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EVERY PRIVILEGE HAS RESPONSIBILITIES!

Today's Text: Zechariah Chaps. 1-2

Abstracts:

The Angel of the Lord answered and said, “O Lord of hosts, how long will You not have mercy on Jerusalem and on the cities of Judah, against which You were angry these seventy years?” And the Lord answered the angel who talked to me with good and comforting words (saying), “I am returning to Jerusalem with mercy; My house shall be built in it,” says the Lord of hosts. ...“For I,” says the Lord, “will be a fire all around her, and I will be the glory in her midst.” For thus says the Lord of hosts, “He sent Me after glory, to the nations which plunder you; for *he who touches you touches the apple of His eye*” [Zech. 1: 12, 13, 16; Zech. 2: 5, 8]

Reverend Jesse Jackson is a prominent American civil rights leader and Baptist minister who was a close associate of the late Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. His son, Congressman Jesse Jackson Jr., is the co-chair of the campaign organization of Barack Obama, the presumptive (would-be) Democratic Presidential candidate, who stands a good chance of becoming the first black President of America. Therefore, Jackson Sr. occupies a very privileged position to reap the realization of his long civil rights struggles. However, on Sunday, 6 July 2008, during an interview break at Fox News, Rev. Jackson made derogatory comments about Obama, without realizing that the microphone was still live!¹ Even though he has apologized for the crude remarks, most critics have agreed that he was no longer relevant to nor did he speak for black America.

Jackson's experience demonstrates that every privilege has its responsibilities. You may be a parent or minister, community or business leader. You may be a prince or a pauper, a television star or a sports fan. You may even be the head of state of the most powerful nation in the world. No matter where you find yourself, it is nothing but a privilege that God has given you to glorify His name. But what have you done with yours? Have you lived up to your responsibilities or have you abused the privilege?

In this week's study, God said of the people of Israel, “he who touches her touches the apple of His eye.” Yet, Israel the apple of God's eye suffered rejection, exile and persecution. Why? What lessons can we learn from their circumstance to enable us to avoid a similar outcome? Those and more are the issues that we shall examine in this week's study.

¹ Based on: ‘Obama accepts Jesse Jackson's apology,’ NBC News and news services, Thurs. July 10, 2008, <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/25611808/>

1. Background: Privilege is not a right!

In last week's study, we showed that Haggai and Zechariah were the two prophets that encouraged Zerubbabel and his fellow returnees from Babylonian exile to complete the reconstruction of the temple in Jerusalem, in spite of stiff opposition. However, they both used different approaches. In the case of Haggai, that we treated last week, he used the economic and personal hardships that the people were passing through as evidence of their misplaced priorities. They needed to first complete the reconstruction of the temple and restore true worship there before building material prosperity [**Hagg. 1: 1-11**]. Zechariah, on the other hand, encouraged the returnees to focus on the end results of their efforts. They were not rebuilding the temple but their future. They were building the temple that the Messiah would use on His return to judge the world.

When you give people a long-term vision of such proportions, you need to add some evidence of short-term success. Otherwise, they may not be interested for, as a famous economist once said, in the long run, we are all dead! Zechariah was in a trance when he heard the angel speaking with him ask God, "O Lord of hosts, how long will You not have mercy on Jerusalem and on the cities of Judah, against which You were angry these seventy years?" In reply, God promised mercy and restoration for Zion [**Zech. 1: 8-17**]. He added, "I will be a wall of fire all around her, and I will be the glory in her midst... for he who touches (her) touches the apple of (My) eye" [**Zech. 2: 5, 8**]. Immediately, the people joined Zerubbabel to complete reconstructing the temple; they knew that any enemies that touched them would be touching the pupil of God's eye and that He had put a wall of fire around them!

Wait a minute! Have we not heard that expression before? When Moses was winding down his ministry, on the verge of the people entering the Promised Land, he spoke the words of a song to their hearing and part of it said, (God) found (Jacob for Israel) in a desert land and in the wasteland, a howling wilderness; He encircled him; He instructed him; *He kept him as the apple of His eye*" [**Deut. 32: 10**]. Centuries later, as David ran for safety from his enemies, he prayed, "*Keep me as the apple of Your eye; hide me under the shadow of Your wings*" [**Ps. 17: 8**].

If God regarded the children of Israel the apple of His eye right from the foundation of their nation in the womb of slavery in Egypt, why did they suffer all those things that we read about them in the Bible and even in contemporary history? The answer is simple: *a privilege is not a right!* Every privilege has conditions and responsibilities. When you fail to meet the attached conditions, you lose access to the benefits of that privilege. Let us illustrate this with a case study from the children of Israel's wilderness journey.

