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THE TRUE GOD CAN ALWAYS DEFEND HIMSELF!

Today's Text: Jer. Chaps. 10-11; Matt. 26: 50-54

Extracts:

1. Hear the word which the Lord speaks to you, O house of Israel. Thus says the Lord: *“Do not learn the way of the Gentiles; do not be dismayed at the signs of heaven, for the Gentiles are dismayed at them. For the customs of the peoples are futile; ... a wooden idol is a worthless doctrine. ... But the Lord is the true God; He is the living God and the everlasting God”* [Jer. 10: 1,2,3a, 8b, 10a]
2. Then they came and laid hands on Jesus and took Him. And suddenly, one of those who were with Jesus stretched out his hand and drew his sword, struck the servant of the high priest, and cut off his ear. But Jesus said to him, *“Put your sword in its place, for all who take the sword will perish by the sword. Or do you think that I cannot now pray to My Father, and He will provide Me with more than twelve legions of angels? How then could the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must happen thus?”* [Matt. 26: 50-54]

*The movie version of the best seller, **The Da Vinci Code** (2003), opened last week and earned well over US\$200 million on the first night alone. As you may already know, the central story of the novel (on which the movie is based) is that Jesus married Mary Magdalene and that they had a daughter who continued their human lineage. Interestingly also, television and radio shows and publications attacking the book have grown tremendously in recent years. The central story in these attacks is that the novel is blasphemous of Jesus the Christ in that it is based on false premises that could make a weak believer lose faith in the truth of the Bible. Happily, we are no longer in the era of the inquisitions when the Church (which controlled state authority in the Middle Ages) burnt heretics and blasphemers on the stake. Thank God we are not Moslems; otherwise, Dan Brown, the author of the novel, would have been in hiding by now, fearing for his life, and movie houses could also have been burning by now.*

All through history, people in authority have taken up arms to defend the integrity of the God that they believe in. They are prepared to kill people or destroy property. What is the motive for such reactions? Is it to defend God or to maintain religious leaders' hold over their congregations? Does the true God need human beings to defend Him? These are the issues that we shall examine in today's lesson.

1. How do you defend your own integrity?

The word of God says that humans were made in the image and likeness of God. Is it then not plausible to assume that we react to an attack on God's integrity by the way we react to attacks on our honour or credibility? Therefore, a good starting point in the study of this subject is to examine how we react to an attack on our own integrity.

Others may attack our integrity by exaggerating our good points or saying good things about us which are not necessarily true or speaking downright lies about us. Therefore, we are often called upon to defend our integrity under the following circumstances:

a) *When we are over-praised*

In this case, what is being said about us is true but it is being exaggerated. For example, David only killed Goliath but the women who sang his praises said, "Saul has slain his thousands, and *David his ten thousands*" [1 Sam. 18: 7]. What do you do in such a situation? For the majority of us, we become *swollen headed* and do nothing to correct the wrong impression! For example, having got away with killing the apostle James and the guards who were on duty when Peter was imprisoned and miraculously rescued, Herod became very arrogant. He turned on the coastal people of Tyre and Sidon who quickly came to make peace with him so as not to be starved of food supplies from King Herod's territory. One day, Herod arrayed himself in royal apparel and gave a rousing speech from his throne. The people kept shouting, "The voice of a god and not of a man!" You know what happened to him? The Bible records, "Then immediately an angel of the Lord struck him, *because he did not give glory to God*. And he was eaten up by worms and died" [Acts 12: 1-25].

Compare that with the reaction of Paul and Barnabas at Lystra after the people had deified them for healing "a cripple from his mother's womb." As soon as what the people were saying in their local language ["The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!"] had been interpreted to them, Paul and Barnabas "tore their clothes and ran in among the multitude, crying out and saying, 'Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men with the same nature as you'" [Acts 14: 8-15]. It is also instructive to note that David reacted to the women's praise by behaving wisely [1 Sam. 18: 14], that is, God-fearing and humble. That is why in today's text, God told the people of Israel, "Do not learn the way of the Gentiles... for the customs of the peoples are futile" [Jer. 10: 2, 3].

b) *When we are flattered*

In this case, others are saying good things about us that are actually false. That is what is called flattering. You are being given an honour that you do not deserve. Most of us would accept the accolades and move on! However, the right thing to do is to reject and correct the wrong impression. Otherwise, it may come back to haunt you in due course.

