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A Word from God to the Dispossessed

In 1648, William Bridge preached a series of sermons in Stepney, London, which God used magnificently! The text for the series was from Psalm 42.

Psalm 42:11, "Why are you in despair, O my soul? And why have you become disturbed within me? Hope in God, for I shall yet praise Him, the help of my countenance, and my God."

In this series, he preached thirteen sermons entitled: "*A Lifting Up For The Downcast.*" And if you are struggling with discouragement in ministry, I highly recommend the book compiling these sermons. And it is in the spirit of this glorious theme that we turn our attention to A

Word from God to the Dispossessed, which I easily could have titled this, “A Lifting Up for the Downcast.”

The background of Ezekiel 34, as well as a couple of observations to help us in our study, show us that in 585 BC those Jews *already in exile* on account of the first two deportations (which I am calling the Babylonian Jews) were faced with a refugee problem of epic proportions. The Babylonian Jews were educated, powerful, and wealthy. As such, they entered the exile and gained back much of what they lost when they were taken from their home- nothing less was expected.¹ However, the exile of 586 BC was quite different. This was an exile of control by which the inhabitants of one region were transported to another to squelched the urge to rebel (again, people tend not to die for a land that is not their own).

As such in 585 BC the established, successful, and powerful Babylonian Jew was greeted with thousands upon thousands of Jewish brothers and sisters who were dirty, stinky, diseased, sick, hungry, weak, and dying. These war-torn survivors would have had need for food, clothing, covering, medicine, work, and the many other resources necessary to begin a new life. And what did the Babylonian Jew do? They turned a blind eye to their brethren (cf. Ezekiel 34:1-10)!

And yet, the neglect was NOT *JUST* on the part of the Babylonian Jew. Even among the newly arriving exiles, the strong and powerful took advantage of the weak – which is why in Ezekiel 34, God turned His attention to them.

Ezekiel 34:17-19, “And as for you, My flock, thus says the Lord God, ‘Behold, I will judge between one sheep and another, between the rams and the male goats [a shepherding practice at this time was to mix within a flock of sheep both “goats” and “rams” which, because of their size, would become the leaders of the flock.² Accordingly, this exhortation is directed at the leaders/strong amongst the refugees of 586 BC]. Is it too slight a thing for you that you should feed in the good pasture, that you must tread down with your feet the rest of your pastures? Or that you they must eat what you tread down with your feet, and they must drink what you foul with your feet!’” should drink of the clear waters, that you must foul the rest with your feet? And as for My flock,

Tragedy and trial can bring out the best in a man as well as the worst. Here we see the latter in that even among the refugees there were those who were looking out only for themselves and so taking advantage of the weak and hurting!

We will return to this, however for now notice the outline of Ezekiel 34;The Outline of Ezekiel it involves two movements:

- For the Babylonian Jew who by this time was well-off, God had a message of rebuke and warning, Ezekiel 34:1-10.
- For the newly arriving Jew, God had a mixed message: Rebuke for those feeding on the

weak and Comfort for those being fed upon, Ezekiel 34:11-31!

With this, let me give you a couple of words regarding the structure of Exodus 34:11-31. In this regard don't forget that God has deigned to communicate truth to us NOT only propositionally (that is, via the words of Scripture), BUT also through the structure and verbal parallels which are part of His word. For example, Psalm 93:3-4 was written to teach God's people the sovereign majesty of their Lord. It does this in two ways. It not only *SAYS* that God is great, but it also *DEMONSTRATES* it, "The floods have lifted up, O Lord, the floods have lifted up their voice; the floods lift up their pounding waves. More than the sounds of many waters, *than* the mighty breakers of the sea, the Lord on high is mighty."

At this time, God's people could NOT conceive of anything more unstoppable in the world than the rising tide. Accordingly, the Psalmist uses the pounding waves of the rising tide to communicate God's greatness in such a way that we not only apprehend it, but also feel the unthwartable power of God's sovereignty!

