

# PRAYING FOR POLITICAL LEADERS

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Early on a Monday morning, my phone rings. With early morning raspiness in my throat, I pick it up, "Hello?"

"Mr. Borthwick, this is the White House calling. Please hold for the President of the United States."

"Is this a joke?" I ask, but silence on the other end indicates I'm on hold.

The next voice I hear begins, "Paul, this is the President. I'm entering this week with some huge decisions to make, both domestically and internationally. I'm wondering if you could stop and pray with me for wisdom so that my decisions foster the greatest long-term good in our country and across the world."

I hang up, stunned at the call, but the phone rings again. This time it's the Secretary General of the United Nations calling with a similar request. Then the President of China calls, followed by the Prime Minister of Israel, the Sultan of Oman, and the President of Venezuela.

Sound far-fetched? In one respect, it is. Neither the President of the United States nor any of these other leaders has ever called me, and I'm pretty sure they never will. But they really don't need to call me. God has already called. God calls all of us to pray for

our government's leaders and our world leaders. Paul exhorts us in I Timothy 2:1-2 to offer "requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving... for everyone" [and especially for] "kings and all those in authority."

I'll get to some of the details on how to pray shortly, but first, a question:

## **WHY DO WE FAIL TO PRAY FOR POLITICAL LEADERS?**

Many of us may feel reticent to pray for these leaders because we feel inadequate or too small to make a difference at the national or international leadership level. Others of us, however, fail to pray because we simply don't like some of the people who lead our nation and our world. We may see them as "too liberal" or "too conservative." We may see their political positions as unbiblical. We may view other national leaders as enemies of the Gospel or as obstacles of our own national interests.

But the Bible doesn't give us the option not to pray.

A few years ago, about the time that the man who was then our U.S. President was alienating a large portion of the Christian population because of his public stance on some volatile social

issues and his private (though public) personal moral failures, I was urging a congregation to remember our political leaders in prayer. An audible snicker echoed across the audience, most of whom – I’m guessing – came from the other political party. It was as if they were responding, “You’ve got to be kidding! Pray for that guy?”

I paused and reminded my brothers and sisters that the commands concerning prayer for those in authority and submission to the authorities were written by New Testament writers who were living under the horrors of Roman emperors like Nero, leaders who would ultimately persecute, displace and kill many first century Christians.

In other words, the New Testament writers don’t give us license to stop praying for our political or our international leaders if we don’t like them or they are not from the political party we favor or they are not people that we wanted elected.

It’s obviously a greater challenge to pray for those who are unjust or not in keeping with our personal convictions. Christians around the world testify of the challenge to pray when the political rulers are despots, oppressors of Christianity, and advocates of un-Christian or even anti-Christian behavior (see sidebar), but the command is still clear – God calls us to pray for those who lead us

politically. And the plural form in I Timothy 2:1 – “kings” – indicates that we must incorporate the leaders of other nations into our prayers.

## **BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS**

Prayer for political leaders flows from a perspective built on the foundation of the sovereignty of God. We pray believing that the whole earth is under his sovereign control. He is the Lord of history – past, present, and future. The people in positions of leadership are incorporated into his sovereign plan.

According to Paul in Romans 13, “there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God.” The Scriptures repeatedly teach that every political leader rules at God’s command (II Samuel 12:7-8; Isaiah 41:2-4; 45:1-7; Jeremiah 27:4-7; Daniel 2:21, 37-38; 4:17, 25; Proverbs 8:15-16; Job 12:18). It may seem unfathomable to us to consider the dictators and immoral and lying leaders of our world as under God’s sovereign plan, but the Scriptures affirm that these historical leaders and the events that follow them are part of God’s long-term design and directive. Even the “beast” of Revelation 13 is ultimately given his power by God (Revelation 13:5, 7, 14, 15). We may not comprehend God’s long-term plan, but the Bible clearly affirms it.

