

When We Need Encouragement

Last Sunday we looked at our need for rest. Now let's think about our need for encouragement. The prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah may have partially fulfilled the concept of God's Ideal Servant, which was a theme in their preaching. But this ideal servant concept was fulfilled perfectly in Jesus Christ, and it remains as a challenge and as a standard to us as God's servants today.

Read Isaiah 49:1-7

*Listen to me, O coastlands,
pay attention, you peoples from far away!
The LORD called me before I was born,
while I was in my mother's womb he named me.
2 He made my mouth like a sharp sword,
in the shadow of his hand he hid me;
he made me a polished arrow,
in his quiver he hid me away.
3 And he said to me, "You are my servant,
Israel, in whom I will be glorified."
4 But I said, "I have labored in vain,
I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity;
yet surely my cause is with the LORD,
and my reward with my God."
5 And now the LORD says,
who formed me in the womb to be his servant,
to bring Jacob back to him,
and that Israel might be gathered to him,
for I am honored in the sight of the LORD,
and my God has become my strength—
6 he says,
"It is too light a thing that you should be my servant
to raise up the tribes of Jacob
and to restore the survivors of Israel;
I will give you as a light to the nations,
that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."
7 Thus says the LORD,
the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One,
to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nations,
the slave of rulers,
"Kings shall see and stand up,
princes, and they shall prostrate themselves,
because of the LORD, who is faithful,
the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you."*

Verse 4 is key in our reading, with the Servant of the Lord's expressing despondency and a degree of discouragement, saying he had labored to no purpose and had spent his strength in vain. Even the ideal and perfect Servant of God, Jesus Christ, in his self-emptying needed encouragement from God the Father. How much more do we need to be encouraged in Christian living and serving!

It seems to me that these are times in which God's people need an extra dose of encouragement. My former denomination is struggling with widespread scandals, and ministry leaders are fearful of a mass exodus from their churches. The COVID pandemic also has taken its toll on churches, with formerly active members still reluctant to return to in-person worship. Many local churches are faced with the task of continuing ministry with reduced financial and staff support. The financial situation of runaway inflation and political divisiveness also is impacting congregational life and unity. More than ever, pastors are leaving the ministry due to discouragement, and some, from sheer hopelessness and overwhelming circumstances, are contemplating, and in some cases, committing suicide. Although I've never considered suicide, I have, in a previous ministry, fantasized about homicide.

Not that all discouraged pastors and disillusioned laypersons are in danger of clinical depression, but I think it can safely be said that all of us at moments in our lives could use some encouragement. Not just church work but also Kingdom living in general can take its toll on our bodies, minds and hearts. Let's face it, when you live for Christ and seek to serve him, you necessarily will face fatigue and opposition. When we serve God, we'll also encounter spiritual warfare. And, the more we serve, the more the warfare intensifies.

When God's servants need encouragement, we must first of all remember that we didn't choose to be servants. God chose us. In the first verse of our text, we read where God chooses his servants before birth. This is confirmed in the experiences of Jeremiah (1:5) and Paul (Gal.1:15), who affirmed they were chosen before birth. That awareness of God's sovereign choice was to be a great encouragement as they later faced life-threatening difficulties.

Jesus himself, as John writes (1:11), experienced a cool, unwelcome "reception" from his own people. Jesus was also abandoned by the crowd which had followed him and received the benefits of his miracles. He asked his disciples if they too were going to leave him after hearing the hard demands of discipleship (6:66ff). And, at his arrest and trial, he was forsaken by his disciples, then betrayed and denied. The heavenly Father had encouraged his Son at his baptism, and then at a crucial time in his ministry, at his Transfiguration, to remind him of his calling, divine appointment and eventual victory.

There will be times in your life, as a servant of the Lord, in whatever capacity, formal and informal, you'll need to be reminded that even becoming a Christian

was not your idea. It was God's sovereign choice. God knew, loved, and then called you to himself. He has your life and eternity planned for you. Had you just arbitrarily chosen him, you might have doubts about your ability to keep your commitments to him. Or, if your decision to serve him were your idea it would be up to you to see your way through to the end.

We've all made poor choices and bad decisions we later regret when they begin to turn sour. The servant of the Lord takes great encouragement from the fact that when God leads and enlists, he enables. He wouldn't call you to do anything he wouldn't enable you to do. The Lord's servant declares that the Lord "*made my mouth like a sharp sword,*" and He "*made me a polished arrow.*" In other words, the Lord makes his servants equal to the task, which more often than not are the tasks involved in daily living and relationships.

Sometimes we get ourselves into situations we would like to blame on God. I recall needing a few elective hours of college credit, and so I signed up for a chemistry course. That week of college chemistry was one of the longest of my life. I then got out of it as quickly as I could, so I wouldn't receive a failing grade for my presumptuous efforts. I had done something without wise counsel, and I realized God hadn't called me to do science, nor had he blessed me with a scientific mentality. God enables us, says his servant, to do what he calls us to do.

Encouragement I've enjoyed during times of difficulty, along with the steadfast ministry of the Word of God, is the assurance of God's call. Throughout over 55 years of ordained ministry, I've been sustained by the assurance of God's call. What I've enjoyed, and even what I've endured, are things for which I was uniquely equipped, by creation, experience, and call. This is true in your life. What God calls and commands, he enables. He created and gifted you in certain unique ways in order for you to live for and serve him. Even in your life experiences, besides your genetic makeup, you're uniquely part of God's plan and purpose.

