

Broomfield



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Kingdom Service, Part 4

An alarming statistic when it comes to the ministry is that a significant portion of those graduating from seminary and entering into the pulpit this summer will not be there in five years. These men will wash out of the ministry. In fact, it has gotten to be such a crises that conservative and evangelical seminaries are re-evaluating how best to prepare a man for kingdom service.

Now in their re-evaluation they have found that those who wash out of the ministry do so not because of moral failure, but because of discouragement, and a sense of wasted effort, and burn out. And yet all this flies in the face of what is written in God's word regarding the outlook and focus of a servant of God.

2 Corinthians 4:16-17, "For which cause we faint not; but though our outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory"

You read a passage like this and you know that Paul never suffered from "burn out." His "momentary light affliction" did not discourage him. In fact to the contrary, listen to how Paul described his experience in ministry. As a servant of God he was, "As sorrowful, yet alway rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things" (2 Corinthians 6:10).

Far from washing out of ministry, the servant of God is pictured in Scripture as one who thrives in the midst of hardship, ill-will, and neglect. Consider this:

Isaiah 40:31, "But they that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint."

What a contrast to the modern scene. Today, the average tenure in the pulpit is less than two years. Most churches opt for term eldership because they can't get good men to stay longer than a half dozen years. Church ministries morph and change not because of a perceived need but because, quite frankly, if things aren't constantly modified people will get bored, lose heart, and go onto something else. On any given Sunday most sitting in the pew are tired, worn out, and embittered. They've paid their dues. They're now on holiday. And they say, it is time for someone else to minister.

- So how does one stay the course?
- How do you remain a servant of people in the face of ridicule and contempt?
- How do you keep giving and giving with nothing in return?

- What is it that will enable you to pour yourself out for Christ and not lose heart?
- What will enable you to run and not grow weary?
- What will allow you to suffer persecution and not shrink back? What enabled Samuel to labor unto the health and welfare of God's body all the days of his life without resentment, regret, burn out, distraction, and compromise?

Centered Around the Altar

Our passage gives the answer after describing three characteristics of kingdom service — service that is directed toward the building up of the body of Christ; service which rests upon each and every one of us here. It closes with a statement which gives insight into the strength and fortitude of Samuel: “he built an altar!”

And this is the key to prolonged kingdom service. It is what allowed Samuel to stay the course when it came to the ministry of people. It is having a life which revolves around the Altar!

1 Samuel 7:17, “And his return was to Ramah; for there was his house; and there he judged Israel; **and there he built an altar unto the LORD.**”

This would have been one of many altars which dotted the country side at this time.¹ In fact, before the building of the temple which brought with it the centralization of all altars to Jerusalem, valid altars — valid places of worship — were erected throughout Israel. We saw it in verse 16 where Samuel went annually to Mizpah, Bethel, and Gilgal for the purpose of performing the divine worship in these altarcities.

And so that Samuel here is said to have built an altar in Ramah, his home town, is not that shocking. However the importance of this passage when it comes to Kingdom Service is seen when we inquire as to the function/purpose of the altar.

- Why did God ordain an altar?
- What was its purpose?

When we consider the Biblical material regarding the purpose and place of the altar, we discover primarily two Biblical emphases: First, the altar was synonymous with worship. Now, a negative example in Ezekiel gives us the purpose of the altar.

Ezekiel 16:23-25, “And it came to pass after all thy wickedness, (woe, woe unto thee! saith the Lord GOD;) That thou hast also built unto thee an eminent place [an altar], and hast made thee an high place in every street. Thou hast built thy high place at every head of the way, and hast made thy beauty to be abhorred, and hast opened thy feet to every one that passed by, and multiplied thy whoredoms.”

What was an altar?

¹ Though Deuteronomy 12:13-14 includes a prohibition against multiple altars, it is clear from OT history either that this was not followed or that it applied only when a central sanctuary was in place. Clearly, such was the case when the temple was built under Solomon. However at the time of Samuel, with the downfall of Shiloh, it is clear that multiple and valid altars had been erected for the purpose of worship.

It should be obvious that the key to understanding the altar is the high place. Accordingly recall, that high places at this time were superstitiously understood to be the habitation of the gods.

1 Kings 11:7, “Then did Solomon build an high place for Chemosh, the abomination of Moab, in the hill that is before Jerusalem, and for Molech, the abomination of the children of Ammon.”

During the reign of Rehoboam we read this:

1 Kings 14:23, “For they also built them high places, and images, and groves, on every high hill, and under every green tree.”

Speaking of Jehoram we read this:

2 Chronicles 21:11, “Moreover he made high places in the mountains of Judah, and caused the inhabitants of Jerusalem to commit fornication, and compelled Judah thereto.”

Truly there are many references to “high places” in the Old Testament. Typically these were make-shift altars erected for the purpose of worshipping false gods. Again because it was believed that the gods dwelt on high, if you wanted to worship a deity, you went up into the mountains/hills.

