

# Does God Intervene in the Affairs of Nations?<sup>o</sup>

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I believe that we can only remain optimistic in the midst of events in our world today if we can answer for ourselves this one question: Does God Intervene in the Affairs of Nations? This is a time of tremendous uncertainty. We see decisions being made in our world that alarm us. Decisions are made that hurt others either by accident or with evil motivation. At best, decisions seem to be made with very narrow interests in mind, not for the general good. This is complicated by the fact that our nations are now so inter-connected that a decision made in one corner of our world affects those across the globe. As a consequence, the problems we face in leading our nations seem beyond the ability of any individual to solve. The question is on all of our lips: Is there any help for us?

I want to test two hypotheses with you: First, there is a God actively involved in the affairs of our nations. Second, His help is essential in leading and building healthy nations. For two decades I have been testing, together with government officials, the proposition that our nations must be governed in partnership with God. I would like to share with you some of those conclusions. I would also like to help you understand the work that God is doing in the life of each government official so that you can better understand the work of God around your own life.

Let me give you background information before we begin testing these hypotheses. God spoke through one of His servants to reveal the following truth:

*He rules forever by His power, His eyes watch the nations.*<sup>1</sup>

*You (God) rule the peoples justly and guide the nations of the earth.*<sup>2</sup>

These affirm that there is a God who has created each nation with a purpose and a plan, and who is actively working out His purposes for each nation. God has described the general tenets of His plan as follows:

*"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."*<sup>3</sup>

God has a plan for each of our nations that is good in every way.

He pointedly tells us that He intervenes in our human plans to accomplish His purposes, with these words: "The LORD foils the plans of the nations"—that is, the plans of human origin that contradict His. God goes on to tell us: "He thwarts the purposes of the peoples. But the plans of the LORD stand firm for ever, the purposes of His heart through all generations."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>o</sup> Statement delivered to a group of diplomats at the United Nations, New York 8 May 2003.

One essential component of His plan is government. Government is God's idea. It did not originate with man. God gave us His perspective on this institution when, referring to governing officials, He said:

*There is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted...The authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing.*<sup>5</sup>

Government is a God-ordained institution, established by God specifically for the purpose of achieving an orderly society in which each individual can reach his or her full potential. All government officials are servants of God, with responsibility for administering this institution. They are servants of God as much as any clergy. The Head of Government is chief among these.

God has given us one more piece of information. He has told us: "He sets up kings and deposes them."<sup>6</sup> Although the head of the nation is important to God because of the crucial role he or she plays in God's plan, God often makes an example of the head of the nation to illustrate a fundamental principle. Generally, the principle God elucidates for the head of the nation applies, by extension, to all government officials. Here, we may conclude that God actively puts into office all government officials, yourself included, regardless of the human instrumentation He uses.

**God's Active Intervention in the Lives of Government Officials.** Now, let us begin testing the hypothesis that there is a God actively involved in the affairs of a nation and its administration. God's active intervention in the lives of government officials is readily visible in the lives of two powerful rulers who headed early empires. During a six-century period leading up to the birth of Christ, the Babylonian, Persian, Greek and Roman Empires, in succession, dominated the known world. God intervened in the lives of Nebuchadnezzar II, King of Babylonia, and Cyrus, King of Persia, for all the world to see.

God said the following to Cyrus, King of Persia:

*I am the Lord...who says of Cyrus, "He is My shepherd and will accomplish all that I please"....This is what the Lord says to His anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I take hold of...."so that you may know that I am the Lord, the God...who summons you by name....I summon you by name and bestow on you a title of honour, though you do not acknowledge Me. I am the Lord, and there is no other; apart from Me there is no God. I will strengthen you, though you have not acknowledged Me, so that from the rising of the sun to the place of its setting men may know there is none besides Me."*<sup>7</sup>

Who is speaking here? Clearly, it is God Himself. He describes Cyrus as "My shepherd" and as "His anointed." He also makes it clear that as Cyrus enters office, he does "not acknowledge Me." God summons Cyrus by name, picks him up, takes hold of his right hand to guide him, bestows upon him a title of great honour, places His anointing upon him, strengthens him, and uses him as His shepherd even though Cyrus does not initially acknowledge God. This tells us about God's patience with us while we learn to work with our unseen Master.

