

Why does God allow corrupt people to gain influence?

August 11, 2023 * Langford Community Church * Graham Gladstone

With the former president of the United States currently facing felony charges for attempting to overthrow the 2020 election,ⁱ today's question seems pretty relevant:

Why does God allow corrupt people to gain positions of power and influence?

If God is good and just and in control, why would He allow people who are NOT good and just to take control?

That's a great question. Why would God give these people power when He knows they're just going to use it for their own benefit? And please note here that we're not just talking about politicians. There are a shocking number of people in positions of power, ranging from coaches to CEOs to PTA heads and even PASTORS! who use their power in sinful ways; why then does God allow them to gain that power in the first place?

We're going to answer that question today, but before we do, I think that we need to answer an even more foundational question: DOES God allow those people to take positions of power? Is God the one who put them there? Or do these people, by force of their own will, make their way up the chain of command to take control, entirely apart from God?

To answer that question, I want to take you to Romans 13 which is a pretty important passage when it comes to power and authority. Romans 13 – join me there.

Romans 13:1 says: 'Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God' (Rom 13:1 NIV).

That makes it pretty clear, doesn't it? 'The authorities that exist have been established by God.' Whatever power exists has been given by God. Are there any exceptions to that? 'There is no authority except that which God has established.' That doesn't leave a lot of wiggle room, does it? All authority comes from God.

This is a foundational principle for understanding God's sovereignty and how the world works. God raises up governing authorities and gives them power to uphold the law and govern society on His behalf. The power that He gives is not primarily for the benefit of the person wielding that power; that person is to steward it for the benefit of the people, as a servant of God. Romans 13:4 says exactly that. 'Those in authority are God's servant[s], sent to uphold the law and do you good.' God establishes people in power to act for the benefit of all the people.

So, does God allow corrupt people to take positions of power and influence? Yes, He does – all authority is established by Him – but I would add one caveat.

God doesn't intentionally elevate corrupt people and give them power to rule. God grants people of all kinds power and then gives them the freedom to use that power as they see fit. God gives authority but He also gives them free will to exercise that authority. In most cases, a leader's own ethical standards, the desire to do good, the power of public opinion – all these tend to keep people in power honest - but sometimes the people that God establishes with power choose to use that power for corrupt purposes. God is responsible for them being in power, but not for the way they use that power.

So yes, God is responsible for putting people in power but when they're in power, those people exercise free will in using that power.

Well, if that's the case, if God has the power to put the people that He chooses INTO power, why doesn't He just always choose morally upright people? Why not make it so that a Nelson Mandela or a Billy Graham fills every position of power?

Why allow people with the potential for corruption to fill those positions of power?

To be completely honest, I don't think there's one specific Scripture text that conclusively answers that question, but I think that we glean some answers from a handful of passages. So I'm going to give you three. Three reasons why God allows corrupt people to gain positions of power.

We're going to start with this: God allows corrupt people to gain positions of power to hold up a mirror to society. God allows corrupt people to gain positions of power to hold up a mirror to society.

What I mean is this. When God establishes a person in a position of power (per Romans 13:1), He doesn't drop them down from on high. God doesn't like put a shiny new, morally spotless leader on an elevator from Heaven and send him down and say 'ok, listen to this guy.' He raises up someone who is a product of the society within which he lives.

And when that society lives with the assumption that there is no god and that everyone should just do what's right in their own eyes to get ahead, it produces people who act like there is no god and that it's normal to just do whatever you think is right apart from any sense of God's morality. For a lot of leaders, that's fine. As human beings, we have these built-in altruistic instincts that make us want to help one another.

Sometimes though, the desire to get ahead overrides those instincts. And when God allows that kind of person to get into power, He's showing us what lies deep in all our hearts. He allows corrupt people to take power to hold up a mirror to society and says 'this is what happens when you ignore me and do whatever's right in your own eyes.' 'Is this really what you want?'

There's a fascinating passage in Micah 2 that culminates in verse 11 with God saying: If a man should go about and utter wind and lies, saying, "I will preach to you of wine and strong drink," he would be the preacher for this people! (Mic 2:11 ESV).

