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Wartime Cabinet Meeting: An Interview with John MacArthur
Scripture: Selected Scriptures
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PHIL: John, it's good to be here with you today. Let me start by asking you this question: How did this invitation to the White House come about?

JOHN: Well, as you know I had the opportunity to appear on the *Larry King Live* program along with Dr. Bob Jones, Max Lucado, a Catholic priest, and a liberal Methodist bishop to discuss the war from a Christian perspective. I did get a letter from the White House office thanking me for the things that I said there, giving what they believe was a right understanding of the picture of the war. I appreciated that. My assumption is, that based upon that appearance and other opportunities to influence people there through the teaching of the Word of God and through our radio program in Washington, led to the invitation.

PHIL: In fact the invitation came the day after *Larry King*, right?

JOHN: Yes, it did. It came the next day. At first I thought: *I don't think I want to go to Washington. I'm not sure I have much to offer. I've said things, I've written things about political issues, related to the kingdom of God.* But then as I began to think about it and everybody around me, including you, prevailed and said, "Look, when your President calls, you go."

PHIL: In fact, at first you said your inclination was not to go.

JOHN: The political world isn't really my world. My first instinct was to say, "Thank you very much for the invitation, but there are certainly others who could maybe make a better contribution." But as I thought about it, and as you all prevailed upon me, I decided that it probably was the right thing to go and to represent the truth and to give support to those in power and authority in our country who do seek to honor God and who do love the Lord Jesus Christ. I'm really glad I did.

PHIL: How much did you know about the agenda of the meeting before it took place?

JOHN: Well, all I knew about was that there was going to be a briefing, that the White House, the President himself, and the White House cabinet wanted evangelical leaders—this small group of evangelical leaders. And by the way, Phil, there were *only* evangelicals there. And my assumption was, and it was accurate, that they just wanted to give us a personal insight into the various issues that are of importance to the White House so that we would have a firsthand understanding, and that's because they recognize that we all have broad constituencies. There are many Christian

people in the White House. The President, as everyone knows, makes no hesitation in confessing Jesus Christ as his Lord and affirming his Christian testimony. He's done that publicly. We've all heard him do that. Attorney General John Ashcroft is a very outspoken Christian and was so at the briefing. There were many others on the White House staff who are Christians. And I think it was important for these people to let evangelical leaders know how strongly the Christian influence is felt in the most powerful place in the world, really, so that we could have confidence, and in particular they said, so that we could pray knowledgeably about the tremendous responsibility that these people feel, not only toward this country but toward God, to discharge their stewardship.

PHIL: It was obvious from the delegation that was invited that someone in the White House understands the evangelical world. Who were some of the other people who were there?

JOHN: People that our listeners would be familiar with, I think: David Jeremiah, Adrian Rogers, Alistair Begg—people who are heard on Christian radio. There were some others I know perhaps who were invited but weren't there, but those people were there. Dr. James Kennedy was there, who is probably known more for his television program. People like that. Ravi Zacharias was there. Erwin Lutzer from the Moody Church was there. Those men who are known in this country as those who faithfully proclaim the Word of God.

PHIL: And you didn't make the trip alone? Tell us about it.

JOHN: No, in fact, I was talking to my son, Mark, who lives in Chicago, and I was telling him that I had been invited to the White House. He said, "Dad, you're not going alone. I'm going with you!" And I said, "I don't know. This is an invitation thing, Mark. I'm not sure I have any weight about getting you in." He said, "You can ask!" And Mark, by the way, is on the Board here at Grace to You and is in his own right a Bible teacher. So he said, "I'm going with you, Dad." We called the White House and said, "Would it be possible to bring along John's son?" And they said, "We'll get back to you." And they called back and said, "Sure, we'd love to have him." Then my other son, my older son, Matthew, who is also a Board member here at Grace to You said, "Look, what about *me*?" and so we called up the White House and they said, "Well, we'll get back to you. We have only a limited number of places." As it turned out they allowed them both to come. It was really a wonderful time just being with my sons who are unashamed in their love for Christ and in their testimony for Him and who love their country and who are very loyal in fulfilling Christian responsibility as citizens. It was just great to be together, to have that experience and to be able to talk about it, and interact about it, and I know that in years to come ahead we'll look back to that as a real unique opportunity and highlight for us.

PHIL: Well, what took place during the meeting? You want to walk us through the experience just sort of step by step. Tell us as much as you can.

