

RETHINKING THE BIBLE, WITH JACK PELHAM

Episode 10: The American Mask Crisis, and How Romans 13:1 Does Not Prohibit Civil Disobedience, Part B

Welcome to Rethinking the Bible with Jack Pelham. This is an audio podcast, where we apply Reality-Based Thinking to interpreting the Bible. Reality-Based Thinking is my name for a philosophy that seeks to make constant use of honesty, rationality, and responsibility in seeking out the reality of things. And I define reality as the state of things as they actually exist, as opposed to one's perceptions, beliefs, or wishes about them.

OK, folks, get strapped in, because we're picking up right where we left off in Episode 9, Part A of this study on Romans 13.

We were looking at how the terminology of "higher powers" ought to get us wondering whether Satan's angels were in Paul's mind—because that's what you do when you're doing your due diligence as bible students---you examine all the available evidence, and all the possibilities you can think of. And I'll show you later in this study that I don't think that Paul was thinking about Satan here. Indeed, that would be worse, even, than if Paul was telling them to obey their human governments! No, I think he was referring to another subset of angels.

But before we get deeper into this, we need to get some more facts on the table---and that's normally what I do with Bible study---I assemble a bunch of facts, establishing them well, and then see how they might fit together, like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle.

So, we were talking about the role of angels in the First Century ekklesia of Jesus---or that is, in more popular terminology, "the church"---and I do remember that I've promised to explain someday why I wish we'd stop using that word. But that topic is really boring compared to this one, and there's no way I'm going to take time out today for that.

So let me give you a few nuggets of information to ponder about angels in the First Century congregations. Remember, God created approximately a bajillion angels. That's just an approximate number, of course, but it's a lot. It's not like there were five or six. Or twelve, even. Do you remember when Jesus was being arrested, in order to be tried and crucified? Here's what he said about angels at that time:

Matthew 26:53 Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me **more than twelve legions of angels?**

According to Barnes Notes on the Bible, a Roman legion might have consisted of somewhere between 3,000 and 6,000 troops. So if Jesus meant to bring the Roman army to mind by using the word for "legion" here, then his statement here suggests he could immediately have had more than 12 times 6,000, which comes to 72,000 angels or so. And that seems like a lot. They would certainly be enough to protect him from this unlawful arrest that was going on. Did Jesus mean to be giving a literal breakdown of numbers? Or was he speaking in more general terms? Is "more than 72,000" what we should take home on this question? Or are there lots and lots more than 72,000? In what manner was he speaking here?

I don't know. But even so, a literal 72,000 figure is a lot of angels! And I'm open to the possibility that the language here---and remember, this was a different culture from ours, so that had different ways of talking about some things than how we might talk about them---I'm open to the possibility that the language here is metaphorical and that Jesus did not intend to bring to mind an actual positive integer, but simply to convey that it is a very large number, indeed.

But this isn't all the information we have about the numbers of angels. We can look at Jude's epistle, where he quotes from The Book of Enoch---also called 1 Enoch by scholars---which was at least a few hundred years old when Jude quoted it, and was very well known by the First Century Christians, and was either quoted or alluded to several times in the Bible documents. Here's what Jude quotes from 1 Enoch on the subject of the number of angels:

Jude 14 It was also about these that Enoch, the seventh from Adam, prophesied, saying, "Behold, the Lord comes with **ten thousands of his holy ones**,¹⁵ to execute judgment on all and to convict all the ungodly of all their deeds of ungodliness that they have committed in such an ungodly way, and of all the harsh things that ungodly sinners have spoken against him."

And there's another place in 1 Enoch, the same book that Jude quotes here, where the number of angels standing around God on one occasion was ten thousand TIMES ten thousand.

1 Enoch 14: 22. The flaming fire was round about Him, and a great fire stood before Him, and none around could draw nigh Him: **ten thousand times ten thousand (stood) before Him**

Well, 10,000 times 10,000 equals 100 Million. So if that's supposed to be understood literally, that's a lot. And if it's only supposed to be understood metaphorically, that's still a lot!

And in Revelation 5:11, many Bible versions corroborate the 1 Enoch scene with "ten thousand times ten thousand".

Revelation 5:11 ¹¹ Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, **and ten thousand times ten thousand**. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders.

In Hebrews 12:22, the ESV uses the word "innumerable" to describe the number of holy angels. And the Greek word here, as in Revelation 5:11, is the one from which we get our word *myriads*.

Hebrews 12:²² But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering,

Now, if you study angels much in the Bible and in the other Ancient Near Eastern documents, you'll discover that they didn't all have the same assignments. So when Jesus says, for example, that he could immediately have more than 12 legions of angels available, we dare not assume that this is all the angels that existed---but all that were immediately available.

And I don't mean to give the impression that the exact number of angels is a knowable number---to us in our situation, that is---but it seems that several of these authors were in agreement that the number was very high.

And what kinds of things were these angels doing in the First Century?

Well, it seems from a few Bible passages that about one third of the angels split off with Satan in his rebellion against God—and we’re definitely going to cover this in depth someday down the road. So, one third of them rebel, and then the ones who remained were sometimes called “holy angels”—to distinguish them, I believe, from the ones who had become unholy in their rebellion. So if you’ll be careful to notice that word “holy” in some of the angel passages, you’ll figure out that this means that the angel or angels in question were one of the good guys who were still faithful to God.

And one fascinating thing about angels in the Bible is that God gave some of them roles—even when they were among the rebel angels. We see Satan in Job, for example, obviously adversarial to God—signifying that he had already rebelled—yet he seems to be acting in an official role as the accuser of Job. And then there’s the really obvious case in which, after the Tower of Babel incident, God adopted the nation of Israel as his own, and he handed off control of the other nations—which were about 70 in number—to some of the more powerful angels who were not only called angels, but also “Sons of God” and “gods” (with a little g). This is an expansive topic—and like our present topic, it’s one that far too few Christians have noticed in the Bible. The modern believer likely believes that the only other gods there were other than The One and Only True God, Yahweh, were not beings at all, but mere carvings of wood or stone, or statues or statuettes of metal. And there are certainly some Bible passages which, if considered alone and apart from the greater Bible context, might give one that impression. But that’s when you get when you cut corners and don’t study out the whole of a topic in the Bible.