However as superstition doesn't arise in a vacuum, one must see that there was something behind the belief that the gods inhabited high places. Recall that it was on a mountain that Abraham was to sacrifice his son, Isaac.² When God met with Moses, the Lord called him up to Mount Sinai.³ Jerusalem with its temple was built on top of a mountain. Christ was transfigured on the top of a mountain.⁴ Christ proclaimed His great sermon of Matthew 5-7 on a mountain. The Lord was crucified on a mountain.

Listen to the statement made by Amos.

Amos 4:13, “For, lo, he that formeth the mountains, and createth the wind, and declareth unto man what is his thought, that maketh the morning darkness, and treadeth upon the high places of the earth, The LORD, The God of hosts, is his name.”

As an apologetic against the notion that Baal owns the high places, Amos here proclaims that God alone dwells in the high places of earth. In fact, it is because of this notion that God's people — in disobedience to God — often times took over the high places of Baal and claimed them for God. And so truly from the perspective of the Bible, a special dwelling place of God was the high place.

Psalms 121:1-2, “I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help. My help cometh from the LORD, which made heaven and earth.”

And so what was an altar?

The altar was a fabricated “high place” for the purpose of worship. Again listen to Ezekiel.

² Compare Genesis 22:2

³ Compare Exodus 3:1; 19:2-3

⁴ Compare Matthew 17:1

Ezekiel 16:23-25, “And it came to pass after all thy wickedness, (woe, woe unto thee! saith the Lord GOD;) That thou hast also built unto thee an eminent place, and hast made thee an high place in every street. Thou hast built thy high place at every head of the way, and hast made thy beauty to be abhorred, and hast opened thy feet to every one that passed by, and multiplied thy whoredoms.”

Because many in Israel lived on the plain, they built high places to accommodate their idolatry. From this we see the purpose behind the altar: it was a fabricated high place! In fact, notice what God said when He officially prescribed the altar in the context of worship.

Exodus 20:22-24, “And the LORD said unto Moses, Thus thou shalt say unto the children of Israel, Ye have seen that I have talked with you from heaven. Ye shall not make with me gods of silver, neither shall ye make unto you gods of gold. An altar of earth thou shalt make unto me, and shalt sacrifice thereon thy burnt offerings, and thy peace offerings, thy sheep, and thine oxen: in all places where I record my name I will come unto thee, and I will bless thee.”

Do you see it?

The altar was given by God, who dwells in a high and holy place, for the purpose of worship. It thus was an elevated structure — a high place — by which to commune with God. And so we see the purpose of the altar is so the people of God could worship anywhere and at any time. All they had to do was build a high place and there God would be in their midst!

This is why we are not surprised to read that everywhere a godly patriarch went, he built an altar.

- Noah was a man of the Altar, Genesis 8:20.
- Abraham was a man of the Altar, Genesis 12:7; 13:4, 18; 22:9.
- Isaac, Genesis 26:25.
- Jacob, Genesis 33:20; 35:1.
- Moses, Exodus 17:15; 24:4.
- Joshua, Joshua 8:30.
- Gideon, Judges 6:24.
- The people of God after the loss of the tribe of Benjamin, Judges 21:4.
- David, 2 Samuel 24:25.
- All built altars for the purpose of worshipping the Lord!

Again, all of this ended with the building of the temple and the centralization of the altar in Jerusalem. After Solomon, the erecting of any altar outside of Jerusalem was considered to be evil. And so, when we read in our text that in his work as a Judge Samuel built an altar in his home town, we see the emphasis of this man's life. Though it was the building up of the people of God, nevertheless this “building up” was inseparably tied to worship!

And this must also be the heart and soul of our service in God's Kingdom- worship, both corporate and private! On Sunday and every day we need to focus upon worshipping God. And yet sadly it is this that we have given up when it comes to life on this earth. Today worship (both corporate and private) is either a man-centered event where the individual endeavors to experience God **or** it is an option, provided something better or more important doesn't arise like football games, family vacations, or the need to get to work before rush hour.

Is it no wonder that we have a hard time staying in the ministry? We have neglected the heart and soul of kingdom living.

Psalm 84:5-7, “Blessed is the man whose strength is in thee; in whose heart are the ways of them. Who passing through the valley of Baca make it a well; the rain also filleth the pools. They go from strength to strength, every one of them in Zion appeareth before God.”

This Psalm is describing the benefits of worship.

What happens to the child of God when they genuinely worship Christ?

They go from strength to strength! In other words, they don't wash out of ministry, or get burned out, or fade into the background expecting the next generation to do the work. Rather, like Jeremiah, after being severely persecuted and ending up in prison on account of the gospel when he was released he went right back and served the Lord with vigor and joy proclaiming the truth. Such is the effect of true worship in the life of the child of God.