The expression rendered “so that” in the English communicates cause and effect. There are two powerful “so that” statements in the passage we are looking at. The first is: *so that you may know that I am the Lord, the God...* God’s first purpose in the life of Cyrus is that he would know for certain that God exists and is in charge. Parenthetically, the word *know* here does not mean to know about, but rather conveys experiential knowledge.<sup>8,9</sup> The same original word is used of the intimacy between two lovers. All of the things that God does in the life of Cyrus, none of which he deserves, are so that Cyrus will know and experience God for himself. By extension, we may conclude that God’s first great purpose in the life of the head of nation, and of every government official, is that he or she knows God in an intimate, experiential way. I am convinced the discerning government official will be able to see God’s hand at work if he or she is willing. I am convinced that this truth applies to every public servant, yourself included.

The second “so that” statement is: *so that from the rising of the sun to the place of its setting men may know there is none besides Me.* God’s second great purpose in the life of the head of nation is that everyone else, as they watch the leader, will recognize the work of God. God works in the life of the head of nation so that members of society will recognize that there is a God who rules over that nation and the lives of all men and women. In Cyrus’ case, God’s expressed impact encompassed all of humanity, because Cyrus ruled the whole, known world. The application of this truth is that the impact is upon everyone under the administration of the head of the nation. Likewise, when you apply this principle to government officials at other levels, the ones impacted are those under the jurisdiction of the official.

From God’s hand in the life of Cyrus, we learn that the government official is so important in God’s overall work on this earth that God sovereignly picks up an individual, and supernaturally places him or her in office. He does this with two overpowering objectives:

1. *so that you may know that I am the Lord,*
2. *so that all those under your jurisdiction may know there is none besides Me.*

We have no choice but to conclude that God is actively involved in the affairs of a nation and its leaders. This is made even clearer by the knowledge that God revealed these instructions and His purposes to Cyrus 170 years before he reigned. God gave these instructions to Cyrus in 710 B.C., whereas Cyrus actually began his reign in 539 B.C. God has His hand so much on the affairs of a nation that He could reveal His work in Cyrus’ life long before Cyrus was born!

With this kind of intervention in the life of a ruler, you would expect him to change the way he governed for the better. The impact of God on Cyrus’ life is in evidence within the halls of the United Nations. In the second-floor corridor between the Security Council and the Trusteeship Council is a copy of a document issued by Cyrus. The original may be viewed in the British Museum.<sup>10,11,12,13</sup> Cyrus begins this document:

*I am Cyrus, King of the World, Great King, Mighty King, King of Babylon...;  
King of the Four Quarters...*

He then proceeds to describe his takeover of Babylon:

*I, well-disposed, entered Babylon and amidst public jubilation, sat on the royal throne...My numerous troops took over Babylon without molestation. I allowed no one to harass or terrorize the people....I concerned myself with the needs of Babylonians...to promote their well-being. I freed the citizens of Babylonia from*

*the yoke of servitude. I restored their dilapidated dwellings and redressed their grievances.*

Cyrus describes himself as a compassionate ruler. That he, indeed, ruled in such a manner is supported by other historical evidence. This document testifies to a ruler being changed from the inside to sincerely care about the people. God picked up this man who did not initially acknowledge God and worked in his heart in such a way that he broke with the prevailing tradition of harsh, authoritarian rule. In fact, this document hanging in the U.N. is aptly entitled “The First Known Human Rights Declaration.” God’s work in the life of Cyrus is real and it is dramatic.

We can also gain valuable understanding by looking at the way God dealt with the head of the first of the four empires, the Babylonian empire. Nebuchadnezzar II was King of Babylon at the zenith of its power. Thus, Nebuchadnezzar was presumably the most powerful ruler who ever lived. As such, he was proud and arrogant. God warned him to humble himself for more than a year. Finally, after Nebuchadnezzar continued to ignore these warnings, God humbled him by removing his sanity. Nebuchadnezzar spent the next 7 years living as a wild animal in the forest. Nebuchadnezzar describes his experience in a fascinating, open letter that concludes with these words:

*At the end of that time, I, Nebuchadnezzar, raised my eyes towards heaven, and my sanity was restored. Then I praised the Most High; I honoured and glorified Him who lives for ever. His dominion is an eternal dominion; His kingdom endures from generation to generation....He does as He pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No-one can hold back His hand or say to Him: “What have You done?” At the same time that my sanity was restored, my honour and splendour were returned to me for the glory of my kingdom. My advisers and nobles sought me out, and I was restored to my throne and became even greater than before. Now 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.<sup>14</sup>*

Although the Bible is the most accurate historical book of antiquity,<sup>15</sup> there are other historical works surviving from the early sixth century B.C. that support Nebuchadnezzar’s absence from the throne for a lengthy period.<sup>16,17,18</sup>

What I find fascinating is that this man—presumably the most powerful ruler in history, who lost 7 years of glory and material benefit due to God’s discipline—expressed no resentment toward God, only the highest admiration. We must conclude that even when God has to correct us as we deviate from His path for us, He does it in such a way that we can recognize His love for us.

