

“REACHING TODAY’S AMERICA FOR CHRIST”

#5: “America’s Secular Age”

SCRIPTURE: Judges 2:1-3, 6-12, 16-17, 21:25

INTRO:

In the days after Moses and the days when Joshua was too old to lead, Israel was led by Judah in their continuing conquest of the promised land of Canaan. Each tribe was to conquer the section allotted to them. However, the mission was never completed. Canaanites were allowed to remain. Judges 2:1-3 tells us:

¹Now the angel of the Lord went up from Gilgal to Bochim. And he said, “I brought you up from Egypt and brought you into the land that I swore to give to your fathers. I said, ‘I will never break my covenant with you, ²and you shall make no covenant with the inhabitants of this land; you shall break down their alters.’ But you have not obeyed my voice. What is this you have done? ³So now I say, I will not drive them out before you, but they shall become thorns in your sides, and their gods shall be a snare to you.”

We have seen this judgment carried out, haven’t we? Who are the thorns in Israel’s side today? Is it not the Arabs who worship false gods? Is it not Allah whose Dome of the Rock sits on the very site of Solomon’s temple?

Picking up the Judges record in verse 6, we read:

⁶When Joshua dismissed the people, the people of Israel went each to his inheritance to take possession of the land. ⁷And the people served the Lord all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua, who had seen all the great work that the Lord had done for Israel. ⁸And Joshua the son of Nun, the servant of the Lord, died at the age of 110 years. ⁹And they buried him within the boundaries of his inheritance in Timnath-heres, in the hill country of Ephraim, north of the mountain of Gaash. ¹⁰And all that generation also were gathered to their fathers. And there arose another

generation after them who did not know the Lord or the work that he had done for Israel.

¹¹And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and served the Baals. ¹²And they abandoned the Lord, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt. They went after other gods, from among the peoples who were around them and bowed down to them...

Then, in verses 16-17, Scripture says, “Then the Lord raised up judges, who saved them out of the hand of those who plundered them. Yet they did not listen to their judges, for they whored after other gods and bowed down to them. They soon turned aside from the way in which their fathers had walked, who had obeyed the commandments of the Lord, and they did not do so.”

At the close of the period of the judges, the last verse of the scriptural record says: ***“In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes”*** (Judges 21:25).

The children of Israel didn’t obey the Lord. As a result, they haven’t really had a land of their own. To this day, they must share the land with their enemies and tolerate their paganism. They violated the condition for making the Holy Land their own.

I submit to you today that what happened with Israel is very similar to America’s history. Now, I’m not suggesting that America is God’s chosen nation in modern history and that we should have exterminated the native Americans who lived here before us. I’m just saying that, like Israel of that day, America has, to a great extent, abandoned God, and there has arisen a generation – the millennials – that, by and large, does not know God and how He has blessed us as a nation in the past. America has entered a “secular” age.

WHAT IS “SECULARISM”?

According to the National Secular Society’s own website, secularism is:

1. Separation of religious institutions from state institutions and a public sphere where religion may participate but not dominate.
2. Freedom to practice one's faith or belief without harming others or to change it or not have one, according to one's own conscience.
3. Equality so that our religious beliefs or lack of them doesn't put any of us at an advantage or a disadvantage.

However,

SECULARISM JUST WON'T WORK.

While this definition seems reasonable, sustaining the *separation, freedom* and *equality* part is impossible. On the one hand, there is the non-Christian, non-Jewish, non-religious part of society that wants to "change with the times," so to speak, and demand tolerance, acceptance and even legal support of practices, behaviors and lifestyles that are in direct opposition to much of the population, namely, immorality, abortion, same sex marriage, etc.

When Christians speak out against such things and promote what we consider godliness, secularists feel that they must suppress us, lest their beliefs be challenged or taken away.

Secularism claims to protect free speech and expression, but when what secularists see as free speech and expression comes face to face with some religious free speech and expression, one winds up in such opposition to the other that there is damaging conflict. One example is that of the bakery that refuses to bake a cake for a same sex wedding. The secularist wants a law guaranteeing that homosexuals who want to marry can order a wedding cake wherever they want to. When a non-discriminatory law is interpreted a certain way, the Christian baker is legally required to provide the cake. However, such a mandatory requirement violates the baker's privacy, free speech and expression.

So, secularism, as secularists define it, winds up dividing a nation. And we are a divided nation.

Consider what “secularists” want...

THEY WANT “FREEDOM OF THOUGHT AND CONSCIENCE.”

