

AWAKENED FROM ISOLATION

GOD'S DEALINGS WITH EZEKIEL

By Steve Zeisler

I rarely think of Bob and Pearl Smith (one of the five couples who founded our church, now moving to retirement in Santa Rosa) without marveling at God's commitment to incarnation. The word "incarnation" is a theological term describing God's determination to live inside people. In his commitment to the restoration and redemption of Adam's race he uses incarnation as the primary means by which he accomplishes his work. Bob and Pearl did not begin their ministry in a church or a seminary but in their home, a normal home with children and activity in a neighborhood. They had no denominational permission or recognized academic credentials. Yet Bob was chosen by God to be a teacher, a church planter, an author, discipler, an elder to elders all over the world. He is a man upon whom the hand of God rests, and he has been faithful to that calling of ministry.

The Lord could have chosen a burning bush for each of us to hear from him directly, but he didn't. Neither did he leave us with a general outline so that we might act on our own to do our best for him. Rather, what he has said is, "I will take up residence in people like you. I will give you gifts which are of the spirit of God. I will empower you for service, and call you into the ministry where I would have you." Incarnation is the way God has determined to act.

ORDINATION BY GOD

The first three chapters of Ezekiel are the account of an ordination of an individual whom God has set aside for ministry. It begins with a dramatic opening in verse 1:

"Now it came about in the thirtieth year, on the fifth day of the fourth month, while I was by the river Chebar among the exiles, the heavens were opened and I saw visions of Cod. On the fifth of the month in the fifth year of King Jehojachin's exile, the word of the Lord came expressly to Ezekiel the priest, son of Buzi, in the land of the Chaldeans by the river Chebar; and there the hand of the Lord came upon him."

By the time we reach verse 16 of chapter 3, Ezekiel's ordination has come to this precise appointment:

"At the end of seven days the word of the Lord came to me, 'Son of man, I have made you a watchman to the house of Israel; so hear the word I speak and give them warning from me.'" (Ezekiel 3:16)

As God defined the characteristics of a watchman, Ezekiel understood that he had both a holy opportunity and a grave responsibility to bring God's message to his people. Life and death were in the balance. Ezekiel's message might be the catalyst for those committed to wickedness to turn from it and live forever. Righteous people who had fallen away might lose relationship with God eternally unless a watchman warned them.

For a long time I didn't see much connection between God's encounter with Ezekiel and his relationship with an ordinary person like Bob Smith. It is apparent to me, however, that Ezekiel lived in similar times to those in which we live. The unbelieving world into which Ezekiel was born in the beginning of the 6th century B.C. was arrogant and rich. The worship of idols, the love of money, the flaunting of human achievement were characteristic of Babylon, the capital city of the ruling empire.

In chapter 17 of the book of Revelation, Babylon is portrayed as the mother of harlots, priestess of the religion

of self-love and sensuality raised up against the purposes of God, "drunk with the blood of the saints." In our age the unbelieving world system is rich and arrogant. It, too, flaunts itself against the things that matter to God, and tears at those who serve him. In addition, the people of God in that day and our day are similar; too often idolatrous, hypocritical, and shallow in responding to spiritual things. Ezekiel lived and ministered during a time of severe judgment by God of his people. The Lord had repeatedly warned the people of the consequences of their rebellion, but they disregarded it.

NOT SO DIFFERENT TODAY

The period of Babylonian exile begins at this point in history. Ezekiel was among the first of the people deported to Babylon shortly before the events of chapter 1 were written. The further deportation of the whole nation and the destruction of Jerusalem would follow as the firm and final judgment of God. Yet there was little repentance among either the first exiles or those left behind in Jerusalem. Rather, they rejected the prophets and continued in their stubborn course.

We also live in a time when God's people can be shallow in their responses and do not receive warning seriously. We make alliances with the world system in the same way that the Israelites made alliances with Egypt, hoping to stave off the Babylonian power.

Ezekiel pointed out that the leaders in Jerusalem as well as those in exile were phonies. Secret sin abounded among the elders and priests. In chapter 8, Ezekiel was told in a vision to view what went on in the precincts of the temple:

Then God said to me "Son of man, do you see what the elders of the house of Israel are committing in the dark, each man in the room of his carved images? For they say, the Lord does not see us; the Lord has forsaken the land.' And God said to me, "Yet you will see still greater abominations which they are committing."