Can we find God working out the same two overpowering objectives in Nebuchadnezzar’s life that He did in Cyrus’ life?

- 1. so that you may know that I am the Lord,*
- 2. so that from the rising of the sun to the place of its setting men may know there is none besides Me.*

Yes, we can! Nebuchadnezzar made it very clear that he recognized God’s working in his life.

You might think that it would be easy for Nebuchadnezzar to recognize God's hand working in his life. However, pride can blind a government official, especially the head of a nation. And in Nebuchadnezzar's case, it took seven years before he was able to recognize that it was God working in his life. Secondly, through Nebuchadnezzar's clear words, every subject in his empire would know there is a God who reigns over the empire and over their lives. We can imagine that both Nebuchadnezzar and Cyrus governed more compassionately as a result of recognizing God working in their lives.

From my view at the United Nations, I have a partial, albeit very incomplete, picture of what God is doing in the lives of heads of nations. I have seen God working in the lives of dozens of heads of nations. So as not to betray trust, I will share very cautiously, without identifying anyone. One example is a man who governed for several years as a Marxist dictator. With the close of the Cold War and the opening up of his country to multi-party elections, he was soundly defeated in the first open election and removed from office. In the process, God began to work in his life. God caused him to repent before the parliament, certainly sparing him from the consequences of his past abuses. He then focused his life on getting to know God. When the next elections were held in his country, he had so changed that he was elected by popular acclaim to head the nation. Those around him tell me that there is no comparison between the way he governs now and the way he governed before. God was working out the same two purposes in this man's life as He did in Cyrus and Nebuchadnezzar. And in the process, this man governs more compassionately as God is becoming the ruler in his personal life. It appears that God took him through a *Nebuchadnezzar experience* and, in the process, changed him into God's instrument in the nation.

Let me share one more example of God intervening in the affairs of our nations today. Two decades ago, there was a nation without the strong leadership it had experienced for many decades. Rivalries developed within the cabinet, each with his own backing, and the nation seemed destined for bloodshed. In the midst of this, followers of Jesus came into that nation. In response to their teaching, God changed hearts, and spiritual rejuvenation occurred throughout the nation. During the course of their stay, these spiritual leaders met with the cabinet. There were changed hearts and spiritual renewal within the cabinet as well. A few days later, one powerful minister came to the Prime Minister to apologize for his intentions and to express a desire to cooperate. As a result of changed hearts among the leadership, bloodshed was averted and the nation was saved. The change was so dramatic that when I shared this example, using similarly vague wording, with an audience that included a later Prime Minister of this nation, he came to me afterward and said, "That was my country you were speaking about!" God still works in the affairs of nations and in the lives of leaders. We simply need the eyes to see.

Not only does God intervene for the sake of nations, but He demonstrates His compassion, even more remarkably, by intervening in individual lives. A number of years ago, Elaine's and my lives were forever changed when God intervened in her life. Elaine was diagnosed as having a malignant ovarian tumour at an advanced stage. This kind of tumour at such an advanced stage is very difficult to treat effectively. Furthermore, the malignancy had spread to other locations in her reproductive system. Did this mean that God was going to allow my beloved wife to die? We did not believe it was God's intent. Two days later, she returned for further testing. As she was waiting in the examination room for the tests, in great pain, Jesus appeared to her in person. This was a miracle in itself. He told her: "You are going to be all right. You are going to be all right." She thought this meant she would not die from the cancer, but that she would have to undergo extensive treatment. Then, Jesus disappeared. A few minutes later, the medical technician began the tests and scanned her body for an hour looking for the tumour,

but could find none! Subsequently, the doctors have taken tissue samples but have found no evidence of cancer cells. The symptoms, which had been present for more than a year, immediately left and never returned. She did not need any medical treatment. God clearly performed a miracle! God still intervenes in the lives of individuals today with a love that seems unwarranted.

