

## *Bible Study*

# Bad Kings in the Hands of a Good God

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*Derek Burnside explores God's reassuring habit of using ungodly rulers for both his purposes and his people's good.*

'Dominion belongs to the Lord, and he rules over the nations.' (Psalm 22:28)

'God changes times and seasons; he deposes kings and raises up others.' (Daniel 2:21)

'You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above.' (Jesus to Pilate, John 19:11)

God, clearly, is in control. Scripture repeatedly shows him as ruler over not just his own people but also over the nations that surround them, regardless of the degree of unbelief, idolatry and sheer thuggery so frequently on display. His plans are thwarted neither by the spiritual amnesia of his covenant community nor the rebellion of the nations.

If history is his tapestry, let's watch as he gleefully weaves the threads of sinfulness into his very deliverance from it. Let's marvel as he delegates temporary authority to human rulers without his own eternal reign being in any way threatened. Let's enjoy the tension of the perfect God using far-from-perfect rulers. Let's celebrate his intended ends being met through human players whose own moral agency – and therefore accountability – is left intact. And

let's see these themes in action through the Bible's portrayal of five pagan rulers.

### 1. PHARAOH: THE STAGE FOR GOD'S GLORY

'I have raised you up for this very purpose, that I might show you my power and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.' (Exodus 9:16)

The King of Egypt serves as a stage on which God's glory is performed. He is the epitome of rebellion against God - enslaving Israel, refusing God's commands through Moses, and hardening his heart against divine warnings.

And yet the plagues, the Red Sea rescue and Israel's liberation set a salvation motif that defines Israel's identity and sketches the shape of

the gospel. God uses Pharaoh like a Swiss Army knife; he has many uses! The impotence of Egypt's gods is exposed, God's compassion for oppressed people is spot-lit, and the groundwork for the covenant at Sinai is laid. The stubborn opposition of the most powerful human on the planet shows that no earthly power can stand against the purposes of the Almighty.

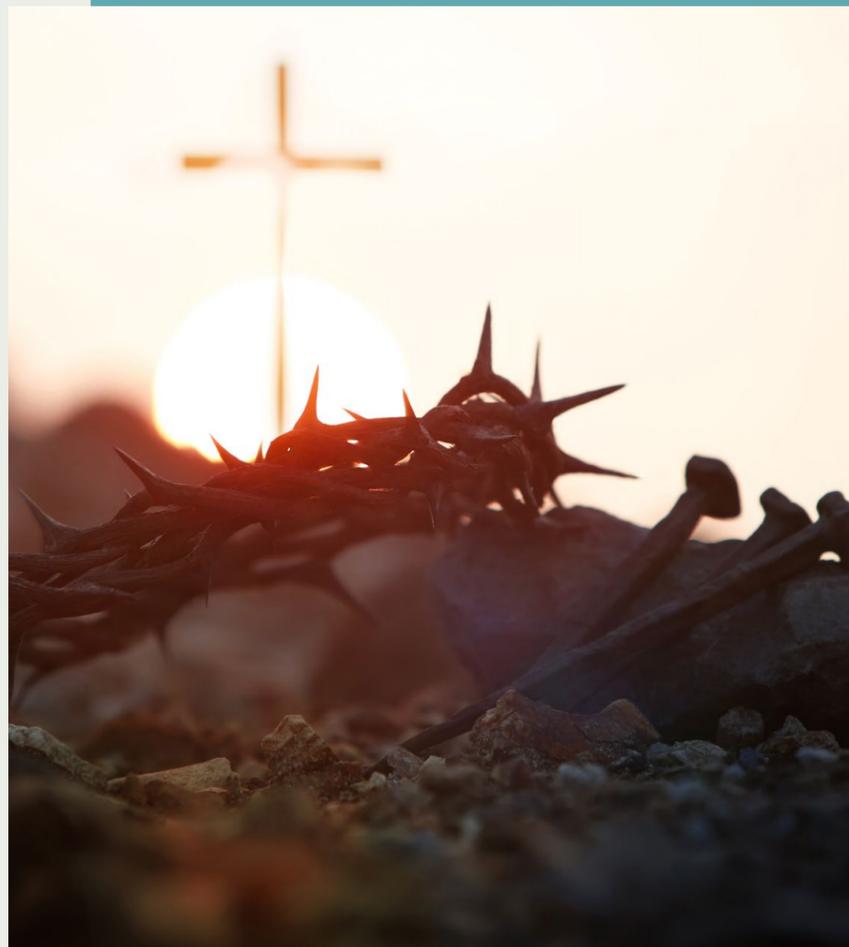
## 2. ASSYRIA: THE ROD OF GOD'S DISCIPLINE

'Woe to the Assyrian, the rod of my anger, in whose hand is the club of my wrath!' (Isaiah 10:5)

The Assyrian kings were no pussycats. The British Museum's collection of stone panels from Sennacherib's Nineveh palace includes graphic scenes celebrating the decapitated corpses of defeated enemies. Responding to Jonah's warning, the Assyrian king himself confesses his people's 'evil ways and their violence' (Jonah 3:8).

