

## BELIEVERS LIVING UNDER UNFRIENDLY GOVERNMENTS

The US House of Representatives recently passed the Equality Act. According to the official Congressional summary, this proposed law would amend the 1964 Equal Rights Act by prohibiting discrimination based upon sex, sexual orientation, and gender identity in areas including public accommodations and facilities, education, federal funding, employment, housing, credit, and the jury system. The official summary adds, **“The bill prohibits an individual from being denied access to a shared facility, including a restroom, a locker room, and a dressing room, that is in accordance with the individual’s gender identity.”** The US Department of Justice would prosecute violations in the federal court system. The bill also explicitly says that it takes precedence over the 1993 Religious Freedom Restoration Act, which set a high bar for government to defend laws if they infringe on religious freedom.

The Heritage Foundation says that there are five groups of people who would be adversely affected by this proposed law. First, employers and workers. Businesses and employees could not argue that their religious beliefs keep them from following this law. For example, Virginia high school French teacher Peter Vlaming, who was fired last August for refusing to use a female student’s preferred masculine pronoun, would not have a case.

Second, medical professionals. Catholic hospitals, Christian physicians, and insurance companies could not refuse to provide gender transition therapy.

Third, families and kids. Public education would tend to normalize this whole transition culture. The *American Journal of Bioethics* says that the government should overrule parents of children who want to change their gender identity and let them have puberty-blocking drugs. This is in spite of another study that shows that between 80 and 95% of children with gender identity issues no longer feel distressed by their bodies after puberty. (*Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 2013)

Fourth, women and girls. This bill would eliminate the advantage of sex-specific sports and facilities. Women’s sports would be required to let biological males compete against girls and women. A couple of years ago biological men took the top two spots in state high school track and field competition in Connecticut. The top finishing girls claimed that they missed out on college athletic scholarships because of the unfair competition.

Fifth, nonprofits and volunteers, including churches. Faith-based adoption and foster care agencies who believe that kids do best in homes where there is a mom and dad would likely be cut off. Churches would be required to let biological males who claim that they identify as a woman to go into the same bathroom where your daughter might be using the facilities.

This proposal will now come before the US Senate. Current rules require that 60 senators have to give their approval before it will come to a vote. Hopefully the bill will be stopped, but we Christians must realize that our country has experienced a tremendous cultural shift. Who could have imagined forty or thirty or even twenty years ago that we would ever have reached the point where federal law requires that biological males who claim that they feel like a female can go into female rest rooms and locker rooms? Our Christian worldview is becoming a minority position. How will we relate to civil government in the face of this kind of situation?

In our study of “A Biblical View of Civil Government” we have considered what the Old Testament has to say about the kind of human beings we are and what kind of governance we need. We have looked at what the Old Testament has to tell us about the kind of policies which just government should follow. Last week we looked at what the Old Testament has to say about the character which good rulers should display. Before we leave the Old Testament, we are going to consider what it has to tell us about how God’s people should live in the face of civil governments which oppose them and what they stand for. So we are going to consider two stories. One involves people who live under a government which still has a tradition which remembers something of the true God. The other involves God’s people who live under a government which is completely pagan in character.

I.

So let’s first consider THE EXAMPLE OF GODLY PEOPLE LIVING UNDER A GOVERNMENT WHICH HAS TURNED AWAY FROM A GODLY TRADITION. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. THE EXAMPLE OF GODLY PEOPLE...) The story which I have in mind involves the life of Elijah. The introduction to his appearance on the stage of history begins in 1 Kings #16 vv. 29-33. (p. 298 in the black Bibles) We only have time to hit the highlights of his life and his interaction with the civil government under which he lived.