So, these “Sons of God”, these angels, these gods (with a lower case g)—and they were also called “shepherds” once he put them in charge over the nations—and this illuminates a lot of the Old Testament talk about “shepherds”—where the modern cognitive miser simply assumes that the “shepherds” talk is about human leaders in Israel. But much of that talk was about these angels. And this fact is richly corroborated in the Book of Enoch, as well. And I’m sorry we don’t have time to get into it deeply, but just so that you know I’m not making this up, I want to show you a passage from Deuteronomy 32. And we’re going to pick up right where we left off when we last discussed this chapter. We were talking about how Moses asked “is this how you repay God?” So we’ll pick it up there and go on:

Deuteronomy 32: ⁶ Do you thus repay the LORD,
you foolish and senseless people?

Is not he your father, who created you,
who made you and established you?

⁷ Remember the days of old;
consider the years of many generations;
ask your father, and he will show you,
your elders, and they will tell you.

⁸ When the Most High gave to the nations their inheritance,
when he divided mankind,
he fixed the borders of the peoples
according to the number of the sons of God.

⁹ But the LORD's portion is his people,
Jacob his allotted heritage.

And while we're at it, I'm going to show you that these angels—these Sons of God, as it calls them here—did not generally do a good job being in charge of these nations. God had put them there to carry out justice over the various peoples, but let's turn to Psalm 82, which is a very short Psalm, and see how it went there---and we'll also see here how he calls them "gods" (with a little g)—and how he mentions a "Divine Council"---an assembly of these divine beings, where God stands in the middle of the crowd of them all and declares judgment against them for their bad behavior:

Psalm 82:1 God has taken his place in the **divine council**;
in the midst of the gods he holds judgment:

² "How long will you **judge unjustly**

and show partiality to the wicked? Selah

³ Give justice to the weak and the fatherless;
maintain the right of the afflicted and the destitute.

⁴ Rescue the weak and the needy;
deliver them from the hand of the wicked."

⁵ They have neither knowledge nor understanding,
they walk about in darkness;
all the foundations of the earth are shaken.

⁶ I said, "You are **gods**,
sons of the Most High, all of you;

⁷ nevertheless, **like men you shall die**,
and fall like any prince."

⁸ Arise, O God, judge the earth;
for you shall inherit all the nations!

I know this passage is mind-blowing for those who've never heard of this. And like I said, this is an expansive field of study that will definitely intersect with many of the future episodes here. But for now, I'm going to refer you to the world's foremost scholar on this subject, Dr. Michael Heiser. He has written several books on the subject and hosts a weekly podcast called The Naked Bible Podcast—the idea being that he doesn't want to dress up the Bible with all manner of spin, as some do, but simply tell it like it is. One great one-liner from Heiser is one that I completely agree with, and it goes something like this: "I see no need to protect people from their Bibles." That is, there's no need to step in and shield people from the stunning or striking or difficult or "weird" passages. Rather, the people should all face these passages themselves and wrestle with them themselves, rather than having an elite class of clergy do that work in their stead----which is timely for us as we've been talking at least a bit about how Bible translators sometimes give in to the temptation to simply tell us what they think a Bible passage means, rather than to translate for us what the author actually wrote.

Dr. Heiser has a convenient page on his podcast site, and the page is called "New? Start Here". You can find it at <https://nakedbiblepodcast.com/newstarthere/>. And I'll leave this link in the show notes for today's episode. I'll tell you for the record that Dr. Heiser's work has been exceedingly helpful to me, and even so, I don't agree with all of his conclusions.

Now, continuing on, we were talking about what all was being done by angels in Bible times, and I was giving you something of a list. So, moving on, we see angels acting as messengers for big events, such as for the birth of Jesus. And we see angels who seem to be in the role of personal guardians for some people---such as when Jesus is talking about the children and mentions "their angels in heaven".

Matthew 18:10 “See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that **in heaven their angels** always see the face of my Father who is in heaven.

And similarly, when Peter was miraculously released from jail and returned to where some of the others were staying, they assumed that the person at the door was not Peter himself, but “his angel”.

Acts 12:13 And when he knocked at the door of the gateway, a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer. ¹⁴ Recognizing Peter's voice, in her joy she did not open the gate but ran in and reported that Peter was standing at the gate. ¹⁵ They said to her, “You are out of your mind.” But she kept insisting that it was so, and they kept saying, “**It is his angel!**”

And that’s a fascinating event that we don’t know nearly enough about, in my eager opinion! Were they right that Peter had his own angel—whatever that would mean? Or were they under a false impression on the matter?

Similarly, depending on how we take Paul’s words in Galatians 1, there may well have been rebel angels that were teaching false doctrine to people. He wrote to the Galatians:

Galatians 1:8 But even if we or **an angel from heaven** should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed.

And then there’s this intriguing mention of angels in Paul’s discussion about why the women were to keep their heads covered. And I’m sorry we’re not going to get into this one today, but here it is, for the record:

1 Corinthians 11: ¹⁰ That is why a wife ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, **because of the angels.**

There was something going on with the angels that the Corinthians would have understood, but that’s not so easy for us, as outsiders, to understand. It’s not obvious to us, but it was obvious to them. Otherwise, we can reason that Paul would have spelled it out for them. But it’s not spelled out for us, and if we want to know more about this, we’re going to have to do some sleuthing through the texts. But I’m sorry that we don’t have time for this today.

