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Comfort and Hope to a Pilgrim People, Part 3

A common expression found in the Puritans is that of “crossing through the river Jordan” as a metaphor for death. For example if you’ve read *The Pilgrim’s Progress* by John Bunyan, you know that the climax of the book occurs when Christian dies, which is pictured as crossing through a river! In fact, one of my favorite quotes in this regard is written by a post-puritan writer, Thomas Sherman. Sherman put it this way:

The Israelites were necessitated first to pass over the Jordan River, before they could

enter Canaan, the Promised Land. But no sooner had the feet of the priests, who bore the ark of the covenant, rested in the water, but the proud waves saw it and fled, and the swelling streams were driven back, and congealed in heaps to enable them to pass over with safety. ¶ Every child of God resembles an Israelite in this respect; he is passing through the wilderness of this world, and traveling to the land of promise. Death is that Jordan River which runs between this wilderness world and our heavenly Canaan. Death is that swelling stream which overflows the banks of every mortal creature. It is that last river which we all must pass over! But this is the happiness which believers have, that Jesus Christ, our High Priest, who bears the everlasting covenant upon His shoulders, has already dipped His feet in the streams of this water, so that the streams of bitterness are diverted, the sting of death plucked out, the waters of the salt sea dried up; yes, the power of the curse cut off, so that death is but a sure step to glory!" *(Divine Breathings; Or, a Pious Soul Thirsting after Christ)*

Wow! So where did the inspiration for such thinking come from? It came from the Bible and passages like the one we are looking at this morning (cf. also Isaiah 43:2)! As we have seen, in 586 BC the nation of Israel — the Old Testament Theocracy — was destroyed by the Babylonians and God's people were taken into exile where they have remained to this day (cf. 1 Peter 1:1; Hebrews 13:12-13)! And so God raised up prophets like Jeremiah, Zephaniah, Habakkuk, Daniel, and Ezekiel; all of whom wrote

1. To explain the reason for the toppled Kingdom, as well as
2. To encourage, comfort, and instruct God's exiled people (which is why I call them the Epistles of the Old Testament).

When it came to Ezekiel's message and ministry, we have seen that the organizing principle with which Ezekiel used to pen his prophecy was the Exodus/Conquest Narratives (found in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy). The implication is that — and this is wonderful — God's people now must view themselves as part of a Second Exodus and Conquest! But this time it is NOT a physical nation or foe from which God would deliver His people (like the Pharaoh); RATHER it is from the bondage of Satan! And it is NOT a physical kingdom or land which God would conquer through His people; RATHER it is sin and death which God would conquer through Christ! It is this that Ezekiel proclaimed to God's people as they struggled as exiles in the land of Babylon. The climax of this exhortation is found in Ezekiel 40-48 in which Ezekiel describes an already/not yet reality related to the presence of God amongst His people. In the final didactic section of Ezekiel (chapters. 33-37) recall the promise God gave:

Ezekiel 37:26-28, "And I will make a covenant of peace with them; it will be an everlasting covenant with them. And I will place them and multiply them, and will set My sanctuary in their midst forever. My dwelling place also will be with them; and I will be their God, and they will be My people. And the nations will know that I am the Lord who sanctifies Israel, when My sanctuary is in their midst forever."

The fulfillment of that promise is detailed in the vision before us, Ezekiel 40-48, in which God gave His people a flashlight of revelation whose beam, though narrow at the start, nevertheless illumined NOT ONLY where God's people were at that moment, BUT where He ultimately was leading them by His grace!

Accordingly, there are significant words of encouragement found in this final section of Ezekiel. Previously we noted that a major theme of this section is that the Lord is THE Sovereign King who Reigns Supreme over the Earth, Ezekiel 43:1-7a. Consider now a second major theme, God's Plan for His Exiled People is that They Follow His Plan, Ezekiel 40:3, 5-9; 43:10-12.

Ezekiel 40:3, "So He brought me there; and behold, there was a man whose appearance was like the appearance of bronze, with a line of flax and a measuring rod in his hand; and he was standing in the gateway."

We note that Ezekiel's tour began at the east entrance of the temple. Here Ezekiel was greeted by an angel who held in his hands "a line of flax" as well as "a measuring rod."

Both of these were carpenter's tools in the ancient world. The "line of flax" was used like a modern tape measure to measure large distances, such as the lengths of buildings. In contrast the "measuring rod" was used like a yard stick to measure short distances.

Now, for the next three chapters we read of the angel walking through the temple measuring everything! Let's get a taste of this section.

