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The Call of Kingdom Ministry, Part 4

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.”

Many have heard of the book, *A Shepherd Looks at the Psalm 23*. It was written by a man who tended sheep (W. Phillip Keller) so he considered the imagery of the passage from the perspective of a shepherd. It is a wonderful little book which I would recommend to any who hasn't read it.

However there is a glaring deficiency in Keller's approach of looking at Psalm 23 from the premise that David wrote the psalm as a shepherd; for when David wrote Psalm 23 he no longer was a shepherd; he was a king! Now this observation becomes all the more profound when it is recognized that in the ancient world, the attribute of a shepherd was the ideal of any and every king! From the Babylonian empire to the Canaanites who dwelt in Palestine, a great king was to be a shepherd! Thus when David penned Psalm 23 he was making a profound statement, “Kingdom of Israel, the Lord is my Shepherd and so He is yours!” With this, notice the provision that God gave to David as king.

Psalm 23:4, “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for Thou art with me; Thy rod and Thy staff, they comfort me.”

As the anointed of God, David received two glorious *Consolations* which no doubt brought much comfort to his soul God was “with him”, and God would provide the resources that he would need in times of conflict; God's “rod and staff”! And yet it just wasn't the office of King to which God provides these resources. For example, when a man was commissioned to the office of an Apostle, he too received some *glorious consolations*.

- An aided memory by which to recall the redeeming acts of God, John 14:26.
- Authority over Satan and his demons, Luke 10:17-19.
- The provision of the Holy Spirit who would guide them, John 16:13.

From these examples we see that ministry in God's Kingdom brings with it multiple and glorious consolations; each related to the specific task to which a person has been called whether that

be the service of a King, Apostle, Priest, Husband, Wife, etc. And God gave Jeremiah the consolations as a prophet; which are applicable to us as we endeavor to serve the Lord as a bearer of His word.

Jeremiah 1:8, “Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you,’ declares the Lord”

This is a huge promise! To the ears of an Old Testament saint, this gave expression to the truth God gave to His covenant people throughout redemptive history; specifically that He was “with His people”!¹ We tend to take this expression to mean simply that God in some way is for us; on our side. Yet this truly falls short of what is denoted by this expression. It refers to the Covenant Presence of God, a principle of the greatest blessing. Simply defined, it involves a restraining of the sin and miseries of this life. Where normally sin and misery has its way, God brings Kingdom blessing. Listen to a couple of passages:²

Genesis 39:1-5, “Now Joseph had been taken down to Egypt; and Potiphar, an Egyptian officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the bodyguard, bought him from the Ishmaelites, who had taken him down there. And the Lord was with Joseph, so he became a successful man. And he was in the house of his master, the Egyptian. Now his master saw that the Lord was with him and *how* the Lord caused all that he did to prosper in his hand [that is the Covenant Presence of God]. So Joseph found favor in his sight, and became his personal servant; and he made him overseer over his house, and all that he owned he put in his charge. And it came about that from the time he made him overseer in his house, and over all that he owned, the Lord blessed the Egyptian’s house on account of Joseph; thus the Lord’s blessing was upon all that he owned, in the house and in the field.”

The Covenant Presence of God involves a reversal of the fall. See it is normal to reap a certain amount of profit in farming. But when God’s Presence is involved (as it was with Joseph), the earth yields its fruit willingly such that what is reaped is 10, 20, 30 times more than normal! That is the Covenant Presence of God which normally references NOT a physical blessing, BUT a spiritual one.

Psalm 84:4, 6, “How blessed are those who dwell in Thy house! They are ever praising Thee... [the Psalmist here is reflecting upon the Covenant Presence of God. And what would be the result?...] Passing through the valley of Baca [weeping], they make it a spring, the early rain also covers it with blessings.”

God’s covenant presence is an oasis in a dry and hot desert. It brings health, life, strength, confidence, and encouragement where normally despair would reign!

Psalm 23:4a, “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil [When facing death, “fear” is the natural response which you will note did NOT occur in David’s life. Why?], for Thou art with me...”

And thus we read in Jeremiah:

Jeremiah 1:8, “Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you,’ declares the Lord.”

The promise is restated in 1:19. It is so important that Jeremiah never to forget it.

Jeremiah 1:19, “And they will fight against you, but they will not overcome you, for I am with you to deliver you,’ declares the Lord.”

The Covenant Presence of God was and is a most important promise given to the believer by which an “earthen vessel” (we call a man) is enabled to stand when all the world around him is falling! It is to know the grace of God by which we flourish though we be in “the valley of weeping!”

