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DON'T GET EVEN GET AHEAD!

“And when Joseph’s brethren saw that their father was dead, they said, Joseph will peradventure hate us, and will certainly requite us of all the evil which we did unto him. And they sent a messenger unto Joseph, Forgive, I pray thee now, the trespass of thy brethren, and their sin; for they did unto thee evil; and now, we pray thee, forgive the trespass of the servants of the God of thy father. And Joseph wept when they spake unto him. And Joseph said unto them, Fear not: for am I in the place of God? But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it for good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive” [Gen. 50: 15-17, 19-20]

On 11 February 1990, Nelson Mandela was released from prison after serving 27 years out of a life sentence. He had been jailed in 1964 along with his colleagues in the African National Congress (ANC), an organization founded in 1912 to end white domination and create a multi-racial South Africa. He had served his jail term in Robben Island, a maximum-security prison, and during the long period, he suffered personal, family and racial humiliation. As international and political sanctions mounted and domestic violence against white interests worsened, the then President of apartheid South Africa, F.W. de Klerk, freed Mandela to seek a peaceful transition to a multi-racial democracy. At the threshold of victory, Mandela said, “I have fought against white domination and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities.”¹ On 10 May 1994, Nelson Mandela was sworn in as the first democratically elected President of a multi-racial South Africa, and de Klerk was sworn in as his deputy! So, instead of getting even (revenging), Mandela got ahead.

To revenge is a major temptation to an average believer. People in authority over you use the opportunity to unjustly punish and mentally torture you or deny you your due entitlements. Then, one day, you find yourself in a position of authority over them. What do you do? Do you regard it as ‘pay back time’ or treat them the way you would have wanted them to treat you? Why has God commanded: “to Me belongeth vengeance, and recompense” [Deut. 32: 35] whereas the secular world is preaching Karma (fate) to justify our vengeful mood? Let us explore those thoughts in today’s lesson.

¹ Nelson Mandela’s Address to Rally in Cape Town on his Release from Prison: 11 February 1990; <http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/mandela/1990/release.html>

1. Joseph as a case study

Joseph was the eleventh of Jacob's twelve sons and his father's favourite, being the firstborn of Rachel, his favourite wife and "the son of his old age" [Gen. 37:3]. At the age of 17, he had a series of dreams that suggested that his parents and elder brothers would defer to him in the future, and he told his father [Gen. 37: 5-10]. When his brothers came to know about it, they hated him.

One day, while Joseph's elder brothers were out tending the flock, his father sent him to check on their well-being. As soon as they sighted him, they plotted to kill him and thereby bury his dreams. However, Reuben, the firstborn of Jacob's, pleaded with his brothers not to kill Joseph but to throw him into a pit. His plan was to later come back and set him free. So, when Joseph joined them, they stripped him of his "coat of many colours" and threw him into a pit, which mercifully was dry [Gen. 37: 18-24]. Soon after, they saw a caravan of Ishmaelite traders to whom they sold Joseph for twenty pieces of silver. When the Ishmaelites [also called Midianites] arrived in Egypt, they sold Joseph to Potiphar, "an officer of Pharaoh's and captain of the guard" [vv. 28, 36]. Meanwhile, the same brothers who had so badly treated Joseph stained his coat with the blood of animals and sent it to their father, feigning ignorance of what had happened to him. Even when the old man wept over the loss of his favourite son, "all his sons and all his daughters rose up to comfort him" [vv. 31-35]!

Joseph found favour with Potiphar who put him in charge of his estate. However, Potiphar's wife "cast her eyes upon Joseph; and she said, Lie with me" [Gen. 38: 1-7]. For refusing to succumb to her persistent pressure, she lied to her husband that Joseph had tried to rape her! For that, Joseph was bundled into prison, the same prison where Pharaoh's prisoners were kept [vv. 13-20]. In prison, Joseph again found favour with the prison officers who put him in charge of his fellow prisoners [vv. 21-23]. His prison ministry brought him in contact with two of Pharaoh's domestic staff: the chief baker and the chief butler. Both of them had dreams related to their jobs and Joseph used his God-given gift of interpreting dreams to prophesy to them. It happened as he had said: the baker was hanged and the butler was restored [Gen. 40: 1-23].

