

*A Broken Christmas: Breaking the Powers That Be*  
*By Jason Huff*  
*December 16, 2018*  
*Psalm 46; Romans 8:35-39; Luke 1:39-56*

Our final Scripture reading today is Luke 1:39-56. May God's blessing be upon the reading of His holy and sacred Word. "At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!" And Mary said: "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me -- holy is his name. His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, even as he said to our fathers." Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home."

Based on the age of everyone in the congregation, it's fair to guess that we all grew up with electricity in our homes. We've never lived without it, at least not for very long. We're used to flicking a switch and having the lights turn on, the oven start baking, the TV broadcasting. We don't realize just what power – well, power – has over us until we forget to pay the bill or we get hit with a major storm that takes the power down. Then you know just how dependent on it you really are. And electricity is dangerous, maybe the most dangerous thing in your home. Wired properly, it is the key to modern life. But they put gigantic warning signs on your breaker box at home for a reason. Power is deadly. Use water and an electric appliance together in the wrong way, and you're not long for this world.

We don't think much about a different kind of power in our lives, the metaphorical kind, the government kind. Even the most savvy political person often goes throughout their days without thinking about all the ways that government power is involved in our daily lives. Sometimes it's good. We have roads and law enforcement, fire protection and military protection, all because of government.

But we also have taxes – property taxes, sales taxes, gas taxes, vehicle taxes, licensing taxes. We're constantly paying the government for the use of their power on our behalf. And far too often, the government doesn't do much we pay for or ask them to do. The more power you have, the more influence you wield, the more ways that your power can be corrupted and used unethically. We take it for granted, but power in most all of its forms is incredibly dangerous when used poorly.

As we've seen the last two weeks in our Broken Christmas series, we know the coming of Jesus heralded a change in the patterns of this world, that in His coming, something new genuinely happened. The endless cycles of sin and sacrifice were broken. He also broke us free from the bondage of sin, that He sets us free from the things that have shackled us. But Jesus' coming also marks the beginning of the end for the earthly rulers and powers that have abused and misused power throughout history. We'll take a short walk through the Scripture and see how it's always been a part of God's plan, then specifically how Jesus' birth speaks to it, and how the church should speak to power today.

God's vision for us in the garden was to obey him and to enjoy His love, peace and presence. Ultimately, that vision goes by the wayside when there is a power struggle. Adam and Eve struggle with the desire to have power like God does, and their choice is their undoing – and the undoing of the human race. The first brother kills the second brother. Why? The second brother's offering is acceptable to God; the first brother's offering is not. There is an imbalance of power now in relationship with God, and Cain kills Abel over that last status. Power struggles of various kinds are found throughout the book of Genesis, often pitting brother against brother.

And then we come to the Exodus, where the most powerful nation in the ancient Near East has made slaves out of Abraham's descendants. When God sends the plagues on Egypt, He displays His control over all things – including the mightiest nation in the world. He has Moses lead the people into the wilderness to conquer Canaan, but worries about the power of the nations they are to overthrow forces them to sit out in that barren land for 40 years. Once they finally do take the land, they have the Law that God gave them through Moses – a Law that was to show that God was their king, and that no earthly power, not even a king or a prophet or a priest, could rightfully claim power that was not given by God.

But the nations surrounding the new power Israel are not impressed. Over and over and over again, they oppress, they attempt to conquer. And yet God protects His people every single time. It is striking that so many of the nations that Israel fought during its ancient history are no more. Very few of the nations surrounding Israel are made up of the descendants of those nations that were once Israel's ancient enemies. God delivered His people throughout the Old Testament era from nations that were stronger, had better leaders, and who without God's help would have almost certainly wiped Israel off the map. God even brought His people back from exile again, freeing them from their captivity in Babylon.