So, moving on, we know from Colossians 2:18 that some were in the very bad habit of worshipping angels—yet we’re not told specifically what all that was about, though we would do well to remember that God had handed over the nations to the control of angels, who were also called gods (little g). So, that might have been in view here. Here’s the passage.

Colossians 2:18 ¹⁸ Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and **worship of angels,**

And there’s also language in Jude that makes me suspect that there were rebel angels interloping at the Christian love feasts. Jude 12 and 13 make use of several terms by which to name these interlopers, and several of the terms can be shown to be used also of angelic beings here and there in the texts. Here’s the passage:

Jude ¹² These are hidden reefs at your love feasts, as they feast with you without fear, **shepherds** feeding themselves; **waterless clouds**, swept along by winds; fruitless trees in late autumn, twice dead, uprooted; ¹³ **wild waves of the sea**, casting up the foam of their own shame; **wandering stars**, for whom the gloom of utter darkness has been reserved forever.

Four of these terms, I believe I can demonstrate to be terms used of rebel angels—though I won't take the time to do it in this episode. The terms are “shepherds”, “waterless clouds”, “wild waves of the sea” and “wandering stars”. Did you know, by the way, that frequently in the Bible, the authors used the word “stars” to refer metaphorically to angels? There is an undeniable instance of this in Revelation 1, where Jesus explains a vision John had seen:

Revelation 1: ²⁰ As for the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands, **the seven stars are the angels** of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

He says “the seven stars ARE the angels of the seven churches...”. So it's explicit here. And wouldn't it be sweet if everything in the whole Bible were explicit?! But a lot of this, we have to work at—especially where angelic beings are being talked about. They get called lots of things in the Bible texts. And here we have Jude talking about them, I think---and I think he's already talked about them in this very epistle when he mentioned rebel angels awaiting judgment.

It's up in verse 6:

⁶ And the **angels** who did not stay within their own position of authority, but left their proper dwelling, he has kept in eternal chains under gloomy darkness until the judgment of the great day—

If angels are sometimes called stars, and if some angels left their proper domain or dwelling or position of authority---then what are we supposed to think of when we hear a phrase like “wandering stars”? Doesn't that seem to fit?

But we must keep moving on.

So what about these seven angels in Revelation 1? In the next two chapters, there are seven letters written by Jesus, and each one is addressed not to the congregations, but “to the angel at...” each congregation.

Some will try to dismiss this by reminding us that angel---or *aggelos* in the Greek---is simply the generic word for messenger. So they'll explain these letters as having been written “to the elder at”. But John, the author of the Revelation, certainly knew the word for “elder”, as he used it twelve times throughout the very same book, as well as in two of his three epistles.

So, why would somebody object right off the bat to the idea that the First Century congregations had angels that were somehow overseeing or guarding them, or doing something else that God might have appointed them for? After all, if God had set angels over the nations, and if he had used angels in so very many other ways—and if the world was plagued by rogue angels having rebelled against God—how

can we be surprised at all at the idea that God might have put an angel over each congregation to act as a protector and messenger and avenger overseeing their behavior?

Doesn't this make sense? And if so, why aren't Christians everywhere figuring this out? Well, there's one super-obvious answer to this that should be on our short list of suspects. That is, that this is not the **experience** of believers today. In cognitive science, there's this bias called What You See Is All There Is. Or WYSIATI, for short. It's also called a "focal bias", where all you're aware of is what you're looking at at the moment. And of course, there's the very similar old saying, "Out of sight, out of mind." So again, it's What You See Is All There Is. But in our present case it would be more accurate to call this particular version of the bias What You See Is All There Ever Was. And what acronym would that have?

WYSIATEW. And that's what's going on when people assume that what they see at church today is what things must have been like in the First Century. But I submit that things are substantially different now than they were then—and that there's lots of evidence in the Bible. But when people run across that evidence as they read, it tends not to register. They just dismiss it—as if it weren't there—because it doesn't readily fit into their mental picture—or their model—of what things used to be like.

And people tend to assume---even against the textual evidence---that things are now as they have always been, and that they have always been as they are now. And they do this based on what they see now.

If you ask the novice Christian to imagine what the First Century congregations were like, will he or she not imagine pews and stained glass windows? Won't they imagine choirs or praise bands? Don't they tend to assume that it must have been then as it is now?

I remember chuckling when a large congregation I was in decided to have a go at splitting up on some Sundays into house churches---having seen in the Bible that the Christians seem to have met in public spaces, and in houses, too. So they decided to give it a whirl once in a while. And I remember watching during the setup period in one house as they were attempting to line up the chairs into rows as much like those in their regular assemblies as they could manage. And they had to have a makeshift lectern for whomever would preach. And so forth it went. The going assumption seemed to be that we were "having church" and yet doing it "at home". It was hard to get people to decouple from their habitual thinking sufficiently as to be able to really think it through about what it would have been like in the First Century congregations, where such trappings as church buildings and pews and stained glass and organs and pianos and choirs and bulletins and flowers and the cross on the wall---where none of these things was part of the congregational experience. It's the WYSIATI bias---What You See Is All There Is.

And I think that lots of people have the same trouble decoupling about things like this---and in lots of ways.

For example, for several decades in the First Century, if you were a believer, your congregation might well have gotten a visit or a letter by a Jesus-appointed apostle, such as Paul, perhaps. Or an apostle might have sent messengers to you to see how you were doing and to help with whatever issues might have been going on.

