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STOP CELEBRATING OTHER PEOPLE'S SETBACKS!

Today's text: 1 Sam. 31-2 Sam. 1; Rom. 12: 14-21

Extracts:

1. "It came to pass on the third day that, behold a man came out of the camp from Saul [and told David] that the people are fled from the battle, and many of the people also are fallen and dead; and *Saul and Jonathan his son are dead also*. ...Then David took hold on his clothes and rent them; and likewise all the men that were with him; *and they mourned and wept and fasted until even, for Saul and for Jonathan his son, and for the people of the Lord, and for the house of Israel; because they were fallen by the sword*" [2 Sam. 1: 2, 4, 11, 12]
2. "Rejoice with them that do rejoice, and *weep with them that weep*" [Rom. 12: 15]

Serena and Venus Williams are sisters who today dominate women tennis. Between them, they have won ten Grand Slam titles [6 to Serena and 4 to her older sister, Venus]. The Grand Slam tennis tournaments are the US Open, the Wimbledon, the French Open and the Australian Open. These past two years alone, Serena has won the Wimbledon twice [2002 and 2003], the French and US Opens [2002] and the Australian Open [2003]. In all the cases, her opponent was her older sister, Venus, and each time, the younger has won. You would expect some bitterness between them but that has not been the case. After their recent [5 July 2003] Wimbledon final in which Serena beat an ailing Venus for the 7th consecutive time, the winner was asked how she felt, she replied, "Big Sis is my inspiration." In response to another question about her older sister's abdominal injury that had apparently hampered her play, Serena replied, "I looked more at the ball than my sister because I could not bear to see her in pain." Meanwhile, the loser was taking her sister's pictures with admiration. The way they both behaved drew a standing ovation from the spectators.

In general, such conduct is rare. Most of us enjoy other people's setbacks, no matter how much we pretend that we do not. When we hear good news or success about others, especially those we consider our rivals or enemies, we are the first to find excuses to downplay the achievement. When they fall or fail, it is cause for us to celebrate! Yet, the word of God has warned us, "Rejoice not when thine enemy falleth, and let not thine heart be glad when he stumbleth; lest the Lord see it, and it displease Him, and turn away His wrath from him" [Prov. 24: 17-18]. How then are we supposed to behave when our enemies or rivals suffer setbacks? That is the subject of today's lesson. We shall use the story of David's reaction to the death of king Saul as the background material.

1. King Saul dies in battle and David can now claim the crown!

By now, we are all familiar with the long rivalry between Saul and David. For about 13 years, Saul had done everything humanly possible to kill David so that he could thereby abort God's plan that David would be the next king of Israel. David had been running, to the extent that during the last 16 months, he had lived among the Philistines, the sworn enemies of Israel. As the Philistines prepared for war against Israel, their generals refused David's offer to fight on their side against Israel. David felt that he owed the Philistines loyalty for the protection that they had extended to him and his men [and their families], but the Philistines, recalling that it was David that had killed Goliath, their prime champion, could not trust him to fight against his own nation.

David returned to his temporary home in Ziklag only to discover that the Amalekites had sacked and burnt the place and taken away their wives and children. That was the story that we treated last week [Vol. 4, No. 13: 29 June 2003 on "Turn your worst day into your best"]. Following God's guidance, David and his men fought and recovered everything that they had lost.

Our story today begins with David and his men resting in Ziklag. It was now two days since their victory over the Amalekites [**2 Sam. 1: 1**]. On the third day, a young Amalekite stumbled into David's presence to report that king Saul and all his sons, including David's best friend, Jonathan, had been killed in the battle against the Philistines. Let us background that story.

After the death of the prophet/judge Samuel, the king (Saul) also "put away those that had familiar spirits and the wizards out of the land" [**1 Sam. 28: 3**]. That is characteristic of tyrants. If the truth is bitter, they do not want to hear it. The best way to avoid hearing it is to eliminate those who have the gift of seeing the future. However, "where there is no vision, the people perish" [**Prov. 29: 18**]. Moreover, "if a ruler hearken to lies, all his servants are wicked" [**v. 12**]. Therefore, when the Philistines threatened with a massive attack, Saul "was afraid and his heart greatly trembled. And when Saul enquired of the Lord, the Lord answered him not, neither by dreams nor by Urim nor by prophets" [**1 Sam. 28: 5-6**]. In desperation, Saul disguised himself and went with his crown prince, Jonathan, to seek for a woman "that hath a familiar spirit, that I may go to her and enquire of her." That was how they got the witch at Endor who after Saul had given her adequate assurances conjured up Samuel that told Saul that he and his sons were going to die in the coming battle with the Philistines" [**vv. 7-19**].

