

4. *Unself-Government*

PSALM 93

The LORD reigns; he is robed in majesty;
the LORD is robed, he is girded with strength.
Yea, the world is established; it shall never be moved;
thy throne is established from of old;
thou art from everlasting.

The floods have lifted up, O LORD,
the floods have lifted up their voice,
the floods lift up their roaring.
Mightier than the thunders of many waters,
mightier than the waves of the sea,
the LORD on high is mighty!

Thy decrees are very sure;
holiness befits thy house,
O LORD, for evermore.

The sovereignty that crossed the surf onto the shore of the New World was a new sovereignty. They began the era of absolute human sovereignty — which is to say the era of absolute human presumption. An infinitely greedy sovereign is afoot in the universe, staking his claims.

WENDELL BERRY¹

Greek children are raised, I presume, with the conviction that Greece is best. Chinese children probably grow up with similar convictions about their country. Also Tanzanian children. At any rate I know that I was raised with the firm belief that America is best, the land of the free and the home of the brave. I also acquired a vaguely formulated but solidly established belief that America was a Christian place. The extraordinarily beautiful mountains and plains, the vast forests and wild rivers were God's bounty. Childhood and textbook stories gave me the overall feeling that America had a Christian history. George III fit the image of Pharaoh conveniently enough. My ancestors were survivors of malign persecutions, their Atlantic passage a kind of Red Sea event. There were even tribes of hostile barbarians enough like the Canaanites to provide convincing parallels between American Pilgrims and Hebrew children. America was the Promised Land; Americans were God's chosen people.

The government that developed on this promised land

1. Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America* (New York: Avon Books, 1977), p. 55.

by these chosen people was a democracy — self-government. There had been earlier ventures in democracy from time to time, but nothing this thorough or successful. Fashioned in a land that exhibited all the qualities of a promised land among a people who experienced the dignity of a chosen people, it was hardly surprising that democracy was viewed, pure and simple, as God's blessing. The version of history that I was taught said that after living for centuries under the abusive weight of papal domination and after a millennium of threat from Islamic fanaticism, American democracy was too good to be true — yet it was true.

American democracy is, by any account, a great success. If there are critics of the American political system — and there are, some of them extremely strident — they do not ordinarily oppose the concept of self-government but only flaws in its execution or hypocrisies in its institutions. There are, it must be admitted, gaping holes in some of our claims. There are many people for whom the promises have yet to come true. Still, the critics of America do not seem to be standing in line to emigrate to either Cuba or China. After centuries of rule by tribal chieftains, military dictators, kings and queens, councils of wise advisers, and cabals of passionate revolutionaries, we have arrived at democracy. Self-government is the apex of political science.

The American Christian with a historical memory so thoroughly shaped by a sense of divine promise and blessing can hardly fail to assume that God's style of government must be along the lines of self-government. But the assumption comes to grief in prayer: there, we find ourselves in a reality quite different from what we grow up in as Americans. The people are not sovereign; God is sovereign. Praying, we do not enter a world where our wishes are fairly represented and then shaped into legislation that balances the maximum of liberty with the minimum of interference. The biblical

revelation presents the God to whom we pray as unequivocally sovereign. It also makes clear that God's intention is to exercise his sovereignty in a total, sweeping way. Everything and everyone is subject to him. There is no division of reality into spiritual and material, with God assigned to rule the spiritual and the politicians assigned to the material. God's rule is inclusive and absolute.

The act of prayer, then, involves us in powerful cross-currents: the swift, noisy, flashing current of assumptions on self-government and the slow, quiet, rising tide of belief in God's sovereignty. We pray prayers of submission to God as king in an atmosphere in which we insist on having a vote in everything. How much does our American pride in self-government unconsciously subvert our Christian commitment to God's sovereignty? Far more, I think, than we are commonly aware. But the subversion also operates in the other direction. Our enthusiastic insistence on self-rule is altered into grateful obedience to God's rule. The cascading mountain stream is absorbed by the rising ocean tide. This has, of course, both personal and political consequences.

