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The Call of Kingdom Ministry, Part 6

Jeremiah 1:4-19, Now the word of the LORD came to me, saying, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations." Then I said, "Ah, Lord GOD! Behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth." But the LORD said to me, "Do not say, 'I am only a youth'; for to all to whom I send you, you shall go, and whatever I command you, you shall speak. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, declares the LORD." Then the LORD put out his hand and touched my mouth. And the LORD said to me, "Behold, I have put my words in your mouth. See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant." And the word of the LORD came to me, saying, "Jeremiah, what do you see?" And I said, "I see an almond

branch.” Then the LORD said to me, “You have seen well, for I am watching over my word to perform it.” The word of the LORD came to me a second time, saying, “What do you see?” And I said, “I see a boiling pot, facing away from the north.” Then the LORD said to me, “Out of the north disaster shall be let loose upon all the inhabitants of the land. For behold, I am calling all the tribes of the kingdoms of the north, declares the LORD, and they shall come, and every one shall set his throne at the entrance of the gates of Jerusalem, against all its walls all around and against all the cities of Judah. 16 And I will declare my judgments against them, for all their evil in forsaking me. They have made offerings to other gods and worshiped the works of their own hands. But you, dress yourself for work; arise, and say to them everything that I command you. Do not be dismayed by them, lest I dismay you before them. And I, behold, I make you this day a fortified city, an iron pillar, and bronze walls, against the whole land, against the kings of Judah, its officials, its priests, and the people of the land. They will fight against you, but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, declares the LORD, to deliver you.”

A Contrasting Christianity

In part five of this series we alluded to Abraham. One of the results of God’s call in his life was to bring him from the place of worldly comfort and security to a place of insecurity, trial, and difficulty. And yet it just wasn’t Abraham. This we is typical when God calls a man to be His servant! The Hebrew writer demonstrates this in chapter 11.

Hebrews 11:13, “All these died in faith, without receiving the promises, but having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance, and having confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth.”

1 Peter 1:1, “Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who reside as aliens...”

Truly this mindset; that this world is not my home, my friend, my security, is that which has characterized God’s people throughout history. Then we come to America in the 1970’s.

In the late 60’s and early 70’s Christianity in the US went through a massive shift. Now “conversion” experiences became the norm. These were experiences in which people went from the uncertain and dangerous lifestyle of the druggie, the hippie, the drifter, the “morally free,” and the like to the comfort and security of Christianity! For these people Christianity was a religion of earthly stability and security (quite the opposite of Abraham). And as their experience became the norm, the message of Christianity changed. Now American Christianity taught God wants you to be happy, healthy, powerful, and rich; it was no longer about striving, but abiding and so enjoying the “higher life.” All this spawned the false expectation that because God had saved us, good things were sure to happen!

But we have all seen that God’s call on a person’s life unto ministry brings the opposite anticipation. The book of Jeremiah explains this.

- God called Jeremiah to be a prophet by which now he would be set against the world- *Contra Mundum!* Jeremiah 1 speaking of the kings of Judah, its princes, priests, and people relays God’s promise to Jeremiah; “And they will fight against you, but they will not overcome you...” (Jeremiah 1:19)
- Now read the rest of this prophecy and you will see that Jeremiah experienced this and much more as he was:
 - Despised by his countrymen.
 - Attacked by his family.
 - Opposed by kings, priests, prophets, and men in authority.
 - Continually subject to public ridicule, persecution, threats, violence, and imprisonment which at times brought him close to death!
- And yet as we’ve seen, it wasn’t just Jeremiah. This is where the call of Christ brings all His people.

John 15:19-20a, “If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. 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...”

That is why I am so thankful that we have the encouraging and yet honest words of Jeremiah 1. This passage doesn’t whitewash the call to Kingdom Ministry. It gives us instruction on how to go about it such that we might stand when the world is falling all around us. It gives us the responsibilities which rest upon all ministers in Christ’s kingdom.

Responsibilities

Jeremiah 1:17, “Now, gird up your loins, and arise.”

After the calling, consolation, commissioning, and warnings of Jeremiah 1:1-16, God specifically charged Jeremiah with three things. The first was that of preparation, “...gird up your loins”!

