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CAN YOU AFFORD TO TAKE GOD FOR GRANTED?

Today's Text: 2 Sam. 24: 1-25; Is. 55: 8-9

Extracts:

1. **"The king said to Joab the captain of the host, which was with him, *Go now through all the tribes of Israel, ... and number ye the people, that I may know the number of the people.* And Joab said unto the king, *Now the Lord thy God add unto the people, how many soever they be, an hundredfold, and that the eyes of my lord may see it: but why doth the lord my king delight in this thing? Notwithstanding the king's word prevailed against Joab, and against the captains of the host. ...And David's heart smote him after that he had numbered the people. And David said unto the Lord, I have sinned greatly in that I have done" [2 Sam. 24: 2, 3-4, 10]***
2. **"For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways, saith the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts" [Is. 55: 8-9]**

The palace guards of a French king consisted mainly of foreigners who had to pass a test in French before they could be confirmed on the job. The French general charged with teaching the language to the foreign recruits soon discovered a short way out. The king asked the same questions in the same order all the time. Therefore, all he needed to do was to teach the recruits the answers to the three questions. To the first question, "how old are you?" the answer was "30 years." To the second question, "for how long have you been in my service?" the answer was "three months." To the third and final question, "are you happy or contented?" the answer was "both." One day, the king saw among the new recruits a very tall German. The king asked him, "Young man, I haven't seen you before. For how long have you been in my service?" He answered "30 years." "What?" exclaimed the king, "how old are you then?" The German answered, "three months." Now furious, the king asked, "Are you mad or I am?" The young man replied "both!"

You can be sure that the general lost his job soon after. He thought that he knew his king enough to take him for granted. That is also what we do all the time in our relationship with God. How often have we taken far-reaching decisions in life, relationships or ministry without first asking God? How often do we act on presumption than faith when we read a Bible verse and act on it as if it were specifically meant for us? A zoo attendant was mauled to death by a hungry lion when he jumped into its den, claiming Daniel's miracle [Dan. 6: 16-23]! Can we afford to take God for granted and get away with it?

In today's lesson, we shall use the story of David's census to understand how we can avoid taking God for granted.

1. Presumption is not faith!

Presumption means to do something without *a* warrant or authority. In our relationship with God, presumption means acting on the *assumption* that God has sanctioned it. Faith, on the other hand, means that *God asked us to do it*. To make this distinction clearer, let us examine three stages in David's life and how he behaved.

a) *David as a fugitive*

Let us use the story of how David responded to the call by the people of Keilah to save them from the Philistines who had robbed their threshing floors [1 Sam. 23: 1-12]. At the time, David was running away from king Saul who wanted David dead. The first thing that David did was to ask God if he should help the people of Keilah. God told him to go. However, when David informed his men about the assignment, they told him, "we be afraid here in Judah: how much more then if we come to Keilah against the army of the Philistines?" David asked God "yet again" and He assured David, "Arise, go down to Keilah; *for I will deliver the Philistines into thine hand*" [vv. 2-4].

So, armed with faith in the word of God, David and his men went to Keilah, defeated the Philistines and restored the stolen animals to the people of Keilah. Somebody stole away to inform Saul that his archenemy was within the walled city of Keilah. Saul took a strong army to come and invade Keilah and David was informed. Rather than *presume* that he already had God's mandate to come there, David instead asked God *again* if he should remain or flee. God told him to run for his life [vv. 6-12]!

b) *David as a young king in his thirties*

David was approaching 38 when he was anointed king over the whole of Israel. Soon after, the Philistines attacked his kingdom. Before responding to their attack, David enquired of the Lord, "Shall I go up to the Philistines? Wilt Thou deliver them into mine hand?" God replied, "Go up, for I will *doubtless* deliver the Philistines into thine hand." David attacked and won a major victory as the Lord had promised him [2 Sam. 5: 17-19].

