



Reflections on Good Governance

by Assoc Professor Ho Peng Kee

Text: 2 Chronicles

1. Introduction

For 14 years, from 1979 to 1993, I was an academic, a lecturer in the National University of Singapore Law Faculty. After that, for 18 years, I was in full-time politics.

I believe that for whatever work we do, we should search out God's word for signposting, to light and guide our professional paths. After all, His word is a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path (Psalm 119:105). So, the first point I wish to make is that whatever vocation you are in, and we have a diverse group here, please dig into Scriptures to find inspiration and strength for your daily tasks. There are general principles that apply to work generally, whatever we may be doing, and also specific insights and guidance for quite a few vocations or types of work.

For me, two key general verses that have guided my working life, whichever phase I was in, were Colossians 3:23: "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for man" and Matthew 10:6: "to be as wise as a serpent, and as innocent as a dove". The first verse in Colossians governs my motivation, which is not to have earthly rewards and the praise of man as our goals, even though these will come if we do our best in whatever task God has given us. We do our best as an expression of thanksgiving to God and when we do this, we impact lives positively and serve our fellow men as well. The second verse in Matthew governs my actions, that is, to embrace wisdom as not everyone we come into contact with has our best interests at heart, yet, trusting and believing that there is innate goodness in everyone we meet that can be tapped.

In politics, a key verse for me was Micah 6:8: "to act justly, love mercy and to walk humbly with my God". This has been a verse I have tried to live out every day in my time in politics. Justice which encompasses fairness; mercy which encompasses compassion; and humility which encompasses empathy, reaching out, putting others at ease. I have had many opportunities to espouse these values through my 18 years in politics.

For over 20 years until May 2011, my key preoccupation was to help promote good governance in Singapore. As such, I would like to offer some personal reflections as to what God's word in 2 Chronicles says about good governance. In doing this, I am mindful that Singapore is a secular state and a multi-racial society, so that as Christians, in our public actions, we should apply the Bible taking into account Singapore's circumstances. Still, it is remarkable that many useful lessons can be drawn from the actions of the kings in 2 Chronicles on good governance.

2. Why good governance

Good governance is the hallmark of any good government. Whilst governance in Singapore is not perfect, the Singapore model is widely acknowledged to embrace and promote good governance. Other countries come to learn from us, both in terms of the hardware, that is, how we provide for Singaporeans in terms of housing, medical, education, recreation etc; as well as the software, that is, important attributes such as incorruptibility, meritocracy, racial harmony etc. Still, practising good governance is work in progress; any government has to continually work at it, especially in light of an increasingly sophisticated citizenry and Inter-connected world. Indeed, all Christians across the world should pray for good governance in their own countries.

3. Overview of 2 Chronicles

Reading 2 Chronicles, I found useful lessons on good governance. The period is the era of the Divided Kingdom from 930 BC (when King Solomon died and his son, Rehoboam became king of Judah, the southern kingdom) to 586 BC (when Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians), spanning about 350 years. After Solomon died, Israel split into two entities - Israel in the north and Judah in the south, because the 10 northern tribes refused to follow Solomon's son, Rehoboam and instead followed a rebel, Jeroboam who set up his capital in Samaria. Only the tribes of Judah and the small tribe of Benjamin followed Rehoboam. Thereafter, a line of 20 kings (including a female) followed, about eight of whom were generally good kings and about 12 bad ones. But God was gracious and through this line of kings in Judah, both good and bad, preserved the lineage of David from whom our Lord Jesus emerged, as promised in His word.

It is noteworthy that the 10 tribes that followed the rebel, Jeroboam, did so because Solomon's son, who was only in his 20's when he ascended the throne in 930BC refused to listen to good advice from his elders (his father's contemporaries) to lighten the yoke on his people by reducing taxes and going slow on conscripted labour. Instead, the young king listened to his own peers. Rehoboam's reply to his people was "My father made your yoke heavy; I will make it even heavier. My father scourged you with whips; I will scourge you with scorpions. So the king did not listen to the people....." (10:14). surely, this is not the way to begin one's tenure as king. Good governance 101's first lesson for any aspiring politician, indeed, even a seasoned one is to keep a close ear to the ground. Another lesson gleaned from the splitting up of Israel is to be mindful who we take advice from; be discerning and listen to good advice but reject the bad ones.