As we consider God's intervention, let us be honest. We must conclude that we, as God's human instruments, have betrayed our responsibilities by not seeking to make decisions as God would have us and, as a result, we have made terrible mistakes, inflicting needless suffering. For example, I feel that we in the West should get down on our knees before the people of Africa and repent for the mess we have handed them through artificially carving up the continent and forcing peoples without natural affinities to function together. Similarly, at Yalta in February 1945, tens of millions of people were arbitrarily condemned to decades of dehumanization at the whim of influential decision-makers. And there are countless injustices being experienced today, all starting with the premise that there is no God reigning over our nations, to whom we must look and to whom we are directly accountable in every action we take.

One issue that causes me great pain is that the constitution drafted for the newly independent United States in 1787 tolerated the dehumanizing institution of slavery. Decades later, it was the sense of God's directive to correct this injustice that drove Abraham Lincoln. Looking at his struggles as he sought to correct this injustice, we gain insight into his perspective on our active God. In the midst of this struggle, one man said to Lincoln:

*Slavery must be stricken down wherever it exists. If we do not do right, I believe God will let us go our own way to our ruin. But if we do right I believe he will lead us safely out of this wilderness, crown our arms with victory, and restore our now dissevered Union.*

Lincoln replied:

*My faith is greater than yours. I...believe that He will compel us to do right in order that He may do these things, not so much because we desire them as that they accord with His plan of dealing with this nation, in the midst of which He means to establish justice.<sup>19</sup>*

Lincoln saw God as working out a plan greater than our own. Our responsibility is to seek to understand that plan and to cooperate with Almighty God in achieving it.

What happens when there is injustice and we do not see God intervening? We must be quick to realize there are times when there is more He asks of us. For example, He has told us:

*If My people, who are called by My name, will humble themselves and pray and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land.<sup>20</sup>*

Many times God's plan includes the requirement for our active participation.

This afternoon, we have taken a very small look at the way God works and intervenes in the affairs of nations and the lives of leaders to accomplish His grand purposes. If we are going to be honest, the conclusion we are forced to draw is that if God is at work in these ways that we can see, we must believe that He is at work in other ways that we cannot see.

As we look at our nations and our world from any angle, it is clear that we need help beyond ourselves. In many cases, our people are worse off than they were 40 years ago. Our hope cannot be in the one superpower. Our hope cannot be in the IMF or the World Bank. And, sadly, as significant as the U.N. is, even it cannot save us. No human force can be the source of our hope. We need the help of the one and only real superpower—Almighty God.

I am convinced that any honest Head of State/Government or other government official will readily admit that administering a nation is beyond the capability of any human being. For a national leader to try to fulfil his responsibilities without seeking to understand the mind of God and depending upon Him would be analogous to your piloting a ship through the barrier reef around Bermuda without using the navigational maps that are available. Let me ask you: Would the use of those navigational maps be an insult to your intelligence, or an affront to your leadership ability? Of course not! It would be common sense. How foolish it would be to view a national leader's expression of dependence upon God as a sign of weakness! Guiding our nations is far more complex than navigating a ship through a reef.

If a leader fails to view himself as the junior partner in this relationship and ignores God's purposes and plans for the nation, I am convinced that untold, unnecessary suffering will be experienced by the people, suffering that cannot be fully alleviated no matter how much money or manpower is poured out in an effort to overcome the problem. Let me ask this question: If the work of the government official is so special to God that He intervenes in the life and actions of that official even before that official acknowledges his Master, shouldn't we readily cooperate with our Master rather than forcing Him to drag us along like a stubborn, disobedient child?

**How can we capture the help that only God provides?** The crucial question becomes: How do we become so intimately linked with God as to become His instrument in the leadership of our nations? God created us out of love and for the purpose of bestowing love upon us as part of this intimate relationship. The God who reigns over nations is holy—without moral imperfection. However, clearly, we are not morally perfect. We have the capacity for evil. We hurt others, even the ones we love, by our selfishness. Our moral imperfection—our unholiness—blocks this relationship with God. It blocks us from the full benefits available to us as human beings, whether as private citizens or government officials. Our unholiness is incompatible with God's perfect holiness. By ourselves, there is no way we can come into the presence of Holy God. By ourselves, we are eternally separated from the One who created us and loves us. The eternal consequences are great when one recognizes that being separated from our Creator at the end of this lifetime means a literal hell.