But does this happen today? No. It doesn't seem that Jesus instituted any sort of apostolic succession. (And yes, I know that some churches teach that he did—but I have never seen any convincing proof of this assertion---for if he did, where is it written? Those today who say he did are in the churches whose

own leaders call themselves apostles---so they are acting as their own authority, testifying to their own authority, and we're just supposed to take it as fact, based on their say-so. But that's cheating, because Christianity is a text-based religion, and if God and Jesus had wanted an apostolic succession from then until now, this definitely would have been in the texts. Indeed, you have in the text instructions on how to pick a local elder---but the office of apostle would have been of global reach, and there's not one peep on how to pick a replacement apostle? Interestingly, Paul does speak to their qualifications somewhat, as well as to what he considered a proof of their having been chosen by God. He mentioned "the signs of an apostle", by which he was referring to the "signs, miracles, and wonders" that they did as part of their ministry. But we have no people today doing signs, miracles, and wonders---although we frequently hear about this happening---strangely, always in Africa, it seems.

So just this one difference between them having had apostles in the First Century, and us having none today---that's quite a big difference in the experience of believers from then until now---and yet very few Christians, as far as I imagine today, spend any time at all trying to imagine what that must have been like for that first generation of Christians. Indeed, imagining is hard mental work. It is not easy if you're going to imagine very much, or do it for very long. It's no surprise, therefore, to find people merely *assuming* that it must have been for those first Christians as it is for us today. That's a bad assumption---as I have already demonstrated here briefly, but it's certainly an easy one. And who's going to challenge them for believing such a thing if everybody else is believing it, too, and if everyone else is too mentally lazy to examine the matter?

So I know it's a really awkward thought to think that the First Century congregations might have had holy angels and even rebel angels actually interacting with them, if for no other reason than that we have never once in our lives been in a discussion about these passages that suggest that maybe some things were going on then that are not going on now.

Now, to get back to our main passage in Romans 13, let's take a closer look at the text and see whether we're getting anywhere in this study. I'm going to read from the ESV, even though they mess it up by trying to "help" us in translating "higher powers" to "governing authorities". I'm going to read from verse 1 through verse 7. And we're going to discuss how well this passage could describe human rulers, and then how well it could describe angelic rulers.

ESV Romans 13:1 Let every person be subject to the governing authorities *(exousia)*. For there is no authority *(exousia)* except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. ²Therefore whoever resists the authorities *(exousia)* resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. ³For rulers *(archon)* are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority *(exousia)*? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, ⁴for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. ⁵Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. ⁶For because of this you also pay taxes, for the *authorities* are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. ⁷Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed.

Now, let's begin by considering how well this passage does if the powers or authorities being described here are human kings and governors and such. Let's start with the items that would make perfect sense in that scenario.

First of all, we see in verse 3 that these “higher powers” were “a terror to...bad” conduct. This might make some sense. Even today---for a judge, for example, might sentence someone to jail for bad conduct---or even to death if the offense is great enough. And we could think of the rush of terror some of us feel when seeing the police lights in our rear-view mirrors while we’re driving. So we’ll hold our finger here and come back to it.

And what else in this paragraph seems to fit the idea that this passage is about human officials?

Well, we see in verse 4 that he “carries the sword”, and in verse 5 that he is an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer. Does that fit with human governors?

Then we also see that there is taxation involved. And this one is very easy to see as part of normal human governments.

At this point, the cognitive miser might be well convinced that nothing more than human governors is in view here. But let’s break out the Socratic method here and ask some questions of this passage. This time, I’ll read it line by line, stopping to ask questions where they need asking. And I’ll start in verse 3:

ESV Romans 13: ³ For rulers (*archon*) are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad.

Let’s stop right here. Does “higher powers” refer to a position like a police officer? If so, are there not a great many people in our own country who are scared of police officers on account of those rarer instances where cops wrongfully kill innocent people? Yet Paul here seems quite straightforward in talking about these higher powers as being a terror *only* to people of bad conduct.

So, does this fit the police officer? And by the way, would you really call a police officer a “higher power” in the government? I could see calling the United States Attorney General a “higher power”, I suppose, or even someone high up in the FBI. But a local police officer is not even a federal employee, nor a state employee, but a county or city employee who answers to a mayor or a police chief or sheriff—who is about as low an elected executive officer as you get in this country. So does this really fit the language of “higher power”?

I don’t think so. But let’s continue. Paul goes on in verse 3:

Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority (*exousia*)? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval,

Does doing what is good automatically win you the approval of government officials today? We had been talking about the police officers, even though it’s difficult to consider them “higher powers”. But are there not a great many reports of crooked cops out there---and no, not all cops are crooked---but aren’t there lots of crooked ones who did not approve of good behavior? Yet Paul here seems to assure his readers that if they behave well, the higher powers will approve of them. So, is this really a good fit if the police officer is what’s in view?

I don’t think so. And if not for the police officer, then is it a good fit for any other government official? How about the president? If I do what is right, will the President approve of me? Well, whatever Paul is describing sounds like an official who is much closer in proximity than the President, who has no idea

how I live my life in my house and in my town. So if not the President nor the Police officer, then just what government official fits the bill here?

And now we're going forward to where verse 4 describes one of these higher powers, saying:

⁴for **he is God's servant for your good.**

If this servant of God is a human, just who is it? And does he see himself as God's servant? And for your good? Isn't our government—at all its levels---filled with people we wouldn't even consider to be good PUBLIC servants? And much less, servants of God for OUR good? Yet whatever Paul is talking about here, he seems to be quite categorical in his view of these higher powers as being God's servants who are concerned with our good.

Surely, there are conscientious Christian cops on the streets who love God and are concerned with the good of the citizens. But aren't there just as many who don't fit these qualifications? And again, if we're talking cops, we've already noted the awkwardness of calling them "higher powers" when they are actually one of the lower powers that exists in all government.

And then, how in the world does the cop idea fit with these next two sentences from our passage?:

But if you do wrong, be afraid, for **he does not bear the sword in vain.** For he is the servant of God, **an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer.**

So, this is a guy with a sword. How shall we handle this? Who carries a sword today? Police officers? Judges? US Senators?