And so it is in Ezekiel 34. In this chapter Ezekiel chose NOT simply to *SAY*, BUT also to *SHOW* how God is going to reverse the bitter Providences of His people. Speaking of the Babylonian Jew and their response to their newly exiled brethren:

Ezekiel 34:4, "Those who are sickly you have not strengthened, the diseased you have not healed, the broken you have not bound up, the scattered you have not brought back, nor have you sought for the lost; but with force and with severity you have dominated them."

The Christian in the meat-grinder of sin and misery becomes sickly, without strength, diseased, broken, scattered, and lost. Pictured here is the unravelling that occurs on account of sin! Yet this is NOT the final word. Notice what God in His redeeming grace does:

Ezekiel 34:16a, "I will seek the lost, bring back the scattered, bind up the broken, and strengthen the sick..."

This verse reverses the order found in v. 4! The implication is profound. Ezekiel here not only *SAYS* that God is going to reverse the lot of His people. But the way he writes it enables the reader to *EXPERIENCE* the reversing of sin! D. I. Block commented:

By inverting the sequence Ezekiel emphasizes that with Israel's restoration the tragedies of the past will be reversed. By recasting negative statements as positive affirmations, he deliberately portrays Yahweh as a good shepherd, the antithesis of the earlier evil shepherds. (Block, 1998, p. 291)

With that, another literary tool employed here is known as Progressive Parallelism. This is where an historical account or an assertion is stated and then repeated with advancement in thought or detail. For example we see it with David's writing of Psalm 29.³

Psalm 29:1-2, "Ascribe to the Lord, O sons of the mighty, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength. Ascribe to the Lord the glory due to His name; worship the Lord in holy array."

Each of the four statements made here begin at the same place, but then advance the thought beyond the previous statement- *progressive parallelism!* We see this in Genesis 1 and 2. Here we read of two creation accounts. Liberals in their bias ignorantly suggest that Genesis 1 & 2 were composed from two different sources. Yet what we have here is another example of Progressive Parallelism; the same truth is here described from a different angle involving a progression of thought from which we learn how Adam and Eve came to be!

We see it in the book of Daniel.

- Daniel 2-7 describes world history from the perspective of God.
- Daniel 8-12 repeats the exact same history, but from the viewpoint of God's people- with a view to explaining God's purposes for them!

Sinclair Ferguson wrote: "One might liken the structure [of Daniel] to a spiral staircase, turning around the same central point on more than one occasion, yet rising higher and higher at the same time." (Ferguson, 1993, p. 17))- that is Progressive Parallelism!

These are but a few examples of this literary device found throughout Scripture in which God enables us NOT only to read the truth, BUT to be involved in the truth through the senses.

It is this we see in Ezekiel 34:11-31. This pericope contains three progressive, yet parallel sections in which God Himself, in response to the abuse that some of God's people perpetrated against others, takes up the care of His people.

- The first section addresses the care of God during the Intertestamental Era, vv. 11-16.
- The second section examines God's care further in the future during the New Covenant Era, vv. 17-24.
- The final section considers the care of God for His people in the New Heavens and Earth, vv. 25-31.

Each of the sections are *PARALLEL* in that each address God's covenant care for His people. Yet each *PROGRESS* beyond the scope of the previous section eventually bringing the reader himself to the life we will enjoy in the New Heavens and Earth!

I want to look with you at the second progression, specifically The Care of God for His People During the New Covenant Era- the era which began with the first coming of Christ and will end with His Second Coming, the era in which we live today! To the weary and heavy laden in the body of Christ, to the dispossessed and downcast, to the neglected and forsaken of men, this is God's message to you!

A Word from God to the Dispossessed, Ezekiel 34:17-24.

Speaking of the strong and the powerful refugee:

Ezekiel 34:21, "...you push with side and with shoulder, and thrust at all the weak with your horns, until you have scattered them abroad."

This is as we saw in vv. 17-19. Mob rule set in amongst the exiles such that the strong took advantage of the weak and the covenant God established with His people was trampled underfoot! And yet, this same treachery would be that which would characterize God's people at the time of Christ.

