

WHEN GOD'S INTEGRITY IS AT STAKE

Today's Text: Ezekiel Chap. 36

Extracts:

Moreover the word of the Lord came to (Ezekiel), saying: "Son of man, *when the house of Israel dwelt in their own land, they defiled it by their own ways and deeds; ... Therefore I poured out My fury on them for the blood they had shed on the land, and for their idols with which they had defiled it. So I scattered them among the nations; ... I judged them according to their deeds.... But I had concern for My holy name, which the house of Israel had profaned among the nations wherever they went. Therefore say to the house of Israel, 'Thus says the Lord God: "I do not do this for your sake ... but for My holy name's sake (so that) the nations shall know that I am the Lord... For I will take you from among the nations... and bring you into your own land"*'"
[Ezek. 36: 16-24]

The Nigerian Civil War (1967-70) pitted the Federal government against a breakaway Biafra, predominantly populated by Ibo-speaking Nigerians. The Federal propaganda was that it did not hate the Ibos but merely wanted to put down the rebellion. At the time, a few Ibo students remained at the University of Lagos, in the very heart of the then Federal Capital. By sheer coincidence, one of them was elected the President of the Students' Union in a Yoruba-dominated institution. The Federal Government hailed that as one proof of the credibility of its propaganda claims. It gave the student union leader royal treatment on state-owned national television. However, the young man had his own personal ambitions. He did not want the adulations to end. So, he desired to remain a student for longer than the normal three years for a bachelor's degree. After several years, changing courses and repeating classes, he finally came to the final year to graduate. However, he deliberately refused to submit his final year project report, an act that could make him repeat that year. The Faculty Examination Board surprised him. It waived the requirement for him only and "pushed" him out with a degree!

Why would the university break its own rules to pass out a delinquent student? It was because the integrity of the Federal government that owned and funded the university was at stake! How could it have faced the claim that the young man had been used for war propaganda and dumped thereafter? In like manner, God has blessed some believers that still practise sin, not because they deserve it but largely because His integrity and honour could be questioned by unbelievers if He did not do so. Should we then take it for granted and continue in disobedience? Is there some fine print that we need to know about? Let us find out more on the subject in today's lesson.

1. Would you put your name on the line for the unreliable?

According to an African proverb, mother-monkey says that she can only vouch for the baby in her womb because the one on her back may have picked at fruits without her knowledge! In other words, you cannot put your name on the line for others unless you can vouch for them. Actually, it is your own integrity that is at stake because other people may need your endorsement for their credibility. In today's lesson, God has put His name on the line for a disobedient people! Why would He take such a risk?

In general, some of us may be willing to stake our integrity for others when:

- There is *a close long-term relationship between both parties*. For example, most parents stand by their children, no matter what. They may chastise them but they may never deny them. For example, in spite of the unfavourable media reports surrounding the young millionaire heiress, Paris Hilton (who was recently jailed for a few days in Los Angeles for driving under the influence of alcohol), her parents stood by her all the way.
- The party needing certification may be undergoing some *training or apprenticeship* and the trainer can see some potential for success down the line, in spite of the trainee's present limitations. That is why most teachers are very patient with their students, especially those who though brilliant are not applying themselves to their full potential;
- Our *own integrity may be hurt if we do not act* to rescue the unruly persons from doing more harm to us, themselves or others. For example, Abram went to rescue his ungrateful nephew, Lot, that had been captured in Sodom and Gomorrah, because Lot's servants knew that Abram's God was a God of forgiveness [**Gen. 14: 1-16**]. Jesus had to stop Saul (Paul) from persecuting the early church whereas Paul's zeal for God was based on ignorance of God's purpose [**1 Tim. 1: 13**]. This may best explain what God had to do with Israel in spite of its being stiff-necked.

2. God puts His name on the line for rebellious Israel

Today's story is set in the time of the people's despair. Disobedience had driven them far away from home and God's promises. God summarized it to the prophet Ezekiel as follows [**vv. 17-20**]:

Son of man, when the house of Israel dwelt in their own land, they defiled it by their own ways and deeds; ... Therefore I poured out My fury on them for the blood they had shed on the land, and for their idols with which they had defiled it. So I scattered them among the nations, and they were dispersed throughout the countries; I judged them according to their ways and their deeds. When they came to the nations, wherever they went,

they profaned My holy name-when they said of them, ‘These are the people of the Lord, and yet they have gone out of His land.’