No, none of them do. We could decide to ignore this one, and just replace "sword" with "gun" in our minds, and then not think any further about it. OK, fair enough. But what about the avenger part, where he "carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer"? This sounds like an executioner, and not a police officer. Does this matter?

In our culture, the judge hands down the sentence, and the executioner carries it out. But in this passage, it sure sounds like the guy with the sword is the one who passes judgment on the wrongdoer. He's the one who recognizes good behavior, and accepts it, and who recognizes bad behavior and condemns the one doing it.

If this is about us and our American culture, does it matter that this does not seem to fit our system very well? Should we rather just lump it all together into one big government bucket, and consider that the details are not important?

Indeed, what Paul is describing here is a system in which bad people are punished. But isn't the reality of our current political situation that there are a great many public officials whose corruption is quite obvious to millions, yet they are never punished for it? If this is about us in the United States, where are these "avengers" Paul wrote about?

I don't think it's fitting our own society very well. But something that carries more weight than that to me is that ***it doesn't seem to fit the societies in Bible times very well, either.*** Hear me out.

In Acts chapters 6 and 7, the prophet Stephen is accused of heresy, even though he was doing good. And the ruling council was there---and yet they let him be stoned to death. How does this fit Paul's description of these "higher powers"? Didn't Paul write that if you don't want to fear the higher powers, just do what is good? Yet Stephen was doing what was good—preaching the truth in Jesus' name—and this ruling council was complicit in his murder. How could this ruling council in Jerusalem, then, have been considered the "higher powers" that Paul wrote about in Romans 13:1?

And if these "higher powers" are indeed "the government", then how was it that Jesus' own apostles were arrested by "the government" in Acts 5:17 and following for preaching in Jesus' name?

In fact, there are MANY accounts in the scriptures of the apostles and other preachers being mistreated by government officials. Is this not a rather famous ongoing feature of the overall story? How, then, can this be that these "higher powers"---if that's what they were---that these "higher powers" that Paul spoke so confidently and highly of, were actually mistreating Jesus' own apostles and prophets and evangelists?

How can that be? Was Paul wrong about them? Then perhaps he was wrong about saying that disobeying the higher powers was the same as disobeying God. Have you considered that?

And now for the record, I do not think that Paul was wrong about them, so that's not MY argument. But you can't have it both ways. Those who want to discount Paul can't cling to the "don't disobey the government" bit. Not honestly, rationally, and responsibly, anyway.

And let's talk about the martyrdom of James in Acts 12.

Acts 12:1 About that time Herod **the king** laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church. ² He killed James the brother of John with the sword, ³ and when he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also.

So, this Herod who killed James with the sword---was he God's servant to do good to James? Or was it rather, that James had disobeyed, and that God had WANTED him dead, and so, turning to Herod as the avenger, God had James killed? Is that really what you think?

And what about Paul himself, and his own accounts of his own experiences? Let me read you a passage from 2 Corinthians 11 where Paul describes the torments of his ministry. Listen carefully as I read starting in verse 24:

²⁴ Five times I received **at the hands of the Jews** the forty lashes less one. ²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; ²⁶ on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, **danger from my own people**, **danger from Gentiles**, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; ²⁷ in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, ^b in cold and exposure.

This does NOT sound like a man whose government was looking out for him. For the Jews to lash a man, that was an official governmental action under their local ruling councils. And those councils had been authorized by the occupying forces of Rome to carry on with their local culture and to handle their own

criminal cases. So it had Roman approval in this occupied territory of Judea—and probably wherever else it had happened to him.

Yet it's Paul who wrote the paragraph in Romans 13 that supposedly instructs all believers for all time under all governments that God is in charge of it all, and that they can count on the governments to do them good?

Really?

Obviously, these avenging “higher powers” were not keeping the rest of the society in check to keep them from abusing Paul. But doesn't Paul promise that the higher powers are a terror to those who do bad, and that they take out God's vengeance on them?

So let me be blunt here. This whole interpretation of Romans 13 that has Paul talking about our civic government is a grand monument to the unthinkingness of our culture. It simply doesn't match the reality of what we have---or of what they had in the First Century either---not when it comes to their human governments.

This cannot possibly be a description of human governments, folks. Not a chance. Unless, of course, Paul was wrong, or lying, or stupid, or waxing exaggerative about the good qualities of human governments.

But I don't think Paul was any of those things. No, I think he was writing about “higher powers” that you and I know very little about---and not the governments (in his day or ours) that we know LOTS about. But shame on us for reading this hundreds of times, and never thinking through it enough to realize how poorly it matches up with what they assume it to be talking about.

I think that some special things happened in the First Century in Judea and around the Mediterranean Sea region of the world. For example, Jesus came to visit that region for three decades plus a little. That's a pretty special deal---and to see it, you had to be there. You can't see it now, because he's not still there. Now, you can READ about it, but only in abridged fashion, as the accounts about him in the Bible cover only a tiny FRACTION of his 33-year visit—or even of his 3-year ministry. So what we read is obviously abridged. And that means that it doesn't cover all the details. Do you have any idea how long the gospels would be if they were to cover his whole 33-year visitation? Or even if they were to cover his entire 3-year ministry? We have only a fraction of it on the record.

Shouldn't we expect, then, to find some very interesting things about which we are told precious little---and the rest of which we are simply going to have to wonder about?

Yes, that's reasonable.

Well, it's like that with more things than just what Jesus did with his time. The apostles were around from roughly 30 AD forward, and before that century was over, they were all gone. You can't go to Jerusalem and find them there today because they're not there anymore. So if you didn't live then, you missed it. And you missed all the “signs, miracles, and wonders” they did, too. What was all that about? Well, we only know brief accounts of some of it. We don't have all the information. But one thing we know is that that time is over.

And who goes around disputing this? Who says, “Peter was at my house church last Wednesday night doing signs, miracles, and wonders, and teaching all night, and boy, did we have a blast!”? Close to zero people—in all the billions of believers on this planet—would tell you anything like that. And they’re OK to let Peter be part of the past, without pretending that he is part of their present like that.

