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The Forging of a Servant of God, 7

Perspective can have a major impact on the things that we do. Understanding the “why?” can make all the difference in the world! Recall the words of Martin Luther:

Alas! Must I walk the baby, wash its diapers, make its bed, smell its stench, stay up nights with it, take care of it when it cries, heal its rashes and soars? And on top of that care for my spouse, provide, labor at my trade, take care of this, and take care of that? Do this and do that, endure this and endure that, and whatever else of bitterness and drudgery married life involves? Why should I make such a prisoner of myself?

What then does Christian faith say to this? It opens its eyes, looks upon all these insignificant, distasteful, and despised duties in the Spirit; and is aware that they are all adorned with divine approval as with the costliest golden jewels. It says, 'O God! I confess today that I am not worthy to rock the little babe or wash its diapers or to be entrusted with the care of the child and its mother. How is it that I without any merit have come to this distinction of being certain that I am serving Thy creature and Thy most precious will. Oh how gladly will I do so though the duty should be even more insignificant and despised. Neither frost nor heat, neither drudgery nor labor will distress and dissuade me, for I am certain that it is thus pleasing in Thy sight.'

Talk about a life-changing perspective! That is the Christian faith, the world from the perspective of God's Kingdom! From afar all that we do in our service of Christ no doubt seems foolish to the world. Paul reflected upon this when he wrote:

1 Corinthians 4:13b, "...we have become as the scum of the world, the dregs of all things, *even* until now."

Yet, what does Christian faith say to this? What does Christian faith say about the work we do as servants of the Lord?

Ezekiel was among the 10,000 who were forcibly taken by Nebuchadnezzar to Babylon in 597 BC. At the time, he was a 26 year old priest. Four years later, when normally he would have been ordained to the priesthood (cf. Ezekiel 1:1), God called him to the ministry of a prophet. Now this calling is described for us in detail in the opening four chapters of Ezekiel. Now in chapter two Ezekiel reveals the telos for his ministry. About 150 years before Ezekiel, Isaiah using [the metaphor of a beast](#) when he spoke of the people of God:

Isaiah 9:15-16, "The head [of the beast] is the elder and honorable man, and the prophet who teaches falsehood is the tail. For those who guide this people are leading *them* astray; and those who are guided by them are brought to confusion."

On account of the sixteen prophetic works that we have in the Old Testament, works which span 400 years of Redemptive History, it is easy to assume that these sixteen prophets were all that there were during the Kingdom years. O.K., add Elijah, Elisha, and Micaiah, and that about wraps it up when it comes to the prophetic ministry in the Old Testament in our thinking. Yet as we see in Isaiah, such was NOT the case! In Isaiah's day, the nation was fraught with many, many false prophets. We see this reflected in the work of Micah:

Micah 3:5, "Thus says the Lord concerning the prophets who lead my people astray; when they have *something* to bite with their teeth, they cry, 'Peace,' but against him who puts nothing in their mouths, they declare holy war."-

Wiseman, Alexander, and Waltke made the following observation based on the language Micah used here,

he verb rendered feeds (Heb. nāšak; 'bite', AV) in ten of its other eleven uses has to do with snakes. Like malevolent and dangerous serpents they kill their victims to feed themselves. As verse 11 makes plain, for these evil prophets 'money talked louder than God' (Mays, p. 83). (Alexander & David W. Baker, 2009, p. 179)

Micah was a contemporary of Isaiah. As in our own day, so it was at this time that many charlatans/deceivers arose amongst the people of God and adulterated the gospel for monetary gain! If you gave a big enough gift, they would give a favorable word from the Lord to *support any ungodly action!* Now fast forward the clock 100 years, and the problem just got worse.

Jeremiah 8:10b-11, "...from the least even to the greatest everyone is greedy for gain; from the prophet even to the priest everyone practices deceit. And they heal the brokenness of the daughter of My people superficially, saying, 'Peace, peace,' but there is no peace." (cf. also Jeremiah 6:13-14)

As dark and bleak as the future genuinely was at this time in Judah, there were thousands of false prophets who were all too glad to tickle the ears of God's people! And this made it all the more difficult for the genuine prophet of God.