The Robe (1953) is a religious movie featuring Richard Burton as the Roman tribune who led the team of soldiers that crucified Jesus Christ. On his return to Rome, his life was no longer the same. He had nightmares in which he kept seeing Christ being nailed to the cross and the part he played in casting lot for His robe. The Emperor then commissioned him to return to Palestine and find the robe. That was what brought him in contact with Peter. The local church leader in introducing Peter to his congregation said something like this, “ When everybody had abandoned our Lord, Peter was one of the few who stood by Him to the very end.” Of course, that was not true because Peter had denied Jesus three times! Peter immediately tapped the man’s hand and told the group how he had denied Jesus and how he had been forgiven. How many of us can do the same thing?

c) *When our secrets are revealed*

In this case others are saying bad things about us that are true. The common reaction is to flatly deny and bury the evidence much deeper than ever before! We hear of destruction of evidence or killing of witnesses so as to prevent the truth from coming out. There was the story of a divorced manager who was allegedly having an affair with his secretary. One day, he overheard in the staff canteen two workers gossiping about the matter. He was so furious that he reported the matter to the Human Resources Manager (HRM) to discipline the said workers for spreading false rumours about him. Following investigation, the HRM received confirmation from the manager’s secretary that there was in deed an affair, to which she had consented on the basis of a promise of pay raise from her boss. In the end, the manager wound up reporting himself for breaking the company’s code of ethics and he was sacked! Would it not have been easier for that manager to stop his misbehaviour than to feel offended by the gossip about it? When David was confronted with his adultery with Bathsheba whose husband he had also killed, he went on his knees, confessed his sins and asked for forgiveness [2 Sam. 12: 13, 14; Ps. 51].

d) *When we are slandered*

In this case, others are not only badmouthing us but also telling lies about us. We are bound to be furious and will not hesitate to go to court to redeem our honour if the culprits refuse to stop the hurt. This is the situation that applies to today’s lesson, when human beings blaspheme

God by propagating false doctrines about His person and His ways. How should God react?

2. Unfortunately, we tend to take the defence of God's integrity into our hands!

God has made it clear that His ways and thoughts are not similar to ours [Is. 55: 8], that His secrets remain with Him, except the few that He has revealed to us [Deut. 29: 29]. Since our knowledge of God is limited, what have we done over the ages, even after the coming of Jesus Christ in flesh? We have made God *in our image and likeness!* That way, it has become easier for us to defend Him when He is being blasphemed. In today's text from the book of Jeremiah, the tendency is manifested in the multiplicity of gods and idol worship.

God told the people of Israel, "According to the number of your cities were your gods" [Jer. 11: 13]. Therefore, *the God that people defend is the one they worship.* That has important implications. For example, the God of the Moslems, *Allah*, has no son and He is unknowable. Among the Hindus, God is infinite and it is only through idols and related practices and devotions that human beings can visualize His infinite form. In Buddhism, God is an abstract void, can never be personal and, in fact, His existence (or the lack of it) is neither central nor important to its message. The Judaists believe in a monolithic God. They do not believe that Jesus is the promised Messiah and they are still waiting for Him! Finally, Christians believe in one God who has a triune nature (Father, Son and the Holy Spirit). The promised Messiah has come in the person of Jesus, the Second Person of the Trinity [Jn 3: 16]. He is expected to return soon as King to judge the world.

The forgoing suggests two different lights in which human beings see God. In one case (shared by Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and, to some extent, Judaism), God is infinite or unknowable. Therefore, you need to rely on earthly "wise" people to define who He is and how to approach Him. The gurus and sadhus, the sheiks and the Pharisees or chief priest take centre stage to define and interpret who God is. To make their work easier, they restrict freedom of choice either by adopting state religions (such as through *Shar'ia* law) or persecuting dissent or winning converts by force (as in a *Jihad*). In the second light, God has revealed Himself to us through His prophets and, lately, through His only begotten Son, Jesus [Heb. 1: 1-2]. We can have a personal relationship with Him as our Father.

