

## Suppressing the Oppressor

Recent military action against Iran's repressive regime has once again drawn the world's attention to a difficult question. How should we think about governments that oppress their own people? Christians sometimes wonder how passages like Romans 13:3-4 fit into situations where rulers behave unjustly or violently. The apostle Paul wrote about the role of government nearly two thousand years ago, yet his words still guide our understanding of authority, justice and God's sovereignty today.

**God's Design for Government.** In Roman's 13:3-4, Paul explains the purpose of civil authority. *"For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil...for he is God's minister to you for good...an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil."* Paul is describing God's design for government. Authority in society exists because God allows it to maintain order. Ideally, rulers serve as protectors of those who do right and punish those who practice evil. When government functions this way, it acts as a servant of order rather than chaos. In that sense, rulers become "God's ministers for good," carrying out a role that helps preserve stability in the world.

**When Rulers Fail Their Calling.** Of course, the Bible never claims that every ruler fulfills this responsibility faithfully. Scripture often condemns leaders who abuse their authority. Through the prophet Isaiah, God declared, *"Woe to those who decree unrighteous decrees...who rob the poor of justice."* Isaiah 10:1-2. Such warnings remind us that oppressive leaders stand in direct opposition to the purpose God intended for government. When rulers become tyrants, whether political dictators or religious authoritarians, the problem is not with God's design but with human rebellion against it.

**Paul's Words Under An Unjust Empire.** It is also important to remember the historical setting of Romans 13. Paul wrote these words while living under the authority of the Roman Empire. That government was far from righteous. It practiced slavery, imposed heavy taxation, persecuted Christians, and eventually executed both the Paul the Apostle and Peter the Apostle. Yet Paul still acknowledged that civil authority exists as part of God's providential order. His point was not that every government behaves righteously, but that the institution of government itself serves a role in restraining chaos in a fallen world.

**Tyrants Do Not Have God's Approval.** Throughout the Bible we see examples of rulers who abused their authority. Pharaoh oppressed Israel. Nebuchadnezzar II ruled with pride until God humbled him. Herod the Great persecuted believers, and Pontius Pilot unjustly condemned Jesus. Each of these men help authority within God's sovereign plan, but their actions were still morally wrong and subject to divine judgement. Authority itself may be permitted by God, but the misuse of that authority is never approved by Him.

**Restraining Evil in the World.** Paul also notes that *government "does not bear the sword in vain."* Romans 13:4. Civil authority has the responsibility to punish wrongdoing and protect the innocent. In some situations, this responsibility may even extend to confronting

violent regimes that terrorize their own people or threaten others. History shows that governments sometimes act, through law enforcement or military action, to restrain destructive powers. In that sense, one authority may be used to limit the harm caused by another that has abandoned its proper role.

**God is the Judge of All Rulers.** While earthly governments rise and fall, Scripture reminds us that every ruler ultimately answers to God. Psalm 82:6-7 warns those who hold power, *“I said, ‘You are gods...but you shall die like men and fall like one of the princes.’”* No emperor, dictator, ayatollah, or president escapes that truth. Human authority is temporary, but God’s justice is eternal.

**The Lesson for Today.** Romans 13 does not teach that every government is good. Rather, it reminds us that God established civil authority to restrain evil and preserve order. Some rulers fulfill that responsibility honorably; while others corrupt it and become oppressors. When that happens, they stand accountable before the Judge of all the earth.

Oppressive regimes do not contradict the teaching of Romans 13. They illustrate what happens when rulers abandon the purpose God intended for government. And history continually reminds us that even the most powerful rulers cannot escape the ultimate authority of God.

~Ron Josselet (ChatGPT Assisted)