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The Minister's Reward

One of the biggest hindrances to ministry is false expectations. In light of this, let me ask you: as a servant of Christ, called by the Lord to serve Him in this age, what ought you to expect? Will it be a relatively easy, Christ-blessed ministry? Or will ministry in this age be fraught with conflict, trial and difficulty?

In recent times, there has been a movement that is hostile to the minister of Christ. It is known as the Keswick or the Higher Life movement. In its most virulent form, it pictures Christianity as a "*let go and let God*" experience. Here the Christian, through a second blessing, enters into a special relationship with God; a relationship of total love, complete joy, and freedom from the struggle and difficulties of sin. It was officially named in the late 1800s in England's annual

Keswick Convention, but has surfaced in Christendom from time-to-time (ex., Hudson Taylor, Amy Carmichael).

Whether you realize it or not, you are familiar with this teaching for it pervades much of Christianity today. In 2000, the book, *The Prayer of Jabez*, took Christianity and pop-culture by storm when it was published. Listen to its claim:

Are you ready to reach for the extraordinary? To ask God for the abundant blessings He longs to give you? Join Bruce Wilkinson to discover how the remarkable prayer of a little-known Bible hero can release God's favor, power, and protection. You'll see how one daily prayer can help you leave the past behind- and break through to the life you were meant to live. (Wilkinson, 2005, p. Back Cover)

What is it that characterizes Christianity: Striving or, according to *The Prayer of Jabez*, "Abiding?" Isaiah 49 addresses this question. It contains the words of THE Servant of God, Jesus Christ, who as the "True Israel" (v. 3) is the type or pattern for all servants of God. As such, this passage details the nature of all Kingdom ministry, and so is quite apropos today! We will turn our focus to "The Minister's Reward" when it comes to ministering in God's Kingdom. As we approach this passage it is imperative that we keep in mind the context of Isaiah 49:4.

Looking at Isaiah 49:1-3, it is obvious that this Servant wasn't naïve, untrained, or uninformed. Rather, He would have approached the world as one:

- Who had been called by God before the foundation of the world unto the ministry of God's kingdom, v. 1.
- Given the unstoppable ministry of the Word of God as His tool, v. 2a.
- Specially prepared and equipped to fulfill His calling, v. 2b.
- Set apart for the specific purpose of serving, suffering, and so glorifying God, v. 3.

Isaiah 49:3, "And He said to Me, 'You are My Servant, Israel, in Whom I will show My glory.'" - what is that glory? It is referenced below in...

Isaiah 49:5-6, "And now says the Lord, who formed Me from the womb to be His Servant, to bring Jacob back to Him, in order that Israel might be gathered to Him (for I am honored in the sight of the Lord, and My God is My strength), He says, 'It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved ones of Israel; I will also make You a light of the nations so that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth.'"

Now all of this would have set this Servant up for the expectation of great success when it came to His calling! God was behind Him: (1) working in and through Him (2) using His talents, background, gifts, and abilities for an eternal purpose and end.

What do you get when you convince a person that God not only is behind them, but has

ordained the end before the beginning? Men of destiny! Like Alexander the Great, Napoleon, and Augustus Caesar, men who boldly went about their business and achieved great success knowing that God had ordained nothing less but their success!

Family of God, such is the gifting and calling of all servants of God. Like THE Servant- Jesus Christ- we have the confidence that God has called us, equipped us, and commissioned us to be His vessels of honor. Consequently, we are assured of victory, for the battle belongs to the Lord AND we are His servants!

- We are as Joshua entering the Promised Land. Because he knew that he was a servant of God he could be, "...strong and courageous..." (Joshua 1:6, 9).
- With Paul, we can be bold for we know that in and through all things God is bringing about His good pleasure (Romans 8:28)!
- Such is our confidence AND such no doubt was the confidence of THE Servant of God- Jesus Christ- as He entered into His ministry.

And all of this brings us to v. 4a and surprisingly, the discouragement of the servant of God.

Isaiah 49:4a, "but I said, "I have toiled in vain, I have spent My strength for nothing and vanity..."

In the context, this is a shocking statement. Again, following vv. 1-3 we would expect a statement of the Servant's success as He went about the work of God. Yet success was not something He immediately achieved. Evidently, it was a hard go, a long road, a difficult path which brought Him to a place of inner turmoil! Notice, the terms used here are strong words!