How can this blocked relationship with God be overcome? We need a way to be forgiven so that God can draw us close to Himself. By ourselves, there is no way we can accomplish this. Only Almighty God can do it. That is precisely why God Himself came to earth as Jesus to die on our behalf to pay the penalty for our sins. God has told us:

*Jesus is the image of the invisible God....By Jesus all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together...He is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything He might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all His fullness dwell in Jesus and through Him to reconcile to Himself all things...by making peace through His blood, shed on the cross.<sup>21</sup>*

Mahatma Gandhi described that sacrifice when he said that Jesus, "a man who was completely innocent, offered himself as a sacrifice for the good of others, including his enemies, and became the ransom of the world. It was a perfect act."<sup>22</sup>

Thus, Jesus has told us "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me."<sup>23</sup> God has told us "There is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved."<sup>24</sup> Through Jesus' death and resurrection, God is able to forgive us and to see us as holy. Jesus' death and resurrection is the only provision given to mankind whereby we can have our sins forgiven and have this intimate relationship with God. God has told us:

*Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behaviour. But now He has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in His sight, without blemish and free from accusation.*<sup>25</sup>

*God took the sinless Christ and poured into Him our sins. Then, in exchange, He poured God's goodness into us!*<sup>26</sup>

Let me be very clear: What I am advocating is not religion. It is the person of Jesus. As God Himself, Jesus is for all of us, not just certain races, cultures, or regions of the world. I believe this is what Mahatma Gandhi meant when he said:

*Because the life of Jesus has the significance and the transcendency to which I have alluded, I believe that he belongs not solely to Christianity, but to the entire world; to all races and people, it matters little under what flag, name or doctrine they may work, profess a faith or worship a God inherited from their ancestors.*<sup>27</sup>

The repentance and forgiveness that allows us to have an intimate relationship with God and, as a result to operate in partnership with God as His servant in our nations, is centred in the person of Jesus. Let us not think we can have this any other way but through embracing Jesus and Him alone.

How do we place our faith in Jesus for the forgiveness of our sins, so we can experience this intimate relationship with God? The illustration that communicates best to me relates to the region where I grew up—near Niagara Falls. The water flows over Niagara Falls so violently that if anyone falls into the water, it is certain death. Many people do risky things over Niagara Falls to gain attention. One of these was a tightrope walker. He had a wire strung over the Falls, from one side to the other. This man first walked along this wire from one side of the Falls to the other, and back. Then, as the crowd grew, he repeated his walk but this time he pushed a wheelbarrow in front of him as he walked over to the other side and back. Then, he boldly filled the wheelbarrow with bricks and guided it along the wire over the Falls. By this time, the crowd had grown very large and was cheering loudly for him. He then asked the crowd "How many of you believe I can take this wheelbarrow over the Falls carrying a person inside instead of these bricks?" The crowd cheered wildly. Then, he asked the crowd "Who is willing to get into the wheelbarrow?" The crowd became silent. Their belief lacked 100% confidence. To place our faith in Jesus Christ means to get into the wheelbarrow with Him, making ourselves completely

dependent upon Him. Our sole basis for having our sins forgiven and for entering a close relationship with God is Jesus' death on our behalf.

It is this making ourselves dependent upon Jesus that gives us the capacity to see God's hand at work in our nations and to help achieve His purposes. No one—neither you nor I—can become the agent God would use in the lives of our nations without the life of Jesus in us. Therefore, if you are serious about developing the kind of relationship with God necessary for building a healthy world, I challenge you to come to Him. Jesus invites us:

*If any man is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture said, "From his innermost being shall flow rivers of living water."<sup>28</sup>*

As we come to Jesus and drink, He will satisfy us and this will spill over to others in our societies, causing them to come to Jesus and drink. As others around us drink, there will be a growing corps of individuals who are able to begin partnering with God to build healthy nations.

For this reason, I invite you to come to Jesus and drink. Let me encourage you to embrace the Master Shepherd of our world and your life. I encourage you to invite Jesus into your life by praying to God:

*Holy God, please forgive me for sinning against You. Thank You for loving me enough that You came to this earth as Jesus and died on my behalf so that I could have an intimate relationship with You. I ask You to come into my life to dwell. Today, I receive You as my Saviour from my sins. I ask You to guide me moment-by-moment as I serve You. Thank You. Amen.*

Not only will this start you on the most exciting journey known to mankind, but it is the most significant thing each of us can do to become God's agents for implementing His plans within our world.

## References

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