And yet notice that the “Covenant Presence of God” is not an unconditional promise! When the Christian rebels against God and deigns to “go it alone,” the Lord doesn’t forsake the believer; yet He can and oft-times does remove His Covenant Presence. At these times sin and its miseries are given full access to the believer. Speaking of the rebellious people of God in the wilderness the Psalmist writes:

Psalm 106:15, “And He gave them their request; but sent leanness into their soul.”

Instead of thriving, there was degradation! Instead of “fearing no evil” there was lamentation and despair! Listen to Isaiah speaking NOT to the non-Christian, BUT the rebellious child of God.

Isaiah 59:1-2, “Behold, the Lord’s hand is not so short that it cannot save; neither is His ear so dull that it cannot hear. But your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden *His* face from you [His Covenant Presence], so that He does not hear.”

When a Christian gives himself to sin, the Lord withholds the graces of His presence such that now the believer is vulnerable to the full curse of this state of sin and misery! This is an important element in Church Discipline! We see this in Jeremiah’s life.

Jeremiah 2:19, “Your own wickedness will correct you, and your apostasies will reprove you; know therefore and see that it is evil and bitter for you to forsake the Lord your God...”

When God’s people give themselves to sin, God can and at times does remove His hand of blessing such that they reap the bitterness of this world! Truly, one of the many blessings of being a member of the family of God is that through salvation the Lord joins Himself to His people in an intimate way so as to bless them in and through all things! This is what is meant by God being “with us.” This is what it means when we reference the Covenant Presence of God. For Jeremiah, that meant that no matter where the ministry of God brought him; whether

before kings, skeptics, authorities, brilliant debaters, in prisons or in a cistern, the Lord would be “with him to deliver him”! In other words, God gave him the promise that though he passed through “the valley of weeping,” it truly would become “a spring”! Why? Because of the Covenant Presence of God! That was the first consolation God gave to Jeremiah as the prophet entered into the ministry of God’s Kingdom!

Now are we able to assume that we too enjoy this consolation in our lives and ministries? Based on the rest of Scripture, we say, “Yes!” Let me give you an example with the last words Christ told the church before He ascended to heaven.

Matthew 28:20b, “...and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

The Covenant Presence of God was NOT intended to be just an Old Testament thing it is a principle/promise that transcends the ages! Truly, from Matthew 28 we conclude the Covenant Presence of God is a Consolation intended for all of God’s servants, including you and me!

God’s Unthwartable Will

Jeremiah 1:11-12, “And the word of the Lord came to me saying, ‘What do you see, Jeremiah?’ And I said, ‘I see a rod of an almond tree.’ Then the Lord said to me, ‘You have seen well, for I am watching over My word to perform it.’”

This is the first of two initial visions which God gave Jeremiah upon calling him to the prophetic ministry. Both visions clearly were given NOT for the people of God *en masse* in Judah, BUT for the prophet himself. Next time we’ll consider the second vision. Notice the first formal vision which God gave to Jeremiah revolved around an “almond tree.” This is incredibly significant! Recall, that Jeremiah was from the city of “Anathoth” which was three miles North East of Jerusalem (about an hour’s walk away). It was a “Priestly city” which traced its lineage all the way back to Eli, the high priest in Shiloh! That was its fame! However its fortune came from its rich pastureland (Joshua 21:18) whose primary crop was, can you guess?, the “Almond tree”! In fact today, this area and the city of Anata are still known for its almond production. J. A. Thompson describes it this way:

Anathoth remains to this day a center for almond growing. The modern visitor to the area in the very early spring is promised the memorable and unforgettable sight of almond trees in bloom and in great profusion around the village of ‘Anata. (Thompson, 1980, p. 153)

Accordingly, for Jeremiah to think of home was to think of the “Almond tree”(and herein was a pun which God used to encourage the prophet in his ministry). The word for “Almond” is שָׂדֶד (*šāqēd*). The term is almost identical with the Hebrew word for “watching,” שָׂדָד (*šāqad*)-. This is a significant word in the Hebrew. There are primarily two words for “watch” in the Old Testament (1) *šāmar* whose emphasis is on the physical act of preservation, and (2) *šāqad* whose emphasis is NOT so much on the physical act of preservation, BUT on the vigilance/alertness involved in such an act. (R. Laird Harris, 2003, p. 2451) The former

emphasizes the certainty of deliverance/protection, the latter emphasizes an intimacy and diligence in watching by which the Lord ever and always knows the status, struggle, worries, concerns, and burdens of those over which He watches. In fact, because *šāqad* (our word) was so closely tied with the idea of comfort, certainty, and security, the first crop of the growing season in Israel, the crop which if good was an accurate indicator of what the rest of the season would look like, was given the name *šāqēd*, “waker, watcher” which we translate as “Almond”!

What is the point?