Sadly, as a culture, there are people who don't want to hear morally upright things. They just want to hear things that are important to them! They are so out of touch with the will of God and so caught up in their leader's rhetoric, they don't want to hear what's true; they want to hear what's good for them. 'What will get me and people like me ahead? What will preserve the status quo that benefits me? How can we get beer for a dollar?' This is God holding up a mirror to us and saying 'What are you doing?'

There's a similar passage in 2 Timothy 4:3 For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. 4 They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths (2Ti 4:3-4 NIV).

When that happens, God allows people like them to take power and reflect their desires right back to them. Holding up a mirror like this will go over some people's head, but for others, it's cause to stop and say 'wait, what are we doing?'

God allows corrupt people to gain power to hold up a mirror to society. And that leads to my second point.

God allows corrupt people to gain power to refine us as believers.

You know how pearls are made, right? A grain of sand or a parasite or something gets into an oyster – it irritates it – and the oyster responds. It starts coating it in layers of nacre or mother-of-pearl.ⁱⁱ After a while, you're left with a pearl. Unless some kind of irritant gets into that oyster, it's not going to make a pearl. Same with us; unless there is some pressure for us to respond to, we're not going to grow as believers.

God allows corrupt people to gain power, so that we, as followers of Jesus, can see 'this isn't how it should be,' and then act in the ways that we should, no matter the cost. That's how we grow.

Peter says just that in 1 Peter 2:13: Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king, as the supreme authority,
14 or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right.
15 For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men.
16 Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God.
17 Show proper respect to everyone: Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honor the king.

And then he goes on to say something that's especially relevant.

18 Slaves, submit yourselves to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh.

19 For it is commendable if a man bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because he is conscious of God.

20 But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God.

Just so that we're clear, slavery is always wrong and it appears here as a relic of the culture in which the Bible was written, but read closely and you'll see that there's a timeless principle here.

It's verse 19 - For it is commendable if a man bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because he is conscious of God.

When we stand up to corrupt person in power, whether it's a politician or employer or pastor, and say 'This is not right; because of my commitment to God, I can't do what you're asking me to do' and maybe pay the price for it, we are refined in our faith. We bear up under that unjust suffering because we know that God is good and it's better to be right with Him for eternity than wrong with this person for the immediate future.

God allows corrupt people to gain power in order to refine us in our faith.

God allows corrupt people to gain power to hold up a mirror to society, God allows corrupt people to gain power to refine us in our faith and finally, God allows corrupt people to gain power to give us a hunger for Jesus' reign.

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See, if we had good leadership across the board, we would never hunger and thirst for Jesus' righteousness. We'd settle for what's good and miss out on the best.

God allows corrupt people to gain power to make us long for Jesus' reign, when justice and mercy are the norm.

Psalm 72 is the classic expression of what that day Psalm be like – Psalm 72 says:

2 He will judge your people in righteousness, your afflicted ones with justice.

3 The mountains will bring prosperity to the people, the hills the fruit of righteousness.

4 He will defend the afflicted among the people and save the children of the needy; he will crush the oppressor...

14 He will rescue them from oppression and violence, for precious is their blood in his sight (Psa 72:2-14 NIV).

Wouldn't that be awesome if that was our everyday experience? God allows people who are NOT like that to give us a hunger for Jesus' return when He WILL rule like that.

And not only that, He gives us that hunger and thirst for righteousness so that we ourselves can reflect His mercy and goodness into the world.

2 Peter 3:11 looks forward to the day when Jesus returns and says 'since that day's coming, what kind of people ought we to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives 12 as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming.'

Philippians 2:14 says 14 Do everything without complaining or arguing, 15 so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe 16 as you hold out the word of life... (Phi 2:14-16 NIV).

God allows corrupt people to take positions of power so that we will hunger and thirst for Jesus' righteousness and express that righteousness in our own lives.

So, just to recap: God allows corrupt people to take positions of power:

1. To hold up a mirror to society.
2. To refine us as believers and
3. To give us a hunger for Jesus' return.

So that's that. But to give a satisfying answer to this question, I think we need to answer another question. What about those corrupt rulers who abuse their power or abuse the people under them? Are they just going to get off scot-free?

