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Freedom of religion or belief

Three biblical encouragements and challenges of ancient times for today

Dear brothers and sisters of the European Baptist fellowship,

What could encourage us to strengthen freedom of religion and belief? What could encourage us more than God himself who gives us examples of his tolerance and freedom to accept different religions and beliefs in his creation?

Let us listen to the prophetic words of the Book of Isaiah, words that amaze us by showing us how big the freedom of different religions is with God!

If people, mostly Christian people, are full of fear about too much tolerance, than normally they fear that God is not the only God anymore, if you are to respect other religions and beliefs. They fear that the God of the Bible is not in power and charge anymore, if you give freedom to different beliefs. But the prophetic word shows that it is the other way round: God is so mighty that he is able to respect other beliefs and use them for his holy purposes.

Jerusalem to Be Inhabited

²⁴ "This is what the LORD says—
your Redeemer, who formed you in the womb:

I am the LORD,
the Maker of all things,
who stretches out the heavens,
who spreads out the earth by myself,
²⁵ who foils the signs of false prophets
and makes fools of diviners,
who overthrows the learning of the wise
and turns it into nonsense,
²⁶ who carries out the words of his servants
and fulfills the predictions of his messengers,

who says of Jerusalem, 'It shall be inhabited,'
of the towns of Judah, 'They shall be rebuilt,'
and of their ruins, 'I will restore them,'
²⁷ who says to the watery deep, 'Be dry,
and I will dry up your streams,'
²⁸ **who says of Cyrus, 'He is my shepherd
and will accomplish all that I please;**
he will say of Jerusalem, "Let it be rebuilt,"
and of the temple, "Let its foundations be laid."

Isaiah 45 New International Version (NIV)

45 “This is what the LORD **says to his anointed,**
to Cyrus, whose right hand I take hold of
to subdue nations before him
and to strip kings of their armor,
to open doors before him
so that gates will not be shut:
2 I will go before you
and will level the mountains^[a];
I will break down gates of bronze
and cut through bars of iron.
3 I will give you hidden treasures,
riches stored in secret places,
so that you may know that I am the LORD,
the God of Israel, who summons you by name.
4 For the sake of Jacob my servant,
of Israel my chosen,
I summon you by name
and bestow on you a title of honor,
though you do not acknowledge me.
5 **I am the LORD, and there is no other;**
apart from me there is no God.
I will strengthen you,
though you have not acknowledged me,
6 so that from the rising of the sun
to the place of its setting
people may know there is none besides me.
I am the LORD, and there is no other.
7 I form the light and create darkness,
I bring prosperity and create disaster;
I, the LORD, do all these things.

The prophet who is speaking to Israel is speaking to a ruined and devastated group of people. The Israelites are groaning with pain, that God has left them and is not in control any more, because the capital Jerusalem has been destroyed, the city wall damaged, the Temple ruined and the Temple treasures taken to Babylon. In contrary to this mood, God is saying to Israel: I am the creator of heaven and earth and I am the only one. “I am the LORD, the Maker of all things”.

The remembrance of God as the creator is not a theology of holiday-feelings, of feeling good while lying at the beach; the remembrance of God as the creator is a word of comfort for all people, who doubt that God is still in control. He is. The Maker of all things makes and directs the way of Israel and his people! So looking to the signs of creation, to the hills, the stars, the sea is to discover that God can help in history, that God can change every situation, that God is in control.

So this Maker of all things can speak even to people, who do not acknowledge him, who do not even know him personally, who do not respect him as the God of all Gods. The Persian King Cyrus is such a guy. He is worshipping other gods, surely Marduk, the god of Babylon, and Ahuramazda, the god of Persian. He believes in stars, the sun and moon, and all powers of heaven. And King Cyrus is powerful; he rules the whole world of the ancient humankind.

But the prophet Isaiah is speaking to the scared people of Israel and says to them, that Cyrus is the shepherd called by the God of Israel, that Cyrus is the anointed one, the Messiah for Israel in its dark situation!

The prophet is passing on the words of God, that the God of Israel is calling Cyrus by his name and gives him a title of honour - " though you do not acknowledge me".

That is a surprise. It is amazing, that the God of Israel is so almighty that he can use a foreigner, a stranger, an unbeliever to fulfill his promises for his chosen people.

The Bible tells us over manifold periods of Israel's history that God is tolerant with people of other religions and that these religious and political powers are tolerant with Israel. Cyrus was ruling a huge kingdom and gave freedom to local beliefs and religions, as long as the people paid taxes to the king!

Furthermore Cyrus is supportive; he is enabling and providing for the cult at the Jerusalem Temple. The Persian king commands his servants that the treasure of the Temple needs to be brought back to Jerusalem, and the Persian king is paying for the costs to re-erect the Judean Temple!