Let us dig a little deeper into history. As Moses was bringing the children of Israel close to the Promised Land (out of bondage in Egypt), he reminded them [**Deut. 7: 6-9**]:

For you are a holy people to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for Himself, a special treasure above all the peoples on the face of the earth. The Lord did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any other people for you were the least of all peoples; but because the Lord loves you, and because He would keep the oath which He swore to your fathers... 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.

However, the children of Israel repaid God’s love for them with disobedience and idolatry. As a result, they were defeated by enemies and sent into exile, first in Babylon. Later, they were scattered all over the world and it came to a point that they no longer had a country of their own. In spite of their hardship and despair, they persisted in sin. God is merciful to the repentant [**1 Jn 1: 7-9**] but visits “the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate (Him) [**Ex. 20: 5**]. There are many of us who have persisted in sin because we think that we are still young and will have time in the future to repent, or that we have gone too far in disobedience for God to take us back. How can we break out of that kind of lock jam? How did the children of Israel do it? They did not because they could not! That was where God took the initiative. He made it possible for the modern state of Israel to be born in 1948, in fulfillment of His promise [**Ezek. 36: 24**].

With God, His name, word and integrity are one and the same. The word that goes forth from His mouth “shall not return to (Him) void, but it shall accomplish what (He pleases) and it shall prosper *in the thing for which (He) sent it*” [**Is. 55: 11**]. He is not a man that He should lie, and you cannot curse whom He has blessed [**Num. 23: 19-20**]. That is why the Psalmist has said of God, “You have magnified Your word above all Your name” [**Ps. 138: 2**]. God’s name, as He Himself told Moses, is “I AM” [**Ex. 3: 14**]. At creation, the Word of God was also God [**Jn 1: 1**]. Therefore, the word of God is synonymous with His name. So God’s integrity hinges on His purpose-driven word. Once he spoke it, He would bring it to pass [**Num. 23: 19**]. For example, when Solomon prayed during the dedication of the temple in Jerusalem, he said, “Blessed be the Lord, who has given rest to His people Israel, according to all that He promised. *There has not failed one word of all His good promise, which He promised through His servant Moses*” [**1 Kgs 8: 56**].

God said to Ezekiel, “But I had concern for My holy name, which the house of Israel had profaned among the nations wherever they went. Therefore, say to the house of Israel, *‘I do not do this for your sake ... but for My holy name’s sake... (that) the nations shall know that I am the Lord... when I am hallowed in you before their eyes’*” [Ezek. 36: 21-23].

Let us examine a case study that illustrates how God defends His own integrity.

3. God takes back the Ark from the enemies of Israel!

In the days of Samuel, Israel was at war with the Philistines. In the first battle, the Philistines defeated the Israelites and killed about four thousand of their men [1 Sam. 4: 1-2]. Worried about why the Lord had allowed Israel to be defeated, they agreed to bring the ark of the covenant of the Lord of hosts among the troops from its abode in Shiloh that “it may save us from the hand of our enemies” [vv. 3-4]. When the ark arrived, the children of Israel shouted for joy but the Philistines were afraid and said, “God has come into the camp... Who will deliver us from the hand of their mighty gods?” [vv. 5-9]. Here, we see that the battle was no longer between the two nations but between the Philistine idols and Israel’s God. However, the children of Israel had sinned and the way they planned to use the ark, a holy object made according to God’s specifications, was idolatrous. In the ensuing battle, Israel was defeated and the Philistines seized the ark and put it in the shrine of their god, Dagon [1 Sam. 5: 1-2].