Jeremiah 14:13-14, "But, 'Ah, Lord God!' I said, 'Look, the prophets are telling them, 'You will not see the sword nor will you have famine, but I will give you lasting peace in this place.'" [This was the exact opposite message that God gave Jeremiah to give to the people of God. The result? Because the vast majority of prophets contradicted Jeremiah, he came out looking like a fool!] Then the Lord said to me, 'The prophets are prophesying falsehood in My name. I have neither sent them nor commanded them nor spoken to them; they are prophesying to you a false vision, divination, futility and the deception of their own minds.'" (cf. Lamentations 2:14)

And though Ezekiel was in exile, the problem manifested itself even there! Listen to Ezekiel's speaking to the false prophets which arose even in Babylon:

Ezekiel 13:8-10a, "Therefore, thus says the Lord God, 'Because you have spoken falsehood and seen a lie, therefore behold, I am against you,' declares the Lord God. So My hand will be against the prophets who see false visions and utter lying divinations. [In the future...] They will have no place in the council of My people, nor will they be written down in the register of the house of Israel, nor will they enter the land of Israel, that you may know that I am the Lord God. It is definitely because they have misled My people by saying, 'Peace!' when there is no peace..."

This should give us a heart of grace and understanding when it comes to the people of God during this time. How is it that God sent genuine prophets to His people *and yet His people by and large ignored them, rejected them, and even killed some* (Matthew 23:30)? During this era

there literally were thousands of false prophets who filled the land with false visions and permissive/endorsing doctrines which supported the wicked acts of the greatest giver! As such the genuine Prophet of the Lord would have been in the minority sporting a message which literally thousands of prophets contradicted!

Now during this era, if you were a genuine child of God familiar at all with the teaching of Scripture, you would know and so reject the false prophet for what they were... deceivers! Yet sadly the majority of God's people were weak, ignorant, spiritually compromised, and so easily duped- *as will also be the case at the last time:*

Matthew 24:24, "For false Christs and false prophets will arise and will show great signs and wonders, so as to mislead, if possible, even the elect."

In fact, the typical cry from the majority of pulpits in the last day will be as it was during the kingdom years of Israel and Judah!

1 Thessalonians 5:3, "While they are saying, 'Peace and safety!' then destruction will come upon them suddenly like birth pangs upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape."

So, that is the background/backdrop of the exhortation God gave Ezekiel in our text, which explains why God gave Ezekiel the following mandate:

Ezekiel 2:7, "But you shall speak My words to them whether they listen or not, for they are rebellious."

How tempting would it have been to compromise in the case of the genuine prophet as they watched the massive crowds thronging to hear the false prophets? In contrast, we know it did NOT go well with the genuine servant of God at the time. The populace did NOT like what they said, and so the genuine prophet of God endured horrible persecution. In fact, it was so bad that Jeremiah himself was tempted to leave the ministry.

Jeremiah 20:7-9, "O Lord, Thou hast deceived me and I was deceived; Thou hast overcome me and prevailed. I have become a laughingstock all day long; everyone mocks me. For each time I speak, I cry aloud; I proclaim violence and destruction [The exact opposite of the message being proclaimed in most every other pulpit at the time!!! As a result...], because for me the word of the Lord has resulted in reproach and derision all day long. But if I say, 'I will not remember Him or speak anymore in His name,' [when the text says, 'If I say...' you have to understand this wasn't a theoretical question, but one that Jeremiah clearly struggled with], then in my heart it becomes like a burning fire shut up in my bones; and I am weary of holding *it* in, and I cannot endure *it*."

That is why he felt deceived! Every time he deigned to keep quiet and play it safe, the Lord's

call weighed heavily upon him! In light of this, we understand the mandate that God placed upon the genuine prophet of God... "...speak My words whether they listen or not!"

Jeremiah 23:28, "The prophet who has a dream may relate *his* dream [this is how the false prophet typically began his work of deceit, "I had a dream!"], but let him who has My word speak My word in truth. What does straw have *in common* with grain?" declares the Lord."

And so as we have seen, the mandate for the genuine servant of God in the face of conflict and limited fruit is to redouble their effort in carrying out their call (cf. John 17:4)! Theirs was NOT to worry about the fruit or lack thereof, BUT to strive unto faithfulness to God in all that they did!

Now if Ezekiel did this, what would happen? What would be the ultimate end/The Telos to his labor amongst God's people?

The Telos of a Faithful Ministry, Ezekiel 2:5.

Ezekiel 2:4-5, "And I am sending you to them who are stubborn and obstinate children; and you shall say to them, 'Thus says the Lord God.' As for them, whether they listen or not- for they are a rebellious house- they will know that a prophet has been among them."

