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Forging of a Servant of God, Part 10

On May 2, 1507, Martin Luther was about to celebrate his first mass. Decked in the garb of the priest, Luther performed flawlessly until he came to that moment when he was called upon to serve the Lord's Supper. When he was supposed to speak the words of Transubstantiation, he froze; nothing came out! Luther stood there shaking and trembling; he couldn't voice the words! Another priest had to take over and Luther and went away publicly humiliated!

This is how many of us feel at times when it comes to our service in Christ's Kingdom; tentative, overwhelmed, embarrassed! However, for most of us, it isn't because we are shaken by the greatness of God as was Luther. It is a little more mundane. We fear what others might think or what might happen if we endeavored to serve. We are ever mindful of our own

deficiencies and weakness, “Who am I to ask someone else about their walk?” Furthermore, we don’t like conflict! And most certainly, we don’t want to cause anyone to be uncomfortable. It is for these reasons and more, we shrink back from the service of Christ!

Yet the resounding theme of Scripture, as it relates to our service in Christ’s Kingdom, is that we NOT shrink back. RATHER, we are called to fulfill the call God has placed on our lives *regardless* of the cost or the circumstances. God give this command through Joshua:

Joshua 1:9, “Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous! Do not tremble or be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.”

Christ told His disciples these words:

John 14:1, “Let not your heart be troubled [ταραάσω (*tarassō*) which speaks of a being vigorously shaken]; believe in God, believe also in Me.”

This exhortation rests also with us. Peter exhorted the persecuted church:

1 Peter 3:14b-15a, “...And do not fear their intimidation, and do not be troubled, but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always *being* ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you...”

Truly, we always are to be bold and ready for service!

But how do we attain this boldness? By boldness I mean the undaunting courage to serve the Lord no matter what may come as the result. There are a variety of answers to this, of which we will look at just one of them. Recall, that during the second exile of Judah in 597 BC, Ezekiel was among the 10,000 that were forcibly taken by Nebuchadnezzar to Babylon. At the time, he was a 26-year-old priest. Four years later, when normally he would have been ordained to the priesthood (cf. Ezekiel 1:1), God called and commissioned him to the ministry of a prophet! And this calling is detailed in the opening four chapters of Ezekiel.

Let us not forget that this section of Scripture, detailing Ezekiel’s call to the Prophetic Office, is unprecedented in the Bible. We find many stated callings in the Bible; most of which span a couple of verses (as in the case of Paul, Galatians 1:15ff). Sometimes a whole chapter is devoted to it as in the case of Isaiah (Isaiah 6). But four chapters? A. B. Davidson describes it this way:

The Book of Ezekiel is simpler and more perspicuous in its arrangement than any other of the great prophetic books. It was probably committed to writing late in the prophet’s life, and, unlike the prophecies of Isaiah, which were given out piecemeal, was issued in its complete form at once. (Davidson 2017, ix)

As that is the case, we understand that what Ezekiel wrote here was intended to be far more

than a description of his call. Ezekiel was intended to be an example and so an exhortation to the people of God as it related to their call to serve the Lord as an alien and stranger in exile!

This brings us to a description of the preparation that accompanied Ezekiel's call to the prophetic ministry; a preparation which can be said to be true of us as well!

Ezekiel 4:9b, "...Do not be afraid of them or be dismayed before them, though they are a rebellious house."

Personally, this is a tall order! Few if any of us like conflict, much less persecution! Yet as we saw in v. 7, God told Ezekiel — and us through him — that his fellow Israelites whom he had been called to serve would have two characteristics... "stubborn and obstinate"! Recall the expressions:

- stubborn: חִזִּיקֵי־מִצַּח (*chiziqay-metsach*): again, there are two words behind this translation. The first is...
 - חִזִּיקֵי (*chazaq*): which means to "be strong" or "become strong." It pictures something or someone that on account of practice/experience has become immovable or strongly resistant to change.
 - מִצַּח (*metsach*): this word is taken from anatomy and is used in reference the "forehead!" The picture is that of animals- an ox or ram- butting heads! It is this butting that has made their forehead strong!

And so, on account of their love of sinning AND God's disciplining hand, rather than becoming soft and so quick to repent, God's people cultivated a hard head... a thick skull! The more obstacles God placed in their paths to block their way to sin (cf. Hosea 2:6-7), the harder their head became in their effort to break them down! Such was their disposition toward God, and such would be their disposition toward Ezekiel! Notice they also had become and so would be...