- I have toiled (יָגַעַ *yaga*) in vain¹ (רִיקָ *riq*): literally, "I have laboriously worked for nothing!" The word for "vain" references that which is without result or to no purpose-emptiness! Here, it is in the emphatic position- which means that the stress is on it. Literally, "FOR NOTHING I have labored to the point of weariness."
- I have spent (כָּלֵאתִי *kālâ*) my strength (כֹּחִי *kôah*): the idea here is that of total exhaustion- of a weariness void of strength. Lit., "I have grown weary..."
- on nothing (תֵּהוֹ *tôhû*) and vanity (הֶבֶלִי *hebel*): the word for "nothing" is the same as in Genesis 1 where it says that the earth was "formless."² The word for "vanity" is הֶבֶלִי (*hebel*) and refers to a person's breath or a vapor. Together the idea is that after all His labor and hardship, that which THE Servant had to show for His work was nothing more substantial than a breath- akin to the original state of the earth on the first day, "formless and void!"

Combined, this paints a portrait of a discouraged and downtrodden individual. NOTHING has He done! The vigor and strength of His youth have been wasted. He has poured out His strength to accomplish the work God had given Him, but the result was desolation and a vapor! *All that work... all that hardship... all that stress for this?*

Now I have a question here. In light of vv. 1-3, what could have happened to discourage this Servant? Nothing more than LIFE IN THIS PRESENT WORLD! See as wonderful, glorious, and IMPORTANT as are vv. 1-3 in our lives as servants of God, they do NOT guarantee worldly success. Yes, they give us Kingdom success! But NOT the success which in this world turns heads, stands out, or makes people sit up and take notice.

Think of:

- Joshua: No sooner did Joshua receive the promise that he would be successful, but that we find him on his face in tears after the defeat at Ai, Joshua 7:6-9.
- Moses: When he was called by God he was told that he was God's chosen vessel to deliver Israel. And yet, how many times in his life do we see him discouraged and downcast? Numerous times!
- Peter: He was the apostle on whose confession Christ would build his church (Matthew 16)! Yet in Acts 12 we find him in a prison cell awaiting the same death that just befell his brother, James.
- Paul: He suffered so much in so little time (2 Corinthians 11:23-27)- all for what? Listen to the anguish in his voice:

1 Corinthians 4:10, 13, "We are fools for Christ's sake... we have become as the scum of the world, the dregs of all things, even until now."

Family of God, don't be deceived into thinking that discouragement and disappointment should not be named in the vocabulary of Christians. You will have difficulty in this life.

- John 16:33: Christ said, "In the world you have tribulation..."
- Galatians 5:17: speaking of our war for holiness, Paul wrote, "...you will not do the things that you please."
- 1 Peter 4:12: Peter writing to the church world in his day, "Do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you..."
- Habakkuk 1:2: we read of Habakkuk crying out, "How long, O Lord, will I call for help, and Thou wilt not hear? I cry out to Thee, 'Violence!' Yet Thou dost not save..."

This is NOT discordant with Isaiah 49:1-3. Both are true of the Servant of God. Truly, we have been called by a Sovereign God and so know that our work in the Lord is not in vain. Yet, the victory and glory will NOT be readily seen by us!

Because this is the case, what is our consolation? It is NOT what so many servants look to when they are discoured or depressed, like a detailed knowledge of past fruit or accomplishments. I assure you this will allude you. John Piper, speaking of the difficult calling of the preacher, wrote this:

You can mark it down that if you are a preacher God will hide from you much of the fruit he causes in your ministry. You will see enough to be assured of his blessing, but not so much as to think you could live without it. For God aims to exalt himself, not the preacher. (Piper, 2005, p. 19)

- The knowledge of past notices of the gratitude of the people you have helped.
- The sense of accomplishment he has enjoyed when it comes to past ministry.

I assure you, these don't do much for the servant when he is struggling! So what ought to be that which consoles the struggling servant? It need to be Christ's consolation. Christ gives us here a twofold assurance to encourage the weary servant! First God approves of him!

Isaiah 49:4, "yet surely [notice his confidence, "*Surely- without any question or doubt...*"] the justice due to Me is with the Lord."