Another key takeaway from 2 Chronicles is that nations rise and nations fall but through it all, God is sovereign and remains in control. Indeed, in the early history of Judah, the first four kings - Rehoboam, Abijah, Asa and Jehoshaphat - over a period of 80-90 years painstakingly built up Judah. But a series of bad kings after Jehoshaphat's death in 848 BC led to the near-decimation of the Davidic line. Whilst we turn to more recent examples such as the Roman and Greek empires to reinforce this point, God's dealings with Judah way back in history is a stark reminder that we can never take Singapore's peace and prosperity for granted. For all of us, in whatever we do, successive generations must be carefully nurtured and good lessons passed on.

4. Basis of good governance

a) Strong security

For external defence, Asa, the third king, built up a strong army (14:8); and many generations later, Judah had a well-trained, well-equipped and well-organised army under Uzziah, the 10th king (26:11-15). Asa also built up fortified cities from scratch and laid strong foundations for latter generations (14:6). With borders secured, the land prospered with proper irrigation under Uzziah (26:10) and Hezekiah (32:27-29). Thus, the important work of early generations helped the land to prosper, for example, Rehoboam had to fend off Israel.

Starting from scratch, the early kings of Judah such as Jehoshaphat (17:13) laid the foundations for a strong nation. Mindful of the recent past due to separation and an unfriendly neighbour in the north, they built up strong armies, fortified the cities, secured the borders and did what were necessary to ensure that the land could be properly farmed so that the people's material needs could be met. In addition, they maintained law and order internally to strengthen the people's resilience. But the early years were testy ones, especially in relation to Judah's relations with its brothers in Israel in the north. Like Singapore in the 1960's, in its early days of existence, Judah had a strong government and built up a strong army, during which time the people rallied together.

b) Adopting an astute foreign policy

Later on, Judah made military, trade and even marriage alliances with neighbouring countries including Israel. It fought fiercely against other bigger predatory countries such as Assyria and Egypt. But in so doing, Judah

compromised on its purity and worked with evil regimes such as the Omri kings, Ahab and his sons, of Israel.

Just like many smaller countries, Judah was surrounded by big neighbours, some of which like Egypt and Assyria were not well disposed towards her. It was a case of geopolitics at play. Hence, for political expediency, Judah entered into alliances or treaties in today's parlance, with some of its neighbours, in particular, Israel. This reaching out to its neighbours was, amongst the early kings, particularly prominent in the fourth king Jehoshaphat's approach to governance. Jehoshaphat was generally a godly and good king, who attempted to rid Judah of foreign imported spiritual influences such as high places, asherah poles and idols. But in entering into alliances with many of his neighbours whatever their moral systems may be, he could be faulted in that he showed a lack of dependence and trust in God.

In this vein, Jehoshaphat entered into a marriage alliance by marrying his son to Athaliah, daughter of King Ahab and his Queen Jezebel of Israel, the very same Athaliah who later almost decimated the Davidic line. He also entered into a trading alliance with Ahab's son and a military alliance with another of Ahab's son. This was the Ahab who, together with his evil prophets of Baal, the prophet Elijah had confronted at Mount Carmel.