But with the advent of the Roman Empire, things were different. One language was spreading throughout the ancient world. The pagans were no longer far away; they were stationed throughout Judah and ancient Israel. Even in exile, the Jews were oppressed in a faraway land. Now oppression had come to them. Rome had an uneasy relationship with Jerusalem because the Jews wouldn't acknowledge Caesar. The Roman garrison was right by the great temple. Rome established Israel as a kingdom under Herod because he bought the kingship – but they still had Romans like Pontius Pilate overseeing and reporting back. There was a real fear that Rome would tire of Israel's provocations and destroy her – and in 70 AD, after the Jews rebelled, that's exactly what happened.

Jesus' arrival heralds the arrival of a completely different kingdom – the Kingdom of God arriving amongst us. This Kingdom is completely different from any world power. It is a kingdom where God rules over His people directly. As the book of Hebrews tells us, we now have just one mediator between God the Father and us – His Son, Jesus Christ, who is Himself God and perfectly follows the Father's will. This Kingdom is eternal, unlike every earthly nation. And there is a promise that God as King will be a perfect ruler – perfectly just, perfectly merciful, perfect in all His ways, and perfect in every action towards us.

Mary's song to Elizabeth reflects the Lordship of God. She describes Him as mighty and merciful, powerful to save but also bringing judgment on the nations of the world and their rulers, supplying the poor with what they need and lifting up the humble but tearing down the proud and the rich who trust in their wealth to save them.

Throughout history, people have served God (or their own gods) for their own ends, believing that appeasing or satisfying God would bring them the results they want. But Mary praises God for who He is. And the King Himself is an example to His people, who want to live like Him because they see Him as good. One day, God's Kingdom will prove itself over every worldly power – but it's not a kingdom that conquers through earthly might but through conquering the hearts of His people.

And the recognition of this change happens even before Jesus' birth. The wise men from the far East herald the coming of a king, which shocks King Herod. Yet these magi from far across the world are more aware of God's Kingdom than Israel's own king. The gifts they bring are gifts for a King. Gold and frankincense and myrrh all signify royalty – they point to Jesus' life and death on behalf of His people.

But God's way of breaking the powers that be is stunning. Everyone in the ancient Near East – and really, people throughout the world even today – expected that to conquer, one had to use extreme force. Overthrowing a foreign nation required a lot of force – lots of men, lots of weapons, a willingness to sustain significant losses in the pursuit of what you want. Jesus displayed God's power through His miracles. Everyone knew that Jesus had extraordinary abilities. In their worst moments, the disciples asked Jesus if they should call down fire to destroy villages that wouldn't listen to them, knowing that Jesus had that kind of power.

But instead, Jesus overthrew the powers that be through becoming a servant. Jesus is eternal, existing with the Father and the Spirit before time began, and yet He became nothing. At His birth, Jesus relied on His parents for everything – and it was on His parents to take Him to Egypt to escape the rage of Herod once He knew a rival had been born in Bethlehem.

And throughout His life, Jesus used His power to help others – to heal them, to feed them. Even after staying in the desert for forty days and being tempted in the wilderness, He wouldn't use His power on His own behalf – He wanted until the Father sent angels to His aid. And at His trial and crucifixion, all of His opponents wanted a sign of power that would prove to them that He was God in the flesh. But He declared that His Kingdom that His Kingdom was not of the world. He willingly went to the cross to be the sacrifice for our sin rather than to use His power to save Himself.

So if Jesus breaks the powers that be, if His birth signals the coming of God's Kingdom to our world, what does that mean for us? For us, it means *we need Jesus' perspective on worldly powers and what we should expect from them*. Because Jesus' view of earthly nations and kingdoms is radically different from the modern American standard.

Jesus had little to say about the Roman occupation of Judea. When the Pharisees tried to rope Jesus into an argument about whether or not they should pay taxes to Caesar, His answer was brilliant and striking. If the money has Caesar's picture on it, He said, give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's. His answer showed that He didn't have interest in taking power by force – His purpose was to call people to repentance and obedience, and for them to find forgiveness of their sins in Him. Let the nations rage. We have different business.

That doesn't mean that there's nothing to be said to the authorities. John the Baptist lost his life for calling out the Herod of his era for taking his brother's wife. Jesus spoke volumes about the spiritual leadership of Israel. He called upon the people to follow the laws and the teachings of their elders, but not their practices – to be truly right before God and not just saying a bunch of nice words they constantly broke. And He didn't tell the people to trust their rulers or trust in their rulers, merely to obey them – unless the law caused them to disobey God.

