



## UNDERSTANDING GOD'S STEADFAST LOVE: GOD, GREED AND THE GOSPEL IN OUR COMTEMPORARY GENERATION

Reflection by  
**+John Cardinal Onaiyekan**  
**Archbishop Emeritus of Abuja.**

Presented at the 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration of the Cherubim and Seraphim Movement Church,  
Dakibiyu District Headquarters, Abuja, FCT on Saturday 31 October, 2020

### INTRODUCTION

**I**t is indeed a great honour for me to receive a special invitation as the Guest lecturer on this occasion when the Cherubim and Seraphim Movement Church here in Abuja is celebrating her 30th Anniversary.

Let me first of all congratulate all of you, especially my good friend, Special Apostle Pastor (Dr.) A.A. Bodunrin, the District Chairman and General Leader who has particularly brought the invitation to me. I have known Special Apostle Bodunrin for quite some time now in Abuja. A sincere friendship and mutual admiration have grown up between us, all to the Glory of God. I believe also that this is for the good and spiritual growth of both parties. May this 30th Anniversary bring blessings and graces to all the members of this Church, and through you to the rest of us within the FCT and in Nigeria at large.

### 1. The Scripture Text

The scripture text that has been indicated for my reflection is Psalm 108 vs 4, talking about God's Steadfast Love. In the Revised Standard Version, it reads as follows:

***For your steadfast love is higher than the heavens and your faithfulness reaches to the clouds.***

Other English versions of the Bible might have different translations. But one thing we must note is that this short verse contains two very deeply theological words and ideas. The two words in the original Hebrew text are **hesed** and **'emet**. The first word "hesed" has been translated as "steadfast love", sometimes it is

translated also as "covenant love". It is basically the love of God for His creatures, but a love that is steadfast, that is dependable. And this word "hesed", steadfast love, often goes along with the second word "emet" which has been translated as "faithfulness". It can also mean "truthfulness" or simply "fidelity". Here again, we have the idea of God whose offer for us can be trusted not to give way. It reminds us of what St. Paul said later on, "We may be unfaithful, God is always faithful".

### 2. In the Old Testament.

I will briefly go through some salient points about the steadfast love of God in the Old Testament.

#### a) God in Creation

I begin with God in creation. God went out of His way to create the universe and especially to devote special attention to creating the Human race. It is for no other reason than His love for us. God has no need of us. He had existed in all eternity without human beings. And He was perfectly happy. He created us so as to give us an opportunity to share in His goodness and blessings.

Let us note here that the blessings and love of God in creation reach out to every human being from the beginning of creation until the end. We often forget that we all derive from the same parents, Adam and Eve. We are so taken up by our differences of nationality, colour, race, and even religion, and we tend to forget that basically, we all belong together. It is God's intention and will that His creatures be one, that we should be

brothers and sisters having a common ancestry. We read in the book of Genesis that after God had created the rest of the universe, he decided to create man "in His own image and likeness" (Gen. 1:27) and created the woman too, who also shares in the image and likeness of God. "God looked at all that he created and indeed it was very good." (Gen. 1:31)

We look at God's creation today and we find it not very good. It is a pity that even God Himself may not find his creation as good as he made it. There is a lot of discussion today about the environment and about what we are doing with the creation of God. Our modern way of life is turning the beautiful garden of God's earth into a stinking refuse dump. It is a duty for all of us to make sure that we reduce the rate and amount of rubbish that we pile up on "our common home" which is how Pope Francis describes our planet. And so the first expression of God's love for humanity is that he created us. When we realise this, we have every reason therefore to love one another, as God loves every one of us.

#### b. The Call of Abraham

As the number of people grew in the world, God at a given point decided, again out of love, to call a particular person, Abraham. He asked him to leave his home and get ready to proceed to a land that will be made known to him. The call of Abraham was out of God's love for him, and Abraham accepted this call out of faith in the love of God for him. This is why Abraham has become "our father in the faith." (Rom. 4:12) Abraham took off from Mesopotamia, which is called today

Iraq, and landed in the Holy Land, which is today the states of Israel and Palestine. He was assured that this was the land promised him and his descendants. He lived there and his son Isaac and the son of Isaac, Jacob. The three generations lived in the Promised Land as strangers. The land promised was only a promise. This partly explains why it was not so difficult for them to relocate from the land of the Cannanite into Egypt because of famine in the land. Here God had prepared the place for them through Joseph, a member of the family that had been sold into Egypt by the same members of the family.