JOHN: We were basically introduced to significant members of the Cabinet, people who are actual Cabinet members such as Don Evans, who is Secretary of Commerce, and the Attorney General John Ashcroft, who is well-known to everybody in our country. They gave stirring speeches to us, talking not only about their Christianity, their background, the things that they are committed to in regard to the Lord, but talking about the issues that face our nation and how they view them from a Christian perspective and even from an absolutely biblical perspective, which was really very encouraging. We heard from Gordon England, who is Deputy Secretary, Department of Homeland Security right under Tom Ridge, talking about the fact that we have a new day in our country. There was a time when you could prosecute criminals and imprison them and even execute them and that would be a threat. In other words, the threat of jail, the threat of long jail sentences, the threat of capital punishment no longer [something missing?] because terrorists are willingly suicidal. The threat of death is no threat to them at all and so we have to stop them *before* they commit the crime. We can't prosecute them afterwards because when they commit them they're dead. There are all kinds of people today asking: "What about war? Is it right?" There is a chapter in the book, *Terrorism, Jihad, and the Bible* which gives you a very clear picture of what the Bible has to say about war. And as I said on the *Larry King* program, this is a *just* war. I think that maybe one of the reasons why the White House asked me to come because that's an affirming thing. They believe this is a just war and they believe that what makes it just is that it is a war of protection and that they cannot wait until the evildoer gets here and wreaks more havoc. A lot of that I pointed out in the book, *Terrorism, Jiha, and the Bible* which could just as well be titled "Terrorism, War, Jihad and the Bible" and how that all fits together in the Word of God. So I was very encouraged with the fact that they do believe that they are acting justly. America has always done that. We've always entered into a war of defense and protection.

PHIL: Let me ask you a question about that because on the Middle Eastern side a lot of these people, and some of the terrorists as you mentioned, do these things because they believe this is *Jihad* —Holy War. On the other hand, you say that people in the White House feel that they are discharging before God and yet I heard the *Larry King* broadcast there and you pointed out that from our side this is not Holy War in that sense. This is not Christians against Islam, or anything like that. Explain the difference.

JOHN: This has nothing to do with Christianity – the war itself. This has to do with discharging a *civil* responsibility. That civil responsibility that belongs to the ruler, that belongs to the agents of government which according to Romans 13, "the powers that be are ordained of God." "They are ministers of God," it says, "for justice." John Ashcroft made the statement that he's so happy as a Christian to be in charge of the Justice Department because it's the only department in the whole American government which has a moral title—justice, and it suits a Christian. He's discharging, as are all of those leaders, a *civil* responsibility. This has nothing to do with being a Christian war. We're not trying to convert people to Christianity. We're not trying to stop them from being Muslims, but that's not the idea. We're not trying to take the message of the gospel as a government in there. Our

government is doing what a government is supposed to do. But what I think is so wonderful about it is they're doing it *because* they understand how God has ordained government. I think it was de Tocqueville who said, "America is great because America is good." That needs to be explained. Americans are not good. There is none good, no not one. We have no right to claim the blessing of God; we have no right to pray for the blessing of God. God owes us nothing. This is an ungodly nation and that rejects Jesus Christ. It's corrupt throughout. Every sinner is a defiled sinner before God. There's anti-God attitude, anti-Christ attitude pervasive all through this land. This just war does not represent *any* spiritual revival in this land. It doesn't put us in a place to be blessed by God. It is simply government functioning the way government should. But it's good to know that the men at the top understand what America has always understood—that a war is a last resort and it is only a war of protection and punishment.

PHIL: So you were in this briefing for how long? How long did this go on?

JOHN: We were in there probably three hours.

PHIL: Were most of the speeches focused on the war?

JOHN: No. Most of them just talked about issues of integrity and character. They all talked about that. And they talked about the President's selflessness. There is one question that he asks when somebody comes into his office with some kind of proposal to solve a problem, a dilemma of some sorts. His question is always this: "What is the right answer?" I forget which one of the speakers said this. You know, that just isn't said in the White House. *The right answer?* What is the politically expedient answer? What is the answer that the media will let us get away with? What do the focus groups say, what do the polls say? *What is the right answer?* I mean, in the day in which we live—postmodernism—one could argue that there was no such thing as a right answer.

PHIL: That's exactly what many people believe.

JOHN: Yeah. *What is the right answer? What is the right thing to do?*

PHIL: And these people who spent their lives in politics are saying, "It's refreshing to have someone to think...."

JOHN: Well, it's a new day. For someone to say: *"What is right."* So I think government under those kind of conditions with people of integrity, functions the best way the government can function.

