

God Is in Control Psalm 66:7

Little Johnny tears away the Christmas wrapping and his eyes widen with excited anticipation. There he stands, *G.I. Joe*, ultimate tough guy, dressed to kill in Army fatigues, with a machine gun and hand grenades at his side. And then he speaks: “Want to go shopping?”

That’s what happened in 1989 when the Barbie Liberation Organization, a group of about fifty California parents with a statement to make about gender stereotyping, purchased a few hundred talking *G.I. Joes* and *Barbie* dolls and switched the voice boxes. Then, they returned them to the store shelves. *G.I. Joe* said stuff like, “I like school. Don’t you?” and “Let’s plan our dream wedding.” The altered *Barbies* said, in macho voices, things like “Eat lead, Cobra!”

You judge for yourself how significant the social statement itself was. I just want to observe that our world tolerates much oddness; from frivolous social causes to far more serious deterioration in the culture at large. Sometimes, I’m surprised God ever made that promise to Noah to never flood the earth again. Could Noah’s day have been any stranger than our own? After all, any society that can make viable a whole TV network dedicated just to Soap Operas probably deserves to be flooded.

God endures not only our frivolous amusements, but also much serious sin and much arrogant trivialization of that which He declares to be sin. He assures us that one day He will have the last word, but that’s hard to grasp right now. That’s where faith must take effect and sustain us. In Psalm 66:7, an anonymous songwriter called ancient worshippers to such tenacity of faith:

He rules forever by His power,
his eyes watch the nations -
let not the rebellious rise up against him. **Selah**

We glanced briefly at verse 7 the last time we were together. Structurally and musically, it belongs to the stanza which also includes verses 5 & 6. That larger context dealt with God’s awesome deeds, in particular, the miracle of the parting of the Red Sea by which He delivered His people, Israel, out of slavery in Egypt. But, in terms of content, I felt that verse 7 warranted its own treatment. You see, in verse 7, the psalmist reminds the worshippers that even when God is not so conspicuously acting to deliver His people from their troubles as He was in the days of Moses, that same power that parted the sea remains fully operative as He continues to safeguard His people. God is still very much in control. He always is. He always has been. He always will be. And, that is good news in an upside-down world.

I. God’s Control Is Eternal (7a)

A. He Rules Forever by His Power ...

God’s rule over everything will last “forever.” To think of forever as “from now on” barely scratches the meaning of eternity. In 1 Chronicles 16:36, the same word translated here as “forever” is used twice and is translated “from everlasting to everlasting.” The word covers all of time, forward and backward, but it also extends beyond time, for time is a created thing and eternity is the abode of God. No wonder eternity perplexes us. We are finite beings. Our finite imaginations are fenced-in by time.

A certain cartoon pictured a grandfather trying to explain eternity to his grandson: "Eternity is hard to grasp, unless you've ever been to a fabric store with grandma." I thought I had my own glimpse into tedious, never-ending, everlasting eternity last week - a little something they called *World Cup Soccer*.

Eternity backwards is even more perplexing. Our belief system tells us that God is the first cause of everything, but what child or, for that matter, what adult has not struggled to understand what existed before anything existed? Find solace in knowing that "God" is the best answer to every such question.

The astronomer who bans God from his thinking and attributes all things to some "Big Bang" owes you an answer about the origin of that matter that went "bang" in the first place. The biologist who traces all of life back to some simple organism owes you an explanation about what generated that first spark of life. If everything to a man is naturalistic, then, he needs to come up with natural explanations for first causes. Our answers to such questions are simply, "In the beginning, God ..." Such an answer won't satisfy the diehard skeptics, but at least, it is an answer of infinity for infinite considerations. It is a confession that final truth lies somewhere outside of the natural man's capacities to determine.

B. Why Does It Often Seem that God Has Lost Control?

God used to show His enemies Who was Boss. In this psalm, the singer features the miracle of the Red Sea, that redemptive "mother of all miracles" when God delivered Israel from slavery in Egypt and drowned the armies and chariots of Pharaoh to boot. He took down the walls of mighty Jericho with an army that did absolutely nothing but walk around that city and yell. In the days of Gideon, *JEHOVAH* chased off thousands of Midianites with a force of 300. God did stuff like that all the time.

Early Israel was a theocracy. God was the only Sovereign. He led His people through judges who were on the same page with Him, but they were not royals. In fact, the Israelites tried to recruit one of those judges to be a king, but Gideon told them, "I will not rule over you, nor will my son rule over you. The LORD will rule over you" (Judges 8:23). The nation eventually cried out for a king like all the other nations had - a foolish plea, for they were never like the other nations. Things were never the same. God did not fight their battles as often as before. Most of the kings did not honor Him.