This verse is a mini-climax when it came to Ezekiel's call! And yet upon first glance, it is rather underwhelming! We would like the text to read: "Ezekiel, when you come upon rough times in ministry- and you will- when few if any respond, know that

1. I am pleased with you!"
2. You will receive a reward in the future beyond anything you could ask or think!"

Yet that is NOT what God says here. Instead the end to Ezekiel's faithfulness as a prophet would be that *long AFTER Ezekiel is gone*, "...they will know that a prophet has been among them!" So much for encouragement!

Personally, after all the abuse that Ezekiel would endure in ministry, just once it would have been glorious if he could have given a powerful prophecy and then have it come to pass before the eyes of the naysayer! And brothers and sisters, that is exactly what happened at one moment in Ezekiel's ministry. God told Ezekiel:

Ezekiel 33:33, "So when it comes to pass- as surely it will- then they will know that a prophet has been in their midst."

This by no means was normative. But it did happen! In fact in this regard, note that in Christ we ACTUALLY HAVE that which I just referenced as the longing of our hearts as servants... the

assurance of the good pleasure of God (Matthew 25:21, 23) as well as a reward beyond anything we could ask or think (Matthew 19:27-30)!

With that out of our system, you must see that the promise here given to Ezekiel as a result of his faithfulness is actually MORE GRAND and GLORIOUS to the one who loves Christ than anything I just referenced. Consider the language of this short verse:

- they will know: יָדָעַ (yada); this is a covenantal term which reflects one of the richest blessings that accompany redemption. The English doesn't do it justice as "knowing" in our language denotes the idea of the acquisition of data. In contrast, the Hebrew word is a relational term and so speaks of a deep, abiding understanding. For example, it is used of Adam and Eve:

Genesis 4:1a, "Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain..." (NKJV)

In this context, then, when used of God's people acquiring a certain knowledge about God, it speaks of God's children coming to the deep realization of God's redemptive program and so God's redemptive purpose/plan! What is it that would be the end of Ezekiel's ministry amongst them? They would come to understand deeply "...that a prophet had been among them!" Consider the word for "prophet."

- they will know that a prophet: נָבִיא (nabi); as we've seen, a priest is one who speaks to God on behalf of man (and so a representative of people). In contrast a prophet is one who speaks to man on behalf of God (and so a representative of God)! That was Ezekiel! In light of this, understand, that which a genuine prophet proclaimed was the will and word of our transcendent God!

This at is huge! Again, at the time there were many voices saying, "Thus says the Lord!" The telos of Ezekiel's ministry is that when God demonstrated Ezekiel was in fact a genuine prophet, then:

- they will know that a prophet has been among them: To have a genuine prophet of God be among a people is to know and so affirm that
1. God is with us- which means in spite of our sin and failure, the Lord still calls us His own! So regardless of what the sinful flesh might think as it was exiled in the wilderness, in the midst of the tragedy of exile, God had NOT abandoned His people!
 2. All that was spoken by the prophet was in fact the word of the Lord! Against the deafening voices of the thousands upon thousands of false-prophets who misrepresented God and so brought so much shame and ill-repute upon the Lord:
 - When the wealthy abused the poor and supposedly received God's endorsement!
 - When the powerful flexed their muscle with the support of God!

- When sin, compromise, and false worship were rampant and it seemed as though God endorsed it all! **and then**
- When ill came upon the land and the temple was destroyed!
- When the exile did occur!
- When God's people appeared to be abandoned in the wilderness!
- When the exile lasted longer than the promised 2 years!

How damaging would these and the many other promises of the false prophet prove to the Lord and His glory! All along God had given the warning to His people through the prophets. As such, the exile should never have been a shock or surprise! God was NOT the bad guy in all of this- though the majority of the people of God as well as the armies of Nebuchadnezzar would initially have thought so!

From this we see the telos of Ezekiel's ministry: The Vindication and Glory of the Lord! When Ezekiel, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Jeremiah, and Nahum were seen to be authentic spokesmen of God, then all quibbling about their messages would be over. God had indeed spoken through these men... accordingly what THEY said about God, His will, the people, their sin and rebellion was true! Far from the exile making God out to be capricious; it in fact glorifies His justice in that He warned His people all the way back in Leviticus¹ and Deuteronomy² and so it came to pass!³

Now that you might see that this is the ultimate and best end when it comes to our lives and ministry on this earth, I want to take a page from John Piper's teaching: When are we most satisfied with God? When are we at our best as image bearers? When God is most glorified! When God is vindicated! When God alone is proven to be right! When God alone receives the glory! This was the personal testimony of John the Baptizer:

John 3:29b-30, "...And so this joy of mine has been made full. [How? Speaking of Christ, John said...] He must increase, but I must decrease."

