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DOES YOUR COUNTRY KNOW GOD?

Today's text: Numbers Chapters 5-9; Jeremiah 9: 23-24

Extracts:

1. **“At the commandment of the Lord the children of Israel journeyed... Whether it were two days, or a month, or a year, that the cloud tarried upon the tabernacle, remaining thereon, the children of Israel abode in their tents, and journeyed not: but when it was taken up, they journeyed” [Num. 9: 18a, 22]**
2. **“Thus saith the Lord, Let not the wise glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches. But let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth Me, that I am the Lord which exercise lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness, in the earth: for in these things I delight, saith the Lord” [Jer. 9: 23-24]**

With the recent admission of Switzerland and East Timor, the United Nations now has a total membership of 191 politically independent countries. If we make room for a few dependent territories, such as U.S. and British Virgin Islands [Caribbean] and Gibraltar [Europe], we can safely say that the estimated six billion people of the world carry the national passports of less than 200 countries! During international events, such as the FIFA World Cup or the Olympic Games, citizens of participating countries become emotionally involved in the fortunes of their national teams/contingents. When the defunct USSR wanted to punish the 1970 Nobel Laureate in Literature, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, for his dissident views on the Russian communist system, it stripped him of his citizenship [1974]. He went into exile in the United States. When the order was rescinded 20 years later, he did not hesitate to return to his native land. That should tell you how important a country or nation can be to every one of us.

*The nation of Israel was on its way to the Promised Land. The word of God says, “righteousness exalted a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people” [Prov. 14:34]. In today's lesson, we shall study **Numbers Chapters 5-9** to see how God prepared the people of Israel to be acceptable as righteous in His sight. Today, we think that a country is great by military or economic strength. However, as we shall learn from today's lesson, “the people that do know their God shall be strong and do exploits” [Dan. 11:32]. Unless our own countries know God, we have a big challenge ahead of us as believers.*

1. A profile of the nation of Israel

We are not told the total population of the nation of Israel that left Egypt, but it can be estimated. The census of the army, that is, heads of households 20 years old and above, produced a total of 603,550 men [Num. 1:46]. The Levites, that is, every male child from one month old and above, from the tribe of Levi, numbered 22,000 [Num. 3:39]. The number of the firstborn of the males of all the children of Israel aged one month and above came to 22,273 [Num. 3:43]. There were likely to be more females, given that they were not in the military where there was a high mortality rate. If we assume a ratio of 2:1 [i.e., 2 females for each male], we can estimate the female population to be 1.2 million [600,000 times 2]. Now, we can comfortably accept the following profile of the population of the nation of Israel at the time:

In the Army	- 603,550 (24%)
Priests and Levites	- 22,000 (1%)
Firstborn males [other tribes]	- 22,273 (1%)
Females	-1,200,000 (48%)
Others [males not firstborn, aged]	- <u>650,000 (26%)</u>
Total	<u>2,497,823 (100%)</u>

We see from the forgoing that, out of an estimated population of 2.5 million, 25% were in the army or on temple duties. In other words, one out of every four persons in the population was directly involved in God's service. The others supported them in such areas as agriculture, animal husbandry, administration and related church work, such as prophets [Amos 7: 14-15].

What does your country's profile look like? It is possible that *on paper* the majority may profess to know God [as Christians or Moslems]. We hear of some countries calling themselves "God's own country." In some countries, religious zealots have adopted *theocracy* [government by God's laws] as their political system. Some others, even where Christianity is the dominant culture, have adopted the doctrine of "separation of church and state" [*secularism*]. In the eyes of God, however, what we profess is not as important as what we do. He knows us by our righteousness for "righteousness exalted a nation but sin is a reproach to any people" [Prov. 14: 34]. Let us learn from the book of Numbers how God developed the practice of righteousness in the nation of Israel that He was preparing to occupy the Promised Land, the equivalent of economic prosperity and social justice.

2. How to cultivate national righteousness

a) *Acknowledge and confess your sins*

God instructed Moses to tell the children of Israel [**Num. 5:5-7**]:

When a man or woman shall commit any sin that men commit, to do a trespass against the Lord, and that person be guilty, then they shall confess their sin which they have done; and he shall recompense his trespass... and give it unto whom he hath trespassed.