But, in spite of appearances, God never lost control in Israel. He just let the rebellion of His people take its course. Joyce Shira Starr, in a book entitled *Faxes to God: Real Life Prayers Transmitted to the Heavens*, cites the innocent prayer of a little boy named Nathan: "Dear God, Can I be God?" Cute, but at second glance, not so cute - or innocent. In fact, it is an all too common sentiment if not an actual prayer. It was essentially the prayer of many hearts in Israel that chafed at the restraints of God's Law. It is essentially the prayer of many today who profess to trust God. God has never lost control, but sometimes, He does seem to step back and be less conspicuous in the lives of those who rebelliously try to play God themselves.

II. Sometimes, God's Control Seems Elusive (7b)

A. His Eyes Watch the Nations ...

The phrase implies that God studies the nations. *The Living Bible* paraphrases this line: "He watches every movement." Sometimes, from a human perspective, the foe seems so formidable that even the most committed Christian loses heart. The huge numbers of abortions in our land, the voices that validate it as well as the vitriol targeted at those who speak out against it seem to have dulled an opposition from the church that was once seemed razor-sharp. God hasn't stopped the brutality, and we feel out-gunned. The social concern of the day is to protect marriage from gay union advocates on the one hand, but also from the frivolous attitude of so many others in the straight community who snicker at such a thing as a "til death us do part" covenant.

Has God lost control? Is His rage toward such abominations less intense than it once was? Are such issues on His back burner just because His people have grown weary? "His eyes watch the nations." He knows the body count of abortion. He knows the enemies of covenant marriage. When it is time for His wrath to be revealed, He will reveal it. God is well aware of what His enemies are up to.

It is right to speak out against the outrages of the age, not as shrill morality police, but in a loving spirit that calls the culture back to God. People need to be warned, but remember, the battle is not against flesh and blood but against spiritual powers. The battle is for human hearts. In the meantime, even though this world seems to be devoid of justice, mercy or morality, "... his eyes watch the nations."

B. God Is Not Really that Silent

People are religious, but that can mean anything and often does. Two weeks ago, in a village in Kazakhstan, a chicken laid an egg that allegedly says ALLAH on the shell in Arabic. The locals are going to hang onto that egg, because they don't think it will ever go bad. That's religion, I suppose. In western Pennsylvania, a concert promoter has been fined for holding concerts in violation of zoning ordinances. Now, he's suing Fayette County's zoning board in federal court, alleging that the board is infringing upon the religious rights of his "Church of Universal Love and Music." That's religion as well, I suppose, even though no one ever heard of that church until the lawsuit. As religious as people allegedly are, does it not seem a pity that so little of religion concerns itself with living out righteousness?

Is God really bashful about judging unrighteousness? It is socially risky and politically incorrect to even probe the possibility. Have you ever seen what happens to anyone who dares to suggest that AIDS just may be divinely-linked to human decadence? Because one innocent bystander contracts the disease for every thousand who contract it foolishly, the suggestion is vilified. Is it really that far-fetched to think that the God Who created us knows what will harm us? God is not really silent. People just don't listen.

C. Why Might God Seem Silent Now Relative to Days Past?

This is a just my thought. We are the Church and we live in an era when God is perfecting the Bride of Christ for eternity. Perhaps, that sensational divine activity that we tend to think would be such a great idea would just get in His way. The Corinthian Church enjoyed miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit - tongues, prophecies, healings - powerful stuff. But, their hunger for those gifts actually distracted them from the most excellent way of love. Might not similar distractions occur if God were to constantly vindicate Himself and His people every time we find standing for righteousness in this world a little tough?

We crave mighty displays of power, not only in our own behalves, but also, and perhaps, especially, when it comes to humbling those who stand opposed to Him (who also, by the way, poke fun at us). But, such mighty vindications might get in the way as God works to perfect His people in faith, hope and love. Faith is acting upon our convictions about God even when we cannot see the rewards of obedience. Would God silencing our enemies build our faith? Hope is the certain expectation of future reward. Would temporal vindications of us build our future hope? Love is laying down our lives for others. How would God straightening those who harass us teach us a thing about going to the mat for an enemy? After all, Jesus died for us while we were sinners and not because we were allies of Heaven.

