

God is our Help and our Shield

Feb. 14, 2016

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I think the toes of the church of Jesus Christ in America need to be stepped on. Are you okay with that? I want to do that as lovingly as I can. This isn't about stepping on our cultures toes; it's not about stepping on politicians toes. We need our toes stepped on. But not to get out the vote; not to challenge Christians to vote biblical values (some are already beating that drum). I think the toes of Christians need to be stepped on to wake the Church of Jesus Christ to stop looking for the state to do for us what Jesus has already promised to do; to stop trusting in the power of the state to usher in the Kingdom of God and to be our provider. Jesus said my kingdom is not of this world. I think, though, we wish it were. I think we are so used to our flesh being satisfied, I think we want our flesh to be satisfied that the clear teaching that we are exiles, that America (this world) is not our home, that we are citizens of a better country doesn't sound like good news to us. And, consequently, we fix our hope in political parties and power.

I firmly believe that I can get myself in more trouble with a wide swath of American Christians for being wrong politically rather than being wrong biblically; I really believe that. I've seen the passion many Christians have for political engagement and wish they had that for the things of God. That's due, in my estimation, to an improper hope and trust in political solutions rather than in the provision of God in Christ. I really believe that our embrace of political positions and convictions are so strong (too strong) we'd struggle to link arms and break bread in true Christian fellowship with other brothers and sisters who disagree with us politically on the 2nd amendment, on the Supreme Court, on immigration or taxation. That, friends, should never be.

I imagine, culturally speaking, fellow Christians who live in NYC, Washington DC, Seattle, WA or New Orleans, LA (not to mention other places around the globe) are going to have different political convictions than you. They might feel differently than you about gun control; they might feel differently about immigration or defense spending or welfare than you. That shouldn't be too surprising. Our immediate context is going to significantly influence political conviction. And while we, theoretically speaking, might passionately disagree and debate the politics of the day, when it comes time to break the bread, when it comes time to worship and serve our Lord Jesus, those political differences should make a miniscule difference in the enjoyment and delight we have with one another in the body of Christ. And my fear is that those things do; political convictions have risen too high in our priorities. That's happened, I believe, because we've lost sight of the glory of the kingdom of God; when that happens, we love the this world too much. And I want to us to return to a pure devotion in the Lord.

Some, I think, will hear my sermons in this series and think I don't believe these political issues matter. That's not true. I do think they matter; I think they matter a lot. Just look at the Korean peninsula and the radical difference the governments make in North and South Korea and you can see that governments matter. And I think there are good reasons for us to stay engaged in our culture and seek to be an influence in the public and political square. These things do

matter and I have several sermons in this series that focus on how they matter and how we should process our involvement. But when I compare the things of earth, the matters of the present age, to eternity, their significance drops by a thousand. You can be a follower of Jesus in NK and suffer from the persecution and oppression of the gov't and have your eternal destiny secure in Christ and be lost in SK and die fat and rich in rebellion to God and suffer in hell forever. The Bible invites us to compare our present reality to the age to come and begs us to believe that what we see and feel and touch with our senses can not be compared to the realities of eternity. Paul says in Romans 8:18, "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us." He says again in 2 Cor. 4:17-18, "For this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal."

When I look at the US Govt, with its vast bureaucracy, imposing army, significant influence on day to day choices, it seems so permanent and enduring. I can't imagine a day when it wouldn't be here. But it won't. My perspective is wrong. All that we can see and taste and touch of this present age will be gone; only that which is of Christ will last. And so we're told, "compare the two; and when you do, count the significance and weight of eternity as infinitely more important and worthy of your time and energy than the things of the earth." I so long to be a part of a faith community that is fully aware of the realities and roles of government, but radically and confidently hopeful in the gospel of Jesus Christ alone. Paul Schneider (PIC), a pastor murdered by the Third Reich and Adolf Hitler's regime for his stand for the gospel, expressed this same wish. Before the Nazi's even were elected into power, during the election that led up to their rule, Pastor Schneider shared this desire in a letter to his family (READ 63). I say "Hear! hear!" Will American Christians learn that lesson?

The temptation to trust in political power has been with us from the very beginning; the government has always been one of our favorite idols. I'm reminded of Israel's longing for a king. As Samuel was growing old, his sons proved to be unfit to judge the people of God. But rather than the people pleading for more of God, they pled for a king, they pled for a geopolitical ruler. They looked away from the Lord and looked to the might of a monarch like all the other nations. Let's read this episode and see what happens (READ 1 Sam 8).