- obstinate: וְקִשְׁיֵי־לֵב (*q'sheh-leb*); this likewise is NOT one word, BUT two words in the Hebrew...
 - קִשְׁיֵה- (*qāsheh*): this is a farming word referencing first (1) the effect of an overly heavy yoke on an animal (it is hard to bear) and then (2) the consequent rebellion of the animal when the farmer attempts to place the yoke on the ox's neck a second time. Accordingly, the word speaks of a strong, violent resistance. The second word is
- לֵב (*leb*): which is the Hebrew word for heart.

Together the picture is an activity that is NOT visibly observable, BUT that which occurs in the heart of the sinner who in the inner life fights against the Lord and His commands. Not only does their "forehead thicken" on account of its repeated bashing against the wall of God's preserving grace, but their "heart becomes wild in rebellion"!

This was the disposition of Ezekiel's countrymen toward God and this would be their disposition toward Him!

Yet what was Ezekiel's call? He must NOT "be afraid of them or be dismayed before them."

- do not be afraid: **יָרֵא** (*yare*); this is the primary word for "fear" in the Old Testament. It speaks FIRST of reverence and so awe. It is what our disposition ought to be toward God in worship and in life. YET when used in reference to circumstances or man, it negatively denotes the idea of being unduly influence or compelled by fear. Rather than being moved by God, the person shrinks back in their service because of what may happen or who may be offended or angered. Notice the second exhortation...
- [do not]... be dismayed: **חָתַח** (*chathath*); this word is stronger than the word for "fear." It means to be broken on account of fear, to be terrified, dismayed, or in a panic. The best translation perhaps is "demoralized" as it is used in reference to...
 - A *seasoned* military leader whose courage has been broken on account of battle, Isaiah 31:9.
 - The devastation of a defeated nation after being vanquished, Isaiah 20:5; Jeremiah 48:20, 39. It is a strong word which speaks of a helpless, hopeless situation!

When Ezekiel went about his ministry, which meant butting heads with men and women who had their foreheads hardened by frequent and repeated acts of rebellion against God, Ezekiel was NOT to be moved in any way by their presence, threats, or demonstrations of power. When he was attacked, bound, placed in prison and even tortured, Ezekiel was NOT to be demoralized in any way!

Now, this is a tall order! Yet it is the same order that has been placed on our life as well. The sons of Korah wrote this:

Psalm 46:1-2, "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, and though the mountains slip into the heart of the sea."

The call of the child of God is to be impervious to the travesty of natural disasters. for that which must move them is NOT temporal security, BUT the character of God (cf. Hebrews 13:5-6)!

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

We furthermore are called NOT to live in fear of man. RATHER we are called to trust the Lord in and through all things! That is the call that God placed on Ezekiel's life and ministry in our text! Isaiah lumps the previous exhortations into one:

Isaiah 43:1b-3a, "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are Mine! When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they will

not overflow you. When you walk through the fire [of persecution], you will not be scorched, nor will the flame burn you. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior...”

Matthew 10:28, “And do not fear those who kill the body, but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.”

As we have seen (most notably v. 7), ministry is going to be tough! The very ones you would think ought to love and receive your care/ministry will be the very ones who inflict the deepest wounds! Yet and again, this ought NOT to make us afraid or demoralized!

- Paul who stood before governors and boldly proclaimed the gospel.
- Isaiah who ministered in the royal court before kings and yet did not shrink back.
- Jeremiah who was repeatedly tortured or thrown into prison and yet did NOT forsake the faith or the ministry.
- WE are called to suffer much in the name of Christ (cf. Philippians 1:29-30) and yet NEVER to shrink back or to be afraid of men (cf. Matthew 5:10-12)!

How is this possible? What is the secret behind such service? Family of God, notice that the secret to such service in the kingdom of God begins

1. With the Lord and
2. On our part, trusting/relying upon the wisdom and grace of Christ!

Look with me at what God here gave Ezekiel, and so the sojourner, to encourage him that he might NOT shrink back.

Ezekiel 3:8-9a, “Behold, I HAVE MADE your face as hard as their faces, and your forehead as hard as their foreheads. Like emery¹ [which was the hardest substance known at the time] harder than flint I have made your forehead...”

This is an incredible statement on the part of God as it pertains to His servants. From this we Conclude: Servants of God are NOT born, THEY are made! They are forged by the steady hand of an all-knowing and all-loving God. From the moment of our birth- in many cases decades even before salvation- the Lord ordains the path that must be traversed in order for the Christian to be a faithful servant of God! We see this in Ezekiel’s life.