Ezekiel 40:5-9, "And behold, there was a wall on the outside of the temple all around, and in the man's hand was a measuring rod of six cubits, *each of which was* a cubit and a handbreadth. So he measured the thickness of the wall, one rod; and the height, one rod. 6 Then he went to the gate which faced east, went up its steps, and measured the threshold of the gate, one rod in width; and the other threshold *was* one rod in width. 7 And the guardroom *was* one rod long and one rod wide; and *there were* five cubits between the guardrooms. And the threshold of the gate by the porch of the gate facing inward *was* one rod. 8 Then he measured the porch of the gate facing inward, one rod. 9 And he measured the porch of the gate, eight cubits; and its side pillars, two cubits. And the porch of the gate was faced inward."

The text goes on like this for three more chapters detailing... the outer court, the gates of the outer court, the inner court, the chambers in the outer court, the rooms, the tables, the main inner hall, the pillars, the walls of the temple, the side chambers of the inner court, the foundations, the Holy place, the Holy of Holies, the galleries, the door posts, the altar, etc.!

So what is the point? Why the obsession with measurements?

Ezekiel 43:10, "As for you, son of man, describe the temple to the house of Israel, that they may be ashamed of their iniquities; and let them measure the plan."

Did you get that last statement? After three chapters of God measuring everything, God now tells His people, *"It is now your turn! As I have measured the work that I am doing and will do, you must be careful to measure everything in your life!"* The text continues...

Ezekiel 43:11-12, "And if they are ashamed of all that they have done, make known to them the design of the house, its structure, its exits, its entrances, all its designs, all its statutes, and all its laws [Get this! The vision in all its detail was designed to comfort God's people struggling in exile. So again, what we are reading here was NOT intended merely as a distant reality, BUT an encouragement to the people of God, beginning in Ezekiel's day!]. And write *it* in their sight, so that THEY MAY OBSERVE its whole design and all its statutes, and do them [again, this can't mean 'build it' for the plans aren't specific enough. Rather, this had reference to the living of their lives in light of the calling and standard of God's word which had been neglected by the nation the last 500 years!]. 12 This is the law of the house: its entire area on the top of the mountain all around *shall be* most holy. Behold, this is the law of the house."

This is referring to the temple of God's people and so the call for them to measure and so consider everything they do in light of God's authority and so His word, it is the law/principle of the house (of God)! Now again and not surprisingly, this parallels the calling that God placed upon His people during the era of the Exodus. Right before the conquest, Moses explained the "method behind the madness" when it came to God's plan for His people in the wilderness. Why the wilderness? And by application, why the exile? Why the struggle? Why doesn't God just make our lives easy and pleasant?

Deuteronomy 8:2, "And you shall remember all the way which the Lord your God has led you in the wilderness these forty years, that He might humble you, testing you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not."

During The Exodus/Conquest Era, why did God keep His people in the wilderness for so long? What was God doing? He was tempering them that they might live by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God! In fact, do you remember THE concern that rested on the hearts and minds of God's people as they were facing the conquest of Canaan, the prospect of war, the anticipation of the death of loved ones, as well as the destruction of the entire nation? The concern was: What was going to happen! *"Moses, you're a prophet... tell us what is going to take place!"* What was God's word of response?

Deuteronomy 29:29, "The secret things [as it relates to the future] belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed [the word of God] belong to us and to our sons forever, THAT WE MAY OBSERVE ALL THE WORDS OF THIS LAW."

According to Ezekiel 43:11b, that is the stated point of the "measurements" found in Ezekiel 40-42. As God has measured everything He was doing, so His people in exile- at all times and in all places- must measure everything they are doing in light of God, His glory, and so His Word!

This remains the calling that rests upon every one of God's children in exile today. Christ re-emphasized the teaching of Deuteronomy when He told Satan.

Matthew 4:4, "...Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God."

Such is the calling that God has placed on the lives of His exiled children- which includes you and me! Continuing his exhortation to his fellow Christian exiles, Peter wrote this:

2 Peter 1:19, "And so we have the prophetic word *made* more sure, to which you do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star arises in your hearts."

In contrast to the showy and miraculous which seems to be that which attracts sinners, the call of the Christian is to live by the word of God! Truly if we are going to navigate successfully the treacherous path before us, it will only be by the light of the word of God! And yet, we are NOT talking merely about outward conformity.

James 1:25, "But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the *law* of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man shall be blessed in what he does."

We think blessing is found in getting more from God. Yet here we learn that spiritual blessing comes as the child of God appropriates God's word!

That is an important word when it comes to God's word, "Appropriate." The "blessed" in God's Kingdom today are NOT the ones who merely do God's word. RATHER, the blessed are those who embody it, which sadly is something our fathers and mothers in the faith failed to do!