The LORD Reigns

Seven psalms proclaim and celebrate this rule.² They probably originated in a New Year's Day festival of worship in Israel in which God's sovereign enthronement over the people, the nations, the earth, and the year was celebrated.³ God's rule

2. Psalms 47, 93, 95-99.

3. These psalms with their characteristic "the LORD reigns" are a polemic against all pretensions to rule by other gods and kings pretending to be gods. Sigmund Mowinckel, the great Norwegian psalms scholar, has argued that they were sung at a New Year's Day ritual that greeted God in an act of worship as the king who renewed his dominion by recreating

is pondered and prayed in these psalms with both precision and exuberance. Prayer realizes the pervasive ways in which God's rule interferes with and finally replaces our petty fiefdoms in which we blusteringly try to run our own lives or indolently let others run them. Psalm 93 is prominent among these seven. Regal in its artless simplicity, imposing in its unpretentious brevity, memorable in its strong rhythms, it attracts and convinces. One of the characteristics of Hebrew poetry is that it "rhymes" meanings rather than sounds, paralleling a similar or contrasting meaning in successive lines. This can be shown visually in the opening stanza of Psalm 93 by separating the lines into four pairs of paralleled sense rhymes.

The LORD reigns;
 he is robed in majesty;
 The LORD is robed,
 he is girded with strength.
 Yea, the world is established;
 it shall never be moved;
 Thy throne is established from of old;
 thou art from everlasting.

The four paired lines build a foursquare solidity. God's sovereignty is a structural fort. It is a historical fact as much

the world. "There is in this proclamation a confession against the great monarchies of the East and their religion. Neither Marduk nor Assur, but Yahweh, became king and is now king and will be king when all other powers vanish. *Yahweh malak* has to be translated: Yahweh became king (in the first creation), he becomes king (now in his enthronement on New Year's Day, the day of the world renewed by him), and will become king (at the day of the eschatological 'second' creation)." Johannes Hemple, *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, 3:949. See also H. H. Rowley, *The Old Testament and Modern Study* (London: Oxford University Press, 1952), pp. 190-92.

as a theological fact. It is a political fact as much as a spiritual fact. It is an earthly fact as well as a heavenly fact. People of faith accept and rejoice in this sovereignty. They enjoy its immense benefits. They celebrate its great holidays. They admire and remember its significant leaders. They seek to be responsive to its legislation and to promote its ends.

At the same time, though, we live under other governments. The enthronement of God, prayed in Psalm 93, was prayed by the Hebrews throughout the centuries in which they also regularly enthroned their own kings. For about five hundred years they were a monarchy. Through that half a millennium they crowned forty-two kings.⁴ Some of the kings were magnificent; some were awful. Many were no better and no worse than we would expect. But every king was crowned in subordination to God's rule. No king was permitted to think of himself as anything other than a human with a job to do. No citizen was permitted to think anything different.

By crowning their kings in the setting of worship, the ritual and song and prayer shaped the imagination of the people to respond to God, and only God, as sovereign. The kings didn't always remember this, nor did the people. But at least the right foundations were laid. Acts of worship continually returned them to the common conviction that the rule of God was being exercised in the actual political and social community in which they were living. Praying kept them from ever supposing that having a king somehow took precedence over having a God. Such praying has continued unchanged into the era of self-government. Generation after generation of such praying by Jews and Christians has developed such an intricate root system of involvement in the

4. This number includes kings of the united kingdom and of both northern and southern kingdoms after the schism.

politics of God's rule that no government is safe from challenge or subversion by the community of faith.

It is neither possible nor desirable for people of faith to extricate themselves from the political conditions of the day and live simply and joyously "under God." From time to time, people attempt to form such communities. None of them has worked, either politically or spiritually. The unavoidable reality is that in addition to living under God we at the same time live under a king, a dictator, a prime minister, an emperor, a president, or a general with attendant councils, courts, senates, armies, and bureaucracies that see to law and order, conduct the census, and dispense justice.

Some rulers claim to have direct access to the mind of God and to be a mirror image of it in their rule. Others acknowledge God's rule in general but believe themselves to be in charge of whatever goes on in *this* nation. Some are so bold as to completely deny God's sovereignty, giving them in effect the final say-so in everything. More often there is simple indifference to God as ruler: God may be believed in as Savior or as comforter, but matters of rule — waging war and collecting taxes, regulating trade and making treaties — are supposed to be far from the mind of God, who has enough to do directing the angels in choir and keeping double-entry accounts in the book of life.

Meanwhile, an underground conviction stubbornly persists: "The LORD reigns." He reigns right here; his throne is earth, the stuff we walk on daily. Furthermore, this rule brooks no opposition: it shall "never be moved." It follows that any earthly leader who is obsessed with exercising power without interference — whether that power is being used to maintain the self unchallenged, or the family in line, or the culture intact, or the government in control — will get more than a little nervous when people are at prayer. Rightly so. The centuries provide more than ample evidence of what

happens: a better rule is discerned and embraced in prayer. When the better rule conflicts with the rule of nation, society, family, or self, the pray-ers shift loyalties. Some even end up crucified — like Jesus, literally, or like Paul, metaphorically.