The typical male Hebrew dress at the time involved five items (1) a loin cloth¹ which reached from the waist to the knee, (2) an undergarment which was a close fitting, sleeveless shirt which typically stretched from the shoulders to the knees, (3) an outer garment which was a loose fitting outer robe which stretched from the shoulders to the feet, (4) an outer girdle which was used like a belt (it held your clothes in place as you walked; a sword also could be fastened to it in battle [Judges 3:16; 2 Samuel 20:8], and when a person needed to jog or sprint, the outer garment could be pulled up over the knees and fastened by this belt- this is what is meant by “girding up your loins”) and (5) a mantle² which was a square piece of cloth typically thrown over both shoulders with openings for the head and arms at the sides; its main purpose was to keep a person warm (as such, if it was given as surety in a loan it had to be returned before nightfall [Exodus 22:26]). (I. Howard Marshall, 1996, p. 282)

With this in mind, the expression “to gird up the loins” denotes in the Bible the idea of preparation; it’s what you did before you went to work (Proverbs 31:17; Luke 17:8) or battle (1 Samuel 25:13; Is. 8:9)! And yet the expression also had a wider connotation. For example, it is used in Job (38:3; 40:7) when God confronted his servant, “Now gird up your loins like a man, and I will ask you, and you instruct Me!” Here we see that the expression “gird up your loins” carried the idea of getting ready, preparing, doing what is necessary in order to participate or engage in something.

Accordingly for God to call Jeremiah to “gird up your loins and arise” did NOT mean that everywhere Jeremiah went he had to wear his outer garment above his knees. RATHER, it meant that he was to do all that was necessary now and in the future in order to be ready to serve the Lord at His bidding! Jeremiah was never again to give the excuse, “But God, I’m not ready! I’m too young!” Theodore Laetsch put it this way:

Whether it was for the work of preaching; or the wearying, nerve-straining argumentation with his opponents, who were always ready to challenge him with questions and who were masters at twisting words and employing sophistries or hurling stinging calumnies, scurvy charges at him; or the actual suffering of persecution, hunger, thirst, imprisonment- Jeremiah is to be ready, prepared for anything that might happen. Such readiness, such constant preparedness was essential for his life’s work... (Laetsch, 1987, pp. 30-31)

From this we derive our first point of application for all would-be servants of Christ; salvation has made you a minute-man. You therefore must be in the business of being ready at all times to serve the Lord!

This gives us an important perspective on the life of Christ’s servants; as servants of Christ we either are preparing for battle or we are engaged in battle, we must not allow ourselves to think that there are other modes of living. This is so important! So many of us have a half dozen modes of living:

- There are the religious obligations we have as Christians (church, worship, service, etc.). We mostly view these as optional.
- There’s the familial obligation we have a family members, these are more demanding and less optional for most.
- There’s our career or jobs. Typically we don’t like these, but we live in a world where if you don’t work you don’t eat.
- Then there is our leisure; this of course is a God-given right.
- Another God-given right is our pleasure.
- And then there is our privacy.

Where does “Ministry” lay? In the first category of those things which are optional! Christian, you must see that a biblical worldview involves recognizing that if we had a pie-chart to represent our lives, “ministry/service” would not be a slice in the pie, but that by which we’d

label the entire pie! Ministry first and foremost is NOT what we do, BUT who we are! Recall, God has made you a “saint” with the anticipation that He would use you at all times.

In light of this, there really are only two modes: preparing for battle and engaging in battle (Jeremiah 1:17)!

Is this what you are about? Let me tell you, it must be! This subtle shift in your thinking will have a profound impact on your life! It is the difference between reading your Bible for information/inspiration and reading your Bible with a view towards effectiveness in ministry. It is the difference between viewing fellowship as something that makes you feel good and viewing fellowship as an opportunity to encourage or bless an individual!

I don't want to belabor the point. Suffice it to say that a responsibility that rests on your life this day is being prepared and so ready to serve the Lord when He calls. There is no, “I'm not ready; I'm just a youth!” Listen! If Jeremiah's age didn't disqualify him from standing before kings, theologians, and leaders of all types, what excuse could you possibly offer for not involving yourself in the lives of a colleague or peer? *Christian, gird up your loins!*

There is another responsibility which God⁵. With this, notice the second responsibility God gave Jeremiah was the calling to faithfulness.

Faithfulness

Jeremiah 1:17, “Now, gird up your loins, and arise, and speak to them all which I command you.”

This was Jeremiah's calling. The Lord raised him up to be “a prophet to the nations” (Jeremiah 1:5) and so a spokesman of God. Jeremiah therefore must strive unto faithfulness to the divine message which God would give him. In this regard, notice that the key word is “all”! If Jeremiah spoke 99 percent of the prophecies which God gave him, holding back on just a few now and then, we would consider him to be a bad prophet. Indeed! Luther wrote this:

If I profess with the loudest voice and the clearest exposition every portion of the truth of God, except precisely that little point which the world and the devil are at that moment attacking, I am not confessing Christ, however boldly I may be professing Christ. Where the battle rages, there the loyalty of the soldier is proved, and to be steady on all the battle-fields besides is mere flight and disgrace if he flinches at that point. (Chuck McIlhenny, 2000, p. 85)

As a prophet, Jeremiah must labor at proclaiming the full counsel of God! He was not to suppress a single threat, no matter the protest or the persecution it might provoke. He was not to omit or qualify a single promise, no matter how inopportune it might seem or unworthy the hearers might be. Jeremiah was to speak what God told him and as God told him, not adding to,

subtracting from, or modifying it in any way. Complete and total fidelity was the calling.