- Thinks of Christ's rebuke of the Jews in Matthew 23.
- Think of Alexander or Demas, both of whom did Paul much wrong, 2 Timothy 4:14 & 10!
- Then there was Euodia and I urge Syntyche, Philippians 4:2ff.
- Or in Paul's final months, think how everyone abandoned him, cf. 2 Timothy 4:11!

This gross selfishness would be in its heyday in the days of Christ where Jewish leaders fed on the poor – unto the poor's detriment, abuse, and neglect (cf. Matthew 23)!

Was this a serious thing? Don't ever forget that the first step when it comes to apostasy is the neglect, forsaking, or trampling underfoot the weak and the helpless among you. That is why the prophets are filled with exhortation and rebuke on account of how the people of God were mistreating the weak, poor, and needy among them. For example:⁴

Isaiah 10:1-2, "Woe to those who enact evil statutes, and to those who constantly record unjust decisions, so as to deprive the needy of justice, and rob the poor of My people of *their* rights, in order that widows may be their spoil, and that they may plunder the orphans."

As we have seen, a Foundational Principle in the Kingdom of God is that God had mercy upon us when we were strangers, weak, and helpless. Accordingly, as the people of God, we ought likewise to do the same!⁵

Leviticus 19:34, "The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God."⁶

This is an amazing command because in most pagan societies, hurting, weak, and poor people were believed to be cursed on account of their sin (which is why they were suffering).⁷ Accordingly, to help them was to endorse their sin!

Yet such was NOT to be the ethic amongst God's people- for God set His love upon them to help them when they were sinful! Accordingly, a major theme of Redemption is caring for the weak, hurting, and poor amongst us! To neglect them indicates that we have forgotten the gospel by which we were saved!⁸ In the words of Matthew 18:33, "Having been forgiven so much, ought not mercy to be our lasting obligation?"

Throughout the prophets this is given as one of the first reasons why God's people went into exile! Accordingly, when we read here that in the midst of the trial and difficulty of exile the strong amongst the refugees were taking advantage of the weak, we ought to sit up. This is an egregious sin which must not be!

Yet it will be! The sheer number of exhortations in Scripture about neglect for the weak and hurting in the Body of Christ tells us that:

- This is a major inclination when it comes to our sinful hearts, and...
- A major problem in any church will be that we will trample underfoot each other!

It always amazes me to hear the disbelief of some Christians that at such and such a church they felt uncared for and neglected. Brothers and sisters, listen if you haven't already, it is just a matter of time before you feel uncared for and neglected here. It is going to happen! In fact, it is just a matter of time before YOU are the cause of someone feeling uncared for and neglected here.

It is part of what being in a relationship involves. Who amongst us would tell a newly married couple that in a good marriage you will never feel neglected or uncared for by your spouse?

Accordingly, if that time should come in your life don't be shocked! It is part and parcel of living in relationships in a state of sin and misery! We will trample underfoot each other!!

Now the focus in this text is this: "What ought to be your consolation and joy when you are neglected and set at naught?"

[The Divine Response, vv. 20, 22.](#)

Ezekiel 34:20, "Therefore, thus says the Lord God to them, 'Behold, I, even I, will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep.'"

This is an important truth that we must take to heart. When we are neglected and our hearts are trampled under, it is God who will address the oversight- NOT YOU OR ME!! That does NOT mean that we take it on the chin and so suffer in silence. If you are hurting you need to speak up; the aggressor needs to hear it.⁹ *But changing or fixing those who have hurt or neglected us is NOT our job!*

We see this so often in the church. Someone feels hurt or neglected and the cry for justice is sounded. And what is “the justice” that is sought? That all depends on the person offended.

- *“Unless so and so grovels at my feet and says the exact words I want to hear, they are not sorry.”*
- *“Unless a significant portion of the body calls me, I will consider this church to be cold and hurtful.”*

Family of God, at those moments when we are offended by others, we must go to the word of God and ask of it what justice looks like in an offense. When we do that, do you know what we will find? Justice belongs with the Lord, “‘Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,’ says the Lord” (Romans 12:19)!¹⁰ It therefore is NOT in our hands which means we ought NOT to have any expectation as to what another ought to do when it comes to their repentance! God will deal with them as His justice and grace demands!