A reporter interviewing an African Safari guide asked him about an old superstition: “Is it true that wild animals won’t harm you if you carry a torch?” The guide answered, “That depends on how fast you carry it.” There is a bit of the superstitious primitive in all of us. We would love to have a God Who makes life easy. He would minister to His loved ones, fry our enemies and that would be that. However, He has revealed that His desire is to shape us for eternity. The ease we crave now would not so build us. Come to grips with God’s silence. Draw near to Him in quietness. Remember that He truly is in control.

III. One Day, God’s Control Will Be Evident to All (7c)

A. Let Not the Rebellious Rise Up Against Him.

The most literal translation of this clause is “... let not the rebellious exalt themselves.” The original language implies an egotistical and unrestrained boasting. Have you noticed the acceleration of arrogance among those who live in open rebellion against God, who belittle the Bible and who encourage the same from others? Even *Tonight Show* host Jay Leno questioned the timing:

“2005 was a year in which nature demonstrated its fury. Hurricanes, tornadoes, floods, and thunderstorms tore their way across the country from one end to the other. Are we sure this is a good time to take God out of the Pledge of Allegiance?”

In June, the Motion Picture Association of America (or MPAA), for the first time ever, announced that it was rating a film *PG* (Parental Guidance) not for any sex, violence or bad language, but just because it is too openly religious. I don’t know if that rating is arrogance on the part of the MPAA itself or if it is just them bucking to social pressure from other sources, but clearly, some particularly brazen anti-God bias lies at the root of that decision.

God’s apparent inaction toward those who make fun of Him and call His ways backwards frustrates us. Part of that frustration is the sad evidence of a nation becoming more and more Godless. Part of that frustration may be that we feel attacked ourselves, for when the arrogant mock our God, they mock us. But, whether our indignation is genuinely in God’s behalf or partly egocentric, we wish He would act.

B. Know that God Will Have His Say

For now, frail human vessels speak God’s Word, demanding varying degrees of respect. A note posted on a hot-air hand-dryer in a church bathroom said: “Press here for a word from our preacher.” When God speaks for Himself, His authority will be much more compelling. It will be like an old man who had nine cats. One day a friend noticed that he had nine separate little kitty doors cut into the wall. Puzzled, he asked why the cats couldn’t all use the same door. The man answered, “When I say ‘Scat!’ I mean ‘Scat!’” One day, God will speak with absolute and terrifying authority - but only when it’s time.

God confused the language of the sons of Noah in order to thwart their plan to exalt themselves. King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon ruled over the mightiest empire of his day. One day, as he was reflecting on his own glory and majesty, God took his mind for a few months. The king lived like an animal in the fields until he conceded God’s glory and majesty. Herod Antipas was the vile king who beheaded John the Baptist and acted like a buffoon at his trial for Jesus. A crowd who depended on Herod for food flattered him, calling him a god. He liked that too much, so God took him out. Worms ate Him from the inside out.

Those were the good old days when God behaved like God. He does not seem to be as mad at those who mock Him today as He once was, but know this; the attributes of God's character have not changed. Even today, He is a consuming fire toward those things that fuel His wrath, and His wrath is perfectly focused on sin. One day, He will arise in judgment, but be patient, for His perfect love also has an agenda. Peter warned that the "last days" would be filled with scoffers who mock God and forget the times in the past when He silenced His enemies, but he also explains why God delays His wrath:

⁸But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. ⁹The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

¹⁰But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare. – 2 Peter 3:8-10

C. What Has Any of This to Do with Worship?

This message has not touched much on songs, worship styles or the theology of worship. The text does, however, emerge from a worship hymn, and the connection to worship should be obvious. Nothing dethrones God. He is on top of things. The same God Who brought down the walls of Jericho will one day drive His enemies to their knees. The same God Who flooded the world will judge it with fire - in His time. And, the same God Who delivered His chosen nation through the Red Sea is still powerful to preserve His Own through any trial and can keep every promise He has made to them.

Six of seven days in a week have little to do with what the average person thinks about when he hears the word, "worship." Tomorrow, you will encounter situations in your life that do not lend themselves to a song service - contemporary or traditional. Your worship style won't matter as you read about injustices against the helpless or the prosperity of the wicked, who often capitalize off their wickedness with a book deal. Worship preferences won't matter much when a loved one faces a devastating illness, or your boss shows himself to be grossly unfair or one your children does something hair-brained. The crux of worship in those times will be the simple fact that in all things, He reigns. The foundation of our praise in any trial is the assurance that God is in control.

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