

WHERE ARE THE DEPENDABLE ROLE MODELS?

Today's Text: Jeremiah Chap. 23

Extracts:

1. "Woe to the *shepherds* who destroy and scatter the sheep of My pasture!" says the Lord. ...For both *prophets and priests* are profane; yes, in My house I have found their wickedness," says the Lord [Jer. 23: 1, 9a, 11]
2. "Behold, the days are coming," says the Lord, "that I will raise to David a Branch of righteousness; ...*in His days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell safely*; now this is His name by which He will be called; **THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS**" [Jer. 23: 5, 6]

Hwang Woo-suk was a top researcher at South Korea's Seoul National University.¹ Following academic articles in 2004/2005, he gained international fame for his purported breakthroughs in cloning and stem cell research that raised global hopes of new cures for untreatable diseases. In recognition of his claimed feat, he received close to US\$2 million in research grants from private and government institutions. He also received state honours and was treated as a national hero in South Korea. He became a role model for aspiring scientists and researchers from the developing world. Then in 2005, his data were discovered to have been faked and his claims untrue. He has since lost his job and is currently on trial on charges of embezzlement and misappropriation of funds!

Hwang's disgrace has hurt him, his family, colleagues, nation and potential beneficiaries of stem cell research. More especially, those who have looked up to him as their role model have been left stranded and disoriented. How many of us find ourselves in a similar situation right now? Is it in sports, family, school, church, politics or judiciary that our role models have not let us down? So, who then can we depend upon to lead us aright all the way to success in our aspirations?

In today's Bible text, Jeremiah was faced with a similar situation. Priests, pastors and prophets had misled the people that had looked up to them for guidance and right conduct. How did God help Jeremiah to deal with the problem? What can we learn from that for our situations today? Those and more are the issues that we shall examine in today's lesson.

¹ Based on "Disgraced scientist says he tried to clone mammoth: Hwang denies embezzling funds," www.cnn.com/2006/TECH/science/07/25/skorea.disgraced.ap/index.html

1. Israel's Role Models led the people astray!

In every field of human endeavour, aspirants tend to look up to their leaders, mentors and others in position of authority to show them good examples of acceptable conduct. Such examples have to do with following *ethically or morally sanctioned means to attain worthy ends*. For example, in his epistle to the church at Philippi, Paul said, “the things which you *learned* and *received* and *heard* and *saw in me, these do*, and the God of peace will be with you.” What are these things? They include whatever things are true, noble, just, pure, and lovely, of good report, any virtue and anything praise-worthy [**Phil. 4: 6, 7**]. In order to motivate the younger admirers and imitators, such *good examples* must be maintained *throughout* the lifetime of the role model. Any let down at any time can wipe off the past and it may not be easy to regain it! Therefore, to serve as a *dependable* role model to others is a life-long assignment.

In Jeremiah's time, there was a thin line between church and state. The role of the prophet, the priest and the pastor was to help the king and the people to remain focused on the worship of the true God. If the land was now “full of adulterers” and the people's “course of life” had become “evil” [**Jer. 23: 10**], something had gone wrong. God revealed to the prophet Jeremiah that the major blame was with the people's role models. For example:

a. *The shepherds fed on their flocks!*

God spoke against the shepherds who fed on His people, saying, “You have scattered my flock, driven them away, and not attended to them. Behold, I will attend to you for the evil of your doings” [**v. 2**].

The good shepherd or pastor goes before his flock and calls his sheep by name because they hear and trust his voice [**Jn 10: 3, 4**]. Since they trust and look up to him, they will by no means follow a stranger. Instead, they will flee from him because they do not know the voice of strangers [**v. 5**]. In Jeremiah's time, it was the priests and kings who led the way in disregarding the word of God. For example, it was Pashhur, a priest and “chief governor in the house of the Lord” who struck Jeremiah and put him in the stocks [**Jer. 20: 1, 2**] for daring to tell the king the truth. When God asked Jeremiah to write a strong message in a book and present it to king Jehoiakim, he disregarded it, and so did his advisers. The king went on to burn the scroll on which the message was written [**Jer. 36: 23, 24**]. If the leaders of the people could do that, can you imagine what those looking up to them would do?

b. *The prophets were false and profane!*

The prophet is a watchman whose duties include warning God's people to eschew evil and follow the truth [**Ezek. 3: 17-20**]. In Jeremiah's days, the

prophets had no good examples to show the people who were looking up to them. The prophets in Samaria (the capital of the kingdom of Israel) were false since they “prophesied by Baal,” an idol, “and caused the people to err” [Jer. 23: 13]. The prophets in Jerusalem (the capital of the kingdom of Judah) committed adultery and walked in lies, thereby strengthening the hands of evil doers. As a result, “no one turns back from his wickedness. All of them are like Sodom to Me, and her inhabitants like Gomorrah” [v. 14].

If the people could not depend on their political and religious leaders to show them good examples of righteousness, where should the people turn? In response, God pointed Jeremiah and the people to the “Branch of righteousness” whose name will be called “The Lord our Righteousness” or *Jehovah-tsidkenu* [vv. 5-6]. We shall return to that subject later. For now, let us see how Jeremiah’s situation applies to our modern circumstances.

2. Today’s Role Models are worse!

In most countries of the world, there is a clear separation between church and state. Therefore, we can examine role models within secular or spiritual settings.

a. *Role Models in secular settings*

You only need to look at *Guinness World Records* to have a glimpse of fields where human beings are striving to excel. Each such field has its own heroes and heroines who have their followers and admirers.