### **c. The People of Israel**

The people of Israel, the descendants of Jacob, remained in Egypt for more than three hundred years. At the end, they had grown into a big population, such that the Egyptians feared, and were no longer at ease with their numbers. You know the rest of the story, of how "a new Pharaoh who did not know Joseph" (Ex. 1:8) imposed heavy regulations on the people of Israel with the aim of exterminating them. The love of God was evident for the three hundred years that the people stayed in Egypt, because during that time, they grew in numbers and had a lot of properties and animals.

But the time came for them to return to the land that was promised to their ancestors. Despite, the three hundred years, the memories of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob remained firm. The leader of the return journey was Moses, specially prepared again through the steadfast love of God. Moses led them through the Red Sea with the mighty hand of God working great miracles, till they reached the Mount Sinai, where God made a covenant with them. The covenant meant an agreement between God and the people of Israel. Having seen the powerful hand of God leading them through the Red Sea and confounding the great army of the Egyptians, they happily gave themselves up under the care of their Lord God who led them out of Egypt.

The agreement was confirmed with the Ten Commandments as well as other rules and regulations that they were

expected to follow. The covenant between God and the people of Israel was completely at the initiative of God Himself. It was God's complete gift of his love to the people of Israel. He assured them that if they remained faithful to him, all will be well with them; otherwise they would suffer the consequence. The story of the journey from Egypt back to the Holy Land is very well related in the book of Exodus.

Even already, during the journey, the people not only doubted God but every now and again abandoned the worship of the true God. Although they were punished and very few of them made it to the Promised Land, the promise of God remained because his love is steadfast. And so Moses brought them to the edge of the Holy Land. There he finished his mission on earth and handed over to Joshua whom God used to establish the people of Israel in the land of the Canaanites, which today is called the Holy Land.

### **d) The Kingdom of Israel**

For quite some time, the people of Israel lived under Tribal leaders called the Judges until they opted for a king which gave rise to the Israelite kingdom, first with Saul and then with David, and the golden age of Solomon. In all these, we see the hand of God, full of love, faithfulness and compassion for his people. But at the same time, we also see the infidelity of the people of Israel to the covenant with God. As a result, God allowed them to fall prey to their enemies. The story of the destruction of Jerusalem including the desecration of the temple, the massacre of large numbers of people and the deportation of the cream of the people of Israel into exile in Babylon; all these show that God is always in control of history. Even though he continued to be faithful to his steadfast love to his people, He put them through the difficulties of learning through experiences and punishments that it is important to be faithful to God. The seventy years of exile in Babylon was an opportunity for soul searching which led to their repentance. Then God intervened again with heavy power through the king of Persia Cyrus who overthrew the Babylonian empire and released the Israelites from exile,

sending them back to the holy land to reconstruct their nation. After seventy

about the priority of God. Whatever may be our concerns and interests, God must always be put first, because His love for us is steadfast and He is faithful in all His goodness. Because of His steadfast love, we also have as priority to love God with all our hearts and with all our minds. This was already the first commandment in the Old Testament which Jesus Christ himself confirmed and renewed in the New Testament. The second commandment is like the first namely: to love our neighbour for God's sake. It is often said, that we should love our neighbour as we love ourselves. But the real Christian message is that we love our neighbour as God loves them. The love of God for our neighbour is steadfast and trust worthy. That is the kind of love we are expected to have for our neighbour. It is not surprising therefore that Jesus expects us to love not only our friends and those with whom we feel safe, but also we should love those who consider themselves as our enemies. Thus, he commands us to "bless those who curse us". (Mat. 5:44) The demands of the Christian gospels are very high in this regard and there is no way we can reduce it or bring it down to our level.

