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LET YOUR LIGHT SHINE

Sometimes things come together in interesting ways, even when the connections seem purely coincidental. Such is the case of the three holidays that usually coincide, or at least come close to each other, in December. Hanukkah, which begins on December 26 in 2005, is where it is on the calendar because those are the dates that the Jews rededicated the Temple after defeating the Seleucid kings. Christmas, on the other hand, is where it is because of a pagan midwinter festival, not because of any actual event occurring on that date. And Kwanzaa is where it is simply because the other two happen roughly together in December.

Because of the nearness of these holidays perhaps we can learn a lesson about tolerance. First, though, we have to understand that tolerance does not mean agreement. Christians and Jews are often branded “intolerant” because they consider a certain “lifestyle” sinful. While some may be intolerant, as a rule they are the opposite. Most can identify sin as sin, and yet still acknowledge the value of the person who is the sinner. Likewise people can be tolerant of other religions without accepting the doctrines of that religion. If the backlash to violence in the Middle East has taught us anything, it should teach us that Muslims and “the people of the book” (Christians and Jews) can live in harmony, if not agreement.

I heard a story a couple of years ago that emphasizes the spirit of harmony that should be prevalent, especially at this time of year. In a certain city there was a neighborhood in which there lived one observant Jewish family. The rest of the neighborhood were Christians or had no religious affiliation. Being observant, the Jewish family displayed a menorah in their window during Hanukkah. One of the requirements of the menorah is that it be displayed where those passing on the street can see its light. Thus it became obvious that this was the only Jewish household in the community. On one night of the holiday vandals painted swastikas and other anti-Semitic graffiti on that one house. The next morning the neighbors saw the family, visibly shaken, removing the filth from their house. One of the neighbors, a Christian woman, felt she had to do something about what had happened. That

day she went to several department and discount stores. After buying as many menorot (plural of menorah) as she could find, she went to each house on the block and asked them to help her show the Jewish family that they were part of the community. She explained to each neighbor the tradition and proper lighting of the menorah. Every night for the remainder of the holiday every house on the block proudly displayed a properly lighted (albeit sometimes electric) menorah. This show of support convinced the offended family that they were part of the community, even though their beliefs differed from those of the majority. The Christians were able to partially overcome centuries of bigotry and mistrust through one simple act of tolerance and love.

“Happy Holidays” may now be the politically correct greeting. While that may be proper, in some ways it is unfortunate. Instead we should learn to greet everybody on their holiday, with genuine respect, rather than trying to pretend that we do not have differences. Instead of teaching people that differences don’t exist, we should be teaching that differences don’t matter.

“As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men.” (Gal 6:10) Christians should do good, and show love, wherever we can. That doesn’t mean we can’t teach others about our beliefs. We should not belittle theirs. Too often we have been known to follow the verse that says “let your light shine before men,” (Matt 5:16) without paying any attention to the conclusion of the verse, where it says that they may “glorify your Father which is in heaven.” That could mean lighting a menorah on Hanukkah, a Christmas tree on December 25th, and the Kwanzaa candles the week thereafter, if necessary.

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WHEN JUDGES OPPOSE GOD

Why do the heathen rage, and the people imagine a vain thing?
The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD, and against his anointed, saying,
Let us break their bands asunder, and cast away their cords from us.
He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh: the Lord shall have them in derision.
Then shall he speak unto them in his wrath, and vex them in his sore displeasure.
Yet have I set my king upon my holy hill of Zion.
I will declare the decree: the LORD hath said unto me, Thou art my Son; this day have I begotten thee.
Ask of me, and I shall give *thee* the heathen *for* thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth *for* thy possession.
Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron; thou shalt dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel.

People want to believe that freedom under law means freedom from law.

Be wise now therefore, O ye kings: be instructed, ye judges of the earth.
Serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling.
Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and ye perish from the way, when his wrath is kindled but a little.
Blessed are all they that put their trust in him.

Psalm 2

There is a theory, which I generally accept, that every word of the Bible is included for a reason. This may or may not apply to words that have been added for clarity of translation, but generally one can say that every word accurately rendered scripture has a purpose. Sometimes that purpose may have been limited to certain people. In the case of most of the "Wisdom Literature" (Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job, the Song of Songs, and possibly Lamentations) there are things we all can learn. After all, as the Preacher says, "there is no new thing under the sun." (Eccl 1:9) There is somewhat that we can learn about ourselves in the second Psalm.

