

GOD'S GOVERNMENT AND GOD'S GRACE

God has two complementary systems—a system of government and a system of grace— through which He accomplishes His eternal economy. A proper understanding of these two systems and how they interrelate yields great insight into the revelation of the Bible, the ways of God, and the nature of God's salvation. It is a grave error to use God's grace as an excuse to neglect or rebel against God's government.

In God's plan, His system of government is primary. When God created the universe, He established a system of government. When Satan attempted to overthrow His government, God created man and transferred dominion over the earth to man. Both of these events involving His government predated the coming of grace through the incarnation of Christ (John 1:17). The New Testament preaching of the gospel begins not with a word of grace but with a word of government: "Repent for the kingdom of the heavens has drawn near" (Matt. 3:2; 4:17). At the beginning of the New Testament the kingdom had drawn near because the incarnate Lord Jesus fully lived under the government of God. In eternity future the river of water of life will proceed from the throne of God and of the Lamb (Rev. 22:1). The throne, as the source of the flow of the river, represents the government of God as the administrative center of His kingdom. All these things point to the primacy of God's system of government in God's plan.

The New Testament speaks of both "the gospel of the grace of God" and the "gospel of the kingdom" (Acts 20:24; Matt. 24:14). What is generally preached today in Christianity is a very shallow rendition of the gospel of grace that takes man's need as its center, namely that man is fallen and needs a Savior, so Christ came to die a vicarious death so that man's sins could be forgiven. While this much is true, it is far short of the complete gospel.

The gospel of the kingdom takes God's need as its center. What is the focus of this gospel? A simple answer lies at the end of the prayer the Lord gave to His disciples as a pattern. There He said, "For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen" (6:13). The kingdom is a realm in which God's authority (power) can be exercised and His glory expressed. It is, therefore, the realm in which God can realize His purpose in creating man in His image and according to His likeness to express Him and in giving him dominion to represent Him (Gen. 1:26).

The demands of God's government are according to His life and nature and are thus absolute (James 2:10; Rom. 3:23 and footnote 1). He is absolutely righteous and absolutely holy, and He requires those in His kingdom to be the same (Isa. 5:16; Matt. 5:48; 1 Pet. 1:16). To express Him and represent Him, we must match Him. However, due to the fall this became impossible. That is why God established a second system, the system of grace. The law of God, which reflects God's person, makes demands upon us that we cannot keep (Rom. 3:20; 8:7). However, grace came in the person of Jesus Christ (John 1:17). God's salvation is marvelous because it marries the system of government and the system of grace. Christ's redemptive death satisfied the requirements of God's governmental righteousness, and His judicial redemption is applied to us by God's grace and gives us access into His grace (Rom. 3:24; Eph. 1:7; 2:5; Rom. 5:2). God's righteousness, which is the foundation of His throne (Psa. 89:14), is also the power of the gospel because God in His infinite love governmentally bound Himself to forgive us based on the redemption of Christ (Rom. 1:16-17; 3:21-22). Brother Witness Lee explained:

The very foundation of God's throne is also the foundation of our salvation. Can the foundation of God's throne be shaken? Certainly not. Likewise, the foundation of our salvation cannot be shaken, for this foundation is not love nor grace, but righteousness. (*Life-study of Romans*, 600)

However, our initial believing in and receiving Christ is just the beginning of God's work in and upon us. By regeneration we were born of God and entered into the kingdom of God (John 1:12-13; 3:5). Now we must grow in the divine life unto maturity (Heb. 6:1; Eph. 4:13; Col. 1:28). This further work also involves both God's grace and God's government.

On the one hand, God in Christ as the Spirit of grace is operating within us to save us to the uttermost in His life (Heb. 10:29; 7:25; Rom. 5:10). Such a salvation will bring our living up to the standard of God's righteousness that we might reign in the divine life over the negative elements of the old creation (2 Cor. 5:21; Rom. 5:17). The renewing of our mind by the inward work of the Holy Spirit will also produce the reality of a corporate new man living under the government of God (Rom. 12:2; Titus 3:5; Col. 3:10-11; Eph. 4:22-24). This new man, composed of those who have been conformed to the image of the One who was absolutely obedient to the Father, affords God the way to deal with His enemy (Rom. 8:29; John 8:29; Luke 22:42; Rev. 12:5, 9).

On the other hand, God is working through His governmental administration to purge His people of the vestiges and entanglements of the old creation. God governs by judging. God's governmental judgment will eventually extend to the entire old creation (2 Pet. 3:10-13), but today, as Peter wrote, "It is time for the judgment to begin from the house of God" (1 Pet. 4:17a). While grace is God's inward work to supply the believers with Himself as their life, judgment, as God's outward work, takes the form of environmental suffering, which Peter refers to as "a fiery ordeal" and "a trial" (v. 12). Paul refers to God's disciplining of His children in His love "that we might partake of His holiness" (Heb. 12:6, 10).

God's system of government and His system of grace thus complement one another. The goal of God's discipline through His governmental judgment is to deal with what hinders us from fully enjoying Christ as our God-allotted portion, that is, as grace. Grace enables us to live a life under God's government. Neither is complete without the other. Without grace we cannot live under God's government. Without being humbled under God's governmental dealing, we can never fully know His grace (1 Pet. 5:5-10). If we try to cast all our anxiety on Him (v. 7) without rejecting pride and being humbled under the mighty hand of God (vv. 5-6), we will find that it does not work. This is because the root of our anxiety is our own pride and lack of acknowledgment of God's mighty hand, that is, His governmental dealing in our circumstances. The end result of our pride and anxiety is to become prey for the devil (v. 8). If, however, we reject pride and are humbled under God's governmental arrangement, He will perfect, establish, strengthen and ground us (v. 10).

To be unbalanced regarding these two systems causes a person to misaim regarding God's economy. Those who attempt to live under the government of God by, for example, keeping the law through self-effort nullify grace (Gal. 2:21; 5:4). Those who take being objects of God's grace as an excuse for lawless behavior and indulgence of the flesh grieve the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:13; Jude 4; Eph. 4:30; Isa. 63:10). Grace does not give us the freedom to live as we choose (2 Cor. 5:15). Doing so dethrones God and enthrones the self as the center of our personal universe. Brother Watchman Nee explained:

Grace never annuls government. In fact, grace makes a person yield to government. I say this solemnly: Grace gives us the ability to subject ourselves to government. Grace does not make us rebels; it does not help us overturn government. These two systems of God mutually perfect one another. Grace cannot annul government. Only foolish ones will say, "Since I have received grace, I can behave loosely and do things carelessly." This is the work of a foolish man!

The more a person's eyes are opened to grace, the more he will know how to be a husband, a parent, a son, and a citizen, and the more he will find himself in subjection to authority. The more a person receives grace from God, the more he will know how to maintain God's government. I have never seen a person who truly knows the grace of God destroy His government. (*The Collected Works of Watchman Nee, Volume 50: Lessons for New Believers (3), 752*)

Knowing these two systems will also help us to discern whether others' words are words of grace that bring us more in line with God's government or "great swelling words of vanity" that promise freedom but lead to corruption (Acts 20:32; Eph. 4:29; 2 Pet. 2:18-19). May we know grace for the fulfillment of God's purpose and echo Brother Lee's words of prayer in *Hymns*, #947: "O Lord, give us grace for Thy Kingdom to live."