My maternal grandfather, Daniel Mooneyham, whom we knew as Pappy, was a railroad engineer who had the best tools which he kept in his immaculate basement work area. For some reason, I inherited his toolbox, which served as a rebuke to my unkempt work area, and to my incompetence in any kind of mechanical work, which he did so well. In fact, I don't know what became of that tool box!

But God keeps his tools, that is, his servants, sharp and ready to use in his service. He delights in doing whatever is necessary to make our lives useful for our eternal good and for his glory. Even the hard experiences of our lives are useful in preparing us to better live for him.

Years ago a friend sent an email message about a missionary family serving in the Karamoja region of northern Uganda with the unreached Karamojong people, a warring people who had begun to show openness to the gospel. The Singletary family was attacked by gunfire from bandits while riding in their car. The children Andy, 19, and Jackie, 15, were in the back seat singing, "God is good, all the time!" Miraculously, though their vehicle was riddled with and disabled by gunfire, no one was seriously hurt. After they fled their attackers, a tire blew out, and they had to stop, and with fear and trembling, change the tire. The 15-year-old daughter, who was slightly wounded by a piece of shrapnel, stood crying by the wreckage repeating, "They just need Jesus! They just need Jesus! They live in darkness. They don't understand...Oh, God, they just need you."

The press release about this incident said, "God's peace descended on the family and they began to calm down as they continued driving." They finally arrived home after another tire blew out, when they were assisted by a passer-by. When they finally arrived home, another tire blew out as they pulled into the driveway!

"We are in the middle of a battle for the heart and soul of this people," the missionary mom said. "The devil is throwing a hissy fit. We all agree that the experience we went through is the reason we are here. It is the sick who need a doctor. Dr. Jesus." To her, it's as simple as that! This family didn't run scared from danger. They know they were encompassed in the Father's hand, just as in our text "*...in the shadow of his hand he hid me.*"

When we like this servant in Isaiah need encouragement, we need to remember that our deliverance and success are in God's hands. What a great response the servant makes, as he moves from discouragement to an affirmation of faith! In the eyes of the world, and even to Jesus' eyes, his ministry must have seemed a failure. The servant says, "*I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity.*"

Jesus was abandoned at the Cross. He was even abandoned by the Father, which is something we children of God need never fear. In the eyes of the world, Jesus died a failure. Is that the way you feel about your life, that you'll die a failure? The world has taught us to measure Kingdom success the same way the world measure success in marketing and commercial enterprises. Maybe even as you look upon your grandchildren or adult children who are still rebelling against what you taught and tried to enforce, you're thinking thoughts of failure.

Satan, the liar and accuser, wants us to sense the despair and hopelessness of failure, but God takes care of the results. The perfect servant in Isaiah, as fulfilled by Jesus Christ, affirmed that what was due him, the results of his service, were with God and in the Lord's hands. God takes care of the results. We're not responsible to be successful. God makes us successful and measures success

in his unique and gracious way. We're to simply be faithful in letting God love us, love him and let his love inspire all we say and do.

There is great relief and release when we can get to the point of freedom from anyone else's expectations of us. God takes delight in us and is pleased with us. He's the great Alchemist. Alchemy was the medieval superstition that thought the right combination of elements would produce gold. This is the transformation of the common into the precious, which is God's specialty. He's turning your life, even with your failures, into gold. And some things, like gold, become more precious with time. For every servant of God, like this servant in Isaiah, the best years are yet to be. Even if we become disabled bodily, as Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4:16, "*inwardly we are being renewed day by day.*" We're to simply let Jesus love us more each day, and let his love pour into and from us.

In a previous pastorate I visited with our oldest church member, Mrs. Florence Wamsley, who at the time was celebrating her 103rd birthday. She shared that her body was finally giving out, but agreed with me that as long as she had breath, she could serve the Lord even if only through prayer and encouraging the rest of us. She was getting ready for heaven, asking a lot of questions about the resurrection body, and was looking forward to her greatest work, which will be her work in the New Heaven and Earth. She related a lot of tragedies and disappointments in her long life. Yet, God was shaping Christ in her, and getting her ready for heavenly living, worshiping, and serving.

The Lord tells his discouraged servant that his work will cause kings to sit up and take notice (7). But it's also true of you. Jesus Christ, King of kings, takes notice of and is intensely interested in you. Your life, where God has planted you, with your daily relationships, is a vital part of his Kingdom building. Take a look at those in your home, at work, and in the neighborhood. Realize also that God has brought you into the fellowship of Dale Heights so your life and love can make a difference in all of our lives. Your life is important to God, who has chosen you, who loves you incredibly, and who is using you, in even very quiet, perhaps unknown ways, to make his love known.

Don Campbell tells about a young man who once studied violin under a world-renowned master. "Eventually, the time came for his first recital. Following each selection, despite the cheers of the crowd, the performer seemed dissatisfied. Even after the last number, with the shouts louder than ever, the talented violinist stood watching an elderly man in the balcony. Finally, the elderly one smiled and nodded in approval. Immediately, the young man relaxed and beamed with happiness. The applause of the crowd had meant nothing to him till he had won the hearty approval of the famous teacher."

You have the Master's approval. Be encouraged!