The word for "justice" does not refer to being judged or of God pressing a case against the Servant. Rather, it refers to the judgment of *APPROVAL* that God pronounces with regard to the Servant (cf. Mic. 7:9). It is, to use Scripture, the "well done thou good and faithful servant!" So hear the message God wants all of us to bank on in life, "*Even in the midst of your sin and sadness... your failure and defeats, I delight in you! You are precious in My sight!*" What an incredible truth! For THE Servant of God- Jesus Christ- His consolation was knowing that God was His Father, that He approved of Him and so His labors, and that through it all, "the Holy One of Israel" loved Him just the same!

And family of God, that is the consolation and comfort of ALL servants of God. No matter how bad you think you are OR how worthless you think you may be, God delights in you!

This was Asaph's consolation when ministry brought him to a horrible place where he envied the lot of the wicked, "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" (Psalms 73:25-26).

To the people of God about to go into exile, this is the word of Consolation God gave to them to be recalled by them in their suffering,

Zephaniah 3:16-17, "In that day it will be said to Jerusalem: 'Do not be afraid, O Zion; do not let your hands fall limp. The Lord your God is in your midst, a victorious warrior. He will exult over you with joy, He will be quiet in His love, He will rejoice over you with shouts of joy.'"

Yes, the Lord's people were in exile because of their sin! Yet we must NOT conclude that God no longer loved them. Truly, "...whom the father loves, He disciplines!" Paul said it in 2 Timothy. Though Paul endured much abuse throughout his ministry, this is what kept him going, "For this

reason I also suffer these things, but I am not ashamed; for I know whom I have believed and I am convinced that He is able to guard what I have entrusted to Him until that day” (2 Timothy 1:12).

When Job was in the crucible with the words of his only companion echoing through his head, “Curse God and die!” (Job 2:9), this is where he turned for encouragement, “And as for me, I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last He will take His stand on the earth. Even after my skin is destroyed, yet from my flesh I shall see God; whom I myself shall behold, and whom my eyes shall see and not another. My heart faints within me” (Job 19:25-27).

Romans 5:8-9, “But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him.”

This passage contains a phenomenal comparison.

- What were you prior to salvation? Sinners deserving of hell and so the wrath of God. Enemies of God! Rebels!
- Yet what did God give you? Life! Salvation! Blessing!
- And now that you are saved, when you sin, what is the only logical conclusion we can draw about God’s disposition towards us? *If He loved us when we were enemies, how much more now that we are His children?*

Ministry and service in a fallen state is going to be hard! Yet you must know that in and through it all God is well-pleased with you!

Horatio Spafford (1828-1888) was a wealthy Chicago lawyer with a thriving legal practice, a beautiful home, a wife, and four daughters. He also was a devout Christian and faithful student of God’s word. On October 8, 1871, the Great Chicago Fire destroyed almost every real estate investment that Spafford had.

In 1873, Spafford scheduled a boat trip to Europe. He sent his wife and daughters ahead of him while he remained in Chicago to take care of some unexpected last-minute business. Several days later he received notice that his family’s ship had encountered a collision. All four of his daughters drowned; only his wife survived. It was with a heavy heart, Spafford boarded a boat that would take him to his grieving Anna in England. It was on this trip that he penned those now famous words:

*Though Satan should buffet, though trials should come,
let this blest assurance control,
that Christ has regarded my helpless estate,
and has shed his own blood for my soul.*

In fact, it was this confession that enabled him to say this:

*When peace, like a river, attendeth my way,
when sorrows like sea billows roll,
whatever my lot,
thy o’erarching love shall cover me,
thy soothing hand shall lend me balm and oil,
thy ever-ready aid shall be my refuge still,
thy strong arm shall be about me,
thy faithful love shall all my sorrows heal,
thy mercies shall my passions still.*

thou hast taught me to say, "It is well, it is well with my soul."

This is the consolation of the servant in our text! And it is the first consolation God gives to the Christian struggling under the weight of ministry! Notice the second is that God will reward.

Isaiah 49:4, "yet surely the justice *due* to Me is with the Lord, and My reward with My God."

Some theologians say that this is talking about crowns. However, in the context "the reward" that is the consolation of all Servants of Christ is Eternal life.