1 Samuel 9 describes the life of Samuel. At this point in Samuel's ministry he already has been told that his labor was no longer appreciated in Israel. He and his sons were going to be replaced. The era of the Judge was over! This text is the record of the time Samuel first met his replacement and one can imagine how the sparks could potentially fly!

1 Samuel 9:17, “And when Samuel saw Saul, the LORD said unto him, Behold the man whom I spake to thee of! this same shall reign over my people.”

1 Samuel 9:22-24, “And Samuel took Saul and his servant, and brought them into the parlour, and made them sit in the chiefest place among them that were bidden, which were about thirty persons. And Samuel said unto the cook, Bring the portion which I gave thee, of which I said unto thee, Set it by thee. And the cook took up the shoulder, and that which was upon it, and set it before Saul. And Samuel said, Behold that which is left! set it before thee, and eat: for unto this time hath it been kept for thee since I said, I have invited the people. So Saul did eat with Samuel that day.”

How is it that Samuel was able to bless this enemy? How was he able to do this for the one who eventually would do him much harm and the one who would replace him? Typically there is “no love lost” between such opponents, so how is it that Samuel could genuinely honor Saul here?

When we get to this text I'll provide a couple of answers, but notice that worship was at the heart of it all! When Saul finally met Samuel this is what was said:

1 Samuel 9:19, “And Samuel answered Saul, and said, I am the seer: go up before me unto the high place; for ye shall eat with me to day, and to morrow I will let thee go, and will tell thee all that is in thine heart.”

Indeed! Samuel could bless one whose existence threatened his well-being because the prophet's life did not revolve around these things:

- Affirmation.
- Getting his way.
- Self-esteem.

- Pats on the back.
- Fulfillment.

Rather Samuel's life revolved around these things:

- The glory of God!
- The honor of His name!
- God increasing!
- Worship!

Worship is the key to unconditional service in the Kingdom of God!

Yet, what is worship? Truly because worship is so central to our lives, it behooves us to understand it!

So what is Biblical worship?

Family of God, we could provide many definitions which would satisfy many a theologian, but I want here to be as simple as I possibly can. True Worship is nothing less and nothing more than beholding the glory of God! It is gazing at Christ's beauty! It is standing in awe of God! Do this consistently, corporately, privately, and passionately and you will "mount up with wings like eagles... run and not get tired... walk and not become weary" (Isaiah 40:31b).

How does it work? How does appreciating God's greatness do anything for us? Don't I need to receive something? Don't I need to get something?

John Piper in explaining the correlation between viewing the greatness of God and strength in the ministry used the example of beholding the Grand Canyon. The Grand Canyon does not profoundly move us because of what it gives us. The Grand Canyon moves us because of its enormity! In the same way, to behold a glimpse of God's infinite, eternal, and unchangeable character is to be profoundly moved. Piper put it this way:

"The Bible teaches that the final ground of our joy is seeing and savoring the personal greatness of God in Christ."

"...no one goes to the Grand Canyon or to the Rockies to increase his self-esteem. That is not what happens in front of massive deeps and majestic heights. But we do go there for joy. So there is a witness in us that soul-health and great happiness come not from beholding a great self, but a great splendor."⁵

Piper's right! Behold the greatness of your God and you will pour your life out for people. You will labor unto the growth and maturation of the bride of Christ. You will bless your enemy. You will not know disillusionment, burnout, or a sense of wasted effort. You will be forever changed!

Habakkuk 3:16-19, "When I heard, my belly trembled; my lips quivered at the voice: rottenness entered into my bones, and I trembled in myself, that I might rest in the day of trouble: when he cometh up unto the people, he will invade them with his troops. Although the fig tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labour of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall

⁵ John Piper, WORLD Magazine, December 29, 2001, Vol. 16, No. 50

yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls: Yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will joy in the God of my salvation. The LORD God is my strength, and he will make my feet like hinds' feet, and he will make me to walk upon mine high places.”

When David was faint of heart he worshipped.

Psalm 61:1-4, “Hear my cry, O God; attend unto my prayer. From the end of the earth will I cry unto thee, when my heart is overwhelmed: lead me to the rock that is higher than I. For thou hast been a shelter for me, and a strong tower from the enemy. I will abide in thy tabernacle for ever: I will trust in the covert of thy wings.”

Job 42:5-6, “I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth thee. Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes.”

If we are to prove faithful to the ministry of God's Kingdom, we must frequently and habitually behold the greatness of God! This must be the end of every quiet time, worship service, sermon, fellowship gathering, or whatever we do in this life. We must become students of God's glory!

And yet “worship” doesn't fully get to the heart of the matter. For the Divinely prescribed altar brought with it another important connotation... which we'll look at next time!

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About the Preacher

Greg Thurston preached this sermon on May 28, 2006. Greg is the Preacher at Broomfield Presbyterian Church.