In other words, confession has to be accompanied with restitution. In practice, it means that it is not enough to regret the sin. We must go beyond that to ensure that we do not do it again. For example, those who stole should confess the sin and return the loot with 20% interest [**Num. 5:7**]. However, the restitution on fornication or adultery may take the form of resolving not to do it again.

In many of our countries, the greatest perpetrators of corruption in government or business are professed Christians! Instead of confessing their sins, they hide their loot from the law enforcement agencies. In the end, when they are investigated and nothing offensive can be found, they come out claiming that they have been wrongfully maligned! Meanwhile, they openly flaunt their ill-gotten gains, with its devastating effect on the moral tone of society.

After the memorable victory in Jericho, the army of Israel was defeated by the small band of soldiers from tiny Ai because a member of the army of Israel, Achan, had looted some gold and garments from Jericho, against the word of God. Joshua caught him through the Lord's revelation and ordered Achan, his family and everything they owned/stole to be completely destroyed [**Josh. 7:1-26**]. We can avoid such judgment if we confess our sins for God is faithful and just "to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" [**1 Jn 1:9**].

b) *Cultivate professional and moral probity*

Wherever we work, especially in leadership positions, our performance is assessed at three levels. People look at our *competence* [ability/qualification/skills to do the work], *compatibility* [our ability to work with others or in a team] and *integrity* [our ability to be trusted with resources, human and material]. In most cases, we may score quite high marks in the first two areas and fail woefully in the third one. Bill Clinton remains one of America's best Presidents in terms of his ability to run the economy for eight years and to relate to people. However, nobody can forget his affairs with Monica Lewinsky for which he was impeached [i.e., put on trial before the Senate].

For the people that He was going to put in leadership positions over the nation of Israel, God prescribed a harsh regime of personal discipline and moral integrity. He enjoined them to avoid sins that defiled the body, such as *infidelity* [Num. 5:11-31] and *alcohol abuse* [Num. 6:1-4]. With respect to the latter, men and women who had taken the Nazarite vow [an oath to separate oneself from certain worldly joys and to consecrate oneself to God] were not to take alcoholic or strong drinks [among other restrictions], and those who abused the vow were subjected to painful restoration rites [Num. 6: 9-20]. Samson [Judg. 13:] and John the Baptist [Lk 1:15] were Nazarites.

The believer's body is "the temple of the Holy Ghost" that is in him/her. Since we have been bought with the blood of Jesus, we are expected to glorify God in both our bodies and spirit "which are God's" [1 Cor. 6:19-20]. As "the temple of the living God," He dwells in us. He is our Father and we are His sons and daughters [2 Cor. 6:14-18]. Therefore, true believers are commanded to avoid sins that defile the body [especially fornication and adultery]. That is why, even if the word of God does not forbid the use of alcohol, "it is not for kings to drink wine nor for princes strong drink. Lest they drink and forget the law, and pervert the judgment of any of the afflicted" [Prov. 31:4-6].

c) *Giving as a national value*

Having set the priests and Levites apart for His work, God did not allow them to starve. So, as soon as the church of the wilderness, a replica of Solomon's permanent temple in Jerusalem in due course, had been set up by Moses, God commanded the princes to take turns to provide offerings there for the benefit of the priests and Levites [Num. 7:1-89]. Animals [lambs, goats, oxen, rams] poured in in abundance. What of items for the dedication of the altar? Here is a sample:

- ✓ 12 chargers of silver, each weighing 130 shekels
- ✓ 12 silver bowls, each weighing 70 shekels
- ✓ 12 spoons of gold, full of incense, each weighing 10 shekels

By modern count, the value of those offerings runs into millions of dollars. They were given freely and *joyfully*. In return, God commanded a blessing for Aaron and his sons, the priests, to place upon the children of Israel: "The Lord bless thee, and keep thee. The Lord make His face to shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee. The Lord lift His countenance upon thee, and give thee peace" [Num. 6: 23-27].