For me, the lesson on good governance here is that whilst no country can afford to live in isolation and should make as many friends as possible, still when making alliances with other countries, it is best to take a principled position where we do not compromise key national values. If we cannot do so, it is better not to enter into an alliance or treaty or ratify a convention, or if it is in our overall national interests to do so, do it setting out appropriate reservations.

c) Looking after people's welfare

Beyond a strong defence and secure borders, internal stability, and alliances with other countries, the early kings also worked to ensure the people's basic welfare (17:12). The lands were irrigated to ensure a steady food supply, annual surpluses were built up and a nation-wide religious education programme was instituted under which religious teachers were sent to all the important cities to teach the people on the Law of Moses. Thus, the Mosaic Law was promulgated (17:7-9). So, very interestingly, other than ensuring that the people had enough food to eat, building up national reserves and promoting mass education were key planks in securing good governance in Judah and like us, were emphasised early on in Judah's history.

d) Observing the rule of law

Another noteworthy point is that special effort was made to safeguard the independence of the judiciary (19:5-7). Jehoshaphat, in particular, instituted reforms that improved the administration of justice. He introduced different tiers of judges. Other than the local judges in each of the fortified cities, he appointed Levites, priests and heads of families as "higher tier" judges stationed in Jerusalem to judge cases of murder and conflict of laws (19:5-11). His admonition to the judges (19:6-7) is especially noteworthy. He charged them to firstly, "consider carefully what you do, because you are not judging for man but for the Lord who is with you whenever you give a verdict"; secondly, "Let the fear of the Lord be upon you" and thirdly, "Judge carefully, for with the Lord our God there is no injustice or partiality or bribery."

The application of these exhortations in the context of a secular state is clear - that good governance is seriously impeded if there is no rule of law, and there is a need for a competent and independent judiciary, whose judges dispense justice without fear or favour.

e) Practising separation of state and church in settling disputes

Amariah, the chief priest had jurisdiction over religious matters ("matters concerning the Lord") and Zebediah, son of Ishmael, the leader of the tribe of Judah over civil matters ("matters concerning the king") (19:11). With

the monarchy in place, there was a need for civil courts to decide disputes on matters such as claims on taxes and manpower.

Even though Judah's laws were embedded in Mosaic traditions and practices that were intertwined with religious precepts, there was nevertheless early recognition that with the institution of kingship over the people and the granting of specific powers exercised by the king such as imposing taxes and conscripting labour, there was a need for disputes to be heard and settled. These disputes were to be heard and settled not by the chief priest, but by a recognised leader not belonging to the priesthood. The king himself, though sovereign, could not decide on these matters as he could not be a judge in his own cause.

This underscores the importance of having a proper, reliable system for settling conflicts and disputes by honest, independent-minded men and women where justice is not only done, but also seen to be done. Moreover, in the case of Judah, even though religion was very much woven into the national fabric, it was recognized that there were nevertheless situations where religion and politics (matters relating to the king), should be kept separate.

f) Walked steadfastly before the Lord

The good kings were upright and moral. "Jotham grew powerful because he walked steadfastly before the Lord His God" (27:6). For Hezekiah, "he did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, just as his father David had done" (29:2). "Now, I intend to make a covenant with the Lord, the God of Israel, so that His fierce anger will turn away from us" (29:10) "they consecrated the temple" (29:7) and "dedicated (themselves) to the Lord" (29:31).

Framing, embracing and espousing core values are important in nation-building. Political expediency and economic imperatives cannot be the sole drivers to policy-making. 2 Chronicles brings out this point. The good kings were driven by a strong desire to please God, to do what was right in God's eyes. Many of the good kings tried and succeeded in varying degrees (the most successful being Josiah) to keep Judah pure.

For Singapore, as a secular state, I suggest that one lesson for us here is that, whatever phase of nation-building we may be in, we should never lose sight of core values such as multi-racial harmony, meritocracy, incorruptibility, the need for hard work to achieve success, and family cohesion. In this regard, Christians can play a key role, as salt and light in society; at a personal level, in our families and amongst our colleagues, neighbours and relatives; as organisations such as churches, church groupings, inter-church organisations; and as a national grouping of churches such as the National Council of Churches of Singapore.

