

## 45 BIBLICAL ANSWER TO TYRANNY

*“Let every soul be in subjection to the higher authorities, for there is no authority except from God, and those who exist are ordained by God. Therefore he who resists the authority, withstands the ordinance of God; and those who withstand will receive to themselves judgment. For rulers are not a terror to the good work, but to the evil... you need to be in subjection, not only because of the wrath, but also for conscience' sake.” Romans 13:1-5*

**Introduction:** Paul's exhortation to be subject to authorities in Romans 13 has been misunderstood to require Christian passivity to dictatorial rule. While the Bible teaches non-violence and prayer for enemies, it does not teach indiscriminate, mindless obedience to tyranny.

The higher authorities Paul had in mind were a terror to evil and protective of the good. We know he was not referring to first century Jewish authorities because they were a terror to Christians, meting out imprisonment and execution for their beliefs. (See Acts 22:4f). The just and good higher authority Paul seemed to have had in mind was Roman law and officials. They were, generally speaking, protective of peace and a terror to bad conduct.

**Historical background.** *“The Pax Romana (Roman Peace) was a period of relative peace and stability across the Roman Empire which lasted over 200 years, beginning with the reign of Augustus (27 BC). The aim...was to guarantee law, order and security within the empire, even if it meant separating it from the rest of the world and defending or even expanding its borders through military intervention and conquest.”* (From World History Encyclopedia)

Rome's enlightened approach to empire building treated annexed or conquered nations justly, overall, and provided for a measure of self-governance. Nations were free to keep their languages, social practices and religions. Peter and Paul lived during the Pax Romana, which conferred a high measure of order and security thanks to Roman law, not perfect by any means, but giving remarkable stability to life and the empire as a whole.

### 1. Paul's Jerusalem temple ordeal in Acts 21-23 illustrates the protective power of Roman Law and Officials.

**21:31** Paul was seized by the crowd with the intent to kill him.

**21:32f** The Roman official and soldiers arrived as peace keepers and to make arrest(s).

**21:34** No coherent charges against Paul could be discerned, although it appeared he was to blame for something very serious.

**21:35** The violence of the crowd was so extreme, Roman soldiers protectively carried Paul to the barracks.

**22:22** After listening to Paul for a time, the crowd again called for his death, apparently preparing to stone him (waved garments and threw dust), but Paul was in the protective custody of the Romans.

**22:26f** Paul invoked his citizenship privilege and his treatment was quickly modified in accord with the law.

**23:1f** The next day, the tribune provided an opportunity for Paul to face his accusers—a council with the chief priests, Pharisees and Sadducees. Paul made his case, but a violent dissension ensued and Paul had to be whisked away by soldiers because the Roman tribune was afraid Paul would be torn to pieces by the unruly assembly.

**23:12f** The following day, over 40 Jews plotted with the chief priests to ambush and murder Paul.

**23:23** When the Roman official got word of the assassination plot, he quickly assembled an extensive military escort to take Paul out of Jerusalem to Caesarea, away from danger.

**Summary:** In the space of a few days, Paul's life was saved multiple times by a Roman official.

### 2. Peter and other apostles refused to obey the ruling tyrants.

**4:3** Peter, John and the other apostles were arrested and imprisoned for speaking about Jesus and healing in His name.

**4:5** All the high authorities of the Jewish leadership gathered together to accuse the apostles.

**4:8f** Peter accused them of lawlessness, murder, opposing Yahweh.

**4:15f** The rulers were taken aback by the boldness of Peter and John. Seeking to silence the apostles, they conspired against them.

**4:18** Jewish officials did not want the truth to get out so they threatened them (Acts 4:29) and told them not to speak of this any more—censorship.\*

**4:19** The apostles let the officials know they were going to speak the Truth and not follow their mandates.

**4:21** Officials were afraid to do anything more to the apostles because of the moral outrage it would provoke from the people.