Two years later, Pharaoh himself had two dreams, which neither his magicians nor wise men could interpret. That was when the butler remembered Joseph! Pharaoh sent for Joseph who was able to show the king that seven years of famine were on the way to be preceded by seven years of abundant harvest. Therefore, Pharaoh needed a prudent manager who could take the kingdom through prosperity and hardship. There and then, Pharaoh appointed Joseph, now 30 years old, to become his governor and second-in-command to Pharaoh himself [Gen. 41: 1-46]!

When the period of famine predicted by Joseph came, all the nations of the then known world came to Egypt to buy food. Jacob also sent his sons to Egypt.

Joseph recognized them but they did not recognize him [Gen. 42: 1-8]. Nevertheless, he showed them kindness. In due course, he revealed himself to them, saying, “I am Joseph your brother, whom ye sold into Egypt. *Now therefore be not grieved, nor angry with yourselves, that ye sold me hither: for God did send me before you to preserve life... to save your lives by a great deliverance*” [Gen. 45: 4- 7]. In no time, Jacob’s whole family, numbering seventy [Gen. 46:27], moved into Egypt and lived on the benevolence and goodwill of Joseph.

After Jacob’s death, his sons were afraid that Joseph was going to retaliate for the evil that they had done against him. They all went to him on their knees to ask for forgiveness, but Joseph said to them, “Fear not: for *am I in the place of God?* But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive. *Now therefore fear ye not: I will nourish you, and your little ones. And he comforted them, and spake kindly unto them*” [Gen. 50:15-21]. Joseph refused to get even. Instead, he got ahead of his brothers. What lessons can we learn from that story?

2. Lessons

In order to understand why we should not revenge, it is good to also understand why people in authority over us perpetuate evil against us. Here are some reasons:

a) *They may be instruments of a divine plan*

God will not come down from His throne in heaven to execute His plans for us. He uses human or physical instruments. For example, Joseph’s brothers wanted him dead so that he would not rule over them. However, they accelerated the process by selling him into slavery in Egypt! If Joseph had not been put in prison, he might never have met the butler who ultimately mentioned him to Pharaoh.

b) *To wake us up from complacency*

Sometimes, we may be getting spiritually too complacent and God wants to accelerate our growth, to move us to a higher level where He is already waiting for us. So, He can stir up trials and tribulations to force us to move forward. For example, in the days of the judges, the children of Israel ignored their worship of the true God. In one case, “the Lord strengthened Eglon the king of Moab against Israel...and he gathered unto him the children of Ammon and Amalek, and went and smote Israel, and possessed the city of palm trees. *So the children of Israel served Eglon the king of Moab eighteen years.*” When they cried to the Lord, He raised up Ehud who delivered them out of Eglon’s grip [Judges 3: 12-14].

c) *To teach us patience and empathy*

Until we suffer injustice or hardship, we may never appreciate how we are hurting those below us, such as our children and subordinates. Until Pharaoh lost his firstborn, he could never appreciate what harm he was causing the children of Israel [Ex. 12: 29-33]. That is why believers are admonished to count it all joy when they pass through various trials and tribulations, “knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience” [Jam. 1: 2-3]. Jesus made the point more strongly in the Sermon on the Mount:

Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for My sake, rejoice and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven
[Matt. 5:11-12]

d) *It may be self-inflicted!*

Sometimes, we invite it by our poor work habits or general disposition. Some of us absent ourselves from work or come late to work without any satisfactory explanations. Some of us cannot meet our work deadlines. Some of us are very disrespectful of elders or constituted authorities. A recent survey in America has found that rudeness is getting worse.² Therefore, it should not surprise us that sanctions are visited on us “for rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil” [Rom. 13:3].

Now that we have an idea of why people may hurt us, why does God command us not to revenge? Here are some reasons:

a) *Vengeance belongs to God*

When a drunken driver kills our loved one, do we pounce on him and kill him in return? No, we don't; at least, in a civilized society. Instead, we hand him over to the police who in turn bring him before the court of justice. Such a person is given the benefit of doubt until evidence proves “beyond reasonable doubt” that he is guilty. Even so, the punishment he gets depends on whether he is found guilty of manslaughter (unlawful killing) or drunken driving! The same principle applies in spiritual matters. That is why Paul has written, “Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves but rather give place unto wrath; for it is written, Vengeance is Mine; I will repay, saith the Lord” [Rom. 12:19].