Once again we need to hear this! Excepting the formal ministries of preaching, church planting, being a foreign missionary, or being an elder or deacon, the call of ministry is given every time the Lord brings a needy person in our path (Luke 10:36-37)! Now just like Jeremiah, it will be quite tempting to hold back on account of the person or need before us. In our hearts we are respecter of persons; we make distinctions! Yet the Biblical calling that rests on our lives is that we prove faithful to the opportunities God places in our path.

Toward that end, let me remind you of a very important principle of ministry; it is always “unto the Lord.” Take, for example, marriage; in premarital counseling I always raise this fact, because Paul does:

Ephesians 5:22, “Wives, *be subject* to your own husbands, as to the Lord.”

For most newly engaged couples, submission and service is done on account of the worth/merit of the other individual. Think of it most people wouldn’t get married if they thought the other person was awful. NO! They serve, sacrifice, and care for each other because the other is so wonderful! And yet soon the other person is going to be seen for what he/she really is: a sinner. At those times, if your service has been conditioned by how nice your spouse has been to you or how much you love them, you will find it hard to serve!

That is why Paul roots the ministry and service of the woman and the man to the worth of Christ. Why should you serve your spouse after all he’s done? Because you love Christ and that is what Christ wants you to do! And so it must be in all the service we render in ministry! We must ever and always keep in mind that when we serve another person, ultimately we aren’t doing it for them, but for the Lord!

Colossians 3:23-24, “Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men; knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve.”

We need to hear this. See we look at the heart of Christ and there see love and compassion for His people and conclude that we too must love and have compassion for His people. And that is right! But then we make the fatal mistake of ministering on account of this love. You know what happens when we do this, don’t you? It isn’t long before the people you are serving out of your love for them do something to hurt you. Then what do you have? Only the obligation to serve!

Now minister long in Christ’s Kingdom out of mere obligation and soon the ministry will become a weight too heavy to lift. Christian, do not give up the calling to love and be compassionate for the people of God. BUT DO give up any and all service out of love/duty to the other person. That which much compel us in ministry is our love for Christ (2 Corinthians 5:14a).

This is the key to Faithfulness in one's calling: when what we do we do for the Lord, rather than man! This brings us to the last responsibility given here; fearlessness.

Fearlessness

Jeremiah 1:17, "Now, gird up your loins, and arise, and speak to them all which I command you. Do not be dismayed before them, lest I dismay you before them."

At the outset note, that this is a difficult statement to understand. At first hearing it sounds as though God is saying, "Do not be frightened or I'll frighten you! // Do not be traumatized or I'll traumatize you!" But that is NOT what this text is saying. So what is it saying? To answer this I want to proceed in an orderly fashion looking at three different points.

First, notice that whatever it means to be "dismayed" that which inspires it in this text on both counts is NOT God, BUT man; both times the text reads, "before them" (in fact, they are parallel expressions). Consider this with me for a moment. There is no question that in the first statement, "Do not be dismayed before them...", that which is causing the "dismay" is the "them"/man! As that is the case notice that the second statement, "...lest I dismay you before them", is parallel to the first such that the "dismay" of this statement must also be rooted in the "them"/man! It is this observation which has served as the key for many commentators in unlocking the meaning of this passage. But we'll get back to this in a moment.

Notice secondly the definition of the word, "dismay": *חָתַת* (*hātat*). It is used to translate the idea of being broken, abolished, afraid, or dismayed. It focuses not so much on a physical breaking, but that which is on the inside: emotional and/or spiritual. In this sense it speaks of being demoralized, ruined, broken, or beside oneself/terrorized.

Third, notice the use of the word, "dismay." Its use is NOT that of the traditional Hebrew pun (which involves two different words in the Hebrew with the same consonants). RATHER the word is used here in two different ways (as a *passive* and then a *causative*).