2. Read the fine print!

By virtue of God's covenant with Abraham [**Gen. 16: 18; Gen. 17: 21**], his descendants were the apple of God's eye. As you well know, you will not allow anybody to touch the pupil of your eye because it threatens your vision. Our eyes are very sensitive to light. That is why the pupil contracts or dilates quite instinctively in response to changes in the intensity of light. In like manner, God will not allow you to be attacked by the enemy because such an attack amounts to trying to hurt the pupil of His eye! But is that protection *inevitable* (i.e., unconditional) or *imperative* (i.e., essential)? Let us study the story of Balak and Balaam for a clearer understanding.

The children of Israel had left Egypt on their way to the Promised Land. On Mount Sinai, God gave them the Ten Commandments to guide their acceptable conduct with respect to God and man [**Ex. 20: 1-17**]. In no time, however, lust and greed that the people had learned in Egypt began to manifest themselves. In one instance, God sent a plague that killed thousands of them [**Num. 11: 33-35**]. They rebelled against Moses and God concerning the Promised Land. As a result, the journey that would have taken less than a year was going to take forty years and the rebellious generation would not get there [**Num. 14: 20-35**]. *The disobedient could not be part of the apple of God's eye!* Nevertheless, God still gave the nation of Israel in the wilderness victory over their enemies, such as the Amorites, and the kings of Bashan and Og [**Num. 20: 21-35**]. The nation continued to survive but not the individuals who transgressed.

As they pitched their tents close to Moab east of the Jordan River, the king of Moab, Balak, hired a soothsayer, Balaam [**Josh. 13: 22**], to curse Israel. Balaam apparently had a reputation (or notoriety?) for Balak said to him, "Curse this people for me, for they are mighty for me. Perhaps I shall be able to defeat them and drive them out of the land, for I know that he whom you bless is blessed, and he whom you curse is cursed" [**Num. 22: 1-7**]. That was a finger directly being poked into the apple of God's eye. From that point on, God used the soothsayer as His prophet! So when Balaam came to Balak, he said, "The word that God puts in my mouth, that I must speak" [**v. 38**].

For the first oracle, Balaam asked Balak to build seven altars on which he offered seven bulls and seven rams, a bull and a ram on each altar [**Num. 23: 1-2**]. Your enemy can counterfeit your mode of serving the true God but he cannot command God to do wickedness. Balak told Balaam, "Come, curse Jacob for me, and come, curse Israel!" But the sorcerer replied, "How shall I curse whom God has not cursed? And how shall I denounce whom the Lord has not denounced?" Then Balaam went on to pronounce blessings on Israel! The king was furious and said, "I took you to curse my enemies, and look, you have blessed them bountifully!" Balaam responded, "Must I not take heed to speak what the Lord has put in my mouth?" [**vv. 3-12**]. Two more oracles were tried, using the same number of altars and animal sacrifice and the same request, but the answer was the same, namely,

“God is not a man, that He should lie, nor a son of man, that He should repent. Has He said, and will He not do? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good? Behold, I have received a command to bless; He has blessed, and I cannot reverse it.” On a note of finality, Balaam said, “For there is no sorcery against Jacob, nor any divination against Israel” [vv. 19, 20, 23].

Look at the extent that God would go to fulfill His own side of the bargain? All that time, the children of Israel were enjoying the benefits of God’s protection without even knowing how furious was the spiritual battle going on over their future. The word of God says that our warfare is not against flesh and blood “but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places” [Eph. 6: 12]. Each time you sleep and wake up, do you know what the witches and wizards had planned for you? Each time you travel and return safely, do you know the spiritual warfare that took place over your safe return? Each time you carry a pregnancy to full term and have safe delivery, do you know how many curses on you or the baby that God stopped? What of those promotions or contracts that come to you even when you had no idea that your employer or clients respectively were thinking about you for good? Clearly, we all enjoy one privilege or another, but do we know the attached responsibilities? Let us see what the children of Israel did on arriving in Moab.

As soon as they got there, the children of Israel “began to commit harlotry with the women of Moab.” They joined themselves to the worshippers of Baal and other idols, “and the anger of the Lord was aroused against Israel” [Num. 25: 1-3]. God asked Moses to send the leaders of the people to hang all the offenders in the sun so that the fierce anger of God might turn away from Israel. That day, 24,000 people died [vv. 4-9]. It was not the enemy that killed the children of Israel. It was their sin and wickedness. Therefore, God turned away His eye and left them to pay the price for their sins.