Get this! The more Christ was exalted in John's life the more joy and satisfaction John experienced! It may sound odd, but it is so true! Think of it... anyone who has visited the Grand Canyon can tell you that when you are there gazing upon this massive geographical wonder, it is NOT about you! When you stand there, the impulse of your soul does not say, "Give me a mirror! Give me a mirror!" Rather, you stand there with NO self-awareness at all! And the reason for this is simple: We were made to esteem something bigger than ourselves. We were made to esteem/glorify God! Understand that is why Christ came to this earth:

Romans 15:8a, 9a, "For I say that Christ has become a servant... for the Gentiles to glorify God for His mercy..."- isn't that amazing?! God took upon Himself flesh and blood NOT to make us happy, BUT that we might "...glorify God for His mercy!"

That is why Christ saved us. Paul wrote of God:

Ephesians 1:4b, 5a, 6a, "...In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ... to the praise of the glory of His grace..." - when it comes to our redemption, God chose to save us from the beginning of time that our end might be "...to the praise the glory of His grace!"

That is the telos of God's love:

Psalms 86:12b-13a, "...[I] will glorify Thy name forever. For Thy lovingkindness toward me is great..."

There is no question that God's love is the *ground* of our redemption! Yet you must see that His glory is and will always be the *goal*/telos of our redemption! John Piper put it this way based on the verses I just quoted:

...man was rescued from sin in order that he might enjoy God's acts of glorifying God. If God values the glory of God so much in the rescuing of man, then the aim of that rescue would be to give man the ability and inclination to value God the way God does (see John 17:26). This is the ultimate loving aim of the cross. Christ did not die to make much of us, but to free us to enjoy, and participate in, God's making much of God forever.

It is profoundly wrong to turn the cross into a warrant for self-esteem as the root of mental health. If I stand before the love of God and do not feel a healthy, satisfying, freeing joy without turning that love into an echo of my self-esteem, then I am like a man who stands before the Grand Canyon and feels no satisfying wonder until he translates the canyon into a case for his own significance. That is not the presence of health, but bondage to self.

The only ultimate love is the sacrificial act of God saving us to share God's passion for the supremacy of God. Nothing glorifies Him, or satisfies us, more. (Piper, 2005, p. 44)

So, what was the telos of Ezekiel's ministry? What is The Telos of ALL ministry? Ezekiel's gifting and calling was NOT for his own vindication, pleasure, or self-esteem! That Ezekiel bore little fruit or didn't like what was going on in his life is too bad! God didn't place this man in the ministry for self-satisfaction!

Ezekiel was chosen by God and set apart for the work of being God's spokesman so that in the end, God's honor and glory might be proclaimed and God's people might say, "The Lord, He is God! He alone is right and good!" This is the telos for every calling God gives:

Talk about implications when it comes to our life and ministry! You say...

- It is not fulfilling to serve the saints in fellowship.

- I'm tired of teaching, serving, loving, encouraging the people of God.
- I no longer like my marriage... it no longer is satisfying me!
- Ministry has become a yoke and so a burden; *I'm burned out!*

In the word of the late Robert Rayburn: "There is no such thing as burn out in ministry... just sinning out!" Burn out occurs when in our ministry, we serve unto self — self-appeasement, self-benefit, or self-esteem. When we are the ultimate end when it comes to ministry, sinning out is just a matter of time (Why? Because the world is NOT moving toward your happiness, BUT God's glory)!

But come now to the telos of all ministry and here we discover that God's aim and so the purpose of our life goes way beyond our personal benefit! We exist for the benefit and glory of God. It is for this that we were created! Accordingly, to be used toward this end is to reap ultimate fulfillment and satisfaction in our lives! When is the hammer most happy? When it is pounding nails! When is the Christian most happy? When he is being used unto his ultimate purpose... the glory, praise, and vindication of God!

Works Cited

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- Piper, J. (2005). *Taste and See: Savoring the Supremacy of God in All of Life*. Colorado Springs: Multnomah.

End Note(s)

¹ cf. Leviticus 26:14-17.

² cf. Deuteronomy 28:15.

³ If as a parent you watched your child tease a dog, all the while the dog growled, snarled, put back its ears, made warning jerks with its teeth, and you repeatedly said, "Stop it! You are going to get bit!" ... If the child got bit, what would you say? "Bad dog?" Or, "It is your own fault! I told you that you were going to get bit and you didn't listen!" You must see that the net effect of the prophetic witness of the genuine prophet of God served to vindicate God, His Name, and His glory!