You say, *“I don’t like that! You mean so and so can treat me poorly and there is nothing I can do to make them change? What about me? What about my needs?”* Great question! For the answer look with me at...

Ezekiel 34:22, “Therefore, I will deliver My flock, and they will no longer be a prey; and I will judge between one sheep and another.”

Brothers and sisters, the Lord here is hinting as to what our consolation is when we are injured by another Christian! HE is the inheritance of the weak and needy! HE is their consolation and joy! Consider how God grows the child of God in grace. Speaking of His rebellious people, God said,

Hosea 2:6-7, 14, 19-20, “Therefore, behold, I will hedge up her way with thorns, and I will build a wall against her so that she cannot find her paths. And she will pursue her lovers, but she will not overtake them; and she will seek them, but will not find *them*. Then she will say, ‘I will go back to my first husband, for it was better for me than than now!... 14 Therefore, behold, I will allure her, bring her into the wilderness [the place of suffering, want, and need], and speak kindly to her. [Why?] 19 And I will betroth you to Me forever; Yes, I will betroth you to Me in righteousness and in justice, in lovingkindness and in compassion, and I will betroth you to Me in faithfulness. Then you will know the Lord.”

From this we conclude that when God brings you to a bitter place where your heart has been trampled upon by another in the Lord, it is so that you and I might find our all and all in Christ! And so, consider the passion and cry of saints in past days when they were wronged. Listen to that which encouraged Jeremiah, a man who knew more abuse and neglect at the hands of God’s people than any of us here ever will:

Lamentations 3:24, “‘The Lord is my portion,’ says my soul, ‘Therefore I have hope in

Him.”-

Not vengeance, not restitution, not the aggressor crawling on a bed of hot coals begging us to forgive them. Jeremiah’s “portion” in life and in death was none-other than Christ! When the prophet was set at naught, his consolation and joy was the Lord! So it was in the life of Asaph. When the sinner got the best of him, look where he went.

Psalm 73:25-26, “Whom have I in heaven *but Thee*? And besides Thee, I desire nothing on earth. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.”

We see it in Paul.

Philippians 3:8, “More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish in order that I may gain Christ.”

Our greatest comfort in life, death, trial, difficulty, or suffering is NOT relief, BUT Christ!... which brings us to...

The Glorious Provision, vv. 23-24.

Ezekiel 34:23a, “Then I will set over them one shepherd, My servant David...”

Again, in this progressive parallel treatment of the consolation of the weak and needy we are talking here about the New Covenant Era. As such, we know who this Shepherd is... it is none-other than Jesus Christ Himself!¹¹ Yet would you notice, in any era in which God’s people live, God/Christ has always been the consolation of His people.

Ezekiel 34:12, “As a shepherd cares for his herd in the day when he is among his scattered sheep, so I will care for My sheep and will deliver them from all the places to which they were scattered on a cloudy and gloomy day.”

- v. 13a: “... I will bring them out...”
- v. 14a: “I will feed them in a good pasture...”
- v. 15b: “...I will lead them to rest...”
- v. 16a: “I will seek the lost, bring back the scattered, bind up the broken, and strengthen the sick...”
- v. 26b: “...I will cause showers to come down in their season; they will be showers of blessing.”
- v. 29a: “And I will establish for them a renowned planting place...”

What is our consolation when we are neglected and trampled underfoot by brothers and

sisters? It is God- loving us, knowing us, communing with us, encouraging us! Now to clarify this, Ezekiel continued:

Ezekiel 34:23b, "Then I will set over them one shepherd, My servant David, and he will feed them; he will feed them himself and be their shepherd."

This passage is so glorious. It tells us two things:

- The consolation and joy of the believer is none-other than Christ.
- When it comes to our satisfaction in Him, it is NOT left to the individual to find fulfillment. RATHER, Christ Himself hand-feeds His children; He is our Shepherd!