Nigeria is a country torn by Muslim-Christian tensions, especially in the northern part of the country. At a recent student mission conference sponsored by the Nigeria Fellowship of Evangelical Students, I was impressed by their sense of God's sovereign work in history expressed in the prayer guide that these students had created.

Expressing their belief that God is the Lord of the whole world, they urged prayer for their President, their Government officials, their judges and the local legislations – even the ones supporting the imposition of rigid Islamic Sharia Law, something very oppressive to Christians. They go on to encourage prayer for the sustaining of the democracy, the improvement of the economy, the defeat of corruption, and the spread of the Gospel.

I brought that prayer guide home to direct my prayers in my own region, state, and country, as well as for leaders in other nations of the world.

## **SO HOW DO WE PRAY?**

As we pray, we first of all can pray **CONFIDENTLY**. Proverbs 21:1 reminds us that “the king's heart is in the hand of the Lord; he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases.” The president or king or prime minister might not be calling us and asking for direction, but the King of kings and the Ruler of all rulers invites

us into his presence to intercede on behalf of these leaders. As mysterious as it sounds, God invites us to turn his hand as he directs the hearts of rulers.

In the summer of 1989, a fifth-grade teacher from a Christian school visited what was then known as East Berlin. The sight of the Berlin Wall and all that it symbolized concerning human and religious oppression overwhelmed her. She returned to school that September and urged her fifth graders to start praying every day for the Berlin Wall to come down. In October/ November 1989, that Wall came down, beginning a process that eventually dismantled Soviet Communism.

I'm sure that those fifth graders were not the only people praying for that Wall to come down, but because they prayed, they gained a confident understanding of God at work in the world through the prayers of his people.

Our confidence in God's global sovereignty encourages us to pray for leaders around the world as well as our own national leaders. For this reason, I try to choose at least one leader from another country to pray for every day. The newspaper or CNN might provoke my prayers through a breaking story, but I turn it into an opportunity to influence global events at the throne of God in prayer.

Secondly, we can pray **HUMBLY AND REPENTANTLY**. Our leaders can be a reflection of our nation. When Isaiah caught a vision of the Lord, he confessed not only his own sin but the sins of his people – “I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips” (Isaiah 6:5).

We too must look at our leaders and realize – especially in locations where the leaders are elected through democratic process – that these political leaders often reflect the best and worst of our nation. A materialistic leader often reflects the materialism of his culture. A violent leader might reflect a spirit of violence sweeping the nation. Leaders who get to positions of power through deception often come from a culture built on lies.

During the time in the USA when President Clinton was lying publicly about his adulterous affair in the White House, a humble, repentant pastor led his congregation in prayer. He prayed for our President to repent and to experience God’s forgiveness, but he went a step beyond the President. He also invited the congregation to repent on behalf of the nation for our sins of immorality and deception as a culture. He saw our president’s sins as a reflection of the spiritual state of our nation.

We pray humbly and repentantly as well because there are times when the people in power are put there as part of God’s



judgment. Jeremiah quotes God as referring to the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar as “my servant” (Jeremiah 25:9; 27:6; 43:10). Isaiah reminds those facing exile that God considers the Medo-Persian King Cyrus as “my anointed” (Isaiah 45:1) and he affirms to the people of Israel that “Cyrus will perform all my desire” (Isaiah 44:28).

When the invasion of the Ottoman Empire threatened at the gates of Europe, Martin Luther referred to the threat as God’s judgment on the church for its unfaithfulness: “The Turk is the rod of God’s anger against the apostate church so opposition to it must begin with repentance, prayer, and preaching God’s word.”

When a political leader’s stance on issues contradicts ours and what we believe the Bible teaches, we need to step back humbly and ask, “What is God teaching us about the spiritual state of ourselves and our nation?”