But the crucifixions backfire. Instead of getting rid of the challenging rule of God they establish it. These praying people have a long record of being misunderstood by families, imprisoned by governments, fired by employers, ridiculed by culture. But they seem not to mind very much, at least not enough to change their loyalties. They are ruled by a better, wiser, more gracious sovereign and are pleased to continue under that government.

Floods of Unrule

How do they arrive at and maintain such convictions and loyalties? There are long stretches of history that seem to show no signs at all of God's rule. There are passages of personal experience that seem all muddle and disorder. If the rule of God is to be affirmed and obeyed, the frequent and disrupting experiences of "unrule" must also be prayed through.

The floods have lifted up, O LORD,
the floods have lifted up their voice,
the floods lift up their roaring.

What good is it that the earth is established if floods rush savagely across its firm surface? Of what benefit is it that the Lord's throne is established if violent waters ruthlessly wash away everything that is loose, leaving it glistening but bare? What comfort is it that the ground under me is eternally solid if I am swept off my feet and battered by the bruising waves? When the floods come, the earth remains as solid as

ever, but nothing else does. The firmament continues, orderly and dependable, but everything between heaven and earth is swept unceremoniously into catastrophe.

In human history the floods grab all the headlines. The established earth has no need to assert itself. It is *there*. Silent. Solid. But the floods lift up their voice, their roaring. The forces of destruction and disintegration, the energies of hurt and disruption, batter and hammer and shout. We can walk for days, years even, on the earth without giving a second thought to its dependable, stoic solidity, but the floods allow no such casual inattentiveness. We can walk all day on dry land and never once notice that we are dry, but if we are swept into the flood we are acutely conscious that we are wet. Dry is our natural state and we take it for granted; wet is an alien state and we panic.

The incredible force of floodwaters is awesome. Only the fish who swim in the waters and the birds who fly over the waters are exempt. Floods scour the land. Great trees are uprooted. Immense rocks are shifted. This too-solid earth is scored and recontoured, leaving badlands.

The flood is an initiation into violence; it is also a master metaphor for anarchy. Floodwaters have their counterparts in flood passions. The unruliness of passion is notorious. The chaos of lust and greed is inherently chaotic. Human aggressiveness is age-old and requires intervening rule. As much as we dislike being told what to do by another, we fear even more a society in which everyone does what is right in his own eyes (Judg. 21:25), a nadir that was reached at least once in Hebrew history and not a few other times in world history.

But there has always been a recovery of government. If there had not, there would be no human history. All government is, in one way or another, a response to the floods. If there were no floods there would be no government. Because of anarchy, government is required. If everyone and every-

thing existed in harmonious tranquillity, government would be as questionable as the vermiform appendix.

Floods have analogies in marketplaces, battlefields, families, and playgrounds: rules are set, everyone is doing what is expected of them, all are having a good time, and then suddenly a single person goes berserk and the peaceful pursuit disintegrates in a melee of hitting and yelling and looting. Are there no guarantees against it? Is there no way to eliminate the destructive floods? On the land, dams are built and dikes constructed; in society, governments are formed, police deployed, legislation enacted. Success varies. The Noachian flood of judgment was a response in kind to the flood of violence ravaging the earth: "the earth was filled with violence" (Gen. 6:11, 13), and then, "the waters of the flood came upon the earth" (7:10). But no more. Violence will no longer be met with violence: "Never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth" (9:11).

Mightier than the thunders of many waters,
mightier than the waves of the sea,
the LORD on high is mighty! (Ps. 93:4)

The anarchical floods are matched by the sovereign Lord. Three times the floods lift up their voice; three times the Lord's might proves sovereign. These paired triplets resonate through the biblical memory. The devil's three testings of Jesus are met and defeated by three sovereign words (Mt. 4:1-11). Peter's three denials are matched by three affirmations of love (Jn. 21:15-19). Paul's three protestations against his "thorn" are matched by the triple reassurance, "my grace is sufficient for you" (2 Cor. 12:8-9). Luke gives three renderings of Paul's conversion, countering his thrice-reported terrorist activities in the early church.⁵

5. Acts 8:1, 3; 9:1; matched by 9:1-19; 22:4-16; 26:9-18.

In all these events, God's sovereignty is not merely asserted, it is experienced. God's rule is not dogma deduced from concepts of God's omnipotence; it is witness that articulates the experience of people who have been battered and wounded but who have gone on to experience God's rule as "mightier."