As individuals, we can give our views and influence discussion with friends and relatives or give feedback to our Members of Parliament. As groups, in appropriate ways, we can make representations to Ministers and parliamentary select committees looking at Bills on issues where the Bible has a clear view, for example, on matters involving morality such as gambling, abortion and sexual depravity or matters that affect the practice of our faith for example, use of premises. When useful, we can request for meetings with the relevant officials and politicians. We can be firm but should be respectful in our tone (Romans 13.1-2), assured in the knowledge that the government will consider all the views expressed but at the same time, accepting the fact that ultimately it will decide in the best interests of Singapore.

To play our part in promoting racial harmony in Singapore, I would encourage more of our church pastors and Christian leaders to take part in Inter-Racial and Religious Confidence Circle (IRCC) activities. Basically, these aim to raise the comfort level amongst religious leaders in the local community so that should an incident happen that frays ties between our different races, these leaders can step forward to play their part to calm the situation.

5. Other aspects of good governance

Good governance does not only involve substance in ensuring that the right policies at a particular point in time are in place, it is also about style. The way the policies are formulated and explained to the people is also important. Moreover, it is also about how the public perceives its leaders based on what they see them do or say. On this score, some of the kings got it right! They donated to the state coffers for the benefit of the people, thus probably reducing any resentment that may have been felt with regards to the gap between what the kings had and what the people had (Hezekiah in 31:3). A few of them were also often seen by the people on the ground. For example, Jehoshaphat walked the ground and also sent his representatives to consult with the people (19:4; 20:3-5; 20:27).

Other kings, like Hezekiah affirmed the people, encouraging some like the Levites to press on in their service to the country (30:22). These acts helped to connect the kings better with the people.

Moreover, at critical times of the life of the nation, for example, when Judah was being attacked by a strong combined army of Moabites and Ammonites, Jehoshaphat led from the front. He gathered the people from every town in Judah to a place beside the temple and after a national time of fasting led in public prayers to God, fervently praying for deliverance from the military threat which Judah faced and which God answered in a mighty way. The reminder here is that in times of national crises, leaders must lead boldly, visibly and from the front.

6. Failings despite success

a) Becoming proud

Whilst the good kings did many things right, they also made mistakes, some of which were serious. For Judah, the most serious one was not keeping the land purified of the vestiges of foreign spiritual practices such as asherah poles and high places. An application of this for us could be that there is a need to constantly nurture the moral fibre of our society, particularly the young.

In addition, some of the kings became proud (Hezekiah in 32:25). In particular, Uzziah demonstrated this when he usurped the priestly function of burning incense in the temple to the Lord. He was so confident of himself and his position as king that he forgot the principle of division of responsibilities and duties. This really underscores another important point, that is, the need for effective checks and balances in promoting good governance (26:16). It is interesting that for every king who ruled Judah, there was a prophet such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel or Zechariah trumpeting God's pronouncements on the land at the same time. Many of their pronouncements were not complimentary of the kings and their deeds. So, priests, prophets and kings had their respective roles to play. In a system of checks and balances, everyone has a duty to play his role responsibly and to the best of his ability, and always for the greater good of the nation.

b) Not listening and oppressing people

Another key failing was that some kings like Asa became overly sensitive to criticism (16:7-10). When Hanani, the seer, chastised him for forming a military alliance with the king of Aram instead of relying on God's deliverance ("you have done a foolish thing"),

Asa was so enraged that he put Hanani in prison (16:10). The verse then goes on to say: "At the same time, Asa brutally oppressed some of the people." This episode highlights the danger that unfettered power can corrupt and lead to abuse and relates to the earlier point about the need for effective checks and balances in any political system.

c) Listening to wrong advice

Yet another point is that whilst all leaders take advice and obtain feedback from diverse sources, and this is useful and necessary, leaders must also be discerning and wise. They must be able to sift out the facts from fiction; objective input from biased, self motivated ones; and urgent ones which need immediate remedial action from casual remarks. In other words, wrong advice or skewed feedback can have dire consequences. A good example is the newly anointed king Rehoboam, Solomon's son, who heeded his peers instead of his father's more experienced advisors to be less harsh on the people (10:1-11).