Let me answer this from two perspectives: First from the Perspective of God’s Word, every time Jeremiah saw or thought of an “Almond Tree” he would be reminded that God was watching over the prophetic word given to Jeremiah as well as the plan that God had for the nation! It is a statement of God’s sovereign and yet intimate dealing with His people. In fact Jeremiah later would return to this concept in 597 BC when the Lord announced His plan for the New Covenant. Speaking of God’s people, Jeremiah wrote:

Jeremiah 31:28, “‘And it will come about that as I have watched over them to pluck up, to break down, to overthrow, to destroy, and to bring disaster [by virtue of this word, “watch,” we know that God was genuinely moved by the hardship and trial which His people encountered during this time], so I will watch over them to build and to plant,’ declares the Lord.”

As God was intimately involved in the discipline of His people, so God would be intimately involved in their restoration and realization in Christ! If *“the devil is in the details”* this word tells us that *“God is in the atoms which make up the details”*! In other words, there are no rogue events in our lives; things that just happen out of God’s control. God is intimately involved in His creation bringing to pass His glorious will unto His people’s ultimate welfare and benefit! That was the message God gave Jeremiah as the prophet embarked upon the ministry. Yes, difficulty and hardship lay in the path of Judah, but God is on the throne. Nothing will occur that He hasn’t ordained. All is for a purpose. All is according to the plan of a good God!

Secondly, we must view this from the perspective of Jeremiah. What was the place of this vision in his life? Recall, God gave this vision to Jeremiah at the beginning of the prophet’s ministry. What message therefore did God intend for the prophet?

Again you couldn’t think of “Anathoth” without thinking about the “Almond tree.” Again it was the first crop and so it was the gauge for the rest of the growing season. Yet having grown up in “Anathoth,” Jeremiah would have associated “Anathoth” first and foremost with the security and comfort of home! While travelling and people find out that you are from Colorado, what typically is the first question you are asked? “Do you ski?” Now let me ask you: when you think of Colorado is the first thought that comes to your mind skiing? Or is it that this is your home? When you think of “Colorado” don’t you think of your family and friends and, on the road, smile as you reflect upon those whom you love and who support you? There is no doubt that this is what came to Jeremiah’s mind when he thought of Anathoth!

Now my question to you is this: When the going gets tough and the pressures of life weigh most heavy upon us, where typically do we go in our mind? To those times and places where we have found most comfort! *“Oh, how I wish I could go back to that carefree time of my youth! Oh how I wish I could go back to that time as a child when my mom was alive and I could snuggle in her arms!”*

So where is it that Jeremiah would have gone in his thinking when he was in prison for preaching the word? Or when he was opposed by the people of God for doing what was right? Or when he was subjected to stocks and public ridicule? Where would Jeremiah have gone? It is not a stretch to think that he would have gone back in his mind to that time when he was most secure as a boy in “Anathoth!”

Now when he did this, what no doubt would have come to his mind? The “Almond tree” which now was a sign NOT that a good harvest was yet to come, BUT that God was intimately involved in the outworking of His word, a word which was the cause for the current trial in Jeremiah’s life! And herein is the comfort that God gave to Jeremiah as the prophet was commissioned unto the ministry. God assured him before the events of his life unfolded: *“Jeremiah, I am involved in all things... tending my word and will to bring it to pass. Your message and the results of preaching it are according to My sovereign will. Do not grow weary... do not give up... do not give in! But trust Me!”*

Christian this is the message God gives us as well!

Luke 12:4-7, “And I say to you, My friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do. But I will warn you whom to fear: fear the One who after He has killed has authority to cast into hell; yes, I tell you, fear Him! [this of course is God! And yet, because this is God and God loves you, our “reverence” of Him brings with it the certainty of our welfare!...] Are not five sparrows sold for two cents? And yet not one of them is forgotten before God. Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Do not fear; you are of more value than many sparrows.”

Hey, are you in stocks and subject to public ridicule (like Jeremiah)? You have the confidence that God is intimately watching over you. Truly where you are is no mistake; so rather than kicking against the goads, endeavor to serve God where you have been planted!

End Notes

¹ cf. Genesis 17:7; 28:15; Exodus 3:12; 19:5-6; 23:20, 24; Joshua 1:5; 2 Samuel 7:9; 1 Kings 8:57.

² Another example is Exodus 33:15. This was Moses’ request following Israel’s sin and the Lord’s command to lead them from the wilderness to the Promised Land, “Then he said to [God], ‘If Thy presence does not go with us, do not lead us up from here.’” Again the “Presence of God” was a promised blessing of the covenant by which God’s people were assured that they would thrive and blossom as a people regardless of their surroundings. And thus in light of this presence, Moses preferred to stay in the wilderness with God’s covenant presence than dwell

in the land of “milk and honey” bereft of this special benefit!

Sources Cited

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About the Preacher

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