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The Forging of a Servant of God, 8

At times, ministry can be rather exciting and wonderfully fulfilling. Acts 2 describes the response that came as the result of the first sermon Peter ever preached, Luke wrote:

Acts 2:41, "So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and there were added that day about three thousand souls."

Wow! Talk about a wonderful beginning! And yet it didn't stop there. Notice the response Peter got to his second formal sermon:

Acts 4:4, "But many of those who had heard the message believed; and the number of

the men came to be about five thousand.”

This would continue for some time as the Lord brought forth amazing fruit as a result of the ministrations of the early church (cf. Acts 5:14)! Yet it wouldn't always be that way! Peter indeed would be used by God to bring many people to saving faith, AND YET Peter himself would encounter multiple setbacks in his life. Ultimately, he faced martyrdom and was crucified upside down!

We are looking at some of the expectations we ought to have when it comes to ministry, and they are all negative, (we will review the positive ones) Now, that doesn't mean that ministry is all doom and gloom. Again, there will be wonderful times where fruit is enjoyed and fellowship is rich. Yet, and this is important, we must be careful that we NOT derive our expectations for ministry from the success stories we read from Scripture or church history. These are but “freeze-frame” moments in the course of a life filled with ups and downs!

Here are the expectations we ought to have as we approach ministry, all negative which should sober us rather than discourage us this day! First off notice, Ezekiel's expectation was that ministry would bring difficulty when and where least expected.

Ezekiel 3: 4-6, “Then He said to me, ‘Son of man, go to the house of Israel and speak with My words to them. For you are NOT being sent to a people of unintelligible speech or difficult language, BUT to the house of Israel, nor to many peoples of unintelligible speech or difficult language, whose words you cannot understand. But I have sent you to THEM WHO SHOULD LISTEN TO YOU.”

I don't think God could have stated it any clearer than what we have here when it comes to what you and I *naturally think* when it comes to ministry amongst our family and friends. Initially, it sounds like a posh calling. In theory, when it comes to them ministry will be like coming home. These people know us, love us, and respect us! When we therefore endeavor to help them when it comes to Christ, His Kingdom, His service, there is no question that they will appreciate our labor and warmly receive it! Even if they don't like what we are saying, yet because of our mutual love and respect, we know they will listen when others would not! This is what we expect when it comes to ministry in the household of God! Yet what will be the reality in many cases?

Ezekiel 3:7, “YET the house of Israel will NOT be willing to listen to you, since they are not willing to listen to Me. Surely the whole house of Israel is stubborn and obstinate.”

What a shocking slap in the face! This is the proverbial dousing of cold water! Rather than support and understanding, what will be that which characterizes some of the people we are called to serve? Stubbornness and Obstinacy! Let's look at these words:

- Stubborn: חִזִּיקַי־מִצַּח (*chiziqay-metsach*): the word behind the translation is actually

two words. The first is -חָזָק (*chazaq*): the idea behind this word is to “be strong” or “become strong.” As such, it pictures something or someone that has become immovable or strongly resistant to change. When the angel Gabriel approached Daniel who was trembling before the Lord the angel said this:

Daniel 10:19b, “Peace be with you; take courage and be courageous!”

In other words, *relying on the grace of God, be steadfast and immovable; don’t shrink back!* That at is the word used here, but in a negative sense. In our passage, the people of God- through practice- had become strong/immovable in their sin.

- מְצָח (*metsach*): this word is taken from anatomy and is used in reference the “forehead!” The picture is that of animals- an ox or ram- butting heads.

Think of the many videos you have seen of two male rams fighting? They get some distance away from each other, run full speed, and then bash their heads together! How can they do that? They have an incredibly “strong forehead!” This is the word used here in reference to the people of God and their sin! On account of their love of sinning AND God’s disciplining hand, rather than becoming soft and so quick to repent, they cultivated a hard head, a thick skull! The more God placed obstacles in their paths to block their way to sin (cf. Hosea 2:6-7), the harder their head became as they bashed against the obstacles in an effort to break them down!