This witness has enormous implications, for if God is not sovereign, I do, in fact, live in chaos. Randomness and chance permeate the universe. On the other hand, if God rules, there is foundational order. No accident is sheer accident. No chaos is ultimate. No conflict is basic. Whatever other wills, powers, and influences that I live under and among, one is first and last, foundational and final: "The LORD on high is mighty." Life is not a haphazard affair run by a committee that meets on alternate Tuesdays, each member subject to intense lobbying by special interests and prone to play favorites with friends and family. The world has design and order. I can plan, hope, believe. The confusion and conflict that convulse history are bounded by a larger clarity and peace.

Do reverberations from this prayer sound in the baptism of Jesus? Early Christians observed continuities between the floodwaters of judgment, from which Noah was saved and blessed with a new beginning, and the waters of baptism, out of which Jesus emerged for our salvation and established a new covenant. The descent of the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove as Jesus rose from the waters was associated with the dove-delivered evidence of emergent life after the flood. God's blessing to Noah, which included a comprehensive delegation of authority, has a parallel in the heavenly voice to Jesus: "This is my beloved Son" (Mt. 3:17). The phrase is a quotation from Psalm 2 and as such is not a term of endearment but a declaration of authority: Messiah emerges from the death-dealing abyss and rules over the chaos. "Mightier than the waves of the sea, the LORD on high is mighty!"

Force Is No Attribute of God

How is this mightier-than-the-waves-of-the-sea rule of God put into effect? How does it enter our history? How is it realized in our lives? Three lines describe how:

Thy decrees are very sure;
holiness befits thy house,
O LORD, for evermore.

Thy decrees are very sure. The waves are subdued by decrees. The violence of the seas is not countered by violence from the skies. "Force is no attribute of God," said Ignatius of Antioch. This is an amazing, but thoroughly biblical, assertion. The means by which God's rule is put into effect is word not muscle, decrees not armies, creative speech not coercive act. These decrees, which can be so casually ignored and so twisted, continue to be spoken age after age by prophet and priest, king and wise man, apostle and disciple. By means of the decrees the rule is maintained.

There is urgent pressure to meet the world's God-defying violence on its own terms — to put it down, to counter brute violence with raw power. "Lord, do you want us to bid fire come down from heaven and consume them?" (Lk. 9:54). But God will not be stampeded into acting out of character. His word rules: *thy decrees* are very sure. The edicts of God are firm, and nothing else is firm. The seemingly fragile word of God is opposed to the arrogant, intimidating actions of the world. The violence and arrogance subside and are spent; the word is firm as ever. *Sure (ne'emnu)* is translated in various contexts as "faithful," "steadfast," "foundational." Another form of the word concludes and confirms prayers: amen, yes, firm and affirmed, very sure.

"Thy decrees" set energies in motion — energies of prov-

idence and of redemption — that finally have their way, outlasting the headline-making spasms of violence. Journalists and historians rarely take notice of these decrees, but there are always a few observant, contemplative people who remain attentive. In the same Jerusalem where Psalm 93 was devoutly and defiantly prayed for so many centuries, Amos Oz, a modern Israeli novelist, creates the character of Hannah to give witness to the sovereign energies that continue to operate in that city, unnoticed and unremarked in the international violence and banal secularism. One day she stands at her kitchen window and looks out:

On a branch of the fig tree which sprouted in our garden a rusty bowl had hung suspended for years. Perhaps a long-dead neighbor had thrown it from the window of the flat above and it had caught in the branches. It was already hanging covered in rust outside our kitchen window when we first arrived. Four, five years. Even the fierce winds of winter had not brought it to the ground. On New Year's Day, however, I stood at the kitchen sink and saw with my own eyes how the bowl dropped from the tree. No breeze stirred the air, no cat or bird moved the branches. But strong forces came to fruition at that moment. The rusty metal crumbled and the bowl clattered to the ground. What I mean to say is this: All those years I had observed complete repose in an object in which a hidden process was taking place, all those years.⁶

It was not far, a few hundred yards or so, from this place that Psalm 93 had been prayed in New Year's Day celebrations of the Lord's enthronement, the Lord whose "decrees are very sure." Strong forces were at work "all those years." They still are.

6. Amos Oz, *My Michael* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972), p. 115.

A second line describes the way God's rule is perceived: *holiness befits thy house*. "Befits" is a weak translation of *na'wah*. There is a positive, pulsating quality to the word in both its sound and sense: "makes lovely, adorns becomingly." *Na'wah* is quiet as a pulse, strong as a pulse. It is used more frequently in the Song of Solomon than in any other book of the Bible.⁷ The context there is the dialog of lovers. In erotic love two powerful and sovereign wills touch and respond. If one will forces another, there is the ugliness of rape. If one will abdicates to the other, there is the dullness of dishrag acquiescence. Only when the two wills are fully developed and expressed in responsive relationship do we acclaim their beauty.