Those who see God in the first light tend to do the following:

- a) *They carry their god but he cannot carry them!*

In describing the gods of the Gentiles, God said, "They are upright like a palm tree, and they cannot speak; they must be carried, because they

cannot go by themselves” [Jer. 10: 5]. Anything that we place above God is an idol that we have to carry wherever we go for it to be potent. They could be a carved image or position or material wealth, etc. The moment we lose control, such gods are powerless to carry us. That is why God calls such gods “a worthless doctrine” [Jer. 10: 8], the imagination of the people’s evil hearts [Jer. 11: 8], and powerless [Jer. 11: 12].

b) *Only their makers can defend them!*

The idolatrous people of Israel told their prophets, “Do not prophesy in the name of the Lord, lest you die by our hand” [Jer. 11: 21]. What were the prophets telling them? That the gods that they worshipped were not the true God, the living God and the everlasting King [Jer. 10: 10], the God “who is the Maker of all things” [v. 16]. Therefore, the only way to sustain their false gods was to silence or persecute the prophets of the true God. Today as in the past, state power must be used to sustain the worship of certain gods. In Moslem countries, *Shar’ia* laws do not permit of any other religion than Islam. Christianity went into its dark ages when it was adopted as the official religion of the Roman Empire. Inquisitions, persecutions and the Crusades took place during that era.

3. But the true God can always defend Himself!

When human beings try to play God, they are bound to make mistakes. When God created us, He gave us the freedom to choose between good and evil [Gen. 2: 16-17]. Either choice has its consequences. In like manner, when people blaspheme God, they have made their own choice. Who gave us the authority to judge such dissent? Why do we not allow the true God to defend Himself as He did in the past? A few examples can be cited here.

- When Jesus was brought before Pilate and false allegations were made against Him, “He answered nothing” [Matt. 27: 12]. Earlier, when He was being arrested, Peter took a sword and cut off the right ear of Malchus, the servant of the chief priest [Jn 18: 10]. What was Jesus’ reaction? First, He healed the young man by putting the ear back [Lk 22: 51]. Then, He rebuked Peter and said, “Do you think that I cannot now pray to My Father, and He will provide Me with more than twelve legions of angels?” [Matt. 26: 53]. A legion consisted of between 3,000 and 6,000 in number. Could His Father not have given Him more than 72,000 angels? When David took a census of the people without God’s consent, it took only one angel to kill 70,000 people as punishment [1 Chron. 21: 14]. When the Assyrians mounted an attack against Hezekiah and their commander blasphemed God, the angel of God killed 185,000 of their troops in one night [2 Kgs 19: 35]. Can you then imagine how much damage 72,000 angels could have done to defend the integrity of Jesus during His trial?

- When Paul took a front seat among those who persecuted the early Christians, no earthly power could stop him. The Christians were poor and helpless. Paul had the mandate of the high priest to go to the synagogues of Damascus “so that if he found any who were of the Way, *whether men or women*, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem” [Acts 9: 1,2]. On the way there, the risen Christ blinded him and redirected his path, to make him “a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel” [vv. 3-11]. Who else could have done that but God Himself?

4. Conclusion

In the second text for today’s lesson, Jesus told Peter that His arrest was permitted by God for the Scriptures to be fulfilled [Matt. 26: 54]. What have the Scriptures told us about end times that we are already experiencing? Jesus had prophesied before His Passion, “False christs and false prophets will rise and show great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect. *See, I have told you beforehand*” [Matt. 24: 24-25]. Paul added, “know this, that in the last days, perilous times will come; for men will be lovers of themselves, *lovers of money*, boasters, proud, *blasphemers*, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, *slanders*, without self-control, brutal, *despisers of good*, traitors, headstrong, haughty, *lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God*... And from such people turn away” [2 Tim. 3: 1-5].

True prophecy is bound to be fulfilled. All of a sudden, there is a rapid rise in sexual immorality and love of pleasure. All of a sudden, we are hearing of the gospels of Mary Magdalene, Judas, Thomas, etc., all of them contradictory to the gospels in the Bible. Dan Brown has become an instant millionaire for authoring *The Da Vinci Code*, a novel that misleads the reader about the true story of Jesus and His redemptive ministry. How should you react? First, go and study the Bible more closely, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, so that you may not be deceived. Why should you lose your salvation on account of fictional doctrines? Second, allow God to defend Himself against modern blasphemers. How can you fight against God’s plan?

There is one truth that you must never forget. The true God can always defend Himself!