Rather than being quick to repent, some in the body of Christ are in the process of rationalizing and justifying their sin. This is going on right now in some of the lives of God’s people, the very ones we will be fellowshiping with today! They/you/me are NOT praying and laboring for God to break our wayward will and so give us a broken and contrite heart. RATHER, we/they are scheming to find better ways to sin or enhance their sin. Referencing Proverbs 22:13 which speaks of the treacherous/deceitful route of sin, John Piper wrote this:

One profound biblical insight we need to embrace is that our heart exploits our mind to justify what the heart wants. That is, our deepest desires precede the rational functioning of our minds and incline the mind to perceive and think in a way that will make the desires look right... Doing the evil we love makes us hostile to the light of truth which will expose the evil and rob us of its fleeting pleasures. In this condition the mind becomes a factory of half-truths, equivocations, sophistries, evasions, and lies- anything to protect the evil desires of the heart from exposure and destruction. (Piper, 2016)

This is what occurs when we allow sin in any form to gain a foothold in our lives. And that is the battle that is raging around us in the hearts of many in the body of Christ this very moment. The result? As sin is privately indulged in, the Christian’s “forehead” gets “harder and harder” as they resist the Lord. Such had become most of the people of God to whom Ezekiel was called

to minister. There is another sin which had come to characterize them as well! They also had become:

- Obstinate: וְקָשִׁי-לֵב (*q'sheh-leb*); this likewise is NOT one word, BUT two words in the Hebrew. The first is קָשֶׁה (*qāšeh*): we've seen this word before. It is a farming word referencing first (1) the effect of an overly heavy yoke on an animal (it is hard to bear) and then (2) the consequent rebellion of the animal when the farmer attempts to place the yoke on the ox's neck a second time. Accordingly, the word speaks of a strong, violent resistance. The second word behind the translation is לֵב (*leb*): which is the Hebrew word for heart.

Combined the picture is an activity that is NOT visibly observable, BUT that which also occurs in the heart of the sinner who in the inner life fights against the Lord when God places thorns between them and their sin. Not only does their "forehead thicken" on account of its repeated bashing against the wall of preserving grace, but their "heart becomes wild in rebellion"!

This is why when a sinner, be they Christian or non-Christian, be they family or friend, is confronted on account of their sin, the Bible tells us that it potentially is an explosive situation!

Psalm 39:11a, "When you discipline a man with rebukes for sin, you consume like a moth what is dear to him..."

It is on account of this secret battle that ministry at times will bring difficulty where you Least expect it! Those who you think should receive your ministry at times may be the very ones who hurt you the most! So once again, don't be naïve! AND don't make resolve statements or ministry changes because of a treacherous response to your love and care. Such is part and parcel of ministering in a sinful world to sinful people- many will be "stubborn" and "obstinate"! Notice a second expectation, is that at times, ministry will result in active persecution.

Active Persecution

Ezekiel 3:25, "As for you, son of man, they will put ropes on you and bind you with them, so that you cannot go out among them."

I won't spend much time here for I've already made reference to this when we examined Ezekiel 2:6.¹ On top of suffering "a sting" whose initial injury will remain long with you, ministry will also involve restriction. In Ezekiel's case, it literally came in the form of "fetters on his hands and feet"! Listen to the many promises in Scripture that God gives us as it relates to ministry.

John 15:20a, "Remember the word that I said to you, 'A slave is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you..."

This is what we must expect at times from the cheerful, fun loving people God has called us to serve! We see it in the life of Paul when he was converted:

Acts 9:16, "...I will show him how much he must suffer for My name's sake."

We see it in the life of Jeremiah.

Jeremiah 12:6, "For even your brothers and the household of your father, EVEN THEY have dealt treacherously with you, EVEN THEY have cried aloud after you. Do not believe them, although they may say nice things to you." (cf. Jeremiah 20:10)

Though we might expect it from the world, this text indicates that it is from the very ones we would expect to support and encourage us that we will be most hurt (cf. John 2:24-25)! How Ezekiel needed to hear this, again, he was being called to minister NOT to pagans, BUT God's people.

Ezekiel 3:5, "For you are not being sent to a people of unintelligible speech or difficult language, BUT to the house of Israel."

And yet, these very same individuals; his family, relatives, and friends, that would physically attack him! The ministry to which we have been called is going to be hard. NOT ONLY are we ministering to brothers and sisters who at times will be losing their battle of sanctification and so be hardened to the things of the Lord. But these very ones will lash out at God and hit us! At these times we must remember that Christ is the ultimate target, not us, "...[they] will not be willing to listen to you, since they are not willing to listen to Me..." (Ezekiel 3:7)!

