

GOD NEVER FORSAKES THE RIGHTEOUS

Today's Text: (a) Ps. 37; (b) Rom. 4: 1-8

Extracts:

- 1. I have been young, and now am old; yet *I have not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his descendants begging bread* [Ps. 37: 25]**
- 2. If Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? "*Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness*" [Rom. 4: 2-3]**

If you grew up in the Tropics like me, you might come across the oil palm tree. It is a versatile plant in the sense that virtually every part of it is useful to humankind. For example, out of the fruits, you get the palm oil, which is the most popular cooking oil in the coastal regions of West Africa. The oil is also used for making bar soaps. Out of the sap, you get the palm wine that is also very popular in a country like Nigeria. As a result of its many uses, you also find that insects, such as bees and ants, are always commonly found in oil palm plantations. The palm nut and the ant are almost inseparable. When you harvest the nuts, the ants come with them into your loading vans. When you assemble the nuts at the collection point, the ants are there. However, the moment you put the nuts into the boilers to cook, the ants disappear! You cannot even see a single strayed one around. Where have they gone? They have forsaken the nuts in their hour of need!

Some of us are in a similar situation right now. We have found ourselves forsaken by family, friends and colleagues in our hour of desperate need. Even those things that used to give us relief, such as drinking, drugs and sexual pleasures, no longer work. We get temporary relief and things get worse soon after. Some of us have turned to God because "when my father and my mother forsake me, then the Lord will take care of me" [Ps. 27: 10]. Yet, do we not sometimes feel that He too has forsaken us? While dying on the cross, even Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, cried aloud, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" [Matt. 27: 46].

In the midst of our doubts, David comes to us boldly to assert that God will never forsake the righteous nor allow his/her descendants to beg bread. That is a radical claim that we cannot let go without validating. That is the purpose of today's lesson.

1. A research finding or a spiritual truth?

Let us restate David's claim in Psalm 37:25:

I have been young, and now am old; yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his descendants begging bread.

From the Scripture, we know that David became king at the age of 30 and reigned for 40 years [1 Sam. 5:4]. Therefore, he died at the age of 70. David is telling us by the verse quoted above that, *based on what he had observed over seventy years, God does not forsake the righteous*. Whether you accept that *finding* or not depends on how you look at it. As a person of faith, you may accept it unquestioningly because you believe that David was speaking spiritually. After all, on his deathbed, David said, "The Spirit of the Lord spoke by me, *and His word was on my tongue*" [2 Sam. 23: 2]. The above verse could be one of the words of God that the Spirit of the Lord ministered to his tongue. That is what I believe myself. However, let us satisfy the skeptics by subjecting David's statement to some scientific tests.

When a scientist wants to do survey research, s(he) selects a *sample* that consists of those who are capable of giving him/her information that can represent the views of *the whole population* out of which that sample was selected. Then, after collecting and analyzing the data, the researcher applies some *statistical tests* in order to ensure that the results have not been obtained by chance. If the researcher is satisfied that his/her findings are significant, s(he) publishes the results in a professional journal. Then, his/her colleagues read the report and go about trying to do a similar study, using the same methods, to see if they will get the same results. If they do, then, the original findings begin to acquire the status of *general principles*.

David did a "survey study" over a period of almost 70 years. Let us assume that he *observed* the lives and times of *righteous* men and women and recorded his findings. Then, he tested his findings to see if there were exceptions to the rule. He did not find any. Then, with a sense of finality, he put out the following general principle in a spiritual journal, the Bible: *God will never forsake the righteous or his/her children*.

David did not use the naked eyes, as scientists would do. Rather, he used spiritual eyes. Paul makes the point very clear in the following passage [1 Cor. 2: 9-11]:

But as it written: "Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him." But God has revealed them to us through His Spirit. For the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God. For what man knows the things of man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God.

If God Himself called David the man after His own heart [1 Sam. 13: 14] and the Spirit of God spoke by him on his deathbed, then David spoke spiritual truth when he said that God would never forsake the righteous. In other words, his finding *is valid and true for all times*.

2. Righteous in whose eyes?

Who then can be regarded as righteous? Righteousness can be defined as “right conduct.” However, right conduct depends on the lenses that we are wearing. Are we using human or God’s eyes?

a) *Righteousness by human standards*

We tend to equate righteousness with human conduct that meets legal, professional or social standards. For example, if some persons were to diligently obey the laws of their country, we would tend to regard them as good people. If we were to follow all the rules and rituals of our religion or denomination, most of us would consider ourselves righteous and hence worthy candidates for heaven or God’s earthly blessings!

However, human beings can only look at the outward appearance whereas God looks at the heart [1 Sam. 16: 7]. Suicide bombers believe that they are on God’s mission and that they will go to heaven when they die! A politician who votes for same-sex marriages and abortion in parliament on a weekday but goes to church on Sunday to swallow holy communion considers himself/herself righteous! If we do what is right in our own eyes [Judg. 21:25], or think that righteousness comes through law or rituals, we miss the point that David has made.

b) *Righteousness by God’s standards*

In the sight of God, all have sinned and come short of the glory of God [Rom. 3: 23], and “there is *none* who does good, no, *not one*” [Ps. 14: 3]. The word of God says, “Most men will proclaim each his own goodness, *but who can find a faithful man?*” [Prov. 20:6]. Therefore, righteousness means right conduct *before God*. What does He consider right conduct before Him?