In 1 Kings #16 beginning at v. 29 we are told this about the civil government of the time: **“In the thirty-eighth year of Asa king of Judah, Ahab the son of Omri began to reign over Israel, and Ahab the son of Omri reigned over Israel in Samaria twenty-two years. 30 And Ahab the son of Omri did evil in the sight of the Lord, more than all who were before him. 31 And as if it had been a light thing for him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, he took for his wife Jezebel the daughter of Ethbaal king of the Sidonians, and went and served Baal and worshiped him. 32 He erected an altar for Baal in the house of Baal, which he built in Samaria. 33 And Ahab made an Asherah. Ahab did more to provoke the Lord, the God of Israel, to anger than all the kings of Israel who were before him.”**

So the time is the 800s BC. Ahab is ruling over the northern kingdom of Israel. He marries the daughter of a king from a city-state to the north to promote a political alliance. She brings along with her worship of the god Baal. Ahab not only promotes this worship, but he also promotes worship of a goddess called Asherah. Still Ahab knows about the religious tradition of YHWH, the true God of Israel.

In #17 v. 1 we are introduced to Elijah. The text tells us, **“Now Elijah the Tishbite, of Tishbe in Gilead, said to Ahab, ‘As the Lord, the God of Israel, lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word.’”** It is clear that Elijah is a prophet. He is from somewhere in Gilead. He does not appear to have a wife and family. Otherwise we don’t know very much about his background.

God tells Elijah to hang out by this brook that flows into the Jordan River. For a couple of years he lives there while the Lord miraculously provides food for him through the use of ravens. Then God tells him to go north toward Sidon, which is the home country of Jezebel, the wife of King Ahab. There the Lord again provides sustenance in the midst of the famine, this time through the instrumentality of a widow and her son.

We pick up the story in #18 vv. 1-4: **“After many days the word of the Lord came to Elijah, in the third year, saying, ‘Go, show yourself to Ahab, and I will send rain upon the earth.’ 2 So Elijah went to show himself to Ahab. Now the famine was severe in Samaria. 3 And Ahab called Obadiah, who was over the household. (Now Obadiah feared the Lord greatly, 4 and when Jezebel cut off the prophets of the Lord, Obadiah took a hundred prophets and hid them by fifties in a cave and fed them with bread and water.)”**

So notice that Elijah is not alone in his true faith. The danger in times of government oppression is to think that one is alone. It turns out that there is a godly guy high in Ahab’s administration. He is secretly providing for these hundred prophets. In this period of Jewish history references are made in the Bible to these groups of prophets. We don’t know very much about them. It appears that they lived together, studied together, worshiped together, and perhaps did various good works together. Perhaps they all also had some supernatural ability to prophesy. They were also keeping a very low profile because their lives were in danger.

Elijah then presents himself to King Ahab and proposes a contest on Mt. Carmel. He tells Ahab to bring 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of Asherah. They meet on the mountain top, and Elijah tells these pagan prophets to build an altar and make a sacrifice and call on their gods to bring fire down from heaven to burn up their sacrifice. They spend much of the day doing that. They cut themselves and dance around their altar and call on their gods to bring fire down from heaven. Nothing happens.

So later in the afternoon Elijah builds an altar and puts an animal sacrifice on it and pours water on it. Then he calls upon YHWH to bring fire down from heaven. In #18 beginning at v. 38 we are told about what happens: **“Then the fire of the Lord fell and consumed the burnt offering and the wood and the stones and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench. 39 And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, ‘The Lord, he is God; the Lord, he is God.’ 40 And Elijah said to them, ‘Seize the prophets of Baal; let not one of them escape.’ And they seized them. And Elijah brought them down to the brook Kishon and slaughtered them there.”**

It was an amazing demonstration of the power of God. It happened before hundreds and probably thousands of Israelites, as well as before the eyes of the king of Israel. It provided the setting for a great spiritual revival. But it didn't happen. Ahab goes back home. His wife is upset when she learns what happened, and an all points bulletin is put out to capture Elijah. Elijah is depressed. He flees way to the south. He meets God at Mt. Sinai. The Lord tells him to get his act together, and He sends Elijah back out to perform other missions.