With all of this in mind, what is God saying here? The idea behind the first expression, which is in the passive ("Do not be dismayed before them..."), is that IF Jeremiah became a respecter of persons (if speaking to the wealthy, powerful, intelligent, the cruel or rude would cause Jeremiah to shrink back, modify the divine message, soft-sell it, or in any way lessen what God was proclaiming) THEN something would happen. What specifically? Notice God now uses the causative theme in Hebrew³: if Jeremiah is dismayed on account of man, God would cause/allow this fear of man to increase. God would lift His preserving grace and give him over to "being dismayed on account of man". That is the idea! "Jeremiah! If you give yourself to the fear of man, I will give you over to that fear such that it will bind you and so enslave you!" (cf. Jeremiah 2:5) Theodore Laetsch put it this way:

If the fear of men's threats or the love of men's flattery causes them to add or detract from His holy Word, he will cause them to be filled with fear... (Laetsch, 1987, p. 31)⁴...

With this we see here a convergence of three Biblical truths. Notice :

- Sin Breeds Sin, Galatians 5:9; Proverbs 26:11; 2 Peter 2:20; Matthew 12:45. Sin rarely exists in a vacuum; it most always leads to more sinning. Thus speaking of sin, Paul wrote: Galatians 5:9, "A little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough." Proverbs 26:11 likens the folly of sin to, "... a dog that returns to its vomit..." To borrow from mass marketing which says, "You can't only eat just one", when it comes to sin, "You can't only sin just once! Sin breeds sin!" If you give in the fear of man, that fear is going to increase!
- One way God deals with sin in His people is by lifting His preserving grace and allowing them to reap in their person a greater portion of the wages of sin, Proverbs 5:21-22; Hosea 2:6-7; Jeremiah 2:19; Psalm 106:15.

Proverbs 5:22, "His own iniquities will capture the wicked, and he will be held with the cords of his sin."

Christian recall, that which makes sin enjoyable in this state is that, on account of God's preserving grace, we don't reap the full consequences of our sin in this life. Yet there are times when God lifts His grace and so gives us a fuller taste of it! God does this NOT as recompense for our sin BUT to reclaim us unto our restoration (cf. Hosea 2:6-7)! That is the idea behind the statement in Jeremiah 1:17. If Jeremiah gave in to fearing man, God would allow Jeremiah to be further traumatized by that fear. Now this should not be shocking to us for God has warned us elsewhere regarding the travesty of fearing man.

- The Fear of Man Brings a Snare, Jeremiah 17:5-6; Proverbs 29:25.

Jeremiah 17:5-6, "Thus says the Lord, 'Cursed is the man who trusts in mankind and makes flesh his strength, and whose heart turns away from the Lord. [What will happen if we give weight to man and so "fear" him? Truly we will be "dismayed"- we will reap the consequence in our person...] For he will be like a bush in the desert and will not see when prosperity comes, but will live in stony wastes in the wilderness, a land of salt without inhabitant.'" - we call this "leanness of soul" (Psalm 106:15)! Truly this is "the snare" which comes when we fear man...

Proverbs 29:25, "The fear of man brings a snare, but he who trusts in the Lord will be exalted."

In light of this, Jeremiah must ever and always guard his heart from being "dismayed before man"; for it most certainly would lead to a spiritual retrogression in his life by which he would be plunged into all sorts of fear, burden, worry, and grief. In fact as one who at times has

known this “dismay,” I can testify to you that it is not a good place to live. Think of the bully... if you pay them off or cower before them, they will only return. So it is with fearing man. The more you fear the more you will fear. No! We must cultivate a heart that says, “God! It is You that I only care about... Your opinion... Your praise... Your endorsement is my only concern!” To live here truly is to know freedom in our service!

In fact, beyond freedom, it is to know health in one’s walk with God:

Jeremiah 17:7-8, “Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord and whose trust is the Lord. For he will be like a tree planted by the water, that extends its roots by a stream and will not fear when the heat comes; but its leaves will be green, and it will not be anxious in a year of drought nor cease to yield fruit.”

You say, “I want this godly fear, but how can I have it if I’m given to the fear of man?” We might offer many suggestions, but let me give you one.

Psalm 119:38, “Establish Thy word to Thy servant, as that which produces reverence for Thee.”- you want to live in reverence for God? Labor in your life to submit to the word of God- make this your passion, prayer, and business! For Christ constitutes reality (John 1:1-14). Thus, to be “transformed by the renewing of our mind” (Rom. 12:1-2) is to live in reality and so to be free from the enslaving effects of darkness!

End Notes

¹ Compare Jeremiah 13:1.

² This cloak, which everybody possessed, could not be given in loan, as it was used at night as a covering (Exodus 22:25–26; Deuteronomy 24:13). It was generally taken off for work (Matthew 24:18; Mark 10:50).

³ Hiphal.

⁴ *Jeremiah*, CCCS, p. 31.

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About the Preacher

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