### 5. From Vicious Circle to virtuous Circle

Before I conclude, I want to refer us back again to the lesson of the Old Testament and apply it to the reality of our land today. From the Old Testament, we learnt the lesson that God enters into a covenant of love with His people. The people break the covenant through their sin. They are punished and in the course of their punishment, they repent. Any time they repent, because of His steadfast love for them, God forgives them and then restores them to the original covenant. Unfortunately, the cycle continues because either the same generation or another comes and breaks the new covenant and the cycle starts all over again. The important thing however is that God never gives up on His people. He always holds them dear to His heart. Even when he punishes them, it is out of His steadfast love. He punishes them like a Father disciplines his son so that they will learn to obey and be saved. This lesson is

valid for the whole of humanity.

In the present circumstances of our nation, we find ourselves now in the situation of chaos which did not start with the #ENDSARS protest. Many Nigerians, including the Church of God and some other religious communities, have been issuing warnings to Nigerians, and especially to our political leaders, that we cannot continue to run our affairs badly and hope that things will continue to go well. We have already seen that things are not going well. A lot of people are in terrible difficulties. When the youth come out in force, it is not only because they themselves are at the receiving end of bad governance. They protest also because they are the ones that are most aware that today's mistakes impact the future, in which they must live their own lives. But we cannot give up. There must be a way forward. And the way forward must start with the acknowledgment of the fact that things are not going well.

We often refer to the experience of South Africa after the *Apartheid* regime, when they went through a process of truth and reconciliation. At the beginning of this present return to civil rule under President Obasanjo, an effort was made to carry out such process under the now famous Oputa Panel. It was obvious that, no matter how good intentions were, it did not achieve its objective of bringing about reconciliation and peace. In fact, perpetrators of horrible acts of oppression got away scot free because there was no clear intention to admit the evils committed. The chaos and the problems of the nations will not be solved until evil is admitted.

But it is not enough to admit that one has done wrong. There must also be repentance and a sincere intention to avoid a repeat. This includes also clear apology for evil that has been perpetrated. Whatever the crime that has been committed, it is always possible to let go and to forgive if there is clear evidence of admission of guilt and repentance plus an apology. This normally should go with a good amount of reparation, in one form or the other.

From there we can move to the next step of forgiveness. In civil terms, we talk of amnesty.

Therefore, the emphasis we have been putting on punishment does not really carry us too far. We have been complaining that people are getting away with crimes. We say that our problem is impunity. But when we look at things more carefully, the insistence on people being punished does not open up for admission of guilt, less still for repentance and apology. If we can broaden our mind sufficiently to make room for forgiveness and amnesty, then we can demand truth and repentance. It is only then that reconciliation can take place. And with reconciliation comes peace.

We should learn our lesson from the experience of the Oputa Panel when the most guilty of the people failed to turn up at the panel and protected themselves with a battery of highest level lawyers. If we are to get out of where we are now, and to move forward, we should be able to find a way to be able to allow people to repent with some amount of dignity. It is a question of pursuing a logic of forgiveness, instead of the logic of revenge. Deep hurts are healed much better by a simply apology: "I am sorry", that stiff punishment on someone who does not admit guilt. It is said that anyone who thinks that forgiveness does not work, let him try revenge!

This is also true for those who are alleged to have stolen a lot from the nation. Is it possible to create a different scenario as follows?

- The thieves admit that they have stolen.
- They repent and bring back what they have stolen.
- They are forgiven, not in the sense that they can go away and continue to enjoy their loot. Rather, the forgiveness is that they are not threatened with jail terms or other stringent punishments.
- The state should be able to allow a reasonable amount for them to live decently in the years ahead.

If we are not ready to go this road, then

## PASTORS' COUNCIL, DAKIBIYU DISTRICT, ABUJA

*Rejoices with the*

District Chairman/General Leader

**Special Apostle Pastor (Dr.) Anthony Adedayo Bodunrin JP**

And the Entire Members of

**Cherubim & Seraphim Movement Church Worldwide,  
Dakibiyu District Headquarters, Abuja**



On the twin occasion of Our



*May God's Abundant Blessings and Divine Protection be Upon Us Amen*

Happy 30TH ANNIVERSARY!!!  
**Aseyi s'amodun!!! AYO NI O!!!**