But they’re not this open-minded on every topic. Suggest to them that angels had a very substantial role in the lives of the First Century believers, and they’ll show themselves to be in one of two groups, likely. Either, they’re going to be OK with that, and they assume, against the evidence, that angels are also doing such things today, behind the scenes, or they’re going to balk at the idea of lots of angelic activity in the First Century, because they don’t see such things happening today. And that’s that WYSTIATI effect again---What yOu See is All There Is.

Again, part of the problem is that since we’re told so little about it, it can’t really sink in until we’ve spent some considerable time imagining what it would have been like.

But where in modern church culture do we take the time for such things?

We don’t. Not normally. So it’s extremely difficult for people to decouple from their current thinking routines in order to flesh out the model in their minds as to what things were like for believers in the First Century. And this is what you get in a church culture that spends very little time in the Bible, wrestling with what it says. (They can spend lots of time in the Bible rehearsing bits and pieces that fit into their own church-specific narrative, but that’s different from letting the Bible authors---ALL the Bible authors---have our ears again and again, and pondering what their messages would have meant to their own contemporary audiences.

I find it very tragic that some believers today are much more apt to imagine that an angel was the reason for a near miss in a potential car wreck situation---or something like that---than they are to believe the Bible when it says that these angelic things happened in the First Century.

Take this passage, for example, and see if you don’t have some bias involved in the way you interpret it. We mentioned this passage earlier in this episode:

This is

Galatians 1: ⁸ But even if we or **an angel from heaven** should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed.

Whenever you have read this passage, have you ever once stopped to consider whether there might actually have been rebel angels preaching a false gospel at that time? Or did you just assume that Paul was making up examples for rhetorical purposes? I can’t prove to you that angels from heaven were doing this—if they were, it might have meant that there were rebelling against God—that there were new rebellions going on, and these wouldn’t have been from the same lot of angels that had rebelled along with Satan so long before. And I think I could make something of a case for that, but I don’t have time to get into that now. But I can definitely demonstrate to you that many people have a bias against such possibilities, and won’t even consider them without being compelled to do so.

But why should we be like that? What do we gain from being stubborn and from refusing to give due consideration to what the scriptures are telling us?

Here's a passage that many will find troubling—and even shocking, particularly if they've never read it before. See how this stretches your understanding of what all was going on back in the First Century. I'm reading from

Revelation 2: ¹⁸ “And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write: ‘The words of the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze.

¹⁹ “‘I know your works, your love and faith and service and patient endurance, and that your latter works exceed the first. ²⁰ But I have this against you, that you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and seducing my servants to practice sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols. ²¹ I gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her sexual immorality. ²² Behold, I will throw her onto a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her I will throw into great tribulation, unless they repent of her works, ²³ and I will strike her children dead. And all the churches will know that I am he who searches mind and heart, and I will give to each of you according to your works.

If this passage weren't already in the Bible, I believe a great many Christians would believe it couldn't possibly be the true words of Jesus, for they have no idea from their modern churches that Jesus would actually punish a living person for their unrighteous deeds. “Throw her on a sickbed”? I know some people who would think that Jesus was a monster for this. And if that didn't get them, then “strike her children dead” would definitely be repulsive to them. Here it is right in the Bible---right under our noses---but look how many people are utterly shocked to consider a Jesus who was stern like this. And I submit that the problem here is that in our generation, we spend far too much time considering ourselves, and far too little time studying what happened in that special First Century.

Indeed, just two chapters earlier in this very same letter to the Romans---and we've been considering Romans 13---Paul told the Romans to keep God's sternness in mind. He wrote:

Romans 11:22 Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God: sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you, provided that you continue in his kindness. Otherwise, you also will be cut off.

A great many Christians today, however, actively work to IGNORE the sternness of God. They create in their minds a twisted Jesus who would *never*, in their minds, do such a thing as to discipline or punish anybody for their sins. Their Jesus would never cut somebody off. He would never avenge their wrongdoing. And if you suggest to them that he would, they will think you are a monster. And so many of them are likely to remain adamant about this for the rest of their lives, and nobody can convince them any differently---not even the scriptures that say things that are in flagrant contradiction to their twisted Jesus model. But I think that God will be able to convince them differently when finally they meet face to face after death.

So back to the Thyatira letter in Revelation 2. Let's notice that this letter, like all the other six epistles in the beginning of the Revelation, is addressed “To the angel of the church in...”

There are a couple of ways to read this. One is that the angel is just the one who opens the letter, and that the letter inside is addressed to the congregation. And that's certainly a possibility. But before we jump on the option that seems the easiest to deal with intellectually, let's do some due diligence and imagine if the letter were written to the angel himself, as the salutation seems to say when taken literally and in its plain sense. Think about this possibility as I read:

Revelation 2:¹⁸ "And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write: 'The words of the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze. ¹⁹ "I know your works, your love and faith and service and patient endurance, and that your latter works exceed the first. ²⁰ But I have this against you, that you tolerate that woman Jezebel,

Suppose that this angel were one of those "higher powers" who were "servants of God" for the "good of" the Christians, and who were "avengers" of God against those who did wrong in the congregations. And suppose that this letter is to this specific angel in Thyatira, and that this angel, who was not supposed to tolerate that woman Jezebel was indeed tolerating that woman Jezebel. And then he--- Jesus, who is dictating the letter to John, says a bit more and he goes on with this:

²² Behold, I will throw her onto a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her I will throw into great tribulation, unless they repent of her works, ²³ and I will strike her children dead.

In other words, Mr. Angel, you're not completely doing your job, so I'm going to step in here and deal with this woman myself.

What if THAT's how the letter was intended by Jesus to be understood?