Third, we should pray **BIBLICALLY AND STRATEGICALLY**. We can be sure that God wants our leaders to exercise biblical ideals like righteousness and justice. We also pray for them in the administration of societal peace. In the early days of the Christian church, Tertullian urged Christians to pray for the Emperor to have “long life, secure dominion, a safe home, a faithful senate, a righteous people, and a world at peace.”

Romans 13:1-7 instructs us to pray that our leaders will do good, defend good, and punish evil. Peter echoes the same idea when he writes that the emperor is “God’s supreme authority” and that governors are “sent by [God] to punish those who do wrong and commend those who do right” (I Peter 2:13-17).

The instructions of I Timothy 2:1-2 mandates that we pray for political conditions which will seek to advance the Gospel. Our prayer for “kings and all those in authority” is so that “we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.” But this is not the end in itself. We pray this way because “This is good and pleases God our Savior, who wants all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.”

Strategic prayer provokes me to pray for our President and Supreme Court Justices and other political leaders that they will enact laws which protect the needs of the poor and defenseless. It challenges me to pray that governmental leaders protect a culture that allows for the preaching of the Gospel. And it reminds me to pray that leaders in oppressive countries to change their positions and allow greater human and religious rights – especially the freedom to choose Jesus Christ.

Fourth, when we pray for our political leaders, we should pray **HISTORICALLY**, remembering that God is in control. Praying

historically, though, requires patience. God seldom works in history and in political leaders as quickly as we'd like.

Commenting on Paul's and Peter's perspective on submission to the horrific regime of Nero and other dictators, William Barclay writes, "Emperors might be persecutors and those in authority might be determined to stamp out Christianity. But the Christian Church can never, even in the times of bitterest persecution, cease to pray for them." Barclay then goes on to trace this sense of submission and support throughout the earliest days of Christianity. By 311 AD, he observes, the emperor was asking for the prayers of Christians.

In the day of Paul the apostle, the Roman government did indeed torture and kill many Christians, but persecution actually provoked the spread of Christianity (see Acts 8:1). Historians also note that it the *Pax Romana*, the Roman peace, which gave the Christian missionary the chance to do his work. Without the communication, travel, and social systems established by the Roman Empire, the spread of Christianity might have been much slower.

When former U.S. President Ronald Reagan died, I remembered the significance of keeping a historical perspective as we pray. In the early 1980's, one of the greatest fears of our culture was that

President Reagan's actions against the USSR would provoke nuclear holocaust. Now more than 20 years later, Mr. Reagan and his counterpart, Mr. Gorbachev of the USSR, are given credit for changing world history by the dismantling of Soviet Communism. These leaders remind me Who is the ultimate Lord of history.

Finally, we should pray **FAITHFULLY**. Our prayers should not just surge at election time, nor in the midst of national crises, nor in response to political leaders we either love or detest. The passage in I Timothy reminds us to incorporate our political leaders into all sorts of prayers. As we make our requests and prayers, we should remember our governmental leaders. As we offer up intercession, we come to the throne of God as advisers to the President or King or Prime Minister. When we list our thanksgiving, we remember to thank God for the rulers we do have, and we remember to thank God that He is the ultimate power behind them all.

To encourage faithful prayer, I try to pray for leaders in my own nation daily – starting with the President, then the Senate, then Governors, etc. In addition, I match a continent (or sub-continent) with each day of the week. On Monday, I pray for countries and leaders in Europe. On Tuesday, I go to Latin America and the Caribbean. Wednesday's prayers focus on North

Africa and the Muslim world. Thursday I'm praying around the rest of Africa. Fridays take me to Central and South Asia, and Saturday's prayer journey finds me in East Asia. Sunday leaves opportunity to pray for global leaders who influence many nations – people like the leaders of the European Union, the Secretary General of the United Nations or the Pope.

Confident, humble, strategic, historic, faithful prayer. The President or other political leaders in our country or internationally most likely won't be calling to request prayer. But don't let that stop you. God has already given the mandate!

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