Years go by. Ahab and Queen Jezebel are still continuing in their sinful ways. At the beginning of #21 we are told that Ahab wanted to buy a vineyard next to his palace. The owner, Naboth, doesn't want to sell because he believes in the Old Testament law which says that one's property is intended by God to stay within the family. So wife Jezebel says that she will take care of it. She pays off two guys to claim that they heard that Naboth cursed God and the king. Interestingly Jezebel is using the standard for evidence in the Old Testament law as a basis for having Naboth executed. Of course, they are all lying. But Naboth is killed. Good guys sometimes get hurt by oppressive governments and their rulers.

God tells Elijah to confront Ahab. He does. We pick up the story in v. 20 of #21 of 1 Kings: **“Ahab said to Elijah, ‘Have you found me, O my enemy?’ He answered, ‘I have found you, because you have sold yourself to do what is evil in the sight of the Lord. 21 Behold, I will bring disaster upon you. I will utterly burn you up, and will cut off from Ahab every male, bond or free, in Israel. 22 And I will make your house like the house of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, and like the house of Baasha the son of Ahijah, for the anger to which you have provoked me, and because you have made Israel to sin. 23 And of Jezebel the Lord also said, ‘The dogs shall eat Jezebel within the walls of Jezreel.’ 24 Anyone belonging to Ahab who dies in the city the dogs shall eat, and anyone of his who dies in the open country the birds of the heavens shall eat.’**

**25 (There was none who sold himself to do what was evil in the sight of the Lord like Ahab, whom Jezebel his wife incited. 26 He acted very abominably in going after idols, as the Amorites had done, whom the Lord cast out before the people of Israel.)**

**27 And when Ahab heard those words, he tore his clothes and put sackcloth on his flesh and fasted and lay in sackcloth and went about dejectedly. 28 And the word of the Lord came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying, 29 ‘Have you seen how Ahab has humbled himself before me? Because he has humbled himself before me, I will not bring the disaster in his days; but in his son's days I will bring the disaster upon his house.’”**

It does not seem that Ahab becomes a genuine believer. But his attitude and behavior change. Judgment upon him is postponed. A bit later he dies in battle.

So what lessons can we take away from Elijah's life which was lived under a government which had turned away from a godly tradition? I find three things. First, pride can be a problem for all leaders of civil government, especially those who have turned away from a religious tradition. Elijah expected a spiritual change in Ahab as a result of the incredible miracle on Mt. Carmel. But it did not happen. We should expect that it will be difficult for genuine believers to deal with rulers who have turned away from a godly tradition.

Second, we need to remember in times of government oppression that we are not alone. Elijah got depressed, partly because he felt like he was all alone. Yet we are reminded by the text that Obadiah was around, even high in this sinful government, and there were many others who were part of the school of the prophets. God has His ways of making sure that we are never really alone.

Third, we should keep praying for our governing officials. As a godly prophet Elijah no doubt prayed for King Ahab. The responsibility to pray for leaders of civil government was an exhortation we encountered in our recent study of 1 Timothy #2. Toward the end of Ahab's reign he did have some kind of repentance which led to changed behavior. We, likewise, should not give up in praying for our governing officials.

II.

Consider then a second story from the Old Testament. Let's look at THE EXAMPLE OF GODLY PEOPLE LIVING UNDER A GOVERNMENT WHICH IS PAGAN. (II. THE EXAMPLE OF GODLY...) The example which I have in mind here is Daniel. He lived about two hundred years after the time of Elijah and Ahab. He and his three friends were from the southern kingdom of Judah. Most of you know the story, and we only have time to summarize the highlights of his life.

In 605 or 606 BC the new king of the Babylonian Empire, Nebuchadnezzar, invaded the southern kingdom of Judah and hauled off Daniel and his three teenage friends from the royal family and brought them back to Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar's overall plan was to take the sharpest young people from these conquered lands, often from the royal families, indoctrinate them in Babylonian thinking and eventually let them help to rule the conquered territories.