It is understandable that in these dialogs that celebrate the intimacy of human love this word should occur so frequently, but it is a surprise to find it in Psalm 93, which celebrates the rule of God in an unruly world. We expect images of loveliness and beauty in love lyrics, but doesn't rule require a colder context marked by severity and efficiency?

God, it seems, does not abandon his essential character when he rules. A God of steadfast love and deep holiness, he is more himself than ever in his rule. He does not set aside the robes of holy love when he exercises his rule in the mud of human history. The *means* of God's rule are consistent with the *ends* of that rule: *holiness*, the gradual, patient, penetrating beauty of God's rule in our desecrated, violated, profaned world.

O LORD, for evermore. The third line affirms the rule in ordinary time. "As the days stretch out through history" catches the tone of the Hebrew "forever," *l'orek yamim*. This is not God's rule eternal in the heavens apart from human history but God's rule working itself out through the calen-

7. As a noun in Song 1:10; as a verb in 1:5; 2:14; 4:3; 6:4.

dar. Prayer is not a patient wait for the rule to come into effect at the end of history, it is a patient participation in present rule. God's rule is not being held in reserve to be inaugurated at some future date, after centuries of human rulers have done their best (or worst). It is in operation now. It does not depend on public acknowledgment.

Whether men and women know it or not, they are now living under God's rule. Some live in rebellion that can be either defiant or ignorant. Some live in an obedience that can be either reluctant or devout. But no one lives apart from it. It is the premise of our existence. There are no days when the rule is not in operation. The week is not divided into one Lord's day when the rule of God is acknowledged and six human days in which factories, stock exchange, legislatures, media personalities, and military juntas take charge and rule with their lies and guns and money. Nor is the rule restricted to occasional interventions that are later remembered as great historical events — exodus and exile, Christmas and Easter.

It is, of course, not obvious. The decrees of the rule are not audible to unbelieving ears, the beauty of the rule is not visible to unbelieving eyes, the presentness of the rule is not apparent to anxious minds and hurting bodies. But many great and important realities are not obvious: the atomic structure of matter, for instance, or the properties of light, or the complexities of language. All the same, even when we misunderstand or do not understand we continue to pick up objects, see forms, and speak words. Likewise, neither ignorance nor indifference diminishes God's rule. Day after day "the LORD reigns." Taking into account the rebellious passions, malicious temperaments, and slothful wills of millions of people, along with the good intentions, misguided helpfulness, and ill-timed ventures of other millions — not to speak of the disciplined love, purged obedience, and sacrificial service of still other millions — our Sovereign presides over

and works with all of this material, personal and political. With it and out of it he shapes existence. He seems to be in no hurry. But prayer discerns that leisure is not indolence. Slowness is not slackness. In the end the sovereign will is done.

Now the symmetry is complete: three lines of anarchic violence countered by three lines of the Lord's mightier rule, expounded in three lines of the way the rule is administered.

Concealed Egotism

Thus prayer is subversive activity. It involves a more or less open act of defiance against any claim of ultimacy by the current regime. "Concealed egotism," says Herbert Butterfield, "is perhaps a greater cause of political conflict, a greater source of political problems, than anything else on this globe."⁸ Professor of modern history at Cambridge University, Butterfield has spent an erudite career searching out and tracing the historical processes that have resulted in the modern condition. But to him "concealed egotism" is greater than any of them. If he is right, the call to prayer, an act that drags egotism into the open and begins to do something about it, is a major corrective to the political problems of the day.

God rules. Prayer develops in us an awareness of God's rule: his intentions, his ways, his strategies, his commands. Jesus' blunt statement, "He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me" (Mt. 10:37), relativizes all authority — family, judicial, cultural, governmental. In praying this prayer an interesting change takes place in us. As our loyalties are detached from nation, club, race, or other affilia-

8. Herbert Butterfield, *Writings on Christianity and History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 57.

tion, our actual capacity for community increases. Patriotism is often only a bloated egotism. Prayer reduces the stridency of our political protestations but enhances our skills of citizenry — our commitments, our involvements, our values, our passion for social justice. We become aware of God's grand sovereignty in prayer; we also discover a developing inclination to obedience. Slowly but surely, not culture, not family, not government, not job, not even the tyrannous self can stand against the quiet power and creative influence of God's sovereignty. Every natural tie of family and race, every willed commitment to person and nation is finally subordinated to the rule of God.