This means is that there is NO secret to being filled in Christ. All that is needed is the capacity/desire to feed upon Him when we are in the valley of the shadow of death!

But see, this is the issue, now! Isn't it?

- Do you want Christ more than anything in this life?
- Do you want Christ more than food, covering, money, success, companionship, and the like?
- Do you want Christ more than being vindicated? Or being viewed as right?

This is the danger of being bereft of any desire. Its lack can create in us an insatiable longing for that which we desire, such that a passage like the one before us will be received NOT as good news!

- *"You mean, in my pain and sorrow, all I get is Christ?"*
- *"I want vindication! I want an apology! I want the person to feel sorry for what they have done!"*

Learn a very important truth when it comes to Christ, NOT ONLY do we "not have because we do not ask" (James 4:2b), BUT we do not have because in our folly and ignorance we do not want! We think personal vindication will be a sweeter meal than Christ!

Don't Miss It! The ministry of neglect- and that is what you have if you are on the receiving end of loveless fellowship- is a glorious opportunity to have and hold Christ in a way you never would in a land of plenty. Yet it brings with it a serious temptation... and that is a longing for vindication above and beyond longing for Christ! It has been said, "Unforgiveness is the poison we drink, hoping others will die." (author unknown)

Oh, hurting Christian, come to your senses. What you need, your ultimate best, can only be met in Christ. Have your enemy crawl on a bed of hot coals and in the end, you will not be satisfied! Spurgeon wrote:

“Desire is insatiable as death, but He who fills all in all can fill it. The capacity of our wishes who can measure? But the immeasurable wealth of God can more than overflow it. I ask you if you are not complete when God is yours? Do you want anything but God? Is not His all-sufficiency enough to satisfy you if all else should fail?... Here is a deep sea of bliss, a shoreless ocean of delight; come, bathe your spirit in it; swim an age, and you shall find no shore; dive throughout eternity, and you shall find no bottom. ‘I will be their God.’ If this does not make your eyes sparkle, and your heart beat fast with bliss, then assuredly your soul is not in a healthy state.” (Spurgeon, 1990, p. Jan 9)

So, resist the urge to suffer in the flesh. Rather, take advantage of the glory that is yours when you encounter relational struggles and worldly trial; at these moments Christ is closer to us than when everything was fine.¹² In fact, God guarantees it, which is the point of v. 24. After repeating the teaching, the pericope ends with, “I, the Lord, have spoken”- which is another way of saying, “I guarantee it!”

So what ought the downcast to do in a world that has treated them shamefully? With Korah say this:

Psalm 42:11, “Why are you in despair, O my soul? And why have you become disturbed within me? Hope in God, for I shall yet praise Him, [He is...] the help of my countenance, and my God.”- may God be your consolation and joy when you encounter the trials and difficulty such that you seek for nothing else in this life!

References

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End Note(s)

¹ That is why they were taken. In both exiles, Nebuchadnezzar took the cream of the crop of Israel that they might be a productive force in Babylon. Recall, these were not an exile of conquest, but, on the part of Babylon, an exile of opportunity.

² J. B. Taylor wrote, "The flock in biblical times, as today in the Middle East, regularly consisted of a mixture of sheep and goats, and the Hebrew word *šeh* in 17, 20, 22 (translated equally misleadingly as cattle, AV, and sheep, RSV) simply meant a member of the flock, whether a sheep or a goat." (Ezekiel, TOTC, p. 216)

³ Another example is the Book of Revelation. It is easy to assume that because Revelation contains history, the whole thing must proceed chronologically with the contents of the latter chapters occurring after earlier chapters. Yet this is an assumption which leads to some serious interpretive problems. A better analysis of the book reveals that Revelation contains seven distinct sections which chronologically are parallel to each other. Each of the seven sections basically covers the same era, yet they progress the story further each time. And so...