Thus we read in Daniel #1 (p. 737 in black Bibles) in vv. 3 & 4, **"Then the king commanded Ashpenaz, his chief eunuch, to bring some of the people of Israel, both of the royal family and of the nobility, 4 youths without blemish, of good appearance and skillful in all wisdom, endowed with knowledge, understanding learning, and competent to stand in the king's palace, and to teach them the literature and language of the Chaldeans."**

Part of the new life of these young men meant violating their Jewish dietary laws. These Jewish boys neither went along with the program nor made a big stink about what they were expected to do. Instead they asked their supervisor to simply have a test. Let them eat food according to their dietary laws and see how their health compares after a

period of time. They were allowed to have this experiment, and they turned out to be healthier than the other students in the program. They were allowed to keep their kosher diet.

These four young men also studied hard to be the best at what they were expected to do. At the end of their two or three year training period they met with King Nebuchadnezzar. In v. 20 of #1 we read, **“And in every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king inquired of them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanterers that were in all his kingdom.”**

In #2 we learn that King Nebuchadnezzar has a dream. He doesn't trust the advisors whom he has inherited in the Babylonian bureaucracy. So he demands that if they have supposed supernatural powers, they tell him what his dream was. He threatens them all with death if they cannot come up with the answer. Daniel and his three friends pray, and God reveals to Daniel what the dream was which Nebuchadnezzar had. The result of this difficult incident is described in Daniel #2 v. 49: **“Daniel made a request of the king, and he appointed Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego over the affairs of the province of Babylon. But Daniel remained at the king's court.”** Life is not easy in this pagan setting, but Daniel and his three friends persevere.

In #3 there is some kind of disturbance in Nebuchadnezzar's administration. So he demands a loyalty test whereby all of his officials are required to bow down before this huge golden image. Daniel is not around. Maybe he is out of the country. His friends are required to bow down, but they do not. They are hauled before the king, and he is ticked off. He tells the guards to throw them into a fiery furnace. The three do not yell and scream. They do not try to escape.

In vv. 16-18 they say this to Nebuchadnezzar, **“O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. 17 If this be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. 18 But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up.”**

So the three Jewish officials are thrown into the fiery furnace. The Lord miraculously intervenes. They are not injured. They come out of the fire without even the smell of smoke upon them. The king is shocked. According to vv. 28 & 29 he responds, **“Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who has sent his angel and delivered his servants, who trusted in him, and set aside the king's command, and yielded up their bodies rather than serve and worship any god except their own God. 29 Therefore I make a decree: Any people, nation, or language that speaks anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego shall be torn limb from limb, and their houses laid in ruins, for there is no other god who is able to rescue in this way.”**

Notice that when the ruler of civil government requires these believers to perform an act of worship to a false god, they decide that they cannot obey. Because of their faithful

testimony in the midst of great persecution the cause and the person of the true God are advanced.

Years go by, and Nebuchadnezzar has another dream. Daniel is called in to interpret it. Daniel warns that if Nebuchadnezzar gets too prideful, he is going to experience a period of insanity where he will act like a cow eating grass. A year later, when a prideful moment overcomes him, he is struck down with a period of insanity. He recovers from it eventually. In vv. 34 & 35 of #4 the king provides his own testimony: **“At the end of the days I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven, and my reason returned to me, and I blessed the Most High, and praised and honored him who lives forever, for his dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom endures from generation to generation; 35 all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, and he does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, ‘What have you done?’”**

Decades go by. Other kings over Babylon have come and gone. Daniel is still working as a high official in the Babylonian government. A guy named Darius appoints him as one of the three highest officials in the land. In Daniel #6 v. 3 we read, **“Then this Daniel became distinguished above all the other high officials and satraps, because an excellent spirit was in him. And the king planned to set him over the whole kingdom.”** Verse 4 adds, **“Then the high officials and the satraps sought to find a ground for complaint against Daniel with regard to the kingdom, but they could find no ground for complaint or any fault, because he was faithful, and no error or fault was found in him.”** Daniel is a believer with a consistent lifestyle. He is different than so many unbelievers in pagan governments who are on the take, who make and expect bribes.