Let us resolve those doubts in your heart right now. How could somebody using the spirit of divination bring out a dead saint like Samuel? Where was Samuel's abode at that time because he was certainly not in hell? And so on! With God, nothing is impossible. The same God who made an ass to speak to Balaam [**Num. 22: 28**], that allowed Satan to attend meetings of the sons of God [**Job 1: 6**] and who permitted a spirit from His throne to be a lying spirit in the mouth of 400

prophets just to get wicked king Ahab killed in battle [1 Kgs 22: 1-22], should have no problem permitting the witch from bringing out Samuel out of Abraham's bosom [Lk 16: 22] to speak the truth to Saul about his future.

In the ensuing battle, which took place on mount Gilboa, the Philistines routed the army of Israel and killed the sons of Saul: Jonathan, Abinadad and Melchishua [1 Sam. 31: 1-2]. Saul himself was badly wounded, and rather than die in the hands of the enemies, "Saul took a sword and fell upon it" and died [vv 3-4]. The remnant of the army of Israel fled. The next morning, when the Philistines came to strip the armour of the dead, they found the bodies of Saul and his three sons. They cut off Saul's head, which they paraded among their people [vv. 7-9]. You can read the rest of the story by yourself. Let us go straight to David's reaction when the Amalekite told him that Saul was dead.

2. Did David celebrate his worst enemy's death?

If I were in David's shoes, the first thing I would do on hearing of my worst enemy's death is to celebrate! I would pick up the phone and call everybody that I could remember, saying, "have you heard the good news?"

General Sani Abacha was Nigeria's military Head of State, 1993-98. He was a wicked tyrant in whose hands thousands of innocent Nigerians died. By 1998, he had eliminated all opposition [military and civilian] to his attempts to succeed himself as the next democratically elected President of Nigeria. To give the semblance of participative governance, he registered six political parties and all of them nominated him to be their presidential candidate! However, one Sunday in April 1998, he went to bed and never woke up! I was living in Los Angeles at the time of his death. Within a few hours of his death, we had received over ten telephone calls from Lagos. Each caller spoke with glee about the man's death and how Nigerians had taken to the streets to celebrate the death of their common enemy.

Would you have reacted differently? I doubt. But David was different. Let us see what he did:

a) *David killed the self-confessed killer of his enemy!*

The young Amalekite expected a reward from David for killing his staunch enemy and bringing the crown to David. Instead, David condemned him to death for killing God's anointed saying, "How wast thou not afraid to stretch forth thine hand to destroy the Lord's anointed?" [1 Sam. 1: 13-16].

There is a lesson here for those of us with big and leaking mouths. We know that Saul killed himself [1 Sam. 31: 4-5]. Now, the young Amalekite wanted to ascribe to himself an achievement that was

motivated by his greed for David's reward. In the end, he paid with his life. Many of us daily kill innocent people with our tongues by lying against them. Many of us are name- droppers, to give the impression that we know people in high places. However, among the sins that God considers abominable are "a lying tongue and hands that shed innocent blood; an heart that deviseth wicked imaginations, feet that be swift in running to mischief; *a false witness that speaketh lies, and he that soweth discord among brethren*" [Prov. 6: 16-19]. David would not want anything bad said about or done to his enemy, Saul.

b) *David went into mourning*

David and all his men tore their clothes in accordance with the tradition of mourning in their country, "and they mourned and wept and fasted until even[ing] *for Saul and for Jonathan his son and for the people of the Lord and for the house of Israel*" [2 Sam. 1: 11-12]. With the exception of Jonathan, it is safe to assume that none of the rest of the dead people wanted David alive. Yet, here was David now mourning all of them. He did not even mourn Jonathan as his best friend but as Saul's son! My goodness, what kind of person is this David?

c) *David wrote a eulogy on his dead enemy to be taught to future generations!*

Pretence for a few hours is possible. We can pretend to mourn and say nice things just for the television cameras. After that, we go under cover to say and do terrible things to the memory of our dead rivals. That is far from David. He wrote a powerful eulogy (tribute) that should be taught as a song to the children of Judah. Here are the key points that David made [vv. 18-27]:

- Saul was mighty, and cursed be the mountains of Gilboa where the "shield of the mighty is vilely cast away, the shield of Saul as though he had not been anointed."
- Saul and his son Jonathan were *pleasant and lovely in their lives and undivided in their death*. They were swifter than eagles and stronger than lions.
- Saul's era was one of prosperity for the daughters of Israel "who clothed you in scarlet, with other delights, who put on ornaments of gold upon your apparel."
- David was distressed for Jonathan whom he called "my brother."