Right from early Biblical times, God made it clear to humankind that righteousness and faith in Him go together. After Abraham had left his country *in obedience* to the word of the Lord, he was shown one night the stars in the sky and God said to him, “Look now toward heaven, and count the stars if you are able to number them. And He said to him, ‘So shall your descendants be.’ And *he believed in the Lord, and He accounted it to him for righteousness*” [Gen. 15: 4-6].

The Old Testament saints believed in the coming Messiah and *by faith* practised righteousness in accordance with the revealed word of God in their time. We the saints of the New Testament have received the Messiah in flesh and also *by faith* practise righteousness in accordance with the revealed word, now *fully* clarified in the New Testament. Paul summarises it well when he wrote [**Rom. 1: 16-17**]:

I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jews first and also for the Greek. For in it righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, ‘The just shall live by faith.’

God boasted of Job to Satan as follows, “Have you considered My servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, *a blameless and upright man, who fears God and shuns evil*” [**Job 1: 8**]. Clearly, righteousness relates to walking *by faith in God and His word*. Therefore, we can reframe David’s statement like this:

*I have been young, and now am old; yet I have not seen **those who walk by faith in God and His word** forsaken, nor his descendants begging bread.*

It makes much spiritual sense now!

3. The righteous before God will never be forsaken!

Before we draw out the key points that David has made in Psalm 37, let us consider two cases of people who walked by faith, listed in the “Faith Hall of Fame” [**Heb. 11: 4-40**]. An obvious first choice would be Abraham

a) *Abraham*

At the time that he chose to obey God’s word to leave his people and settle in a foreign land, we have no evidence that that was what he would have wanted in life *for himself*. After all, he was already 75 years old and rich. His barren wife then 65 years of age was already past her menopause. Therefore, he was happy as he then was. Nonetheless, he moved because he believed in and obeyed the one true God [**Gen. 11: 27-31; 12: 1-5**].

For the next 25 years, he followed as God led him. He did fumble in the matter of Hagar and Ishmael, and that was the only occasion that he followed his wife’s advice [**Gen. 16: 1-16**]. At the age of 100, his 90-year old wife, Sarah, gave birth to Isaac, the child of promise. Soon after, God asked him to offer his precious son, Isaac, to God as sacrifice. Abraham did not hesitate to do as he was told. However, at the critical moment, God stopped him and gave him a ram in Isaac’s place. In appreciation of his

faith, God swore to Abraham, “In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, *because you have obeyed My voice*” [Gen. 22: 18].

Abraham’s faith was accounted to him for righteousness. Abraham has been called the “father of us all” [Rom. 4: 16] in his capacity as the father of faith. Consequently, “also for us, it shall be imputed to us *who believe in Him who raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead*” [vv. 22-24]. Abraham was not forsaken and we his descendants by faith are not begging bread!

b) Rahab

The citation on Rahab reads, “*By faith the harlot Rahab did not perish with those who did not believe*, when she had received the spies with peace” [Heb. 11: 31]. Rahab’s former profession remains stuck with her name wherever she is mentioned to remind us of the depth from which God lifted her up. Can you imagine what it was to operate a brothel in a morally depraved city like Jericho? She was quite good at it; otherwise, her “business place” would not have been the first port of call for foreign spies! The best place to hide in such a city was a busy brothel like Rahab’s where the Jericho intelligence agency would find it difficult to differentiate between citizens and strangers.

However, by the time that the two spies that Joshua had sent to Jericho arrived there, Rahab had given her life to God. No preacher came from elsewhere to convert her. Apparently recounting to the two spies what she had been told by her visiting clients, she said “*I know that the Lord has given you the land, ... for we have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea for you when you came out of Egypt... for the Lord your God, He is God in heaven above and on earth beneath*” [Josh. 2: 8-11]. After helping the Jewish spies to escape detection, she obtained a promise of protection from them over “my father, my mother, my brothers, my sisters, and all that they have, and deliver our lives from death” [vv. 12-14].

Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God [Rom. 10: 17]. Having confessed the Lord God with her mouth and believed in her heart His saving strength, Rahab was saved. When the attack on Jericho did come, Rahab and all her family members were spared. In fact, they took her along with them to dwell in Israel [Josh. 6: 23-25], where she married Salmon, the father of Boaz, David’s great grandfather [Matt. 1: 5-6]! By faith, the harlot has been grafted into the lineage of Jesus! Her seed, Jesus Christ, has become the Bread of life [Jn 6: 35]. He now gives us bread instead of begging bread!

4. Conclusion

Thank God that our righteousness is not based on our own effort but on God's grace of faith. Otherwise, many of us would long have been forsaken! Let us summarise what David is talking about in **Psalm 37**:

- Trust in the Lord and feed on His faithfulness [v. 3].
- Delight yourself in Him [v. 4].
- Let His law be in your heart [v. 31] and commit your way to Him [v. 5]
- Rest in the Lord and *wait patiently for Him* [v. 7]

When you rely *absolutely on Him and walk as He directs*, then He will count you righteous and grant you the desires of your heart. For example:

- He will uphold you [v. 17]. No matter how many times you fall, you will “not be utterly cast down” [v. 24]
- God will be your strength in time of trouble [v. 39]
- The little you have will satisfy you better than the riches of the wicked [v. 16]
- God will order your steps and your future is peace [vv. 23, 37]
- You will be among those who will inherit the earth [vv. 9, 29]

The righteous will have trials and tribulations because “narrow is the way which leads to life” [Matt. 7: 14]. However, even when you suffer setbacks or failures or even physical death, remember that God “does not forsake His saints; they are preserved *forever*” [Ps. 37: 28].

God will *never* forsake the righteous!