The only charge upon which these jealous rivals can get Daniel is something to do with his religion. So they convince the king to make a law that for thirty days the only petition that people can make is to the king. Anyone caught making a petition to anyone else goes in the lion’s den. It might make sense for Daniel to lay low for thirty days. But in v. 10 of #6 we read this: **“When Daniel knew that the document had been signed, he went to his house where he had windows in his upper chamber open toward Jerusalem. He got down on his knees three times a day and prayed and gave thanks before his God, as he had done previously.”**

So Daniel is caught. King Darius realizes that he has been tricked. But he has to follow his own law. Daniel is thrown into the lions den. But the lions are not hungry that night. Daniel survives. King Darius sends the officials who tricked him into the lions’ den. Now they are hungry.

So what lessons can we take from Daniel’s life? First, in the face of persecution from government God’s people have to be the best at what they do. In many parts of the

world Christians start out with a black mark because of who they are. In our country in the world of academia there is a bias against professors and students who believe in God, who don't accept evolution, who believe in capitalism, and who believe in moral absolutes. We have to work harder than others to get a job, to gain a hearing, to be respected.

Second, we should expect that life will be difficult in the face of governments that are biased against us. But we must remember that God has promised to be with us. This proved to be true with Daniel and his three friends.

Third, we need to retain a certain respect for even rulers who appear to be bad. For they also bear the image of God. Nebuchadnezzar was a pagan guy. He killed lots of people. He was responsible for the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. He tried to kill Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego. But because Daniel was able to maintain a certain respect for him, Nebuchadnezzar eventually acknowledged Daniel's God as the true God of heaven.

In the extremely partisan environment in which we live, Christians need to remember to retain a certain respect for whoever is in office at whatever level of government from whichever party.

Fourth, we believers must always remember to trust God in the face of governments that are run by pagans. The temptation is to think that things are hopeless. But God is sovereign over all rulers, and He always has His purposes.

### III.

Consider finally THE EXAMPLE OF A GODLY PERSON LIVING UNDER A HOSTILE GOVERNMENT TODAY. (III. THE EXAMPLE OF A GODLY PERSON...) Georges Sada grew up in the land of Babylon. His father was employed at an English air force base in Iraq. His family was part of the Assyrian Church of the East. As a member of a religious minority, Georges had extra challenges to face. Nevertheless, at age 19 he was accepted into the Iraq air academy. He worked hard. Because of his recognized ability, he received additional training in Britain, Russia, and the US. He eventually became a two star general in the Iraqi air force. He retired in 1986. That same year he became a born again Christian.

When his country invaded Kuwait in 1990 and the US and its allies began to intervene, Georges was called back to active duty. A total of 45 allied pilots were shot down in that conflict. Guess who was put in charge of them? Georges Sada. This modern Obadiah kept them fed and safe. On January 24, 1991, one of Saddam's sons came with five guards and orders to kill the pilots. Georges refused to let them have access. There was a heated argument. Georges warned Saddam's son that if the pilots were killed, the US would come looking for him and his father. The son backed down, but Georges was sent to prison. The pilots were saved.



Georges was released. In 2003 the US and its allies invaded Iraq. Georges was called in by Saddam and asked for a solution. He warned Saddam that Iraq had to back down, because these other nations were too powerful. Georges was told by others that if he said that again, he would be killed. Saddam had often turned to him because he knew that, unlike other aides, Georges would give him objective advice.

In 2009 Georges told an audience at Luke Air Force Base in Phoenix, **“When I was an advisor I would raise my hand when I wanted to speak, and he [Saddam] used to like to listen to me. I was never a threat because I was a Christian. Because I was a Christian, he knew I would not kill or betray him or take his position. A Christian couldn’t be president.”** (Luke Air Force News, 2/12/2009)

Georges Sada also told the airmen, **“What America has accomplished, nobody else in the world could have done. Your nation has done a great job. Yes, there have been mistakes, as there are in any conflict, but Iraqis are finally a free people now.”** (PROJECTOR OFF)

The important lesson for us as Christians from the example of Georges Sada and Daniel and Elijah is that we can have hope in the face of oppressive governments. God has His sovereign purposes. He has a role for every Christian to play. We just have to maintain our trust in God, keep being obedient to Him, and be confident that He will be with us.