**4:29** The apostles prayed for more boldness.

**5:12f** The apostles continued to teach and heal.

**5:17f** Jerusalem officials were jealous of the apostles and consequently imprisoned them again.

**5:19f** The apostles were miraculously freed from prison and went back to the temple to teach and heal.

**5:26f** The apostles were again arrested and rebuked for not heeding their threats and mandates.

**5:29** The apostles replied they were following their conscience and obeying God rather than men.

**5:30f** The apostles went on to accuse the officials of murder and opposing God.

**5:33** Officials were enraged and wanted to kill them, but were given wise advice not to.

**5:40** The apostles were beaten and again told not to teach about Jesus.

**5:41f** The apostles went right on following their conscience and refused to obey Jerusalem leadership. They rejoiced at the pain and dishonor they suffered for Christ.

**Summary:** The apostles did not subject themselves to wicked authorities, but rather, followed their conscience.

### **3. Examples in scripture of righteous disobedience to wicked authorities.**

**Exodus 1:** The Egyptian midwives disobeyed the king's order to kill male Hebrew babies and lied about their "failure." They were granted prosperity from God for defying the Pharaoh's order.

**Joshua 2:** Rahab disobeyed the direct order of the Jericho King to turn over spies. Additionally, she lied to the king and aided the spies 'escape. She was richly rewarded.

**Judges 4:** Jael, wife of Heber, deceived King Jabin's key official. She killed him by pounding a spike through his head. King Jabin was an ally of Jael's husband.

**I Sam. 14:** King Saul gave the order no one should eat until the battle against the Philistines was won. Out of ignorance of the decree, Jonathan ate honey and Saul ordered his death. The soldiers opposed Saul and saved Jonathan.

**I Kings 18:** Jezebel ordered death to God's prophets. Obadiah hid 100 prophets, saving their lives.

**2 Kings 11:** Athalia, queen of Judah (usurper?) ordered the murder of the royal blood line. The wife of the High Priest hid the infant Joash until he was crowned king at the age of seven. Queen Athalia was executed on orders of the high priest.

**Daniel 3:** Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego refused to obey King Nebuchadnezzar's command to worship the golden image.

**Daniel 6:** Daniel opened his window wide to demonstrate his defiance of King Darius 'decree to pray to no one but the king.

**Mt 21:** Jesus drove out those who sold and bought in the temple and overthrew the money changers 'tables.

**Acts 4, 5:** More than once, Peter, John and the other apostles were ordered by Jerusalem authorities, to stop teaching about Jesus. They were compelled to defy their orders and obey their conscience.

**Acts 25:** Knowing the Sanhedrin corruption, Paul appealed to a higher authority, defying Jewish rule.

**Rev. 13:** Jerusalem inhabitants were commanded to worship the image of the beast but refused.

**Summary:** We see many examples of godly people acting from conscience and not bowing to unjust rule.

### **Conclusions and further considerations.**

- We have noticed that Paul, in Romans 13, called his audience to obedience to upright government which was a terror to evil and protective of good. We saw an exemplary case of such a government in Acts 21f.
- We also saw believers exhibiting disobedience to evil, tyrannical governments in Acts 4, 5 and other passages in scripture. We notice opposition to tyranny may even be demanded for righteousness sake.
- In Revelation 21:8, we hear a sobering warning: cowards were counted among the murderers, sorcerers, idolaters, liars and their lot was the lake of fire. When the state forbids what God commands or commands what God forbids, it may alert our conscience to righteous action.
- "If anyone comes to me, and doesn't disregard his own father, mother, wife, children, brothers, and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he can't be my disciple." Lk 14:26
- "He who loves his life will lose it. He who hates his life in this world will keep it to eternal life. If anyone serves me, let him follow me. Where I am, there will my servant also be. If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him." Jn 12:25

**\*Censorship:** It appears censorship is murder in God's eyes. Mt 5:22

**\*\*What about Nero?** In the first part of Nero's rule, at the time of the writing of Romans, Nero was guided by the wise political council of philosopher Seneca and Prefect Burrus. His rule was not marked by the extreme wickedness of his latter years.