Consider, at the writing of Ezekiel 40-48, why was it that God's people were in exile? Because they stopped living by "every word that proceeded from the mouth of God." Well God's people clearly learned the lesson and, from passages like Ezekiel 40-48, in the exile they purposed to order their lives according to God's word!

Now 2,500 years later we have the privilege of perspective! What came of the calling God placed on His people's lives to measure everything they did by the word of God? In their zeal to follow Scripture, they went too far and began speaking, teaching, and prescribing where God had not spoken, taught, or prescribed! As a result they became legalistic and so placed their focus on the "outside of the cup" — such that by the time of the New Testament, Christ exhorted God's people with these sad words.

Matthew 23:25-28, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the

outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside they are full of robbery and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee, first clean the inside of the cup and of the dish, so that the outside of it may become clean also. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. Even so you too outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness."

Why did they fail? Because they did NOT appropriate the word of God! In no time, God's word became an external standard of blessing, which means they traded the lucky charm they thought they had in the nation for the lucky charm of obedience to God's word.

God can raise up children of Abraham from rocks (Matthew 3:9); He most certainly does NOT need your external conformity to His Law. So what is God after? A life that appropriates or is measured by the word of God from the inside out. Consider Paul's encouragement to the Romans:

Romans 6:17-18: "But thanks be to God that though you were slaves of sin, you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were committed, and having been freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness."

Herein is kingdom blessing. It is NOT external conformity to the word of God, BUT a heart subjected to the penetrating gaze of God which occurs as we appropriate His Word!

That secondly is what God is after when it comes to His exiled children. Notice a third word of encouragement is the call of God's People — the call of redemption — is a call to worship, Ezekiel 40:2, 5; 43:18-21.

Ezekiel 40:2, "In the visions of God He brought me into the land of Israel, and set me on a very high mountain; and on it to the south *there was* a structure like a city."

At the start of this vision, Ezekiel was brought to one of the tallest mountains in Israel, most likely Matthew Gerizim (2,849 ft.) or Matthew Ebal (further north @ 3077 ft.). I doubt there are few here who know the significance of these two mountains in the Old Testament history of God's people. To a Jew listening to Ezekiel, the reference was quite significant for between these two mountains God renewed the covenant with His people following their eventual campaign over Ai (cf. Josh. 8). Regardless, here on one of these mountain plateaus Ezekiel saw to the south (presumably Matthew Moriah which was 2,440 ft.) what initially looked like "a city." However, as he approached the city his evaluation of what he saw changed.

Ezekiel 40:5, "And behold, there was a wall on the outside of THE TEMPLE all around..."

When Ezekiel came to the "city" he instantly knew it wasn't a city at all, but a "temple." What's the difference? Bottom line: a city is a place where people live and do business. A

temple is a place where people worship.

So how did he know that the structure before him was a temple and not a city? The same as you and I would know; based on its form and so its contents and furnishings. If you've read Ezekiel 40-47 you know they describe in some detail the structure and furnishings of a temple, beginning with the Temple Structure itself, and then:

- Its Priests.
- Its priestly quarters.
- An altar.
- A holy of holies.
- Its sacrifice.
- Its raised platforms.

And much, much more. In fact, if you haven't already, read Ezekiel 40-47; you can't walk away from this text without seeing that the entire section revolves around the activity of worship! And why is that? Because ultimately the vision that Ezekiel detailed here was of "the presence of God amongst His people!"...

Ezekiel 37:27-28, "My dwelling place also will be with them; and I will be their God, and they will be My people. And the nations will know that I am the Lord who sanctifies Israel, when My sanctuary is in their midst forever."

As you know, Ezekiel 40-48 is a description of God's presence amongst His people in the form of the Temple. With that, consider the final statement in this vision.

Ezekiel 48:35b, "...and the name of the city from *that day shall be*, 'The Lord is there.'"

יְהוָה שָׁמָּה *Yahweh Shamah*

And so that which Ezekiel ultimately saw was a vision which detailed an ever growing reality that though God's people lost everything on account of the exile, they had NOT lost God! The Lord had not abandoned them!

Do you understand what this means? God's plan was never to leave His people as they were in the Old Testament Theocracy. Rather the Old Testament Theocracy was a shadow of God's ultimate plan to make His people His temple and so dwell in their midst forever! At the consummation of the ages, this is what will be seen and heard:

Revelation 21:3, "And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, 'Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He shall dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself shall be among them.'"

