

## **Nation-Building, #9**

### **The King Cyrus Effect**

A couple of weeks ago, President Trump flew to Israel to celebrate the release of the last alive hostages held prisoner by Hamas, and to sign the peace agreements and cooperative efforts among many nations to assure the ceasefire, the peace, and the rebuilding of Gaza. Trump's arrival was met by gigantic billboards and posters declaring Cyrus the Great is alive, featuring the smiling face of President Trump. I felt immediate vindication. I'd been telling people for months that one of these podcasts would be titled King Cyrus, Daniel, and Us, and mostly I got blank stares. The general response was *who is Cyrus? What does he have to do with Donald Trump? And why does it matter?*

Well, that's my challenge for today. Today's episode is the most overtly political in that it connects directly with President Trump. In today's environment, everything is considered political. To point at the president is political, to ignore the president is political. Even more obvious is that you are listening to a podcast or reading the script about citizenship, governance, leadership, and all three are political. I can tell you that this series has been on my mind for seven years and that they are written and spoken in honor of our nation's 250th anniversary next year. People may *still* say it's political.

And nowadays when we say the word political, we don't mean government or citizenship or leadership, we mean politics, partisan politics, one side or the other. That's just a fact of life, don't fight it. But big occasions, like America's 250th, give us the chance to think deep about the consequential and ideals and history central to the events. And central to the founding of these United States were questions about the role of citizens, the shape of governance, and the type of leaders.

A long ago comedian began her routine with *can we talk?* An assertion more than a question. It is tailor-made for our times. Can we talk? Can we be honest and direct, no tiptoeing as if we were afraid of one another. So sure, it is inevitable that people may think this is all about President Trump. With everything being political and Trump being president, everything can seem about him. Nowadays, can you name one aspect of daily life that's free of politics? It used to be that the standard escape from uncomfortable talk was to ask about the weather or sports. No more. Even weather and sports join other used to be safe topics like libraries, culture, movies, medicine, and classrooms as contentious.

With that in mind, let's consider the biblical King Cyrus, the contemporary President Trump, and the equation we all make in choosing and accepting our leaders. And thank you, people of Israel, for the *Cyrus the Great Donald Trump* billboards so that I don't look like I'm making this stuff up or pushing an analogy that doesn't make sense.

The King Cyrus Theory of Political Analysis, my lofty term as near as I can tell, began during President Trump's first term. It is entirely biblical and based on the idea that to get what you really desire from a person in power, you may have to look the other way on some other stuff. It's transactional. Like *you want my loyalty, I want my freedom*. So there's a trade. Cyrus was king of Persia back in the late 500s BC, while a lot of Jews were still captive. It's convoluted, I know, but aren't Middle Eastern politics always convoluted? Unlike our own, which are always smooth sailing, right? (!) Anyway, bear with me. Israel was conquered by Babylon in six hundred seven BC, with many Jews carried off to Babylon, enslaved, forced to bend to the will of the Babylonians. The brightest and best of the young Jews were given the opportunity to serve Babylon in exchange for perks and privileges, and some did with distinction, like Daniel and his friends Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. But even their successes and privileges were constrained by sudden waves of antisemitism meant to curtail Jews from participation and power in polite society. Eventually the Babylonians got their comeuppance when Persia conquered Babylon, inheriting all those subjected, exiled, oppressed, semi slave Jews.

That's when King Cyrus did this totally unexpected thing. He let the Jews go free. He literally allowed, encouraged, funded, expedited the return of Jews to Israel. Once freed, they rebuilt their temple, town, homes, careers, and nation, thanks to King Cyrus, quite literally. Now remember, Cyrus is Persian, a foreigner, a pagan, a non believer from the Jewish point of view, an idolater, morally questionable, culturally impure beyond the pair religiously, by definition the other, a Gentile, practically an untouchable, you wouldn't let your daughter marry one of his kind, you wouldn't invite him to dinner, you wouldn't trust him or like him. He's the enemy. But if you're a Jew stuck in Persia, Cyrus is the one person with the power to set you free, to give you what you want, to answer your prayers, to restore your nation, and he does it. So he's okay by you. The old adage is true, politics make strange bedfellows.

Another adage comes from a long ago radio talk show host with whom I had a funny relationship, I can talk about that some other time. He always said during elections, people get the government they deserve. He especially said that when the people of

Massachusetts, or America, voted contrary to his wishes. It was his way of saying *you idiots voted for this guy, now you're stuck. Tough luck.*

Parsing elections is a cross between an art form and science. In America, in recent decades, most every election disappoints half the country. With many elections described by friend and foe as being between the lesser of two evils, even the winning side has reason to worry and must hasten to rationalize their preference. Every election winner benefits from certain reliable voting blocks. Labor unions, ethnicities, business groups, policy advocates promise to deliver votes in return for preferences and favorable policies. It is part of the democratic process and fairly upfront. Every president works the voting blocks. President Trump has benefited from the almost unparalleled support and effective organization of evangelical Christianity.