The People v. God

The first three verses of the psalm should sound familiar, in principle, to every follower of God in America today. They seem to describe, especially, a legal system that often seems to go overboard to protect the rights of those who don't believe in God while trampling on the rights of those who do.

Rage against God is not a new thing. Imagining vanity is not either. It used to be called idolatry. Now it is called by various names: humanism, evolution, communism, and civil liberty. It seems that anyone who doesn't want to believe almost anything else can calmly disbelieve. But if you want not to believe in God you have to be forceful, adamant, and vocal. Yes, there are exceptions, but many people who don't believe in the God of the Bible choose to oppose God. In matters of science, history, mathematics, or artistic interpretation we are allowed to calmly express our differences of opinion. In matters of religion, it seems to end in a knockdown, drag-out brouhaha.

The psalmist explains why even governments actively oppose God. Most of this world has gotten used to the American experiment in freedom. On some level, everybody ends up saying, "I want to do it my way." Some Jews in Jesus' day, even under the yoke of Roman rule, said, "We be Abraham's seed, and were never in bondage to any man: how sayest thou, Ye shall be made free?" (Jn 8:32) People don't want to recognize when they are under rule. Many Americans want to believe that freedom under the law means freedom from the law. Men don't want to be ruled by God. They don't realize that it is not a choice of having as a master God or nobody, but rather whether the master is God or Satan. It is not "choose you this day whether ye will serve," but "choose you this day whom ye will serve." (Josh 24:15) Little do they realize that when they "break the bands asunder" and "cast away" God's cords they are actually forging stronger bonds for themselves.

So that they are without excuse: Because that, when they knew God, they glorified *him* not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools. (Rom 1:20-22)

God's Response

Have you ever been in an argument with someone and they just laughed at you the angrier you got? Well,

that is what God says he does. He laughs. And when he gets through laughing, he expresses his disappointment and his displeasure.

Some people are actually afraid that God is going to cause the end of the American experiment because of his anger against what he is seeing today. Perhaps they are right. Some prominent people supposedly promised that if George W. Bush won the presidency of the United States they would leave the country. (Few left.) Maybe they have a point. Because of their own positions and actions, perhaps it would be a good time to leave the United States, before God speaks in his wrath.

God does have a more interesting response, however. In spite of, or in addition to his expression of displeasure, he simply establishes his authority more firmly. The nations want nothing to do with God. Instead he sets his king on high. He establishes his own son as ruler.

Paul says this was done many years ago by raising Jesus from the dead. "The promise which was made unto the fathers, God hath fulfilled the same unto us their children, in that he hath raised up Jesus again; as it is also written in the second psalm, Thou art my Son, this day have I begotten thee." (Acts 13:32-33) Even when the rulers of this world today object to God's rule, God can answer that he has put his son on the throne, and no mere man may dislodge him.

The irony of this is that God has done more than strengthen the bonds. In another sense he has done what these man want to do. He has set them free. Not free from Himself. By binding them more strongly to himself he can set them free from sin. "Likewise reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord." (Rom 6:11)

The Lot of the Unbeliever

The next section of the psalm tells what will happen to the unbeliever. Those familiar with what italics mean in the King James Version might have some questions, however. These are words added by the translators to make the meaning more clear. In some few cases, they actually change the meaning from the intent of the original. Those who are aware of this might read verse 8 as "Ask of me, and I shall give the heathen thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth thy possession." This would lead some to ask why God would give the heathen the inheritance of his followers. This difficulty would be resolved if the word translated "give" were rendered "make." This is how the Jewish Publication Society translators read the word. This makes the King James Version read correctly with the italicized words included.

God promises his followers that those who are oppressing them will not do so forever. While the situation looks bleak, it will be reversed. Those who follow God

will be given an inheritance. We usually think of our inheritance in the world to come, but here he says that the oppressors are the inheritance. God's people will inherit those who are trying to remove God's name from public awareness.