There is actually a passage of Scripture that answers this question.

Habakkuk 1, Habakkuk the prophet is looking around at his culture, seeing all sorts of corruption and he prays:

2 How long, O LORD, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, "Violence!" but you do not save?

3 Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrong? Destruction and violence are before me; there is strife, and conflict abounds.

4 Therefore the law is paralyzed, and justice never prevails. The wicked hem in the righteous, so that justice is perverted.

Are you going to let these corrupt rulers get away with it?

God says: 'You just watch.' Verse 6 - 6 I am raising up the Babylonians, that ruthless and impetuous people, who sweep across the whole earth to seize dwelling places not their own. (Hab 1:6 NIV).

God gave authority to the leaders of Israel; they abused it so God gave authority to the Babylonians to come in and judge the leaders of Israel. So they'll get theirs.

But Habakkuk rightly realizes – 'But now these Babylonians will do the same thing. They'll become corrupt too.' And in verse 12-13, he writes:

O LORD you have appointed them to execute justice... [but] 13 Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong. Why then do you tolerate the treacherous? Why are you silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves? (Hab 1:12-13 NIV).

And God replies 'Don't worry, they'll get theirs too.' Over in Isaiah 13:17-19, God says "17 See, I will stir up against them the Medes [and]... 19 Babylon, the jewel of kingdoms, the glory of the Babylonians' pride, will be overthrown by God (Isa 13:17-19 NIV).

Corrupt rulers will pay for their corruption.

Galatians 6:7 puts it like this: 7 Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows.

2 Corinthians 5:10: 10 For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.

And 2 Thessalonians 1:6-7 concludes: 6 God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you 7 and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels.

Corrupt rulers will pay for their corruption.

But in the meantime, what do we do? How do WE conduct ourselves as people who are committed to Jesus' reign?

Let me put it to you like this: When corrupt leaders flourish, serve the incorruptible King, Jesus.

When leaders get ahead by ignoring God's ways and exploiting the people, and seem to be getting away with it (!), don't give in and act like them. Instead, act like the incorruptible King Jesus would, with grace and mercy and justice and peace.

Don't let them drag you down to their level, but instead, lift your heart heavenward and let Jesus' values shape yours.

I really think it comes down to Philippians 2:14: Do everything without complaining or arguing, 15 so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe 16 as you hold out the word of life... (Phi 2:14-16 NIV).

Yes, God allows corrupt people to gain influence, but when those corrupt leaders flourish, don't get discouraged, but serve the incorruptible King, Jesus.

PRAYER – PSALM 10

NIV Psalm 10:1 Why, O LORD, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?

2 In his arrogance the wicked man hunts down the weak, who are caught in the schemes he devises.

3 He boasts of the cravings of his heart; he blesses the greedy and reviles the LORD.

4 In his pride the wicked does not seek him; in all his thoughts there is no room for God.

5 His ways are always prosperous; he is haughty and your laws are far from him; he sneers at all his enemies.

6 He says to himself, "Nothing will shake me; I'll always be happy and never have trouble."

...

12 Arise, LORD! Lift up your hand, O God. Do not forget the helpless.

13 Why does the wicked man revile God? Why does he say to himself, "He won't call me to account"?

14 But you, O God, do see trouble and grief; you consider it to take it in hand. The victim commits himself to you; you are the helper of the fatherless.

15 Break the arm of the wicked and evil man; call him to account for his wickedness that would not be found out.

16 The LORD is King for ever and ever; the nations will perish from his land.

17 You hear, O LORD, the desire of the afflicted; you encourage them, and you listen to their cry,

18 defending the fatherless and the oppressed, in order that man, who is of the earth, may terrify no more.

(Psa 10:1-18 NIV).

ⁱ <https://apnews.com/article/trump-indicted-jan-6-investigation-special-counsel-debb59bb7a4d9f93f7e2dace01fecdc>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/blogs/national-museum-of-natural-history/2021/08/05/true-story-behind-how-pearls-are-made/>