1. Section #1 (chapters 1-3): We see the Church as it exists in the current age.
 2. Section #2 (chapters 4-7): We see the same history but this time viewed from the perspective of God's Throne. In this vision we see the church suffering trial and persecution against the background of the victory of Christ. Metaphor: Seven Sealed Scroll
 3. Section #3 (chapters 8-11): Once again we have the same history, but now the church is avenged, protected, and victorious. Metaphor: Seven Trumpets
 4. Section #4 (chapters 12-14): We have the same history as seen from the perspective of Christ, His coming, and His people. Here we are introduced to the beast out of the sea and the beast out of the earth.
 5. Section #5 (chapters 15-16): Once again we have the same history with an emphasis on the wrath of God and its devastating effects upon mankind. Metaphor: Seven bowls of Wrath
 6. Section #6 (chapters 17-19): The same history as before with an emphasis on the fall of Babylon and of the beasts. Here the dragon's two helpers, the two beasts, are punished.
 7. Section #7 (chapters 20-22): Finally, we have the same history but now progressing to the final
- ⁴ We see the same exhortation in Amos 2:6; Dan. 4:27; Jer. 5:28-29; Zech. 7:9-11; Mal. 3:5 and many more!

⁵ Cf. Jam. 1:27!!

⁶ Cf. also Deut. 24:17-18.

⁷ We see this thinking even amongst the disciples, cf. Jn. 9:1-2; Lk. 13:2-3!!!

⁸ In the Kingdom of God, the weak and the poor are said to be our greatest treasures. Consider 1 Cor. 12:24b-26, "But God has *so* composed the body, giving more abundant honor to that *member* which lacked, that there should be no division in the body, but *that* the members should have the same care for one another. And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if *one* member is honored, all the members rejoice with it." Our most precious possession as a people is the weak and hurting- for to care for them is to proclaim and enjoy- to participate in- the gospel!

In fact, so ingrained was the thinking that during the Decian persecution (~250 A.D.) the Roman authorities stormed into a church-gathering. These Roman officials were seeking to loot the vast treasures which were believed to be held by the church. Upon entering the gathering, the Roman prefect demanded from Laurentius, the deacon, "*Show me your treasures at once.*" Laurentius is said to have pointed at the widows and orphans who at that moment were being supplied with food and said, "*These are the treasures of the church.*" (quoted in William Barclay's, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Vol. 1, p. 244)

⁹ Cf. Matthew 18:15-20.

¹⁰ Cf. also Deut. 32:35; Psalm 94:1; 1 Thess. 4:6; Heb. 10:30.

¹¹ Cf. Lk. 1:32; Matthew 22:42-45; Rev. 3:7.

¹² Recall what we saw in Hosea. In 2:14 God said, "Therefore, behold [that is, you are never going to believe this; in the midst of her struggles on account of the sin and misery of this life...], I will allure her, bring her into the wilderness, and speak kindly to her [lit. speak upon her heart]": we've talked much about the role of the wilderness in the life of the child of God. The wilderness is where we find ourselves when vexed by sin, abused by this world, or neglected by

God's people.

But that is the beauty of the wilderness. We think of the wilderness as a God-forsaken land of misery and suffering.¹² Yet don't miss it: it is there that God incubates the faith of His people. For in this place of suffering, the silly temptations of life do not dwell. All we have is God! Yet what a possession! Hos. 2:15 says, "Then I will give her her vineyards from there [the metaphor of "vineyards" denotes the idea of spiritual prosperity], and the valley of Achor [this is a reference to the burial place of Achan who after sinning against God was crushed beneath a pile of rocks. Accordingly from Achan on down to the contemporaries of Hosea, Achor was a name of disgrace! Yet grace radically transforms shame, doesn't it? Notice, the "valley of Achor" - this judgment- would become...] as a door of hope [a portal of hope, anticipation, and so blessing]": how is it that trial, difficulty, or neglect can be a portal of hope? Simply stated, through the trials, pain, and sufferings of neglect, God removes the distractions of this world, leaving only Himself at the Christian's side... where the Lord hand feeds them!