Tell me: What does freedom of thought and conscience lead to? Judges 21:25 tells us: ***“Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.”*** In other words, each person decided for himself what was right, what was moral, etc. And what does that lead to? A society or culture in which you find a very wide spectrum of standards – so wide that the nation is polarized or divided, and those in each side of the spectrum vie for dominance because they want the culture to reflect their values, not those of the other side of the spectrum.

In such a society, those calling for adherence to God’s standards as laid out in Scripture will be attacked and silenced. Christianity is intolerable in a secular world because it teaches standards and a specific morality. Such teachings fly into the face of a society where individuals set their own standards.

How long do you think that ***“Everyone did what was right in his own eyes”*** thing lasted? It lasted until the people got so tired of the chaos that they asked the aged Samuel to appoint a king to rule over them.

But let me challenge your thinking just a bit...

HOW IN THE WORLD DID THE CHURCH GET ESTABLISHED AND GROW IN THE PAGAN ROMAN EMPIRE?

Christianity, with its “God is love,” “grace,” and “forgiveness,” message, made no sense at all to the Romans. They worshiped many different gods, but none of them were gracious and loving. The message of Christianity was unlike any other religious teaching the world had known. To the Romans, the teachings of Christianity were radical.

Christians, to the Romans, were weird and anti-social. They wouldn't attend public spectacles, wouldn't eat meat sacrificed to the gods and refused to worship in the Roman temples. When Romans converted to Christianity, they stopped sacrificing to the gods, and so, when disasters occurred, converts to Christianity were blamed. The Romans decided that the gods were angry because of the refusal of the Christians to sacrifice to them. Roman citizens were even required to recognize the emperor as a god. Christians refused.

As converts to Christianity increased in numbers, they were persecuted all the more. Nero blamed them for the fire that burned most of Rome and executed them by the hundreds. Domitian was even more cruel, demanding that they acknowledge him as "Lord and God." When they refused, they were killed. When a plague ravaged the Empire from A.D. 251 to 266, claiming 5,000 lives a day, Christians were blamed for provoking the wrath of the gods and executed by the thousands.

In the beginning of the 4th century, under Emperor Diocletian, church buildings were razed, and copies of the Scriptures were burned, Christians were banned from public office, and both church leaders and church members who would not sacrifice to the emperor were tortured and imprisoned.

Amazingly, Christianity not only survived, but actually thrived under the constant threat of imprisonment, enforced servitude, confiscation of property, and martyrdom. They refused to renounce Christ and their faith until, in A.D. 311, the "Edict of Galerius" granted Christians freedom of worship for the first time. Following that, the Diocletian tetrarchy crumbled and, after a battle for control, Constantine became emperor.

Even though Constantine, reportedly, became a Christian, the population of the Empire, by and large, remained pagan. They merely added Jesus to the pantheon of gods and remained profoundly polytheistic.

During this time, the church had inner struggles with false doctrine, which led to the church council at Nicaea, out of which came The Nicene Creed.

Constantine's son, Julian, who had rejected Christianity, rose to power and prohibited Christians from serving in the emperor's bodyguard, removed Christian officials from government, and prohibited them from being teachers in Roman schools.

Later emperors tried to strike a balance between paganism and Christianity, but it wasn't until 380, when Emperor Theodosius was baptized, that Christianity became the official religion of the empire.

In the early 400s the Western Roman Empire experienced a series of attacks by Visigoths and other barbarians, for which the Romans blamed the Christians. In the middle of all this, Christianity spread throughout the empire by displaced Roman believers. The king and queen of Georgia were converted. The king of Ethiopia was baptized. A Christian by the name of Patrick evangelized Ireland. A few decades later, Christianity was brought to Scotland.

In spite of hardship, persecution, slavery, torture, imprisonment and even death, Christians not only survived, but thrived. Why? How? I believe that it is the nature of the Christian faith. I believe those early Christians believed what the apostle Paul wrote to the Romans in chapter 8:

³¹What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? ³⁵who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? ³⁶As it is written, 'For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.' ³⁷No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸For I am sure that neither death nor life, not angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

CONCLUSION:

I'm not saying that such difficult times are coming for the church in America, but I do believe that the liberals and secularists are going to become more powerful and more extreme in the future. We have entered a secular age. By this I mean that secularists are in the majority. I don't have a lot of confidence that America will ever be the America of our fathers again. The faith of our children and grandchildren will be tested. I hope they will be faithful and strong.