

RELIGIOUS LIBERTY DAY – January 2025

Sermon:

Blessed and Courageous to Bless

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Scriptural Basis:

"Honor all people. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the king." (1 Peter 2:17, NKJV)

Introduction

The story of Joseph, who was taken as a slave to Egypt, was transformed into one of triumph and glory. He shared power with Pharaoh. From his position of influence, Joseph brought his father Jacob before Pharaoh, as recorded in Genesis 47:7-10:

"Then Joseph brought in his father Jacob and set him before Pharaoh; and Jacob blessed Pharaoh. Pharaoh said to Jacob, 'How old are you?' And Jacob said to Pharaoh, 'The days of the years of my pilgrimage are one hundred and thirty years; few and evil have been the days of the years of my life, and they have not attained to the days of the years of the life of my fathers in the days of their pilgrimage.' So Jacob blessed Pharaoh and went out from before Pharaoh."

Here, we see a scene where the patriarch blesses one of the most powerful kings. These verses invite us to reflect on our position before God and before authorities, to be courageous without arrogance, and to demonstrate the grace of Christ in all situations, relying on prayer. What difference can we make?

First, we will (1) draw inspiration from Jacob's courage (2) to understand our intrinsic value in Christ. Then we will consider (3) how to emulate Joseph in connecting others to authorities. Once in the presence of authority, what attitude should we adopt? Finally, we will recall (4) our mission—our ultimate purpose—which cannot succeed without prayer.

I. Jacob's Courage Before Pharaoh

Genesis 47:7, 10 illustrates an unusual interaction: Jacob, a nomadic shepherd, blesses Pharaoh, the most powerful ruler of his time. It may seem strange that Jacob, aged and without significant earthly possessions, takes the initiative to bless a king. Yet, this action holds deep spiritual significance. According to Hebrews 7:7, "Now beyond all contradiction the lesser is blessed by the better." Jacob understood that his position before God surpassed any earthly power. He acted not out of arrogance but with humble assurance.

Ellen White emphasizes that believers should exhibit a respectful attitude toward authorities while remaining faithful to their divine calling. She writes: "Let us say and do nothing that would unnecessarily close up our way. Let us go forward in the name of Christ, advocating the truths He has committed to us" (*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 6, p. 395). This instruction is crucial in a world where direct confrontation with authorities can easily be misinterpreted.

Jacob's interaction with Pharaoh shows us that the intrinsic value of a believer does not depend on social status or economic position but on their identity as a child of God. This reminds us that we too can stand before the powerful of this world with confidence and respect.

II. Intrinsic Value in Christ

In a world where believers are often marginalized, it is essential to recognize our value in Christ. Jacob's encounter with Pharaoh teaches us that the source of our courage lies in our relationship with God. Today, more than 360 million Christians face persecution worldwide, according to the 2023 Open Doors report. This includes acts of intolerance, physical violence, and legal and social discrimination. These alarming statistics remind us that religious freedom is a rare and precious privilege.

However, like Jacob, believers should not be paralyzed by fear or intimidation. Ellen White exhorts us to present the truth before authorities with discipline and humility (*Review and Herald*, July 28, 1896). This personal discipline, combined with total dependence on God, enables believers to face the challenges of persecution and remain faithful in their testimony.

A modern example of such courage is found among Christians in North Korea, where owning a Bible can lead to imprisonment or even death. Despite these risks, they continue to practice their faith in secret, demonstrating unshakable confidence in God. Their courage inspires us all, reminding us that our strength comes from God, not our abilities.

You are more than what people say about you. Your worth is determined by your Creator. Do not listen to those who discourage or belittle you. Do not dwell on past failures or wounds; do not look to yourself alone, as suggested by New Age proponents who claim self-sufficiency. You are unique in this world.

If, like Gideon, you consider yourself the smallest in the nation, God speaks to you now as He did to this fearful man: "The Lord is with you, you mighty man of valor!" (Judges 6:12, NKJV). "Gideon said to Him, 'O my Lord, how can I save Israel? Indeed my clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father's house.' And the Lord said to him, 'Surely I will be with you, and you shall defeat the Midianites as one man'" (Judges 6:15-16, NKJV). Rise and be courageous! You will have victory in this battle. Despised and abandoned, God commands that you be strong and victorious.

If, like David, you are considered a flea or a dead dog, forgotten and rejected, God knows you. To everyone's surprise, the insignificant shepherd will be clothed with majesty and glory. The rejected stone becomes the cornerstone.

"We should be mentally able to present God's Word even before the highest authorities in the world, glorifying His name. Let us seize every opportunity to intellectually prepare for God's work." Ellen G. White, *Christ's Object Lessons*, p. 333.

"For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind." (2 Timothy 1:7, NKJV)

III. Do Not Fear Authorities But Avoid Provoking Them

One of the challenges faced by religious leaders is the hesitation to engage with civil authorities, visit them, or pray for them and their families. Some find excuses not to attend meetings or invitations. Joseph accompanied his father Jacob to Pharaoh. He had this ease of access to the monarch. Similarly, today, many holding high positions should play the role of connectors or facilitators.

If you do not know how to give a Bible study to your ministerial colleague, invite your pastor to join you and give them the opportunity to bless the authorities and cultivate the habit of sharing the three angels' messages in the upper echelons of the nation. This is how radical change can be introduced into governance systems.

"Let us not defy authorities. Let our written or spoken words be carefully measured, lest we appear antagonistic to law and order. Let us say and do nothing that would unnecessarily close up our way. Let us go forward in the name of Christ, advocating the truths He has committed to us. If men forbid us to carry out this work, then let us answer, as did the apostles: 'Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than to God, you judge. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard'" (Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 6, p. 395).