Some of those who will be the inheritance might question their fate. The picture is that of a man with a crowbar, swinging away in a china shop. How could a loving God give them over to being broken? It is simple. "Do ye not know that the saints shall judge the world?" (1 Cor 6:2) How will they do so? How will they break the heathen? Simply by being who they are. God's children break the others, and judge the others, just because God knows that some are capable of following him. That

Subjection to God is really freedom; freedom from sin.

knowledge causes him to condemn those who oppose his people, because he knows the possibilities that they refuse to accept.

Be Wise

God demands wisdom, especially from governments. Practically from the first words of the book of Proverbs, God advises wisdom. But the wisdom God advises is not the wisdom of the world. "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge: but fools despise wisdom and instruction." (Prv 1:7)

Here in the second Psalm, God says that the wisdom of governments, and of judges, is to serve God. Failure to do so will result in destruction. But trust in God will establish a nation.

Should the laws of the land be judges solely on the word of God? Certainly, when it applies. Quite often, God is neutral on a matter and judges can rule on human law alone. Should others be afforded equal protection under the law? Certainly! If the Ten Commandments are displayed publicly, then so should Muslim and Christian scriptures, as well as those of other religions. If a person does not want to pray to God, does he have that right? Yes! But not at the expense of the rights of others. All God demands of judges is justice. Equal protection for all. Not protection for those who reject God by trampling on the rights of those who accept him.

Trust God and the blessings will come. Reject God and be rejected. It was true in King David's day. It is just as true today. That is all God asks of men. It is all he asks of governments.

THE KING'S FOOT

There are many legends that have grown up around a former slave in Ireland named Padraig, who is better known as St. Patrick. He is, of course, said to have driven all the snakes out of Ireland. That was pretty easy, because islands like Ireland rarely have any snakes. He is supposed to have sent the devil rolling downhill in a bell. But one of the great stories, possibly true, about Padraig concerns the conversion of the King of Cashel to Christianity.

It seems that the King of Cashel had heard Padraig's preaching, and decided to become a Christian. Since he was a king, this was a very big deal. If the king converted, so would many of his followers, so this was quite a coup for the preacher. On the day designated for the ceremony Padraig arrived in all of his ecclesiastical regalia, including a tall metal or wooden crosier. As he began the ceremony, which required at times the use of both hands, he forcefully stuck his crosier in the ground. Then he proceeded with the appropriate rites, including the sprinkling of the king which, by that time, had replaced baptism (immersion). As the public ceremonies ended, Padraig reached for his crosier, preparing to leave. At that time he noticed that he had stuck it through the king's foot, pinioning him to the ground. He immediately apologized to the king, and asked why he had not cried out or objected. In answer, the King of Cashel reportedly said, "I thought it was part of the ceremony."

Some people would probably condemn the blind faith of the King of Cashel. They might point out that ignorant faith is of little value, because God wants to be worshipped in "spirit and in truth." (Jn 4:24) Going through the motions without understanding, they would point out, is worthless. It is like the Methodist

minister who was traveling by horseback with "Raccoon" John Smith and debating infant baptism. As they crossed a river, Preacher Smith pushed the other minister off his horse. He then asked the Methodist if he had just been baptized. When he replied that he had only been dunked because he hadn't intended to be baptized, Mr. Smith pointed out that he had just proved his side of the debate. The ceremony without the knowledge of the individual is of no value.

On the other hand, perhaps the King of Cashel can be praised for his faith. He was so willing to become a Christian that he endured pain for a considerable time, thinking it was part of his commitment to his new God. How many people today would do the same thing? Some people are afraid of what others would say if they talked about God. Others refuse to participate in worship, even in congregational singing, because of fear of embarrassment. Still others are willing to be known as Christians, as long as they can keep their own pet sin in a closet at home.

God wants our total devotion, even if it means having our foot pierced with a crosier. "He that taketh not his cross, and followeth after me, is not worthy of me." (Matt 10:38) His disciples at the time probably did not understand what he meant by taking up their cross. They had not yet seen him literally take his on his back. Chances are he did not mean a cross in the foot. But if a cross through the foot is what comes your way in Christian life, then perhaps that is what he meant.

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. (Rom 12:1)

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