a criminal. On hearing the eloquent eulogy of him, what a wonderful man he was, etc., she said to her son, "Go up and see if that's your father that's in that coffin!"

The second example is found in Verse 11:

**Because sentence against an evil deed is not executed speedily, the heart of the sons of men is fully set to do evil. {Ecc 8:11 RSV}**

What an honest, accurate observation on human life! We find abundant examples today of delays in justice which permit crime to increase and criminals to be encouraged. When justice is delayed or circumvented in any way, when judges turn loose criminals for technicalities when it is clear that they are guilty of outrageous crimes, this only encourages more crime. This is a clear picture of the evil that can be present in government.

Nevertheless, the Searcher finds cause for patience in the twofold promise that follows. Verses 12-14:

**Though a sinner does evil a hundred times and prolongs his life, yet I know that it will be well with those who fear God, because they fear before him; but it will not be well with the wicked, neither will he prolong his days like a shadow, because he does not fear before God. There is a vanity which takes place on earth, that there are righteous men to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked [righteous people being treated like they are wicked], and there are wicked men to whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous [obvious criminals being treated as though they were righteous]. I said this also is vanity. {Ecc 8:12-14 RSV}**

He clearly admits this, but two things encourage him. One, God will preserve his own despite what happens to their bodies. Jesus said to his disciples, "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell," (Matt 10:28{RSV}). That is, the claims of God take precedence over the threats of mankind; we are to walk in the light of that. God is able to take care of his own. In God's eyes, what happens to our bodies is not nearly as significant as what is happening to us. Those who walk in fear before God -- we have looked at this word, fear, which means love, respect, honor and willingness to obey -- will be kept by God, regardless of what happens to their bodies.

But second, God will judge the wrong in his own time. Though the sinner seems to get away with murder, and does the same thing a hundred times, nevertheless God is watching; an accounting will be made. Though the rewards of life seem to be reversed

at times -- wicked men get what the righteous ought to have, righteous men get what the wicked deserve -- nevertheless the promise is that the wicked shall not "prolong his days like a shadow."

That is an interesting phrase which, I think refers to the wicked man's influence after his death. "Life prolonged like a shadow" is not real life; it is the influence of a man after his death. Reading through the course of history, it is remarkable that though they may have been praised and honored during their lives, following their deaths notoriously wicked men are always revealed to have been what they really were. Adolf Hitler and all the Nazis who were associated with him are now despised and abhorred for the most part around the world; they have not been able to prolong their days like a shadow. God works in life to bring truth and justice to light.

So the Searcher comes to the true conclusion -- this is where this book returns again and again -- in Verse 15:

**And I commend enjoyment, for man has no good thing under the sun but to eat and drink and enjoy himself, for this will go with him in his toil through the days of life which God gives him under the sun. {Eccl 8:15 RSV}**

Do not misunderstand. That is not justification for living it up now, for saying, "Eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die." That philosophy is based upon the lie, the illusion that enjoyment comes from pleasant circumstances. If this book is teaching us any one thing it is telling us that that is not true. Enjoyment does not come from happy, pleasant circumstances, where everything is going the way we like it. That is what the world believes; that is what underlies all the television commercials of our day, the magazine ads, etc. No, according to this book, enjoyment is a gift of God which can accompany even difficult and hard circumstances; that is why he encourages us to it. True enjoyment, true contentment does not come from having everything the way you like it. It comes no matter what you are going through, as a gift from the God of glory, who, in relationship with you, is able to give you peace and contentment in your heart in the midst of the pressures, the problems and the dangers of life.

Surely this is what the apostle Paul meant in Philippians: "I have learned the secret both how to be abased and to abound," {cf, Phil 4:12}. What secret? He tells us: "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me," {Phil 4:12 RSV}. It is that inner strengthening, by a relationship with the Living God, which is the secret of contentment, whether you are abased or whether you abound; the realization that a loving Father is working out strange and inscrutable purposes, which you cannot always guess at or estimate, through the difficult problems and circumstances which you are undergoing.

Some of you may be going through such times. Some of you young men may be facing the matter of draft registration and are afraid of what will happen; it is not convenient, it interrupts the affairs of life. But there are a lot of things like that: accidents can do that; disease can do that. Life must be taken the way it is. The glory of the Scriptures is that they do not try to evade life, to put over it a veil, to doll it up or dress it up to make it look different. Scripture faces life just the way it is, but tells us that God has provided an answer, and that answer is found by those who know how to walk before him, to love him, to fear him, to trust him and to rest their lives in his hands. This does not excuse us from the struggles of life, or from the need to make decisions, but it does reassure us that those who walk that way will find a source of contentment and satisfaction that is the gift of the God of grace.

#### **Prayer:**

Thank you, Father, for your faithful dealings with us. How like children we are, so little understanding life, so often confused, so many times bewildered by what we face, sometimes resentful, sometimes angry because it is not all working out the way we thought. Forgive us, and help us to trust, to know, to learn and to realize afresh that your word is always true, that you will indeed be to us what you promised to be, as we trust and obey. We ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

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