PHIL: In your view, the reason for the meeting? Did they call you there to brief you so that you would pray?

JOHN: I think the reason for the meeting was what happened at the meeting. To fully inform us about the process that goes on there. Why they do what they do. So that we, as evangelical leaders, would know that we could trust them, and they kept saying to us, “Pray for us. Tell your people to pray for us. This is a huge responsibility.” They don’t believe they are fighting, as I said earlier, a Christian war. This isn’t about Christianity. This isn’t about converting people to Christianity. They just want God to be honored because they do what is right for the stewardship they have been given. If that makes sense. They just want to fulfill their responsibilities. And obviously, the Christians—and they are not all Christians of course, but there are many Christians there—they see the really big picture and they know their stewardship is before the Lord.

Just a note on that. When I first got there they said that was really interesting. We’re going through security, which obviously is significant. A gentleman came up to me, introduced himself as an inside person in the White House who is attached to the President, and he said, “You know, John, I want to talk to you about a message you gave.” And I said, “Wow, sure.” I didn’t know what he was going to say. He said, “You gave a message on the deadly dangers of moralism.” And I said, “I sure did.” I was ready to duck because that was a sermon I preached that called into question much of what is going on in the name of the religious right.

PHIL: In fact, that became a chapter in your book *Can God Bless America?*

JOHN: That’s the final chapter, kind of the culmination of the book *Can God Bless America?* But when I gave that message on the dangers, the deadly dangers of moralism, about how getting caught up in how to make America moral can be deadly dangerous because it misses the point and it substitutes a good thing for the *only* thing, and that’s the gospel and evangelism. Well, anyway he said, “I was told I should listen to that tape. I thought, I don’t know whether I want to listen to that tape, but I listened to it.” This is what he said, Phil. He said, “John, you got it exactly right.” I thought I had been criticized by the religious right for saying those things. Here’s a guy inside the White House who said, “What you said is exactly right.” He said, “It made me completely rethink what we do.” Apparently this has affected others there, Christians there in the White House, and what I said in the tape was, he re-iterated, “You know, John, we fight so much for these political issues and get so involved with trying to get them through (get them through Congress, or whatever it is), get these things passed, and we do tend to turn our opponents into our enemy and get so caught up in the kingdom of this world, we forget that our responsibility is the kingdom of God. And we can’t alienate these people that we have to reach.” I just said, “Wow.” It encourages me to know that somebody in the White House would see a higher authority than the White House—and that would be the Word of God—and say, “That’s what the Bible says. We need to rethink what we do here.”

PHIL: Yes, that is encouraging.

JOHN: I would encourage by the way, our listeners, the book *Terrorism, Jiha, and the Bible* which deals with the biblical view of war, and the book *Can God Bless America?*, which has the message: "The Deadly Dangers of Moralism." Those are available from Grace to You. They're pertinent. They are right now the kind of thing that will help you to understand what is going on and be able to give answers to people around you.

PHIL: Interesting that you bring that up about the deadly dangers of moralism. You've been really outspoken about the importance of not confusing social and political reform with the gospel and spiritual transformation. Were you concerned that even making this trip might be sending people the wrong message?

JOHN: My going couldn't undermine that. I mean, I've been preaching this too long. I've been known for teaching the Bible for so long. What I've said, I believe the Bible teaches, is public knowledge to everybody in the evangelical world. So I don't think that they would assume that this was a sort of a change. My view was that if I go they will know, that in all that I've said, I'm not at all saying that I don't want to support my government; I don't want to support people who are just and honorable, and doing right. I do pray for those who are rulers and those who are in authority that we might live a tranquil and quiet life.

PHIL: In fact, that is something you've taught on recently at the Shepherds' Conference this year, you gave a prayer for President Bush, and I think we broadcasted that on Grace to You also.

JOHN: That's clear in the Scriptures. Pray for those that are over you. Pray for your rulers, those who have authority over you. Pray that God will so work in their lives and through their leadership, whether they're Christians or not. Paul wasn't talking about Christian rulers when he wrote that. There weren't any.

PHIL: That's probably an important point to be made. It's easier to be supportive of a President who seems to share our concerns, our convictions, and our values as Christians, but what would be our responsibility to another kind of President.

JOHN: Well the last one claimed to be a Christian, too, didn't he?

PHIL: He claimed to be.

JOHN: Yeah, he said he was a Christian. He carried a Bible and went to Church.

PHIL: Our responsibility to pray for him was the same, right?