That is one of the tales of disobedience exhibited by the children of Israel throughout their history. That in part was what God drew to the attention of the returnees from exile through the prophet Zechariah when He said [Zech. 1: 2-6]:

The Lord has been very angry with your fathers. Therefore say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord of hosts; ‘Return to Me,’ says the Lord of hosts, ‘and I will return to you.’ Do not be like your fathers, to whom the former prophets preached, saying... ‘Turn now from your evil ways and your evil deeds.’ But they did not hear nor heed Me... Your fathers, where are they? And the prophets, do they live forever? Yet, surely My words and My statutes, which I commanded My servants the prophets, did they not overtake your fathers? ... So they returned and said, ‘Just as the Lord of hosts determined to do to us, according to our ways and according to our deeds, so He has dealt with us.’”

The returnees went on to rebuild the temple and God renewed His covenant to Israel, “a holy people to the Lord . . . for Himself, a special treasure above all the peoples on the face of the earth” [Deut. 7: 6]. Therefore, whoever touches her touches the apple of His eye. Every privilege has responsibilities.

3. Lessons for the modern believer

The most popular books and pamphlets among believers today are those that emphasize or glamourize the promises of God. People memorize and recite them in their prayers and songs. However, if you will take time to analyze them, you will find that for every promise, there are conditions attached. Let us take two examples:

a) *There shall not be male or female barren among you* [Deut. 7: 14]

This promise is popular among believers looking for the fruit of the womb, and in deed, they are entitled to it. However, there are certain conditions attached. When you go to Scripture, you will find a verse preceding that promise which says, “Therefore, know that the Lord your God, He is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and mercy for a thousand generations *with those who love Him and keep His commandments*” [Deut. 7: 9]. Clearly, that promise is for those who love and obey God. To love God is to obey and fear Him. Therefore, if you want this promise fulfilled in your life, you must be properly married in accordance with the word of God [Gen. 2: 24-25; Gen. 4: 1-2].

Search throughout Scripture and you will not find any barren woman that was blessed with a child outside of marriage. For example, Isaac’s mother, Sarah, was married to Abraham [Gen. 11: 29, 30], Samson’s mother was married to his father, Manoah [Judg. 13: 2], Hannah, Samuel’s mother, was the wife of Elkanah [1 Sam. 1: 1-2]. Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, was married to Zacharias the priest [Lk 1: 5-7], just as the Shunammite woman had a husband [2 Kgs 4: 8, 9, 14]. Therefore, believers need to claim this privilege with integrity.

b) *No weapon formed against you shall prosper, and every tongue which rises against you in judgment you shall condemn* [Is. 54: 17]

This is another popular promise and there are good testimonies to confirm its fulfillment in the lives of many believers. However, we usually ignore the second part of that verse which says, “This is the heritage of the *servants of the Lord, and their righteousness is from Me*, says the Lord” [v. 17]. When God boasted of Job to Satan, He said, “Have you considered My servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, *a blameless and upright man, one who fears God and shuns evil?*” [Job 1: 6-8]. The

righteousness from God is walking by faith, for Abraham “believed in the Lord, and He accounted it to him for righteousness” [Gen. 15: 6].

Clearly, you cannot live a life of sin and expect God’s protection from your enemies. Why would you steal and cheat and pray for God’s protection against arrest and imprisonment? Why would you expect to get a good job or obtain a residence permit in another country all on forged documents or lying records? Stop mocking yourself because God is not mocked and people reap what they sow [Gal. 6: 6- 7].

4. Conclusion: Every privilege is tied to God’s purpose!

As we saw in last week’s study, God made Zerubbabel a signet ring that He had chosen [Hagg. 2: 23]. In today’s study, God promised a wall of fire around Jerusalem, and whoever touches her touches the apple of His eye [Zech. 2: 5, 8]. God granted those special privileges to Zerubbabel to complete the reconstruction of the temple, in fulfillment of end time prophecies concerning the return of the Messiah. Therefore, every privilege that you may enjoy is closely tied to God’s purpose.

In the light of that, you should have the following attitude to any privileged position that God has granted you:

- It is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. If you blow it, you may never get it back. For example, Saul had the chance to be the first king of Israel. He blew it through disobedience and lost it to David. In the end, he and his sons died in a battle with the Philistines.
- Every opportunity that God grants you is to help others. For example, in spite of the fact that it was Joshua that supervised the allotment of land in the Promised Land, he was the last to get and it was just a city of his choice given to him by the children of Israel “according to the word of the Lord” [Josh. 19: 49-50]..
- Have an attitude of gratitude. It is your share of the labour in the Lord’s vineyard. It is your duty and you should thank God for choosing you instead of others [Matt. 9: 38; Jn 15: 16].

As a true believer, you have a privileged relationship with God *by faith in His Son, Jesus*. So, if you *love God and are called according to His purpose*, all things will work together for good for you [Rom. 8: 28]. You see what I mean?