By that victory, the Philistines believed that their idol, Dagon, was more powerful than the God of Israel, whereas Israel had lost because of the sin of the people and their priest, Eli, and his wicked sons, Hophni and Phinehas [1 Sam. 3: 13-14]. God’s integrity was now at stake. Would He allow the pagans to profane His name? Never! So, for the seven months that followed, the Philistines suffered one plague after another. For example:

- The head of Dagon and both palms of its hands were broken off on the threshold; only its torso was left of it [1 Sam. 5: 4];
- The priests and worshippers of Dagon abandoned the idol’s house in Ashdod for fear of the ark of God [v. 5];
- God struck the people of Ashdod with tumors [v. 6];
- The lords of the Philistines carried the ark away from Ashdod and brought it to Gath. There, God visited them “with a very great destruction and He struck the men of the city, both small and great, and tumors broke out on them” [vv. 8-9];
- Then they carried the ark to Ekron, another Philistine city. There, death, destruction and disease were more widespread than in earlier cities [vv. 10-12]!

At that stage, the Philistines called on their priests and diviners to find out what to do with the “ark of the Lord” and how to return it to its place [1 Sam. 6: 1-2]. The

diviners told them, “If you send away the ark of the God of Israel, do not send it empty; but by all means return it to Him with a trespass offering. Then you will be healed, and it will be known to you why His hand is not removed from you” [v. 3]. Following spiritual guidance, the five lords of the Philistines put the ark on a cart drawn by two milk cows (along with the trespass offerings) and the animals “headed straight” for the highway that led to Israel [vv. 4-13]!

The people of Israel came to appreciate their sins and lamented. Samuel told them, “If you return to the Lord with all your hearts, then put away the foreign gods ... from among you, and prepare your hearts for the Lord, and serve Him only, ... He will deliver you from the hand of the Philistines” [1 Sam. 7: 1-3]. They repented and they subdued their enemies. Then, Samuel took a stone and set it up and called its name *Ebenezer*, the rock of help, to mark how God had helped the people of Israel [vv. 4-14]. The hard heart of disobedience had been turned into the heart of flesh!

There are many of us right now who have been scattered abroad into despair and hardship by our sins. We have shed innocent blood through gossip, backbiting and practising abortion and other abominations. We have given or taken bribes. We have stolen and cheated with guns or our pens. Yet, every Sunday or worship day, we go to church to work signs and wonders in the name of Jesus. That we produce results is not because we are “righteous.” Rather, God does not want His name to be profaned among non-believers and believers alike who may be our congregation, neighbours, friends or colleagues. But does that stop God from still judging us according to our ways and deeds? No! That was why Jesus told His listeners, “Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me you who practise lawlessness!’” [Matt. 7: 22-23]. *So, while God defends His integrity, He will still judge you.*

4. Conclusion: How will you respond to God’s love?

The modern nation of Israel was born in 1948 and all efforts by its Arab neighbours to extinguish it since then have failed. In fact, every new war since then has enlarged its territory! Did God do that for the people because they deserved it? No. He did it for His sake, for His purpose. We know that when Jesus Christ shall return to establish His eternal kingdom on earth, it will be in Jerusalem [Zech. 8: 3]. That is where God’s plan is going.

Just as the return of the ark of covenant opened the eyes of Israel to the glory of God in their midst, prompting their repentance, God’s plan is to prepare the children of Israel for the new birth. Speaking through prophet Ezekiel, God said [Ezek. 36: 25- 28]:

I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them (and) you shall be My people and I will be your God.

In like manner, “let us draw near (God) with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water” [Heb. 10: 22]. God’s Word has come to earth in flesh as Jesus the Christ [Jn 1: 14], the only begotten Son of God. Out of His love for sinners, God sent Him to die for us *while we were yet sinners*. That was at God’s initiative because His integrity was at stake after Satan tried to steal our inheritance from Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. He did it because He loves us.

So, what should be your response to this generous offer? Just as God plans to give the Jews a new heart and a new Spirit, He has also provided you with the baptism of water and the Holy Spirit so that you can see and enter His kingdom [Jn 3: 3, 5]. Now, like His chosen people, you are “a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, (God’s) own special people” [1 Pet. 2: 9]. You have become the temple of the living God and He has challenged you not to “touch what is unclean and (He) will receive you (and) be your Father and you shall be (His) sons and daughters” [2 Cor. 6: 17, 18].

When God’s integrity is at stake, He will defend it with or without your support or cooperation. But *for the sake of your salvation*, you will do well not to profane God’s name among your contacts. That is the challenge.