JOHN: Absolutely. Pray that God would even, through him, accomplish His will. And more than that. That God would do a work of grace in his heart and accomplish whatever spiritual work needed to be accomplished in his heart. I think that when you're praying for the ruler you have to pray for what it is the ruler needs. First of all he needs Christ and he needs salvation and then he needs wisdom from God to rule in a wise way and we would pray that, in whatever case.

PHIL: In fact, when the apostle Paul wrote these commands in Romans 13 and when he wrote to Timothy to pray for rulers, at that time the Roman Empire was ruled by men who were so overtly hostile to Christianity that they were persecuting Christians, killing people for their faith.

JOHN: Yeah, there was no such thing as a Christian ruler. They were all pagan rulers. That didn't change our responsibilities. Submit to the powers that be. Didn't change our responsibility to pray for them, but it does tend to indicate what our prayers should be. In this case, you have a President who affirms his faith in Jesus Christ, who by testimony of everybody around him lives like a Christian lives—has integrity, is selfless. We still need to pray for wisdom for him. We need to pray for the work of God to be mighty in his life. We need to pray for him to be faithful to the testimony that he gives so that his integrity is never called into question. We need to pray that for all the people in leadership who say that they're Christians that that would be genuine and it would manifest itself in an ongoing way. And then to pray that God will give them wisdom. The decisions these people will make are really immense. The implications are way beyond what any of us would ever be able to imagine. And the Lord has called us to pray, and that means that He would work through those prayers to accomplish His purposes.

PHIL: In fact, John, maybe as a way of wrapping up this discussion, why don't you lead us in prayer for President Bush right now.

JOHN: I'd be glad to.

Father, we thank You that You have, seemingly, in this country, given us a bit of a reprieve from the downward rapid spiral we seemed to have been experiencing. You have brought into power a man who claims to consult You on a regular daily basis, who by the testimony of those around him, starts every day with Bible study and prayer, who surrounds himself with those who know Jesus Christ, and we're grateful for that. It's almost an anomaly that You would be so gracious at a time like this which is so crucial. We thank You for putting this administration in place before 9/11 so that when it did happen, men of character and justice, men who care about righteousness, men who care about serving others, who are willing to consider what is the greatest need for the people, both now and in the future, were already in place. We thank You for putting men who are decisive, who are compassionate, and yet resolute about the punishment of evildoers and the protection of those who do good. We thank You for giving us rulers and a President who understands the right role of

government, and who’s a steward of that responsibility. And we ask Lord, and this is our greatest prayer, that through this war and through the influence of this government, salvation would come to many. Yesterday, Father, I saw a picture of a foxhole in Iraq, a trench in which two soldiers were baptizing a third one in the name of Jesus Christ—right this week in Iraq. And I received a letter from one of the guys in our church who is with the Marines fighting in Iraq saying people are coming to Christ because they’re facing death and they want to be sure they’re right with God. Lord, this is what we pray. We’re not praying that we would win a war and that our economy would go up. We’re not praying that everything in America would be safe and comfortable. We’re praying that people would be converted to Christ. We’re praying that in these days of fear and questioning there might be a turning to You because there is an anxiety about death. We’re praying that there might even be in our country pulpits that have been watered down and given over to psychology, given over to foolishness, and given over to shallowness, where the powerful reign of biblical truth might return so that people can hear the true gospel, not the gospel of self-fulfillment, but the gospel of self-denial, cross-bearing—the true gospel of salvation. This has to start in the pulpits, and maybe the testimony of our President, the testimony of his resolve, his willingness to be straightforward and do what is right might set an example for preachers who have lost the vision for being bold and forthright and straightforward and resolute and manifesting fortitude and courage in the proclamation of the true message in the very, very important days. We do pray, Lord, that You will continue to bless those in authority over us; those that don’t know Christ, may they be saved, may they come to grips with their eternal souls. We know there are many in leadership in our nation, leadership in our military, that don’t know Christ. We pray for their salvation through this time and we pray for the salvation of our troops who don’t know the Lord Jesus Christ. We do pray that maybe even some day, through the end of this war, if this country prevails, that it might open a way for the gospel to penetrate the Muslim world. We pray for the salvation of people in our own country, many people—most people by far in America—who know not Christ. We pray that there might be a real movement of the Holy Spirit to bring about the salvation of souls. We know this is dependent upon the hearing of the message. How can they hear without a preacher? And so we go back to praying for the preachers of this land to be faithful proclaimers of the true gospel. These things we pray for the glory of our Christ. Amen.

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