Accordingly, Ezekiel — and we along with him — must realize that his/our only ally in life and in death is NOT the fellow believer, BUT Christ! That does NOT mean we ought to look with suspicion upon one another. RATHER, it means that we understand that each of us are in a battle with Christ. As such, there will be times when the Christian will not be at his best when he bites the hand that would seek to care for him! This is why Peter exhorted us this way:

1 Peter 4:8, "Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins."

It is somewhat ironic and something we must never forget that in ministry we are called to minister to men and women just like us! That is why pride on account of a hurt or an unforgiving spirit is so ludicrous!

Thirdly, ministry will involve struggling with our own inability.

Ezekiel 3:26, "Moreover, I will make your tongue stick to the roof of your mouth so that you will be dumb², and cannot be a man who rebukes them, for they are a rebellious

house.”

This is an amazing statement in its own right. Unlike Isaiah, Jeremiah, and the many other prophets of the Lord, for the first seven years of Ezekiel’s prophetic ministry, the prophet’s mouth would be closed! What does this mean?

Ezekiel 12:6b, 9, 11a, “...I have set you as a sign to the house of Israel... Son of man, has not the house of Israel, the rebellious house, said to you, ‘What are you doing?’ ... Say, ‘I am a sign to you. As I have done, so it will be done to them...’”

Other prophets were called to be signs to God’s people.³ Yet with Ezekiel, during the first seven years of his ministry, all he could be to the people of God was simply a sign/a parable- *and so an UNEXPLAINED declaration of the word of God!* He would do things, the people would ask him what it meant, and he could say nothing beyond what God gave him! J. B. Taylor describing Ezekiel’s ministry as a sign wrote this:

...it was a ‘ritual dumbness’, an imposed and willingly accepted proscription of any speech unless it was a pronouncement given him from the Lord. (Taylor, 1981, p. 29)

This would last until the announcement of the fall of Jerusalem, which would occur a little more than seven years later:

Ezekiel 24:26-27, “...on that day⁴ he who escapes will come to you with information for *your* ears? On that day your mouth will be opened to him who escaped, and you will speak and be dumb no longer. Thus you will be a sign to them, and they will know that I am the Lord.”

So Ezekiel’s ritual dumbness would last until a refugee from Jerusalem shared with him the news of the fall of the city. On that day, Ezekiel’s mouth would be opened; which is exactly what happened.

Ezekiel 33:22, “Now it came about in the twelfth year of our exile, on the fifth of the tenth month [Jan. 8, 585 BC], that the refugees from Jerusalem came to me, saying, ‘The city has been taken.’ Now the hand of the Lord had been upon me in the evening, before the refugees came. And He opened my mouth at the time *they* came to me in the morning; so my mouth was opened, and I was no longer speechless.”

That is why in Ezekiel 34-48 we have the prophetic ministry of Ezekiel in full. Everything prior to this as it related to God’s people were signs, acts, parables, and strange activities- recall, things like these:

- Locking himself up in his house, Ezekiel 3.
- Setting up a small replica of Jerusalem in the town square and laying siege against it, Ezekiel 4.

- Sleeping on his left side for 390 days and then on his right side for 40 days, Ezekiel 4.
- Tying a cord around his entire body except for his right arm which was to remain bare, Ezekiel 4.
- Starving himself throughout all this time, Ezekiel 4.
- Cooking his bread over cow dung (which originally was to be human waste), Ezekiel 4.

And much, much more! That was the calling and much of the initial ministry of Ezekiel! For what must have seemed like an eternity, Ezekiel could NOT speak to explain anything he said or did beyond what God gave him⁵- which at one point brought him to lament this Divine limitation.

Ezekiel 20:49, “Then I said, ‘Ah Lord God! They are saying of me, “Is he not *just* speaking parables?””

Such is the nature of ministry... It Brings With It Inability!⁶ You say, “*Ezekiel’s inabilities were divinely imposed... so this really isn’t applicable to us!*” You couldn’t be more wrong! Yes, at times, ministerial inability is Divinely imposed.⁷ We see it in Paul’s life:

2 Corinthians 12:7, “And because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet me- to keep me from exalting myself!”

But whether it is actively imposed in time or given to us at birth, are not all our inabilities according to the will of our all-wise God?

- Moses was born with a speech impediment, Exodus 4:10.
- Elisha was bald (2 Kings 2:23-25) which had a negative impact on his ministry.
- Zacchaeus was of a small stature, Luke 19:3.
- Timothy was naturally timid, 2 Timothy 1:6-7.
- Isaac was born with a propensity to deceive, Genesis 25:26; 27.
- On account of their birth, none of the original apostles were educated!