The example of Jesus is fundamental here. Although He lived under a corrupt and tyrannical government, He never attempted political reforms. Ellen White states: "He who was our Example kept aloof from earthly governments. Not because He was indifferent to the woes of men, but because the remedy did not lie in merely human and external measures" (*The Desire of Ages*, p. 509).

"Present every issue to God in prayer. He alone can restrain the power of authorities. Do not advance rashly. Let no one lack wisdom in claiming their freedom, giving an impression of insubordination, but act as servants of God."

This teaches us not to provoke authorities unnecessarily but to submit insofar as it does not lead to spiritual compromise. In 1 Peter 2:17, the apostle exhorts believers to "Honor all people. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the king" (NKJV). This balance between respect for authorities and faithfulness to God is essential for bearing witness to the love and truth of Christ.

A contemporary example of this approach is Martin Luther King Jr., who, despite fierce opposition, advocated nonviolence and respect for the law while defending civil rights. His faith-based activism changed history without compromising Christian principles.

The early Christians showed courage in the face of authorities. They blessed them but never followed them into disobedience to God.

IV. A Responsibility for Prayer and Intercession

Religious Liberty Day reminds us of our responsibility to pray for nations and their leaders. 1 Timothy 2:1-2 calls us to intercede "for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence" (NKJV). This prayer is not only an act of love and faith but also a declaration of trust in God's sovereignty.

Let us not be mistaken: neither from presidential palaces, prisons, nor the imposing offices of our ministries will the radical change for development and prosperity come. A miracle is needed—the miracle of the Gospel. We must return to the Gospel—not a revised, tailored, or interpreted-for-convenience Gospel, but the everlasting Gospel. Not a mandatory Gospel imposed by men on other men or by a global authority, but a Gospel freely accepted by individuals conscious of the absolute need to change attitudes and acquire positive behaviors to halt the destructive processes plaguing humanity.

If the inhabitants of the earth would turn to the God of the Bible and study the plan designed for humanity's happiness, how different would the actions and circumstances we deplore be! "Oh, that you had heeded My commandments! Then your peace would have been like a river, and your righteousness like the waves of the sea. Your descendants also would have been like the sand, and the offspring of your body like the grains of sand; His name would not have been cut off nor destroyed from before Me" (Isaiah 48:18-19, NKJV).

Today, as religious tensions rise in many regions, our role as a church is to promote peace and the everlasting Gospel. Ellen White reminds us that "the remedy for the world's woes begins with the regeneration of hearts." Our prayers and testimonies can be powerful tools to bring hope and reconciliation.

Conclusion

Jacob, in blessing Pharaoh, demonstrated an acute awareness of his value before God. We too must act with courage, respect, and faith. Let our lives be a living testimony to God's grace. Ellen White reminds us: "Let us do nothing that would unnecessarily close up our way, but let us proclaim the truth boldly."

We are blessed with every spiritual blessing in Christ Jesus. Let us not keep this treasure to ourselves but bless others without fear or shame. We are blessed and must be courageous in sharing this blessing with all authorities.

"That the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him, the eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power which He worked in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come. And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all" (Ephesians 1:17-23, NKJV).

Prayer: Lord, grant us the courage to live faithfully in You, honoring authorities while proclaiming the principles of Your kingdom. Amen.

Suggested Activities for Religious Liberty Day and Prayer for the Nations

1. **Special Recognition Service**
 - Invite authorities to an official ceremony where they will be honored for their efforts in maintaining peaceful coexistence and protecting religious freedoms.
 - Present them with a gift, such as a book, a Bible, a certificate, or a commemorative plaque, in recognition of their commitment. Additionally, extend an invitation to them for the WAD Impact 2025 conferences.
2. **Forum on Religious Liberty**
 - Organize a panel or roundtable discussion involving religious leaders, civil officials, and legal experts. A suggested theme could be: *“Collaborating to Promote Peace and Religious Tolerance.”*
 - Encourage constructive dialogue on the challenges and opportunities related to religious freedom and invite participants to the WAD Impact 2025 conferences.
3. **Community Service Activity**
 - Propose a collaborative activity (e.g., food distribution or community cleanup) involving church members and civil authorities to demonstrate the importance of working together for the common good. At the conclusion, invite participants and beneficiaries to attend the WAD Impact 2025 conferences.
4. **Training and Awareness Session**
 - Host a workshop to educate participants, including authorities, on the importance of religious liberty and its implications for societal development.
5. **Pastoral Prayer for the Nation**
 - Dedicate a segment of the worship service to prayer for peace, wisdom, and unity among governments and citizens.
6. **Dinner or Official Reception**
 - Organize a dinner or reception where civil leaders and church members can interact informally, strengthening personal relationships. Distribute invitations to the WAD Impact 2025 at the end of the program.
7. **Exhibition and Testimonials**
 - Set up an exhibition showcasing stories and testimonials of faith in contexts of religious persecution.
 - Invite individuals who have faced challenges in this area to share their experiences and the impact of positive relationships with authorities.
8. **Signing of a Common Commitment**
 - Propose a declaration or mutual commitment to promote values of respect, tolerance, and religious freedom. Make this a symbolic activity signed by religious and civil leaders.
9. **Cultural Concert or Festival**
 - Host an interfaith concert or cultural event celebrating religious and cultural diversity, demonstrating the harmony possible among different beliefs. Invite participants and attendees to the WAD Impact 2025 conferences.
10. **Communication Campaign**
 - Launch a local media campaign with messages encouraging religious freedom and cooperation. Use radio spots, social media posts, and posters. Ensure that WAD Impact 2025 is prominently mentioned.

You can select the activities best suited to your local context and available resources.