No, I'm not saying that I know for sure that that's how he intended it, but I've at least THOUGHT about that idea in my studies. Have you? Have you thought about it, or do you just somehow know that this is impossible because nothing like this happens at your own church in 2020?

This sort of congregation-specific angelic overseer solves a lot of the problems we had when trying to imagine how Romans 13 could be about a police officer or a president. These angels would have been locally based, so they could see people's behavior. They would have had swords (whether literal swords or some other deadly weapons that was metaphorically referred to as a sword). They would have been able to deliver messages from God to the congregants for their good. They would have been able to protect and to administer justice.

And there's other evidence in the Bible regarding real-time punishment—including death—for Christians who were not behaving properly. In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul was fussing at some of the Corinthians for how they were desecrating the Lord's Supper by their bad behavior. And listen to what had been done about it:

1 Corinthians 11:²⁷ So then, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. ²⁸ Everyone ought to examine themselves before they eat of the bread and drink from the cup. ²⁹ For those who eat and drink without discerning the body of Christ eat and drink judgment on themselves. ³⁰ That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep. ³¹ But if we were more discerning with regard to ourselves, we would not come under such judgment.

³² Nevertheless, when we are judged in this way by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be finally condemned with the world.

He says “That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep.” He directly links these things to their bad behavior. Do you remember how Jesus said he would strike “that Jezebel” with sickness in the Thyatira letter of Revelation 2? Well, some of these Corinthians were sick as a result of their bad behavior. And what about this line where it says “a number of you have fallen asleep”? This is typical of Hebrew metaphorical language for death. For example, when Lazarus died, Jesus said:

John 11:11 After he had said this, he went on to tell them, “Our friend Lazarus has **fallen asleep**; but I am going there to wake him up.”

And even in this same letter that we’re looking at now, 1 Corinthians, Paul writes about those who were witnesses to the resurrected Jesus. Listen to this:

1 Corinthians 15:6 After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have **fallen asleep**.

Here, we have “fallen asleep” set explicitly against “still living”. These two things were opposites in the way they would talk in that culture.

So some of these unruly Corinthians were “weak”—and perhaps this is what they had done to themselves by their sin. That is, that they had become spiritual weak on account of it. Or perhaps he’s talking about something else we just don’t know about. But then others of them were sick as a result. And I doubt the sickness was as a direct result of the sin, but as the result of being PUNISHED for the sin. And then some of them had “fallen asleep”—meaning that they had died—or more likely that God or one of his avenging angels—his “higher powers”—had killed them.

And this kind of “church discipline”, as some would call it, seems absolutely fantastical to many today because the modern churches are so far from this paradigm of personal accountability for living according to the image of God. But there’s reason to suspect that it was commonplace in the First Century congregations. In fact, we have to consider the possibility that there was even corporal punishment involved.

Let me offer up another passage from Paul where he addresses the unruly. And this time, he mentions corporal punishment.

1 Corinthians 4:18 Some of you have become arrogant, as if I were not coming to you. ¹⁹ But I will come to you very soon, if the Lord is willing, and then I will find out not only how these arrogant people are talking, but what power they have. ²⁰ For the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power. ²¹ What do you prefer? Shall I come to you with **a rod of discipline**, or shall I come in love and with a gentle spirit?

Now be honest! When you have read this passage in the past and you got to that part about him bringing a rod of discipline---and some other translations say “whip” instead of “rod”---did you assume

that this was just rhetoric? Or did you give serious consideration to the question of whether Paul might actually have ever used corporal punishment against unruly Christians?

Again, am I telling you that he did? No. I don't know for sure one way or the way. The point is that, just like the passage about angels preaching a false gospel, this one opens up a possibility. And yes, yes, yes, it COULD just be Paul's rhetoric, and perhaps he never whipped anybody. But let me show you another passage that you can't wiggle out of, and it shows a punishment for sinful behavior in the congregation, and that punishment is far worse than whipping.

Acts 5: 5 Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property. ²With his wife's full knowledge he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles' feet. ³Then Peter said, "Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? ⁴Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied just to human beings but to God." ⁵When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened. ⁶Then some young men came forward, wrapped up his body, and carried him out and buried him. ⁷About three hours later his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. ⁸Peter asked her, "Tell me, is this the price you and Ananias got for the land?" "Yes," she said, "that is the price." ⁹Peter said to her, "How could you conspire to test the Spirit of the Lord? Listen! The feet of the men who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out also." ¹⁰At that moment she fell down at his feet and died. Then the young men came in and, finding her dead, carried her out and buried her beside her husband. ¹¹Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events.

So in this story, these two dishonest Christians lie to the apostles—and the way Peter puts it, they lied "to the Holy Spirit". So they drop dead right there on the scene. There's no reason to believe that the apostles stabbed them or beat them to death. No, they just dropped dead---apparently as the result of some heavenly decree. It was flagrant sin, and it was a flagrant punishment. And look at the result of it. It says:

¹¹ Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events.

And this line is very important. It bears a striking resemblance to Jesus' later remarks in that letter to Thyatira. Let me read the last part, that I didn't read before:

Revelation 2: ²²So I will cast her on a bed of suffering, and I will make those who commit adultery with her suffer intensely, unless they repent of her ways. ²³I will strike her children dead. Then all the churches will know that I am he who searches hearts and minds, and I will repay each of you according to your deeds.

It appears it was important to Jesus to run a tight ship, and he knew that these kinds of punishments would serve to keep the rest of the Christians sober in all the congregations. And I'm not suggesting that he punished the guilty ONLY as a deterrent to the others. But that was definitely part of it, it seems. In fact, this theme of "then you will know that I am the Lord" runs throughout much of the Bible. And if we had an extra hour, we could get into that topic, too! But if you're itching to get into it now, go read Ezekiel 36, for example, and see how God was going to bring his people back into his land—which

happened in Acts 2—and how he was going to clean them up, spiritually speaking, and put a new Spirit within them, and how, finally, his people were going to live righteously in the land, and then, as it says:

Ezekiel 36: ³⁶Then the nations around you that remain will know that I the LORD have rebuilt what was destroyed and have replanted what was desolate. I the LORD have spoken, and I will do it.'