From the forgoing, we see that at no time did David say anything about his bitter experiences in the hands of Saul. Instead, he dwelt on his strong points and his successes.

3. Lessons

Those who celebrate other people's misfortunes are also likely to downplay other people's achievements. In both cases, the evil spirit of *envy* compounded by *vengeance* seeking is at work. If we can deal with envy, we can develop a better attitude to others, such that we will be able to weep when they do and rejoice when they do [**Rom. 12: 15**]. How do we know that we have the spirit of envy? Here are some examples:¹

a) When we feel threatened by other people's growing stature.

Saul became threatened when the women praised David over the king [**1 Sam. 18: 8-9**]. The chief priests delivered Jesus to be crucified because He was overshadowing their influence [**Mk 15: 10**].

b) When we wish other people's success were ours.

Zedekiah, the head of the 400 prophets who had prophesied that Ahab would win if he went to battle, slapped the young prophet, Micaiah, for knowing the truth denied the rest of them. Zedekiah said, "which way went the Spirit of the Lord from me to speak to thee?" [**1 Kgs 22: 24**].

c) When we downplay or feel sad over other people's successes.

Miriam and Aaron played down Moses' superior relationship with God saying, "hath the Lord indeed spoken only by Moses? Hath He not spoken also with us?" [**Num. 12:2**].

d) When we gloat over other people's misfortunes or setbacks.

As Jesus was dying on the cross, the Jews mocked Him, saying, "Ah, Thou that destroyeth the temple and buildest it in three days. Save Thyself, and come down from the cross" [**Mk 15: 29-30**].

e) When we deny others the respect/honour/position due to them.

The Jews refused to see Jesus as the Messiah. Rather, He was the carpenter's son [**Mk 6: 1-6**].

When we celebrate other people's setbacks, we achieve the following, among others:

a) We set our enemies free!

¹ "Admiration or Envy?" *Weekly Bible Study Series*, Vol. 2, No. 22: 26 August 2001, pp 2-4

Under the principle of *double jeopardy*, no criminal can be punished twice for the same offence. Therefore, when we gloat over our rivals' setbacks, especially those who have hurt us, we have played God. We have executed judgment that is God's prerogative and thereafter He sets such people free! That is why the word of God says, "Rejoice not when thine enemy falleth, and let not thine heart be glad when he stumbleth; *lest the Lord see it and it displeases Him and He turn away His wrath from him*" [Prov. 24:17-18].

b) What goes around comes around!

Every one of us is in the centre of the world. As we have people of higher status above us, and those of lower status below us, the rest are on our right and left at the same level with us. So, as we think that we are being hurt, we are in turn hurting so many others. The word of God says, "The merciful man doeth good to his own soul, but he that is cruel troubleth his own flesh" [Prov. 11: 17]. We reap what we sow "for he that soweth to his flesh shall of his flesh reap corruption {i.e., death}; but he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting" [Gal. 6: 8]. Therefore, when we celebrate other people's failure or misfortune, we are actually laying a solid foundation for our own downfall! Haman built gallows in his house to hang his archenemy, Mordecai. In the end, Haman himself was hanged there by the king [Esth. 7: 9-10]!

4. Conclusion

Our problem seems to come from double-mindedness. We want to obey God but we cannot get out of the world system. The world system is built on Satan's principles with heavy-duty emphasis on the so-called law of *Karma*. Vengeance is appropriate and inevitable. God's way, on the other hand, is built on *mercy and grace*. Forgiveness is imperative. You have to make a clear choice because, in the words of the risen Christ, "I would thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of My mouth" [Rev. 3: 15-16]. Like David and the Williams sisters, let us learn to show love and appreciation for our rivals and all others. In doing so, we are actually building the road to our own self-respect.

May God open our eyes and understanding to His way.