Yet we believe that each of these servants of the Lord were given exactly what they needed in order to fulfill the call God placed on their lives!

So, what are your inabilities? You most certainly have them! Accordingly- and this is the secret when it comes to effective ministry, we must NOT allow our inabilities to hinder us in ministry. But with the inability, recognize that they were given to keep us humble and so ever reliant upon Christ. Again, Paul wrote:

2 Corinthians 12:7: “And because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet me- to keep me from exalting myself!”

They were given NOT to limit our ability to minister, BUT to enhance it! Recall the story of Gideon:

God called him to defend Israel from the combined armies of “the Midianites, the Amalekites, and the sons of the east” (a combined force which numbered 135,000 fighting men [cf. Judges 8:10])!! Accordingly, Gideon issued a call to his countrymen to assemble together and fight to protect their land... and 32,000 men responded. Yet accordingly to Judges 7:2, the sheer size of this army would only puff up Gideon if the Lord should use him to defeat the Midianites, *“Look what I did with so few people!”* And so God told him to allow any to go home who were at all frightened at the prospect of war... and overnight 22,000 men left! Yet an army of 10,000 was still too large of a fighting force to keep God’s army reliant upon the Lord rather than military tactics and the wisdom/ability of a leader, so God had Gideon bring his men to a river to drink. Any who knelt down to the water and drank from it (like a dog might) would be disqualified. This cost Ezekiel another 9,700 men! His fighting force was down to 300, a size which no amount of wit or strategy could bring about a victory against so large of a force!... *but now Gideon was ready for battle!*

What happened? The Lord used these 300 men to frighten and then conquer 135,000 hardened men to the praise of the glory of His grace!

Family of God, that is the role that inability plays when it comes to ministry. It keeps us humble and ever reliant upon the Lord and so brings maximum glory to God. Because of his thorn, Paul prayed this way:

2 Corinthians 12:8-10, “Concerning this I entreated the Lord three times that it might depart from me. And He has said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness. Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ’s sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.”

Christian, you cannot actively serve the Lord for long before you begin to struggle with your own inability. This would be Ezekiel, Paul, David, Moses... and this also will be YOU!

Ecclesiastes 9:11b, “...the race is NOT to the swift, and the battle is NOT to the warriors, and NEITHER is bread to the wise, NOR wealth to the discerning, NOR favor to men of ability...”

The race belongs to the Lord! Yet again, do NOT allow this to discourage you, BUT to encourage you to minister in the strength of the Lord such that you can say with Paul...

1 Corinthians 3:6-7, “I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth. So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who

causes the growth.”

And so, in spite of the fickle heart of the people to whom we are called to minister, in spite of the persecution that may arise as a result, we step out in faith trusting NOT in our selves, BUT the Lord to bring about His results and so bring maximum glory to Himself!

Works Cited

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End Note(s)

¹ See footnote #1 above.

² D. I. Block wrote, “The prophet is hereby forbidden to add to or subtract from the words that he receives from Yahweh. Unlike his contemporary Jeremiah, Ezekiel is not free to exploit any rhetorical means available to move the people to repentance, unless those strategies in here in the received oracle. This deliberately chosen form of expression prepares the way for the prophet’s confinement and dumbness. Ezekiel’s own voice must be silenced; he must let the message of the digested scroll issue forth from him.” (Block, 1997, p. 128)

³ e.g., Hosea (Hosea 1:3-9) and Isaiah (Is. 8:18).

⁴ Cf. also Jeremiah 29:21.

⁵ D. I. Block wrote, “The later association of Ezekiel’s speechlessness with his role as a sign (môpēt) to Israel (24:27) demands a literal understanding of his silence.” (*The Book of Ezekiel*, NICOT, p. 155)

⁶ The world just doesn’t understand the nature of Christian service! When it looks at a minister, like Ezekiel, they see strange and odd things where we see the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit binding us to make us ever and always reliant upon Christ. D. I. Block, speaking of Ezekiel’s call, observed, “For a century psychoanalysts have had a field day with Ezekiel. The prophet has been posthumously diagnosed as suffering from a wide range of pathological and psychological maladies: catalepsy, katatonic [sic] schizophrenia, epilepsy, hallucinosis, neurosis, hysteria, paranoia.” (Block, 1997, p. 154)

⁷ cf. also Luke 1:20 and the limitation placed on Zechariah!