Here's what's so striking to me in this passage: the people long for a king so that this king might do good to them, that he might fight for them, that he might work for them. But what did Samuel say would happen? The exact opposite. The king will take your sons, he will take your daughters into his service. The king will take your fields and possessions. He will make you his servants. You wanted a king to fight and judge for you. You won't get that; you're going to be fighting and working for him.

I think that formula is still at work today. It does not take a very discerning eye to see that the temptation for a state worker or representative to serve oneself at the expense of the people rather than serve the people at his or her own expense is great. We will see in a number of weeks

that God has a good and important purpose for governments and governing officials today; the state is to provide something important in God's economy. It's just that they fail so often like sinful humans do and end up using their power for their good, their legacy, their purposes rather than for the people. God constantly warns us in the scriptures that if you misplace your hope you will be disappointed. Yet, every 4 years Americans go to the polls and vote with a glimmer in their eyes hoping that maybe this one is the right one. And everyone is disappointed.

Now, I know that you all agree with that; I'm thinking most Christians think this way. But I would submit to you that we don't live this way; we don't vote this way; we don't have political discussions and debates this way; we don't watch FOXNews, CNN or your favorite news channel of choice with this kind of hope in Jesus; we stay glued to cable news and curse whoever we feel like cursing because our heart is drifting away from a pure devotion to Jesus to a loyalty and hope in the state. Like the the people of Israel thousands of years ago I think we're tempted to say, "Maybe this next President will deliver us; by getting a majority in the Senate, then things will be different; if we can only get the right Supreme Court justices..." then what?

With the changing religious climate in America and the rise of anti-Christ values, Christians have upped their ante on another vain hope - The US Constitution (Oh, man, I'm going to get emails on this one). Our Constitution is an amazing work; I marvel when I think about and study the way in which the founding fathers of our country devised and schemed a government by the people and for the people. But it's not perfect. When it was initially ratified, people of color counted for 3/5ths of a person for the purposes of census taking. The framers intended it to be changed because it wasn't perfect. And democracy isn't perfect. The famed Prime Minister Winston Churchill is quoted in the House of Commons in 1947 as saying, "Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others." The government laid out by the Constitution is imperfect.

And it certainly is not a guard against the Evil One; it certainly is not a shield. As we see the changing values in our culture, especially related to religious liberties and other trials we face in our future, the Constitution is a vain hope. Let me ask you: "Who is our enemy? And how is he trying to hurt us?" Truly, as we stand here today in 2016 with what many people say is a generation-defining election (again) in the fall, who is your enemy? And how is that enemy trying to hurt you? Is your greatest enemy those for (or against) clean energy? Is your enemy those who might disguise themselves as refugees to attack the US on our own soil? Is your enemy more governmental regulations? Is your enemy that particular presidential hopeful with his or her platform? You see, if you get the enemy wrong and his goals wrong, you set your hope in the wrong place and you implement the wrong strategy. So, yes, if gun control, immigration, taxation, regulations, national defense are your biggest problems then voting for the right person is the right solution. But any believer who can rightly call themselves a believer knows good and well that our Adversary is of another world and he prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. He's an enemy of your soul, not of your wallet or time or business. His goal is cause you to hate God not to raise your taxes. He wants you to lose hope in the power of the Lord Jesus Christ, not in the power of the Constitution. And if he can convince you and deceive you into

hoping in a stronger Constitutionalism or changing the Constitution, he's already won. Our Constitution is no hope against him. Powers and principalities of this present darkness (that's Satan) win against flesh and blood and a 200 year old piece of paper every single time.

We have one shield; it's Jesus Christ. Let's see how the Psalmist talks about this in Ps. 115 (READ).

This is such great psalm; a brief outline might look like this:

- vs. 1 ~ Intro: the greatness of God
- vs. 2-8 ~ The impotency of the idols of nations and those who trust in them
- vs. 9-15 ~ The blessings of God and those who trust in him
- vs. 16-18 ~ Summary: God's people will praise him

First, notice the contrast between the idols of men and our God in heaven. The idols of the nations are impotent. They have eyes but don't see; noses, but don't smell; ears, but don't hear; feet, but don't walk. What's he getting at? The writer is saying the idols of the nations have the appearance of power and ability, but they have none. They have no power. And those who trust in them will be just like them, lacking the power themselves to realize and experience what their hearts long for because it only comes from God; it can't be provided by other means. As strong as governments may be in the present age, they are impotent to provide what we truly need. They are idols with no power.

God is the one who blesses. In that next section the psalmist repeats that theme over and over again, doesn't he? God is our shield; he is our help. So, what should we do? Trust in the Lord! Fear the Lord! In every one of those verses (9-11) that's repeated over and over. Trust in the Lord; he is your shield. Trust in the Lord; he is your shield. That's where you go; that's what you do. Your help isn't found in any other place.