Self-centredness is today a mark of success. In some developing countries, political leaders have built fortresses from stolen public funds to insulate themselves from the cries of the deprived citizens, especially in the

absence of public welfare schemes and adequate physical infrastructure. In advanced countries, those who are required to pay higher taxes to maintain welfare schemes for the underprivileged frown upon such schemes. In churches everywhere, people do not pay their tithes and vows “as and when due.” Even when they do pay, they nose around to know whether their contributions are being properly used! Consequently, the devil is having a field day pushing legislation and policies to facilitate moral decadence, such as gay rights, abortion clinics or condom distribution to teenagers. The whole nation pays the price for disobedience.

d) *Worship God*

God commanded Moses to let all the children also keep the Passover at its appointed time [**Num. 9:1-14**]. This was to commemorate the deliverance of the children of Israel from bondage in Egypt, and it was to be observed on the fourteenth day of the first month of every year. It involved the killing of a lamb without blemish [**Lev. 23:4-8**]. The Passover symbolizes the crucifixion and death of Jesus, the Lamb of God, “which taketh away the sin of the world” [**Jn 1:29**] for “Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us” [**1 Cor. 5:7**].

In many countries today, we do observe Good Friday as a public holiday but its spiritual significance has been lost. Such days and weekends when we do not go to work are spent as days of sleep or fun, not for worship. Therefore, churches are virtually empty on Sundays, especially in the so-called advanced countries. As a result, churches are forced to employ user-friendly but hardly God-fearing strategies to bring people back to the church.

e) *Be Holy Spirit-led*

Right from the time that they left Egypt, God guided the children of Israel by a pillar of cloud by day and of fire by night [**Ex. 13:21-22; Num.9: 15-23**]. If it stayed in one place for two days or one month or even one year, the nation of Israel waited. That pillar of cloud was the Spirit of God [**1 Cor. 10:1-2**], and those who are led by the Spirit of God are the sons of God [**Rom. 8:14**]. Sons of God are also those who believe in Jesus Christ [**Jn 1:12**]. Faith is one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit [**1 Cor. 12:9**] and believers are expected to walk by faith, not by sight [**2 Cor. 5:7**]. But what do we find today in our respective countries?

We are impatient for success or achievement. We cannot wait for our turns. We steal and cheat unless/until we are caught. We are led by the flesh rather than by the Spirit of God. Promiscuity and pornography, single-parenting and same-sex marriages, divorce and broken promises, ethnic cleansing, etc., now monopolise our attention span in the mass media and daily living [**2 Tim. 2: 1-4**]. In some advanced countries, it is

unconstitutional to mention that God created this world. Rather, we are expected to accept as *fact* the theory of evolution even when the scientists keep changing their positions! We have in deed entered the era when people are “ever learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth” [2 **Tim. 2:7**]. The whole nation pays the price for disobedience.

The bottom line of God’s plan for the nation of Israel was to train them to obey and trust Him. The basis for obedience and trust is faith. Abraham believed and “it was imputed to him for righteousness” [**Gen. 15:6**]. Abraham’s righteousness has been extended to those who “believe on Him that raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead” [**Rom. 4:24**]. *So, if “righteousness exalteth a nation,” it means that only nations that truly obey and fear God can be called righteous.*

3. There is hope!

Ordinarily, when we see what is happening in our respective countries, we can conclude that there is no hope, that our people do not know God, as He wants to be known. However, there is hope, as we can see from the following promises of God:

- a) God promised Solomon [and it extends to us by faith], “*If My people, which are called by My name, shall humble themselves and pray, and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land*” [2 **Chron. 7:14**]. Since the events of September 11, 2001, many countries all over the world have started to turn back to God. Many people are praying and fasting for their countries to survive economic hardship and/or official corruption. Evil practices in government, business, church and family are being discovered and punished. God is healing many lands already.
- b) God assured Abraham that He would not destroy Sodom and Gomorrah if He could find just ten righteous people there [**Gen.18: 32**]. He could only find four [Lot, his wife and two daughters]. So, those cities were destroyed. I am sure that there are more than ten righteous people in your country fasting and praying right now your nation. For their sake, the Lord will hear in heaven and heal your land. Join them so as to increase the number!

We thank God for His mercies. There is hope.