We put a lot of stock in our government – no matter what political party we support. Every party claims that we are just one election away from complete and total chaos, a loss of all our rights, the end of civilization as we know it. And that's what we've been told for the last seventy years. We want our government to reflect our values, and we live in a place where we have the right to voice our opinion and vote according to it. Those are huge blessings. And yet, we do not put our trust in government. We put our trust in God and His Kingdom instead.

The truth is, God's strength is shown in our weakness. The church has spread most organically when government was opposed to it or even persecuted it. The church has spread like wildfire in communist China, and even now when it's going through another wave of persecution, it is growing. In many countries, the church has survived and thrived under oppressive governments for centuries.

In fact, the church is often in greatest danger when it is supported by the government. When government and church are hand in hand, corruption usually follows because people get used to having the ear of authority. We see the seeds of corruption in the church as early as Constantine making Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire way back in 325 AD. Compromise becomes a part of the church as it bends to the will of whoever's ruling. And even now, we see how the state churches of Europe, where the churches were supported by taxes from the state, are dying off. Christ came to change hearts, and when the government tells you what your religion should be, often hearts turn hard – because nobody likes being told what to do!

Long and short of it – participate in your government, especially at the community level. Write your congressmen and women; make your voice heard; vote; if God leads you, see what you might do to help others through government. But God is above all governments and works in the most difficult situations. Don't put your trust in government, and don't trust it to serve our faith. Unfortunately, to many politicians, we represent votes, not moral truth and values.

Here's the other major thought: *since Jesus taught us specifically how to deal with authority, we need to obey His lead.* What did Jesus say about those in power? He said in Matthew 5:44, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” We should be praying for those in government, and not just those people we voted for. If anything, we should be praying more for those who oppose us, who would use their government authority to oppress those with Christian beliefs.

If God is in the business of changing hearts, then the issue is not always voting the right people into office as it is God changing the hearts of the people who are already there. Many people change their beliefs and affiliations, often in ways that go against God's desires. But others have a change of heart, and that can make all the difference.

Jesus had more to say along these lines, too. In Matthew 5:41, Jesus said, “If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two.” That's a statement about those in authority. The only person who had the authority in that era to demand someone to travel with them one mile was a Roman soldier. By law, a Roman soldier could force anyone to carry their belongings for one mile. That was one of the things the Jewish people hated about the occupation – they could be forced by these pagans to do their bidding.

But Jesus said, “Take their pack two miles.” He was saying, “Go above and beyond what is required of you to show your love for God, that you might be the children of your Father in heaven.” Going two miles was something nobody would do for a soldier. To do it gave believers the opportunity to talk about what made them different – how the love of Jesus had made them different.

What does going the extra mile for someone opposed to us politically look like? It doesn't mean giving up our sincere beliefs any more than carrying a soldier's pack made a Jewish man give up his beliefs. Some belief systems out there are wrong, and we should speak against them – not against an entire swath of people in a different party, but against the ideas that are immoral and do not actually help human flourishing.

But it does mean finding the places where we are in agreement and doing everything we can to make those things happen. It means caring for people who disagree with us, especially in the church. It means praying for them, sincerely and without malice. It may mean swallowing our pride and realizing that some political issues are about personal preferences rather than deep moral concerns. It means that as far as it depends on us, we do not let our feelings about those in authority or those who support them hinder us from being Christ's ambassadors to them.

Friends, as we've seen, we live in a broken world, and politics and the powers that be are one of the prime examples we all see. That brokenness affects us in subtle ways every day. But we do not have to add to the misery. We are part of a different Kingdom, a Kingdom where love, kindness, and faithfulness are the rule rather than a brute show of strength. We are part of a Kingdom that will outlast every kingdom on earth. And our King, our Jesus, came so that we might know that whatever political situation we might find ourselves in, we only have one Lord and Savior on whom to rely and place our trust.