In this regard it is most interesting that THE metaphor God used to represent His presence

amongst His people was that of “a temple”! He could have used (and eventually would use) many images to picture His presence amongst His people.

1. A vine and its branches (John 15:5).
2. A mother bird caring for its young (Matthew 23:37).
3. A shepherd with His sheep (John 10:11).
4. A light which lightens our way (John 8:12; 9:12)

Yet THE metaphor which is most frequently used to picture the consummation of God’s redemptive plan amongst His people is that of a Temple! Do you understand what this means? At least two things:

- The essence of a saving relationship with Christ is that of worship. We were saved to worship God. In God’s promise of hope and encouragement to His exiled people, the Lord said, speaking of His people.

Isaiah 43:6b-7, “...Bring My sons from afar, and My daughters from the ends of the earth, everyone who is called by My name, and whom I have created for My glory, whom I have formed, even whom I have made.”

That is the purpose of His redemption. That is the reason for the exile (cf. Exodus 8:1). And that is what lies behind everything God is doing in your life today! He is all about raising up a people who would offer to Him, most properly and most honorably- worship (cf. Job 13:15a)! This is His grand scheme. Christ told the woman at the well,

John 4:23, “But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers shall worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers.”

What is God after in His plan of redemption? True Worshipers! In this regard, what does it require to worship God acceptably? As worship is a declaration of God’s worth on the part of the individual/community

1. It begins with coming to a greater understanding of who God is and who you are.
2. It then involves coming to a greater understanding of what God has done for you.
3. It climaxes in praise and adoration on account of who God is and what He has done.

As that is the case, we understand that this is what is behind God’s providences in your life. He is all about revealing your character, demonstrating His (via His word), and then bringing you to the point in your life where all you want or value is Him! With all of this, it is NOT a surprise that Paul spoke of the Christian in these terms:

Philippians 3:3, “For we are the *true* circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God...”

Do you see? That is the essence of a Christian... he/she is a worshipper of God!

In this regard you must understand that the focus here is NOT about our activity as Christians, BUT our identity! Truly, THE ISSUE at any moment in your life is NOT “Are you worshipping God?” BUT “What is the worship you are offering to Him?” Truly, the essence of a saving relationship with Christ is that of worship. Notice secondly, from Ezekiel 40-48 we conclude that for the rest of eternity, our relationship with God will be based on and so revolve around the sacrificial death of Jesus.

Ezekiel 43:18-21, “And He said to me, ‘Son of man, thus says the Lord God, “These are the statutes for the altar on the day it is built, to offer burnt offerings on it and to sprinkle blood on it. And you shall give to the Levitical priests who are from the offspring of Zadok, who draw near to Me to minister to Me,” declares the Lord God, “a young bull for a sin offering. And you shall take some of its blood, and put it on its four horns, and on the four corners of the ledge, and on the border round about; thus you shall cleanse it and make atonement for it. You shall also take the bull for the sin offering; and it *shall be* burned in the appointed place of the house, outside the sanctuary.””

Again, I remind you that Ezekiel 40-48 is NOT the description of a literal temple; RATHER, it is a vision (akin to Ezekiel 1) of what it means for a people when God dwells in their midst!

O.K. So what does it mean for a people, based on the teaching of Ezekiel 43:18-21, when God dwells in their midst? As long as you and I live, in this life and in the life to come. sacrifice will be at the heart of our relationship with God!

The rest of eternity will involve a growing understanding on our part of the breadth, depth, and so significance of Christ’s redeeming work!

- Do you understand that God saved us “to the praise of the glory of His grace” (Ephesians 1:6a)?
- Accordingly the agenda God has for us today and for eternity is for us to grow in our understanding, appreciation, and application of the cross work of Christ to our lives!

That clearly is the point and place of the passage before us! As it describes what it will look like for God to dwell in our midst forever- and herein it mentions the offering of sacrifice, we conclude that for the rest of eternity we will relate to God on account of THE sin offering, THE burnt offering, and THE peace offering which once for all presented to God on our behalf by Christ! So how will eternity be spent? Glorifying in Christ Jesus- which just so happens to be another definition of a Christian.

Philippians 3:3, “For we are the *true* circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus...”

Do you understand? This is the point and place of behind all exiled living! This is how our salvation is to be spent on this side of the grave! This is how we will spend the rest of eternity!

In the words of Samuel Rutherford, “The bride eyes not her garment, but her dear bridegroom’s face; I will not gaze at glory, but on my King of grace; not at the crown He gifteth, but on His pierced hand: the Lamb is all the glory of Emmanuel’s land.” (*Red Trinity Hymnal* #546)