For illustration, role models abound in the following areas:

o Family

Many children have been inspired by their parents. For example, the golf prodigy, Tiger Woods, recently lost his father to cancer, the man he fondly called his *coach, mentor* and *best friend*.² On Sunday, 23 July 2006, barely a month after his father’s death, Tiger won the British Open, his 11th major title. Soon after his victory, the usually stoic Tiger broke down and sobbed in the arms of his caddie, and then in those of his wife. Later, he said, “I realized that my dad’s never going to see this again... He would have been very, very proud.”

On the other hand, many children would have nothing to do with their parents. For example, the *Oprah Winfrey* show that was aired on Thursday, 27 July 2006, did a follow-up (to a story shown on 21 October 2004) on a pastor who had raped his three daughters

² Ian O’Connor, “Tiger does his father proud, resumes chase,” www.msn.foxsports.com

while they were young. Even when they reported the ongoing abuse to their mother, she hushed them up. When they grew up, they reported the abuse to the police. Their father owned up to the offence and recently, he was sentenced to 36 years in jail. Given their memory of their earthly father, how can you get those women to relate to God as Father?

○ Sports people and entertainers

Sports men and woman, actors and actresses tend to have a sizable number of admirers who regard them as their role models. They are glamorous and well paid. Some of them run good charities and support good causes. However, scandals, such as sexual promiscuity, drugs and unruly conduct can be quite common among them. For example, the French football hero, Zidane, recently shocked over one billion television viewers around the world when he head-butted an Italian player during the World Cup final match in Germany for allegedly insulting his family. How do you expect children looking up to him as their soccer role model to forget that negative image for the rest of their lives?

○ Professionals

Doctors, lawyers, teachers, administrators, scientists and politicians are examples of professionals. A good number of professionals have distinguished themselves in terms of dedication and service to humanity. Some of them have earned international recognition, such as the Nobel Prize. Therefore, they serve as role models to a good number of people. However, a growing number of them have also disgraced themselves and their professions and disappointed their admirers. We mentioned earlier the case of the disgraced South Korean scientist. In our schools today, we hear reports of teachers seducing their students. In the private sector, we have read of how top companies were run down through the greed of their administrators.

b. *Role Models in the spiritual setting*

It may be easy to excuse role models in the secular world that have failed. What do you say of those in the house of God who are supposed to know better? As in the days of Jeremiah, the verdict may not be impressive or encouraging. Yes, the majority of our pastors, prophets and teachers may be above board and continue to inspire confidence in those that they are mentoring. However, a few bad eggs have threatened to give a bad name to all the people of God.

We hear of church leaders (married or single) who are sleeping with members of their congregation. We see gay bishops and lesbian priests who defend the “righteousness” of their way of life. We hear of ordained priests who violate the trust and morality of altar boys. How about church leaders charged to court or convicted for misappropriating church funds? By their fruits, we do know them!

What conclusion can we draw here? The word of God says, “If the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?” [Ps. 11: 3]. Human role models will fail us, no matter how much they try to impress us. Even the good ones will one day die off and leave us forsaken. For example, Tiger Woods’ father is dead and the young man is now on his own. In spiritual matters, the situation is worse because “there is none righteous, no, *not one*” [Rom. 3: 10]. That human being that we may consider infallible today may fail us sooner than we think. That is why we need the role model for *all seasons*. He is THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS.

3. Jehovah-tsidkenu is the true Role Model!

In response to Jeremiah’s concern about the failures of the pastors, priests and prophets that had facilitated the exile of the people of Israel to Babylon, God made him the following promise [Jer. 23: 5-6]:

“Behold, the days are coming,” says the Lord, “that I will raise to David a Branch of righteousness; a King shall reign and prosper, and execute judgment and righteousness in the earth. In His days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell safely; now this is the name by which He will be called: THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS.”

The broader picture applies to the final restoration of Israel when Christ returns to establish His earthly kingdom. However, it also applies to all believers as heirs of Abraham by faith [Rom. 4: 13-16] and sons of God by adoption [Rom. 8: 14-17]. From God’s Covenant with David [2 Sam. 7: 4-17], we know that the Christ would come as a “Rod from the stem of Jesse (David’s father), and a Branch” out of his roots [Is. 11: 1]. In announcing the birth of Jesus, the angel told Mary that she would conceive and bring forth a Son and “shall call His name Jesus.” He would be called “the Son of the Highest” and God would “give Him the throne of His father David ...and of His kingdom there will be no end” [Lk 1: 26-33].

What is a kingdom without subjects? As the descendants of fallen Adam, we lost access to the kingdom of righteous citizens. That is why Jesus had to first come as the Suffering Servant [Is. 53: 1-6], and God “made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” [2 Cor. 5: 21]. If Jesus is the Righteousness of God, then He is *Jehovah-tsidkenu*, the only one who can serve as our *dependable* Role Model!

4. Conclusion: make Jesus your dependable Role Model!

After Jesus had ascended into Heaven, two of His disciples, Peter and John, were brought before the Sanhedrin for preaching in His name. The temple leaders could not stop them, and “when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated and untrained men, they marveled. And they realized that they had been with Jesus” [Acts 4: 13]. What a dependable role model He had been for them!

You have been with Jesus since you accepted Him as your personal Lord and Saviour. He has promised that He will never leave you nor forsake you because He is the same yesterday, today and forever [Heb. 13: 5, 8]. Therefore, like Peter and John, you can afford to look unto Him who is the author and finisher of your faith [Heb. 12: 2]. Paul looked unto Him and ran the course of his life to glory in God’s kingdom [2 Tim. 4: 6-8]. Human beings will disappoint you. Satan will deceive you. Religion will frustrate you. Only Jesus can save you.

Make Him your Role Model today, *right now!*