

Our Cultural Mandate - Part III¹

Having the oracles of God (the Bible) in our hands gives us a lot to work with to understand what constitutes righteous moral laws, proper justice, and social compassion. As discussed in an earlier column, ancient Israel was a theocracy, so application of their laws must be done with care in our current secular environment. With that in mind, any Biblical examples of believers in nations hostile to God is in many ways more akin to what we face today. Surveying the Bible, we find only a few of God's people in positions of tremendous power and influence while in pagan environments – but the ones we have are wonderful examples for us today.

The first is Joseph (Genesis chapters 37 through 50). Here was a man God brought from slavery to prison to being second only to Pharaoh in power. His integrity, purity, and truthfulness brought favor with those over him. He applied his considerable abilities for the good of the entire country of Egypt, for his own family, and to began the events leading ultimately to the nation of Israel. It's important to note that Joseph neither compromised his faith, nor condemned the false beliefs of the Egyptians. Instead, God had him work within that pagan system, respect authority, establish new laws, and become a premier example of an incredibly influential civil servant – one whose life was committed for the good of all, independent of their personal beliefs or failings.

Daniel was another gifted civil servant (Book of Daniel) that rose to a position of power and authority in Babylon through the intervention of the Lord. He distinguished himself in government service through unquestionable displays of trustworthiness (Daniel 6:3-4) and, like Joseph, demonstrated mercy towards false teachers and astrologers, even interceding for their lives (Daniel 2:24). His personal testimony of faith and example so changed the hearts of Babylonian kings that it speaks to us even today of what godly, faithful believers can accomplish when they strive for excellence, desire to please God, and work diligently to do what is right. If you think this was easy, mentally place either Joseph or Daniel in our world under any current tyrannical, theocratic government and consider the implications.

You may be saying, well, God worked through Old Testament saints in difficult times in miraculous ways, but He doesn't work that way now. I believe that type of reasoning reflects more an unwillingness to do what needs to be done, than anything grounded in Biblical teaching or example. Remember Mordecai's warning to Esther that if she remained silent before the king and didn't intercede for the Jews, God would bring deliverance through someone else while she and her family could perish (Esther 4:12-14). Jesus Himself said that if we had the faith of a mustard seed, incredible things could be accomplished (Matt 17:20-21) for God's glory.

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What about common people in difficult times? We gain more insight into how God's people influence a harsh environment by studying Jeremiah. His letter to the exiles (Jer 29:4-9) is one all believers should strive to follow. Jeremiah exhorted the Jews to seek the peace and prosperity of the city where they were forcibly being taken. How does one do that? Jeremiah specifically mentions prayer, but the implication is also to be diligent in bringing about peace, in effect work for peace. This not only entails personal examples of right-living, but in our day encouraging proper justice, public policy and moral laws. Likewise, the exiles were to labor hard and seek prosperity. This provides for the common welfare of a society and ultimately benefits everyone. God's people, of all people, realize that without our example and influence (sometimes pressure) government will not, on its own, do what's right. Even though the ancient Israelites didn't have access to Babylonian rulers, they were told to influence the culture and society around them in fundamental ways; basically they were to exercise their "cultural mandate".

Unlike Biblical times, in our land of freedom we have the opportunity to seek high government positions of power, directly work to establish justice, and openly proclaim and work for righteousness and compassion in the public square. We have opportunity to provide godly counsel and warning to those in authority, and to work to restrain government to its proper role. Like the above examples, we have a noble calling to invest our lives in society for the common good. But even if there were no personal Biblical examples for us to emulate, principles to guide our involvement are readily there. These will be explored in more detail in next month's installment of this series.

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