Such sin will not go ultimately unpunished, and Assyria's brutal, hubristic expansionism earns the 'woe' referenced above. God's use of pagan kings does not absolve them of responsibility; Assyria will be judged for her arrogance and cruelty. God may use ungodly rulers for a season, but he remains morally just and ultimately holds them accountable.

Nevertheless, God uses them as 'the rod of my anger,' to discipline his people for their idolatry and injustice (Isaiah 10:7). He uses Assyria's assaults to shape, purify, and correct His people. These are divinely permitted and directed acts of discipline, of grace. The goal is not his people's destruction but their purification and eventual restoration. 'The Lord disciplines the one he loves' (Hebrews 12:6).



## 3. NEBUCHADNEZZAR: THE REFINING OF GOD'S PEOPLE

'Now I will give all your countries into the hands of my servant Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon; I will make even the wild animals subject to him.' (Jeremiah 27:6)

Nebuchadnezzar is one of scripture's most apparently effective opponents of God's people and purposes. The seemingly catastrophic siege of Jerusalem, the destruction of the temple and the exile of God's people all came under his reign as Babylonian king. Yet Jeremiah and Daniel both interpret those events as part of God's purposeful plan, to the extent that Nebuchadnezzar is called God's 'servant', an unwitting instrument in the creator's hands.

Through the exile, God accomplishes profound spiritual renewal among his people. It confronts God's people with the consequences of their covenant unfaithfulness, strips away idolatry and prepares them for restoration. It deepens their longing for God's presence and sharpens their understanding of his sovereignty, holiness, and mercy.

'You disciplined me like an unruly calf, and I have been disciplined. Restore me, and I will return, because you are the Lord my God. After I strayed, I repented; after I came to understand, I beat my breast.' (Jeremiah 31:18-19)

Nebuchadnezzar's dreams, Daniel's interpretations and the king's downfall all point towards the fact that 'the Most High is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth and gives

them to anyone he wishes' (Daniel 4:32). Nebuchadnezzar's own confession of faith is one fulfilment of the blessing to the nations that comes through Abraham's line: 'I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and exalt and glorify the King of heaven, because everything he does is right and all his ways are just. And those who walk in pride he is able to humble.' (Daniel 4:37)

## 4. CYRUS: THE AGENT OF GOD'S FAITHFULNESS

'To fulfil the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah, the Lord moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation throughout his realm.' (Ezra 1:1)

God's precise orchestration of history is seen vividly in Cyrus, King of Persia. God raises up a pagan ruler, 'moves his heart', guides his policies, and through him restores his covenant people to their land, in the process fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah 45. The ambitions and administrative reforms of a pagan king serve the redemptive plan of God. For the Jewish people returning from exile, Cyrus's decree is evidence of God's continued faithfulness to his promises.

## 5. PILATE: THE KILLER OF GOD'S LAMB

'"Shall I crucify your king?" Pilate asked.' (John 19:15)

So many of these themes find their fulfilment in Pontius Pilate. A ruler with power only because, as Jesus tells him, it was 'given to him from above' (John 19:11). A man motivated by compromised political pressures that are used to fulfil God's redemption plan. Flawed and fallen, his failings and weakness lead to an unjust execution. Yet it's that death that brings freedom from sin and death for all who will believe on its

power and significance. Joseph's words to his brothers find their ultimate fulfilment in the actions of Pilate and his collaborators: 'You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives' (Genesis 50:20).

## CONCLUSION

God's use of ungodly kings and rulers in scripture reveals his character and mission. From Pharaoh's hardened heart to Pilate's cosmically-significant decision, God will accomplish his will through any circumstance, any nation, any ruler. These stories affirm his power, his control, his commitment to a lost world, and his capacity to weave even the actions of the ungodly into his redemptive plan.

This same God remains sovereign over history today. Let's take confidence in his ability to work all things - including the rise and fall of rulers - for his glory and the good of his people. Ultimately, the Old Testament's testimony prepares us to see in Jesus Christ the fullest expression of God's kingship and the hope of a kingdom that will never be shaken, and points us to five key truths:

### 1. God is in control of kings.

Even when rulers appear godless, corrupt, or hostile to God's people, Scripture assures us that their authority is limited and subordinate. God can steer the course of their decisions to accomplish his purposes.

### 2. God uses ungodly rulers to both judge and deliver.

Pharaoh and Nebuchadnezzar are instruments of judgment, Cyrus is an instrument of liberation, Pilate is unwittingly a contributor to God's plan of redemption.

### 3. God's people can flourish spiritually even under oppressive pagan rule.

The faithfulness of, amongst others, Daniel and his companions, of Esther and of (eventually) Jonah shows that godliness is possible even in hostile environments. Sometimes the very pressure of ungodly rule refines faith. The witness of the persecuted church today is often testimony to that truth.

### 4. God's heart is always the good of his people.

Whether through discipline, cleansing, rescue, or restoration, God works for the good of those who love him and are called according to his purpose.

### 5. God's dealings with the nations highlight his love of the world.

By involving foreign rulers in his plans, God foreshadows the reality that his salvation is not for Israel alone but for every tribe, tongue, and people.

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