The Philistines attacked again. *Rather than assume that the old mandate still subsisted, David went back to God* to ask if he should attack as in the previous case. God replied, "thou shalt not go up, but fetch a compass behind them, and come upon them over against the mulberry trees. And let it be, when thou hearest the sound of a going in the tops of the mulberry trees, that then thou shalt bestir thyself: for then shall the Lord go out

before thee, to smite the host of the Philistines.” David did as the Lord had commanded him and he won another major victory [vv. 22-25].

c) *David as an old man*

Now close to 70 years of age, David wanted to take a census of the people of Israel “that I may know the number of the people” [2 Sam. 24: 2]. He did not ask God first *if* he should do so and his generals were surprised where the king’s mandate came from. If you look at the history of census-taking up to that time, it had to be commanded by God. For example, soon after the children of Israel had left Egypt, God commanded that Moses take a census of those 20 years and above [Num. 1: 2, 18, 20]. The next time that God ordered a similar census, it was after a plague in which 24,000 people had died for disobedience [Num. 26: 1-64]. Therefore, this action of David’s was not in his character. He acted out of presumption, not faith.

2. Ways in which we act out of presumption

Among many others, the following should be noted:

a) *When we act without first asking God*

We have seen the case of David above. We can also remember the case of Joshua when, without first asking God, he signed a pact with the Gibeonites who had tricked him to believe that they were from a far country, whereas they were within hearing distance [Josh. 9:14]. How many decisions [personal or professional] do we bring before God for guidance before we make them? In most cases, we rely on our professional expertise. When Paul told the centurion taking him as prisoner to Rome that he perceived danger and harm to the ship, the man “believed the master and the owner of the ship more than those things which were spoken by Paul” [Acts 27: 9-11]. Along the way, they suffered a shipwreck!

b) *When we act on an earlier mandate without seeking a fresh one*

It is not enough to *arrogate* to our circumstances some verses of scripture or an earlier message [by dream or vision or prophecy] without seeking an update from the Lord. If fugitive David had not asked God again but had remained in Keilah to face Saul’s might, he might have been killed.

c) *When we act on a prophecy that contradicts an existing mandate*

When a new message contradicts or is in conflict with an earlier mandate, it is a warning to seek God’s clearance again before moving forward. The

young prophet from Judah that was sent to warn king Jeroboam to desist from his evil ways was specifically warned by God to “eat no bread nor drink water nor turn again by the same way that thou camest.” After delivering his message to the king, he was invited by an old prophet to his house who offered him food and drink. When the young prophet refused on the grounds of God’s word, the old prophet said, “I am a prophet also as thou art, and *an angel* spake unto me by the word of the Lord, saying, Bring him back with thee into thine house, that he may eat bread and drink water. *But he lied unto him.*” He went on to eat and for his disobedience, a lion killed him on his way home [**1 Kgs 13: 1-28**]. How different would it have been if he had merely asked God again!

d) *When we rely on “church wisdom”*

Many of us tend to behave on the basis of denominational codes of acceptable conduct, fashioned by a committee of human beings, as if they equate with what God accepts. In most cases, we know that such codes are meant to trap members in, not necessarily to lead them to fear and obey God! Church wisdom has led to the election of gay bishops, protection of abusive clergy and other vices!

When the Pharisees and the scribes challenged Jesus and His disciples for not walking according to “the tradition of the elders,” Jesus quoted **Isaiah 29:13** to let them know that “in vain do they worship Me, teaching for doctrine the commandments of men,” and such people make “the word of God of none effect through your tradition, which ye have delivered, and many such like things do ye” [**Mk 7: 6-13**].

3. Exactly why do we act presumptuously?

It might surprise us that a man like David who grew up on seeking God’s face all the time could in his old age succumb to presumption. In one of the psalms that he wrote, David said, “One thing have I desired of the Lord, *and that will I seek after*, that I may dwell in the house of the Lord *all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to enquire in his temple*” [**Ps. 27: 4**]. So, what factors can make us succumb to presumption? Here are two important ones:

a) *Temptation from Satan*

A record of David’s story on the census that can be found in **1 Chronicles Chapter 21** begins with “And Satan stood up against Israel, and provoked David to number Israel” [**v. 1**]. The same story in **2 Samuel Chapter 24** begins with “And again the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and He moved David against them to say, Go, number Israel and Judah” [**v. 1**]. Of course, we know that Satan cannot touch us unless God allows it [**Job 1: 12**]. Reading both verses together, we get the following picture: *to*

create the chance to punish a disobedient people, God allowed Satan to steer David to walk by sight instead of by faith.