Another good example is that of Joash, who had preserved the Davidic line by escaping the evil clutches of his grandmother, Athaliah, daughter of King Ahab of Israel and his evil wife, Jezebel as a one-year old infant and who began his reign when he was seven years old. The first part of his reign was benign and positive when the priest, Jehoida (who had saved him when he was an infant) was at his right hand (24:1-3; 17-19). After Jehoida's death, the wickedness in Joash emerged, fuelled by evil officials who sucked up to him! This resulted in Joash putting to death Zechariah, Jehoida's son, who had challenged Joash as to why he had "disobeyed the Lord's command"? (24:20).

d) Becoming arrogant and boastful

Another problem with some of the good kings is that they became arrogant. In this vein, Hezekiah, in a moment of boastfulness and rashness (thus, he dropped his guard), showed his riches to envoys from Babylon (32:31; 2 Kings 20:12-18). The prophet, Isaiah, on knowing that this had happened, warned Hezekiah that his riches "will be carried off to Babylon. Nothing will be left, says the Lord..." (2 Chronicles 20:16). Indeed, this came to pass. Often, rather than actual display of arrogance, perceived arrogance on the part of a leader can be as damaging in terms of his public image.

e) Failure to groom a good successor

All of you come from different backgrounds. Many of you are leaders in areas where you work and serve, both in and outside of church. A principle of good governance applicable to all that we do, whether in politics, family businesses, grassroots work, voluntary welfare organisations, national sports associations or church leadership at various levels, is the need for us to do succession planning, especially the grooming of a successor.

How can we ensure that the good work that we do will outlive, indeed grow even more, after we step down from office? This is another key lesson on good governance gleaned from 2 Chronicles. Many of the good kings were succeeded by sons who did not follow in their father's footsteps. A good example is Jehoshaphat's son, Jehoram, who put to death all his brothers upon succeeding his father, Jehoshaphat to the throne (21:4). Jehoram did evil in the eyes of the Lord (21:6). Hezekiah's son, Manasseh became king when only 12 years old and undid all his father's good work. He rebuilt the high places Hezekiah had demolished (33:3) and practised sorcery, divination and witchcraft, even sacrificing his own sons (33:6). Hezekiah did not teach him well when young.

Conclusion

Let me now conclude by suggesting four key takeaways from my sharing.

First, in every vocation, there are reflections and lessons that can be gleaned from God's word. Our work is a means to glorify God in the use of our gifts and talents which He has given us, not only to support ourselves financially but also to impact lives positively for the greater good of society. This is one way we can be effective as salt and light. Second, everyone here tonight will have his or her "Esther" moments. Listen to Mordecai's words in Esther 4:14: "And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this"? I thank God that during my sojourn in politics – from entry, through two years as a backbencher and then 18 years as officeholder, and right to the timing of my stepping down – there were "Esther" moments. I suggest you reflect prayerfully on your lives, and discern what these "Esther moments" for you may be. They may not be

monumental ones like what Esther was confronted with, where the fate of an entire race was at stake, but smaller moments that nevertheless still impact lives positively. Did you listen to the prompting of the Holy Spirit and seize those opportunities as they came? The key is - will we recognise those moments when they present themselves, and are we able to respond as God would want us to, with fortitude and total trust in Him?

Third, as citizens, we should be mindful of what good governance entails. Whilst we quite rightly expect it of our elected government, we should also do our part to contribute to making it happen. Though not comprehensive, 2 Chronicles offers interesting and useful insights that as Christians, we can build on, but of course, bearing in mind that Singapore is a secular state and a multi-racial, multi-religious society.

Lastly, we will not know the exact timing of our Lord's return, but are called to be alert to the signs of the times – whether these are political in nature as in governments falling; natural calamities as in tsunamis and earthquakes; social developments as in the decline in morality worldwide; or on the economic front such as an increasingly globalised and linked world economy. 2 Chronicles serves as a reminder that God works intimately in world affairs too!

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