When Cain killed Abel, God put a mark on him, saying, “whosoever slayeth Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold” [Gen. 4:15]. For killing all the males in Shechem in retaliation for defiling their sister, Dinah, Simeon and Levi lost the birthright blessings to Judah through whose lineage King David and Jesus Christ descended [Gen. 49:1-10].

² “Survey finds rudeness is getting worse”, <http://cnn.com/2002/US/04/02/rude.americans/index.html>

However, God can delegate the power of vengeance to earthly rulers and authorities because every ruler “is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; *for he beareth not the sword in vain; for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil*” [Rom. 13: 4].

David was on the run from his son, Absalom, who had rebelled against him. Shimei from Saul’s tribe cursed David and hurled stones at him [2 Sam. 16:5-12]. After the rebellion had failed and Absalom killed, Shimei came to apologise to David. Abishai, one of David’s men, asked the king, “Shall not Shimei be put to death for this, because he cursed the Lord’s anointed?” The king refused and said to Shimei, “Thou shalt not die” [2 Sam. 19:16-23]. However, on his death bed, David instructed Solomon concerning Shimei as follows: “Behold, thou hast with thee Shimei . . . which cursed me with a grievous curse in the day when I went to Mahanaim: but he came down to meet me at Jordan, and I sware to him by the Lord, saying, I will not put thee to death with the sword. *Now therefore hold him not guiltless, for thou art a wise man, and knowest what thou oughtest to do unto him; but his hoar head bring thou to the grave with blood*” [1 Kgs 2:8-9]. So, even though David had forgiven him the offence, the state authority exercised the delegated authority from God, and Solomon executed Shimei in due season [1 Kgs 2:36-44].

b) *You may actually be setting your oppressor free!*

When a person who hurt you in the past suddenly finds you in a position to revenge, he/she is psychologically prepared for the worst from you. Therefore, when you in deed act as expected, the person is relieved because you have got back your ‘pound of flesh.’ But, what if you were to return the evil with good? Since it goes against expectation, he/she is thrown out of gear. Their conscience gets worse because you have not given them the privilege to purge it. That is why we are enjoined: “if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink; *for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head*” [Prov. 25:21-22; Rom. 12:20].

However, if we choose to take vengeance by ourselves, instead of letting God do it, we set the offender free and transfer the danger of punishment to ourselves. That was what God did to the people of Edom: “*Because that Edom hath dealt against the house of Judah by taking vengeance, and hath greatly offended, and revenged himself upon them; therefore thus saith the Lord God; I will also stretch out Mine hand upon Edom, and will cut off man and beast from it; and I will make it desolate from Teman; and they of Dedan shall fall by the sword*” [Ezek. 25:12-13].

c) *Your enemy may wind up blessing you!*

When you are in a position to revenge and you do not, your enemy may begin to bless you. For example, Saul pursued David because he saw him as a rival to his throne. In the wilderness of Engedi, Saul and his men were sleeping in a cave when David slipped in and cut off the skirt of Saul's robe. Then, at daybreak, he stood on top of the hill and showed Saul and his men that he had had the privilege to kill the king that night, but that he had spared his life. He showed them the piece that he had cut from the king's skirt. Listen to the Bible's record of Saul's response:

Is this thy voice my son David? And Saul lifted up his voice, and wept. And he said to David, Thou art more righteous than I; for thou hast rewarded me good, whereas I have rewarded thee evil. ..And now, behold, I know well that thou shalt surely be king, and that the kingdom of Israel shall be established in thine hand' [1 Sam. 24: 16-17,20]

So, for not getting even with Saul, David received his blessing and got his enemy's agreement for him to become the next king of Israel!

3. Conclusion

According to an African proverb, a person who wants to succeed in preventing you from climbing up a fruit tree will have to have his feet firmly planted on the ground. That suggests that you will always be nearer the ripe fruits than such a person. In like manner, when you get even with your enemies, you are giving them the chance to dominate you. So, get out of their traps. Stop getting even. Get ahead!