Heretofore I have NOT spent any time on the translation of “Ezekiel’s” name in the Hebrew. The word is **יְחֶזְקֵאל** (*Yechezqel*) which is a compound of two different words in the Hebrew.

- **חָזַק** (*chazaq*) which we’ve seen, means “to strengthen” or “to grow hard” through repeated use, and...
- **אֱל** (*el*) which is Hebrew for “God.”

Combined we could translate the name as “God has strengthened” or “God has grown him

hard.” Because of our culture, you and I might think that this was a meaningless name given to this child born in 622 BC during Josiah’s revival. YET we know in the Old Testament, names could be given and received as significant declarations on the part of God. For example speaking of Abraham at the consummation of God’s covenant in the patriarch’s life:

Genesis 17:5, “No longer shall your name be called Abram [which means, ‘exalted father’], but your name shall be Abraham [literally, ‘father of a multitude’]; *for I will make you the father of a multitude of nations.*”

Genesis 32:28, “And he said, ‘Your name shall no longer be Jacob [that is, ‘one who deceives’], but Israel [which means ‘one who strives with God’]; *for you have striven with God and with men and have prevailed.*”

Hosea speaking of Gomer his wife wrote:

Hosea 1:6, “Then she conceived again and gave birth to a daughter. And the Lord said to him, ‘Name her Lo-ruhamah [which means, ‘no compassion’], *for I will no longer have compassion on the house of Israel, that I should ever forgive them.*”

And so it was in Ezekiel’s life. God ordained that a priest named Buzi and his wife would name their son “Ezekiel” — a name which God intended to reflect reality — *he would be one whom the Lord grew hard or tough for ministry!* As such, Ezekiel would be raised by the Lord by which God would temper him in and through all things! It makes me think of this poem:

When God wants to drill a man, and thrill a man, and skill a man,
When God wants to mold a man o play the noblest part;
When He yearns with all His heart to create so great and bold a man that all the world shall be
amazed,
Watch His methods, watch His ways!

How He ruthlessly perfects whom He royally elects! How He hammers him and hurts him,
And with mighty blows converts him into trial shapes of clay which only God understands;
While his tortured heart is crying and he lifts beseeching hands!

How He bends but never breaks when his good He undertakes;
How He uses whom He chooses, and with every purpose fuses him;
By every act induces him to try His splendor out- God knows what He’s about. (Anonymous)

Truly this was Ezekiel. V. P. Hamilton wrote this:

God says to Ezekiel (3:7) that all Israel is stiff of forehead... and hardhearted... The phrase “stiff/strong of forehead” suggests, perhaps, the picture of an animal, an ox or ram, butting its head. But in the next verse (3:8) God says that he has made the prophet’s forehead stronger than the foreheads of his foes. That is to say, God will not

only give him hardness equal to that of his foes, but that he promises Ezekiel to make him harder for the truth than the people are against it. (Hamilton 2003, 522)²

This is the work that God does in the heart of His servants as He equips them for ministry! From their birth, onward He forges in them the requisite character and skill to accomplish that to which He has called them.

After discussing in some detail the judicial laws of segregation between clean and unclean animals, God gave this rationale:

Leviticus 20:26, “Thus you are to be holy to Me, for I the Lord am holy; and I have set you apart from the peoples to be Mine.”- do you understand what this means? From birth, God takes the child of God to himself (be they saved or not yet saved). They are the Lord’s and so one’s whom God raises up to be His servants- that is what is included in being “set apart to God.”

Do you remember the appeal of Mordecai to Esther when it came to her approaching the king on behalf of God’s people?

Esther 4:14, ““For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place and you and your father’s house will perish. And who knows whether you have not attained royalty for such a time as this?”- the English makes this sound weak, “Who knows?...”

In reality, Mordecai is stating a very important truth: God had ordained everything in Esther’s life to equip her for that moment of time. Accordingly, though the waters of tribulation were raging in her life, they could not overcome her... God had made her to overcome them! Consider the conviction that drove Paul in his ministry,

Galatians 1:15-16, “But when He who had set me apart, *even* from my mother’s womb, and called me through His grace, was pleased to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with flesh and blood.”

Paul understood that from birth, God was involved in his life- making him the man the Lord wanted him to be! This gave him a strong sense of boldness as he knew that no tribulation would occur in his life which God hadn’t prepared him for! Listen to the conviction which impelled him in ministry.