Now I'll get back to Cyrus the Great in a minute, I promise, but the term evangelical Christianity begs some definition, don't you think? At its most basic, any root use of the word evangelical, like evangelism or evangelist, refers to the commitment to sharing the good news of God's love and salvation through the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. While based on New Testament scripture and rooted in Christian theology, it really became prominent as a concept in the eighteen hundreds. Mostly nonpolitical, even antipolitical. That changed in the 1970s with Reverend Jerry Farwell, his moral majority, and the advent of TV evangelism and mass marketing by evangelical groups. In short, evangelicals began to organize. At first, abortion and homosexuality were the main drivers for their political activism. That got expanded more broadly to culture wars, public education, school choice and vouchers, and more recently to vaccinations and every conceivable issue surrounding sexuality. Evangelicals are on the march to the voting booths, to the halls of power, to the White House. If you agree with them, be proud. If you don't agree with them, give them credit. In the language of an old TV commercial, *they did it the old fashioned way. They earned it.*

President Trump has provided an interesting challenge, especially for these evangelicals on the right wing side of pro Trump voters. He's not your classic Bible quoting church going, hymn singing, ardent evangelical practicing Christian. His demeanor, behavior, language, beliefs, and practice put him outside the usual evangelical embrace. Except, by and large, they do embrace him. To explain their embrace, in Trump's first term, his Christian base began likening him to King Cyrus. Other parallels have also been made to other pagan, nonbelieving, even enemy kings who nevertheless benefited the Jewish people. These include the Egyptian Pharaoh during Joseph's time, who utilized Joseph to

save Egyptians from a devastating famine, and then welcomed the nomadic Hebrews to live and work in Egypt, likewise saving them from famine. We can add Queen Esther's husband, King Ahasuerus, who intervened to prevent the genocide of Jews in ancient Persia.

Both leaders, by Jewish standards, were pagans, who worshipped idols, non-existent other gods, confirming their status as non-believers. They were the oppressor generally, the enemy historically, the wrong spiritually, but they ended up doing right by Israel at the point of greatest need, which brings us back to King Cyrus the Great. Simply stated, the King Cyrus idea as applied to contemporary politics is that you get from a leader what you want and need. There may be a lot else you don't share, values, personal lifestyle, background, even other political and societal differences, but you decide the trade-off is worth it.

President Trump has provided ample support for the religious right. Supreme Court selections, Supreme Court decisions about abortion and religious freedom, a staunch pro-Israel agenda, moving the US Embassy to Jerusalem, the Abraham Accords that offered a chance for Middle East peace and security for Israel, the crackdown on antisemitism, expanding of school vouchers and school choice, the drumbeat attacks on liberal bastions from Harvard to USAID. Trump promised and delivered for his evangelical base. I cannot think of any elected official who so fully benefited their favored constituency.

To further explain the King Cyrus President Trump analogy, we go further back in biblical history to see the equation that people may feel required to make in order to work with a government or a leader that doesn't seem like a good fit overall, but you believe that you need each other. When the Babylonian Empire conquered Israel, they did what conquering empires are prone to do, raping, pillaging, killing, and destroying people in places and then dragging survivors off to slavery. Generations of Jews ended up living in a nation hostile to them, a culture alien to them, under kings brutal to everyone. Slaves or not, happy with the government or not, afraid or not what to do. An old saying advises *go along to get along*. Each of those Jews in exile had life and family, and with that responsibilities.

So the basic question becomes how to survive. Here's where it gets interesting. Certain of the Jews, the brightest and best of young Israelite manhood, were given the opportunity to serve Babylon, gaining perks and privileges, even a modicum of freedom. Those Jews, led by a young Daniel and three of his friends, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, at

great personal risk, negotiated an agreement to serve Babylon without compromising their Jewishness. They gained the right to worship God faithfully, biblically, in accordance with Jewish laws and rituals. They would keep the Sabbath, eat kosher, and help Babylon.

Did it work? To a degree. And I'm not minimizing the importance of even one little degree. In tough, dangerous, oppositional times, when the goal is to survive, you need to get from point A to point B, and you worry about point C and D and X and Z later. For right now, the immediate number one goal is to live. In contemporary political terms, live to fight another day. There's always an election of consequence in two years or four years. In dire circumstances, with threats at every turn, you just hope to live another day. This is germane to American politics today and to hundreds of millions of humans around the world fleeing horrific devastation as migrants, refugees and exiles, fleeing for their lives, fleeing to live another day. In my visits to Africa and India, I learned the real meaning of subsistence farming. Hundreds of millions of farmers, daily wage earners, sharecroppers, tenant farmers work to the bone to grow enough, earn enough to subsist, which means to barely exist. Each day you hope to till enough soil, grow enough food, to feed your family enough calories to survive another day. There's no time for planning, no room for dreaming. You are just trying to make it to tomorrow.