The ruler of the majority of the society, the powerful king, is providing for the minority of a group of believers and protecting their right of freedom of religion and belief.

So if you want to measure the border of support and help from other beliefs, than you find here an example of the wideness of mental encouragement, political support and legal security granted to strange people and beliefs.

Furthermore, the Persian King gave lawful empowerment to the religious rules of the Jews, not as exotic rules, but as official Persian Rules for Jews! He authorized the Torah with the importance and significance of the Persian law!

The secret of this historical event is the manner in which the prophet is linking this amazing development to the power of the unique and only God:

⁵ I am the LORD, and there is no other;

apart from me there is no God.

I will strengthen you,

though you have not acknowledged me,

⁶ so that from the rising of the sun

to the place of its setting

people may know there is none besides me.

The reason why the LORD is using Cyrus as a King of Freedom is to witness to all people, that he alone is the only God who can accept and use other beliefs...

Even if Cyrus himself is not acknowledging God, people may discover that God himself is using Cyrus like a hidden puppet player.

This remembrance leads to us to trust that tolerance does not necessarily mean to be indifferent or unconcerned. Tolerance does not necessarily weaken your witness, rather it can strengthen your testimony.

Especially if the majority needs to decide how to handle minorities, the Persian Period is more or less an ideal example of how beautiful freedom of religion and belief can be – for the sake of people and for the sake of God!

Let me remind you briefly of two other examples of the beauty of freedom of religion and belief:

There was a commander of the army of Aram – a chief of the Syrian soldiers, “he was a great man in the sight of his master and highly regarded” (2Ki 5:1). Everything was “gold” in his life, but there was one “but”, “but he had leprosy”. To make the story short – he asked the prophet Elisha for advice and he was healed by washing himself seven times in the Jordan. This bath and new-born experience converted him to a new belief.

We read at 2Kings 5:15f.

¹⁵ Then Naaman and all his attendants went back to the man of God. He stood before him and said, “Now I know that there is no God in all the world except in Israel. So please accept a gift from your servant.”

¹⁶ The prophet answered, “As surely as the LORD lives, whom I serve, I will not accept a thing.” And even though Naaman urged him, he refused.

¹⁷ “If you will not,” said Naaman, “please let me, your servant, be given as much earth as a pair of mules can carry, for your servant will never again make burnt offerings and sacrifices to any other god but the LORD. ¹⁸ But may the LORD forgive your servant for this one thing: When my master enters the temple of Rimmon to bow down and he is leaning on my arm and I have to bow there also—when I bow down in the temple of Rimmon, may the LORD forgive your servant for this.”

The Syrian soldier experienced the grace of God and he acknowledged the God of life as only God. He wants to pay back something of the grace he received, but grace can never be bought.

Travelling back home he wants to take some Israelite earth with himself, to have some piece of the Holy Land under his feet and under his offering place.

But he knows that he is coming back into a society of multi religions. And because of his position at the king's palace, he is under pressure to bow down before his ancient God – Rimmon. Does he have to quit his job and follow the one and only God? The prophet Elisha promises the tolerance of God in this special case of conversion.

We read

¹⁹ "Go in peace," Elisha said.

Peace is more important than to be right and pure?! Obviously.

Lastly I want to remind you of the Renewed Covenant of Shechem in the times of Joshua:

The historian of the Book of Joshua presents a great speech of Joshua, *the* great speech of Joshua to all the people, reminding them of all the experiences with the God of Life. Joshua is challenging the people to commit themselves to God and to make a decision:

¹⁴ "Now fear the LORD and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your ancestors worshiped beyond the Euphrates River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD.

¹⁵ But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD."

Joshua 24,14-15

Joshua pleads to them to follow the God who brought them out of Egypt, the God who gave them the possibility to live in Canaan and so forth. But even Joshua, who is without any doubts in his belief, emphasises the freedom of choice, the freedom of conscience, the freedom of belief.

As a leader and missionary Joshua himself is sharing *his* testimony - that the God of Israel is better and more worthwhile than all the gods of their ancestors - even the gods of the forefathers, *but* he opens the space of decision and does not force them with violence or judgements.

Conclusion

Three reminders of ancient Old Testament times can be helpful in our survey and consultation about the freedom of religion and belief.

If we are in a majority position – how do we act towards minorities?

If we are in a minority position – how grateful would we be if all rulers were like the Persian King Cyrus?

If there are dilemma situations of new and old belief – can we be full of peace, even if we compromise our lifestyle like Naaman had to do?

If we are fully convinced of the right path to follow, do we have enough courage to share our testimony, to be Christ's ambassadors and to invite people to Christ on Christ's behalf (2Cor 5:20), but to not force anybody - but rather to give freedom of choice?

May the God of peace and love bless the governments of our very different countries and the leadership of the church we belong to – may HE bless this special day of consultation!

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