1 Corinthians 15:9-10a, “For I am the least of the apostles, who am not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am...”-

As it related to the Kingdom of God, Paul did NOT have the best pedigree. Yet that did NOT detour him for he understood that in and throughout all of his life, God was there preparing

him for the work which the Lord had for him! *Such would be the conviction of Ezekiel.*

Ezekiel 3:8, “Behold, I have made your face as hard as their faces, and your forehead as hard as their foreheads.”

In other words, no matter how bad it may get in your ministry or how daunting may be the task, know that I have made you for such a time as this!

This is so amazing and encouraging! In ministry, WE tend to think of RESULTS (and so fruit)... yet we must see that GOD is all about the PROCESS!

John 9:39, “And Jesus said, ‘For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see; and that those who see may become blind.’”

The word for “judgment” in this text is from a word group which includes κρίσις (*krisis*) which we’ve seen many times before. What is a κρίσις (*krisis*)? It is a fork in the road which requires a person to make a decision, either *for* or *against* God. Now get this; “It was for this purpose that Christ came into this world” ... to force us to make a decision either to serve the Lord or self! How frequent are we faced with these “crisis”? In and at every moment of our lives.

Ephesians 2:10, “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”

Christianity is all about the process! As such, there ought never to be any past sin, weakness, or stumbling that should hold us back! What we are today is what God has deigned us to be- warts and all. We are God’s choice to tackle the difficulties placed before us today! Remember the words of encouragement God gave His people for this day of trial (recall Isaiah 40-55 were intended of the people of God in Judah during the exile):

Isaiah 48:10, “Behold, I have refined you, but not as silver; I have tested [tempered] you in the furnace of affliction.”

The purpose of affliction is to produce faithful servants of God (cf. 1 Peter 1:6-7). This is what God is about at all times in our lives! Accordingly, it behooves us in ministry to take our eyes off of the results/fruit of our ministry (that which God is solely responsible for [1 Corinthians 3:6]). We must understand that everything that has, is, and going to be in our lives is part of God’s forging process in the raising up of His servants- both you and me! Accordingly, WE ARE ALWAYS EQUAL TO THE TASK!

Can you believe this, Christian? Will you believe this? This is why D. Martyn Lloyd Jones used to say, “There is no such thing as a bad experience, just a learning experience.” Truly as Christians we live with the conviction that everything that occurs in our lives has been according to the divine plan of our Lord to equip and ready us to serve Him *TODAY*. As such, we are eminently qualified to do what is before us! And every moment in our lives is according

to the divine plan of the Lord to equip and ready you and I for *FUTURE* ministry.

As such, there have been nor should there ever be wasted moments! All are according to the wisdom and good pleasure of God in equipping us for our chief end, *“To glorify God and enjoy Him forever!”* John Calvin wrote this:

Although, therefore, this seems to have been spoken once for Ezekiel’s private use, yet it belongs to us all. Let us learn, then, when God calls us to the office of teaching, never to measure the effect of our work by the standard of our own capacity, nor yet to consider our own powers, but to repose on some communicated strength which God here extols in no empty praises... Hence there is no reason why we should be afraid of the violent attack of any enemy, and although the whole world should be in a tumult, yet we need not tremble, because God’s strength in us will always be more powerful. (Calvin 2017, 137)

As Ezekiel therefore approached a ministry which promised trial, difficulty, and intimidation at the hands of his own countrymen, he must know that God had specially prepared and equipped him for such a time as this! His road would be hard, but God had made his determination and conviction for truth even harder! So truly, he would be up to the task! *And so also it will be with you!*

Christ exhorted the disciples with these words:

Luke 12:11, “And when they bring you before the synagogues and the rulers and the authorities, do not become anxious about how or what you should speak in your defense, or what you should say.”

Not only would the Holy Spirit enable them (v. 12), BUT from our text we know that God had equipped them from birth for that very moment! And so it is with you and me!

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End Note(s)

- ¹ šāmîr occurs elsewhere in Jeremiah 17:1 (paired with “iron”) and Zechariah 7:12. Although šāmîr is

often translated “diamond,” this is unlikely since the diamond is not attested before 480 B.C. (CAD, 16:257; AHW, p. 1114).

² J. B. Taylor added, “The repetition of the word hard in verses 8 and 9 (Heb. ḥāzāq) may be a deliberate play on the prophet’s name, for Ezekiel means ‘God strengthens’ or ‘God hardens’ (Heb. yēhezqē’l). It was certainly a characteristic mark of his ministry that he was able to outlast his opponents and not to be worn down by their apparent intransigence. To that extent, at any rate, he was well named.” (Taylor 1981, 68)