Responding to Peter's declaration that he and the other disciples had sacrificed much for Christ, Jesus said, "Truly I say to you, that you who have followed Me, in the regeneration when the Son of Man will sit on His glorious throne, you also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or farms for My name's sake, shall receive many times as much, and [as the ultimate reward] shall inherit eternal life" (Matthew 19:28-29). No matter how you "slice it," this passage describes the reward of Eternal Life as the CHIEF reward of all Christians. Truly, "eternal life" is more precious and more important than co-reigning with Christ on twelve thrones, judging the earth with Christ, and the "many times as much" reward that Christ references here.

You say, "While I appreciate knowing at the end of my life when I die I'll go to glory, that doesn't do much for me in the here and now!" That is only because you don't understand the blessing that is yours when you entered "eternal life"! Notice John 17.

John 17:3, "And this is eternal life, that they may know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent."

Based on this passage, what constitutes eternal life? Eternal Life is nothing less than a love-relationship with Christ. Look at the text again, "And this is eternal life, that they may know Thee..." The word for "know" here is *γινώσκω* (*ginōskō*) which is a relational term in the Bible.

"Cain knew his wife and she conceived" (Genesis 4:17) — the word for "know" in the LXX is *ginosko*. "You only have I chosen [lit. "known"³] among all the families of the earth" (Amos 3:2). Where we read of Christ's words to the reprobate on the last day, "And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you...'" (Matthew 7:23). This doesn't mean that Christ had no knowledge of these unbelievers. Rather it is that Christ did not have an intimate relationship with them as their Savior!

Accordingly, when John 17:3 equates Eternal Life, the Christian's reward, with knowing Christ, we understand the essence of the Christian's reward: It is a level of intimacy and communion with Christ. Truly laboring fifty years on this earth for Christ is to grow in one's capacity to love and enjoy the love of Christ. And thus, the reward awaiting all who deny themselves and live for Christ today, who forgo the passing pleasures of sin "looking for the reward" (Hebrews

11:25, 26), is a greater intimacy and communion with Christ both now and in the age to come! The ultimate reward of the 5 and 2 talent slaves was not more talents, but that glorious invitation, "...enter into the joy of your master" (Matthew 25:21, 23)!

And Christ said these words to those who had suffered so much for Him, "He who overcomes shall inherit these things [the privileges of Heaven], and I will be his God and he will be My son" (Revelation 21:7).

Ministry is akin to living in a hurricane. It is Christ's love and our privilege of loving Him in return that enables us to serve on this earth in the eye of the storm! That is the ultimate consolation for THE Servant of God- a deeper and more abiding relationship with God! So yes, in this world you have tribulation- serve the Lord and

- You may suffer.
- You may go without.
- You will not have free access to the pleasures of sin.
- You will be inconvenienced.

But you will have as your consolation and joy the fellowship of an "ever present Lord!" In light of this, notice how this section closes:

Isaiah 49:7, "Thus says the Lord, the Redeemer of Israel, *and* its Holy One [IOW, One who loves you, has your best interests in mind, and who cannot be thwarted], to the despised One, to the One abhorred by the nation, to the Servant of rulers [this is what we become in this world on account of Christ; yet behold the promise...], 'Kings shall see and arise, princes shall also bow down [In the end we shall be most honored. Why? Three reasons...]; because of the Lord who is faithful [God will not let you down; He is able to be trusted!], the Holy One of Israel [again He is sovereign and transcendent and so His will cannot be opposed or thwarted] who has chosen You [who has selected you unto a high and holy calling which includes an eternal love relationship with the Lord].'"

With this before us, may God give us the grace to serve in the face of difficulty and heartache without growing weary!

Works Cited

- Piper, J. (2005). *Taste and See: Savoring the Supremacy of God in All of Life*. Colorado Springs: Multnomah.
- Wilkinson, B. (2005). *The Prayer of Jabez: Breaking Through to the Blessed Life*. Colorado Springs: Multnomah.

End Note(s)

¹ The words translated for vain in this verse (*riq, hebel*) are NOT the same as in Exodus 20:7.

² This word is a favorite of Isaiah (cf., 24:10; 29:21; 34:11; 40:17, 23; 41:29; 45:18, 19; 59:4). It is best translated as “desolation” and refers to a fruitless work.

³ This doesn't mean that God is limited when it comes to His knowledge of those on this earth- He is Omniscient. Rather, this means that of all the peoples of the earth, only with Israel did God enter into a special, intimate relationship!