Maybe you're thinking, "Brian, I don't trust the state to save me, bless me or to be my shield. But I do want them to provide clean drinking water or a just police state or fair taxation or to enforce immigration laws." Yes, I know. And as I mentioned, in a few sermons I'm going to share what God's intention is for state power and officials. But I'm pleading with you as your pastor, don't ignore the warning. There's a reason why the scriptures speak of the vain hope of chariots and horses. There's a reason why Ps 146 says (vs. 3), "Put not your trust in princes, in a son of man, in whom there is no salvation." Or when Ps 118 says (vs. 9), "It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in princes." The reason is because we're tempted to do that very thing. Don't pridefully declare immunity from this temptation as your days are dominated by cable news and you can't stop talking about how such n such candidate is the devil and how your favorite candidate hung the moon. Your actions betray your words and your pride keeps you from life.

I think we would serve our souls well as we begin this sermon series by doing some self-examination. Would you bring the word of God that we've heard this morning to bear on your

heart and mind? Are you guilty of placing your hope for a better future in the power the state? Have you been living as if a particular form of government, particular governmental policy, a particular presidential candidate is your greatest enemy?

How might you know if you are? What might be a test to determine whether we are doing this or not? Well, what do you set your mind on? Followers of Jesus set their mind on the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. You do that by spending time with God in his word, in prayer, in opportunities with your brothers and sisters in Christ. Setting your mind on Christ (or anything else, for that matter) is intensely practical. You don't do that in some esoteric way; when I watch 6 hours of football, I'm setting my mind on football. When I read magazine after magazine on the best hunting resources and tips, I'm setting my mind on hunting. If I spend every breakfast and lunch in McD's or the cafe talking about the politics of the day, I'm setting my mind on politics. It's that simple. So, examine where you set your mind; that will tell you what are your hopes and loyalties.

Examine your fears. What do you fear? Do you fear God? His judgment? Do you fear him as a consuming fire? Or do you fear a certain presidential candidate? That policy decision? When you examine your fears, you will learn where your devotions lie. Examine your behavior. Jesus said from within, out the heart of man or a woman, come our words, actions and decisions. So, consider the actions of your life; they are a window into your heart.

And what do you do if you find something less than a pure devotion to the Lord? I have great news for you. You repent; you turn away from it and turn back to Jesus where he quickly and graciously forgives all of our treason. He's not like the kings and Presidents of earth who refuse to forgive traitors; our God gives grace. Turn to him; he is our shield.

Key Verse: Ps. 115:12-13 ~ The Lord has remembered us; he will bless us; he will bless the house of Israel; he will bless the house of Aaron; he will bless those who fear the Lord, both the small and the great.

## Small Group Questions

### Sermon Series: In God We Trust

Feb. 14, 2016 ~ "God is our Help and our Shield"

1. What emotions are you feeling as you begin a discussion group on this topic (i.e. fear, excitement, sobriety?) And why?
2. How politically active or passionate would you describe yourself? (i.e. very active and passionate; casual; uninterested; indifferent; your word of choice)
3. Do you think political discussions usually bring out the best or the worst in people? What biblical instructions should we apply to make sure our discussions bring out the best in us? Is there an opportunity in this to witness for Christ? How so?
4. Pastor Brian began his message by saying he felt the church needs its toes stepped on. Do you remember the reason why he said that? Do you agree with him or not? Why or why not?
5. Read together Psalm 146 and answer the following questions.
  - a. The Psalmist tells the reader in vs. 3 not to trust in princes. What's reason does he give in vs. 4 not to do that?
    - i. How might that apply to modern-day politicians and their plans?
  - b. The Psalmist wants his readers to hope in God. How does he describe God in vs. 6?
    - i. Why would these descriptions engender trust in God?
    - ii. How is that different than our modern-day politician?
  - c. Politicians make promises and write up plans. For example, they make welfare promises, healthcare promises and so on. How many "policy platforms" does the Psalmist say God takes care of in vs. 7-9? (*example: God gives food to the hungry = social justice or welfare; God opening the eyes of the blind = healthcare*)
  - d. How would you say the big idea of this Psalm? (maybe, *Why trust in princes when we have God or God is worthy of praise because he can do what princes can not*)
6. Do you think political differences can threaten Christian unity? Should we be concerned about that? Why or why not?
7. Why are we tempted to look to government or governing officials for what God has promised to do for us?
8. What did you hear today in the sermon that make the greatest immediate impact on you? Why?

9. Do you plan to make any tangible changes to the way you think about, engage and participate the upcoming 2016 election based off this mornings sermon?