God's people—with very few exceptions—had always let him down, and had been a TERRIBLE example to the other nations of the world. But God had a plan for that, and would eventually put his Spirit in his people, and cause them FINALLY to follow his decrees and to live righteously. And this was all about that period that started in Acts 2, when he poured out the Spirit in those last days. And we could talk for a month about all that---and we will, but not anytime soon. But this grand kindness of God in pouring out his Spirit, along with all the spiritual gifts that he gave them—this was not a one-sided coin. It was not a matter of kindness only, but of kindness AND sternness. And you did not want to take the name of the Lord God in vain. That is, you didn't want to be claiming to be a Christian, and yet not living according to the image and likeness of God. Even though the idea is nearly lost to Christians today, in the First Century, it was common knowledge that:

Hebrews 10:31 It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God."

And in the First Century, these kinds of events went beyond just those in the congregations of the Christians. Non believers were punished in severe ways on at least two occasions that come to mind quickly. One was when Paul struck Elymas the Sorcerer blind for trying to influence an official not to believe Paul's gospel message. You'll find that story in Acts 13. And another is when God struck King Herod dead for bad behavior:

Let me read it to you:

Acts 12: ²¹On the appointed day Herod, wearing his royal robes, sat on his throne and delivered a public address to the people. ²²They shouted, "This is the voice of a god, not of a man."
²³Immediately, because Herod did not give praise to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms and died. ²⁴But the word of God continued to spread and flourish.

For your information, the Jewish general and historian, Josephus, also gives an account of Herod Agrippa's death, where he gives some more details of it, but while I'm torn about telling you about it in our limited time here, I'm going to do it anyway. So here's Josephus' account of when God had an angel kill Herod Agrippa. And this has been abbreviated somewhat with ellipses, so that it's an easier read.

Agrippa... came to the city Cesarea... and there he exhibited shows in honor of Caesar... At which festival, a great multitude was gotten together of the principal persons, and such as were of dignity through his province.

On the second day... he put on a garment made wholly of silver... and came into the theatre early in the morning; at which time the silver of his garment being illuminated by the fresh reflection of the sun's rays upon it, shone out after a surprising manner, and was so resplendent as to spread a horror over those that looked intently upon him; and... his flatterers cried out... that he was a god; and they added, "Be thou merciful to us; for although we have hitherto revered

thee only as a man, yet shall we henceforth own thee as superior to mortal nature.” Upon this the king did neither rebuke them, nor reject their impious flattery.

A severe pain... arose in his belly, and began in a most violent manner. He therefore looked upon his friends, and said, “I whom you call a god, am commanded presently to depart this life; while Providence thus reproves the lying words you just now said to me; and I, who was by you called immortal, am immediately to be hurried away by death. But I am bound to accept of what Providence allots as it pleases God; for we have by no means lived ill, but in a splendid and happy manner.”

When he said this, his pain was become violent. Accordingly he was carried into the palace; and... when he had been quite worn out by the pain in his belly for five days, he departed this life, being in the fifty-fourth year of his age, and in the seventh year of his reign...⁴

So there’s that story. And let us note for the record that the account in Acts says explicitly that “an angel of the Lord struck him down”. God killed him, yet he had an angel do it. So think about Ananias and Sapphira, and how they just dropped down—but how, obviously, God, or an angel of his, was working behind the scenes to make that happen. And think about “that Jezebel” being struck with sickness, and her children being struck with death, and about the Corinthians being struck with sickness and death on account of their unruliness, and Elymas being struck with blindness---and on and on.

When you actually take into account all this “New Testament” material, it starts to sound quite Old Testament-y, doesn’t it? It does to me. And there were angels all over the place doing all manner of things. And sometimes, the texts tell us explicitly that it was angels making them happen, while in other places, it simply gives more of a summary view, telling us that God did this or that.

And so we have a better picture of the First Century ekklesia—the congregations of Jesus’ followers--when we take all this into account. And if we have really got it all in view, it actually becomes quite strange to think that the God of the Bible would have run angels all through those earlier centuries, but then suddenly put an end to it at Acts 2, running the congregations with no angels whatsoever being involved.

What happened in the First Century certainly involved some new things, but it’s not like the timeline that had run beforehand was cut off, and a new timeline was started. No, no! What happened in the First Century was the prophesied continuation and fulfillment of so much of what was discussed in the scriptures beforehand.

And this is not hard to see for those who have their eyes opened to it, and are willing to invest the time to become familiar with these things.

But that leads us to the more pressing question:

Are things like this happening today?

No. They are not.

Did they happen in the First Century?

Yes, they did.

Do corrupt kings get eaten by worms today? Do lying couples in the churches drop dead for telling lies? Does Jesus strike the sexually immoral down with sickness and kill their children? Do selfish Christians get struck down with sickness or death for desecrating the Lord's Supper?

No. These things aren't happening today, as far as we can tell.

So not everything is the same today as it was then. And the angel business is included. Like so many things about the life of believers in the First Century, the oversight of angels over the congregations simply wasn't to be a permanent and perpetual thing.

Naturally, then, it's very awkward for us to imagine back to a time when congregations did have their own angels. But it's far better to do the mental work and to come up with an accurate interpretation of the scriptures—and an accurate idea of what things were like then---than it is to misinterpret the scriptures and to make bad assumptions about what it all means.

So I'm going to wrap up this episode now and come back with Part C of this conversation next. And that's where I'll get more specifically into the current American Crisis and what the Bible says and doesn't say about what we can and should do about it.

Thanks for joining in.

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