That is a serious thing! It suggests that *we are likely to fall into the trap of acting presumptuously when we are living in disobedience of the word of God.*

b) *Fear of the truth*

Some of us are living in self-denial and would not like to hear the truth. Therefore, if asking God will reveal the truth, why try at all. After the death of Samuel, Saul “put away those that had familiar spirits and the wizards out of the land” [1 Sam. 28: 3]. In other words, he no longer welcomed anybody who had the gifts of seeing into the spirit world!

When Ahab the king of Israel wanted to go to war against Syria over Ramoth-gilead, his visiting brother-king Jehosaphat of Judah asked him to find out the Lord’s position on the matter. He gathered 400 prophets who told him to go to war, that he would win. However, Jehosaphat had the Spirit of discernment and he knew that those prophets were not telling the truth. So, he asked Ahab, “Is there not here a prophet of the Lord besides, that we might enquire of him?” Ahab replied, “There is as yet one man, Micaiah... by whom we may enquire of the Lord, *but I hate him, for he doth not prophesy good concerning me, but evil*” [1 Kgs 22: 1-8]!

4. How then can we get out of this danger?

David and Israel were visited with a plague that killed 70,000 people [2 Sam. 24: 15]. The young prophet from Judah was killed by a lion on his way home [1 Kgs 13:24]. Israel was defeated and King Ahab was killed in the battle over Ramoth-gilead [1 Kgs 22: 29-38]. Therefore, presumption is dangerous to our faith and our well-being. How then can we deal with its infection? Here are some suggestions:

a) *Confess the sin*

It is not hard for people of faith to know that they have acted out of presumption rather than faith. The conscience pricks you immediately because God chastises those He loves. David’s “heart smote him after that he had numbered the people.” He repented and told God, “I have sinned greatly in that I have done, and now I beseech Thee, O Lord, take away the iniquity of Thy servant, *for I have done very foolishly*” [2 Sam. 24: 10].

b) *Retrace your steps*

When the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray, He taught them what is now regarded as the Lord's Prayer. An important part of that prayer says, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from all evil" [Matt. 6: 13]. Satan tempts us by planting doubts in our minds. He told Eve "you shall not surely die; for God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil" [Gen. 3: 4-5]. Since Eve was not there when God gave that command to Adam [Gen. 2: 15-17], her curiosity was aroused and she fell. Compare that with his temptation of Jesus. The devil told Jesus, "If Thou be the Son of God, command that these stones be made bread" [Matt. 4:3]. Of course, Jesus knew that He was the Son of God and so Satan could not fool Him! *Therefore, the more we know God (not about Him), the less Satan will be able to lure us into presumption.*

5. Conclusion

A thief was once asked what it would take for him to stop stealing. He said that he would stop when there were no more opportunities to steal! In like manner, a true believer might say that he or she would never take God for granted if they could always hear Him clearly. From the Bible, we know that the promise of God in these last days is to pour of His Spirit on *all flesh* and "your sons and daughters shall **prophecy**, and your young men shall **see visions**, and your old men shall dream **dreams** [Joel 2: 28-32; Acts 2: 14-21]. How can we use those gifts and manifestations to walk by faith?

Two friends went shopping in the busy business district of the city. The one from the rural part of the country said to his friend, "I can hear a bird singing." His urban friend laughed and said, "You mean you can hear a bird singing *in spite* of the traffic noise?" A few minutes later, the city man went on his knees searching for something. His rural friend asked what he was looking for. He replied, "I heard some coins drop!"

When your mind is transformed and no longer conforms to this world, you will know when God is speaking to you, *no matter where you are!* Therefore, don't allow the temptation of age or experience or position or status to take you away from the path of seeking God *first* and obtaining His mandate before you act. Anything else is presumption.

Can you afford to take God for granted?