The Jews, exiled in Babylon, live that precarious subsistence. For the subsistence farmer, the vagaries of weather make or break each day. For the subsistence citizen, the vagaries of politics make or break each day. In other words, the Jews were safe in Babylon until they weren't. Every now and then, Babylonian plotters would scapegoat Jews and convince the king to wage a deadly persecution against them. This led to famous Bible stories like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego being thrown into the fiery furnace, and Daniel tossed into a lion's den. Why? Because their faith practice didn't mesh with the king's priorities. But their miraculous survival led the king to corral official antisemitism, and even to praise the Jewish god. It always went well till it didn't. Every dictator and empire have their comeuppance. Babylon's kings fell by the wayside, as did Babylon, left to be remembered for its modern iteration under Saddam Hussein in Iraq and for its hanging gardens. Babylon was conquered by Persia, with King Cyrus eventually on the throne.

What did Cyrus do to make today's Christian and Jewish pro-Trump supporters feel comfortable with their votes? In a word, freedom. The Jewish slaves and exiles in Persia, Babylon got what they wanted and needed from Cyrus, the right to return to Israel. I'll

summarize it, but I encourage you really to read the entire first chapter of the Old Testament book of Ezra. It really is stunning. An enemy, pagan, conquering, foreign empire willingly gives up its enslaved or at least co-opted workforce, sending them home not only with the loot originally stolen, but with additional free will offerings and valuable gifts to ease the transition. The cherry on top is that King Cyrus credits the Jewish God with inspiring his generosity. In one fell swoop, Cyrus affirms Israel, Judaism, the Jewish people, the temple in Jerusalem and freedom. How on earth and heaven did this happen?

Well, I don't doubt Ezra's account that God tugged on Cyrus' ear to get his attention. If you've ever had your ear twisted or tugged upon, you know how quickly you cried uncle. Whether it was by dreams or visions or voices in her head, wise advisers who knew Judaism intimately and or God's incessant ear pull, Cyrus was convinced to do the right thing. That was one part of it. The other part was surely the Jewish people themselves. However they managed to have favor with their conquerors, Cyrus was convinced that it would be good to let the Israelites go home to Israel.

Sure, it was transactional. Whenever we're in a crisis, no doubt the first thought is how do I get out of this mess? For generations the Jews caught up in Babylonian and Persian politics were in a mess, trying to survive. Sometimes you do go along to get along. Sometimes there are compromises, plenty of swallowing your tongue and turning the other cheek, a good deal of keeping your head down and your mouth shut. However they did it, King Cyrus was one over enough to give the Jews their heart's desire freedom. That's the trade off of every election. Do I get enough of what I want from such and such a candidate to put up with what I don't like? Will my lesser of two evils give me enough good?

I make the same equation, not just every election, but for every day in between elections. Did enough of what I believe in happen yesterday to allow me to turn away from some things happening today? Or at least keep quiet? I'm not admiring that I do that, just admitting that I do. I am not a pristine idealist. The key question for King Cyrus apologists is how far or how low will we go? What's the price point for selling our soul? Can we sell just a bit of our soul? Half? Three quarters?

Now I'm asking you to think hard, so I should be willing to do the same. And to make it more real, I should be blunt from my own life. When I think about the last three years, two hot topic political issues have been front and center for me the end of Russia's war

against Ukraine and a lasting peace between Israel and Palestinians. The president has worked hard on both. How many destroyed lives and careers caused by Elon Musk and DOGE am I willing to put up with if there's real peace in Ukraine, Israel and Palestine? How much tariff hurt, medical research cuts, and armed masked soldiers on our streets earn my silence if I get what I want on two seemingly intractable and unjust wars?

This presidency, this administration, this nation are key players in all of these equations. They are in a position to give me what I want, and I'm in a position to back away from what I don't want. That's King Cyrus calling. Until America lurches into monarchy or dictatorship, we will continue to lurch from election cycle to election cycle, getting more of what we like this time around, less of what we like next time around.

I've brought King Cyrus to you today so that we'll better understand the other half, whichever half you are. And may we all be wiser in seeking and settling for trade-offs.

Remember, I do treasure feedback, push back, and today I've given you plenty of openings. Again, this is David Rowe from Greenfield Hill Congregational Church in Fairfield, Connecticut. God bless you.