What the elders of Israel were doing away from the public view is not unlike many tele-evangelists of our day. They foolishly thought that God did not see their sin, no one would know. The evidence is sadly clear that many in Christian leadership today are as hypocritical as the elders of Ezekiel's day.

CUT OFF BY CIRCUMSTANCES

Returning to chapter 1:1, we note that these events took place when Ezekiel was 30 years old. For a priest, the thirtieth year marked the completion of his training and his graduation into ministry. However, Ezekiel's exile to the dusty plains along the Chebar canal precluded that event. He was a man cut off by circumstances, and felt denied the chance to respond to God's calling in his life. But then the heavens were opened, and he said, "I saw visions of God." In the previous message I stated that this series of sermons will recount occasions in which the Lord God does something dramatic and life-changing, by personally invading the life of one of his children. None will top the experience of Ezekiel recorded here. God's purpose for the vision described in verse 4 and following is to take a man who felt himself isolated, without an apparent opportunity to serve, and ordain him as a prophet who would affect every subsequent generation.

Standing alone in the wilderness he looked to the north and "behold, a strong wind was coming." It proved to be something much greater—the chariot of God. It was a vehicle with four wheels like gyroscopes, capable of rolling in any direction. Next to the wheels were frightening cherubim, angels of God with four faces and wings, noise, lightning, and fire. There was a great expanse (like sheet of glass) over the wheels, and on it was a throne occupied by God himself. Listen to Ezekiel's words at the end of chapter 1:

As the appearance of the rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day, so was the appearance of the surrounding radiance. Such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord. And when I saw it, I fell on my face and heard a voice speaking.

THE GREATNESS OF GOD

Everything changed for Ezekiel when he saw the greatness of God. The prophet was taken from the experience of isolation and frustration to the place of prophesy and joy in service by seeing the glory of God. His God was mounted on a chariot and moved everywhere. He was not localized in Jerusalem, such that the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem might diminish him. He was everywhere, sovereign, and without peer. Ezekiel could look to the opulence of Babylon a day's journey away with its temples and architectural structures and they paled in comparison to this vision of Yahweh, the God of Israel.

PERMISSION

Like Ezekiel, most of us will struggle with a sense that we were made for something greater in Christ's service than we see being accomplished. We believe that God indwells us and could use us, but most of the time we experience frustration and wish there was a clearer calling to open doors for service.

Many of us feel unable to serve because nobody has given us permission. We haven't met the requirements. We let ourselves believe that Christian service is open only to those who attend the right schools, get the right degrees, join the right discipleship groups, or who sit on important committees. Human organizations are granted the power to validate service of God. So we make excuses for our reluctance by saying such things as, "I'm too young. It's only older people who serve effectively." Or, "I'm too old, it's really only the young and vital who God seems to allow open doors of opportunity." Or "I'm too female, it's only men." Or "I didn't go to Bible school or seminary when I had the chance." Or "My English is broken and I don't speak well enough." Or "I'm too short," or "I'm too quiet," or "I'm too single," or "I'm not rich enough," or "I'm not established enough in the community." We deem ourselves unqualified because no one has placed enough value in our credentials to impel us to useful service. Ezekiel struggled with the same problem. Living in the midst of the nation of Babylon, in a dusty outpost on a canal among a handful of other exiled Jews, he perceived himself to be a priest without a place to serve. Humanly speaking, all the doors were shut to him.

CONFIDENCE

Maybe you don't feel that the doors of opportunity are shut to you as much as you feel a lack of confidence that your gifts are useful to God. It can seem that only those who are outspoken and communicate well are used by God. You look at your gifts, which you consider less significant, and realize your gifts are more the "hands-on" type: that you are better at giving cups of cold water in Jesus's name, embracing the poor, or or visiting the sick or imprisoned. You might conclude that your gifts are not valuable because you don't have confidence that they will benefit God's kingdom.

When the apostle Paul wrote about gifts and calling in I Corinthians 12, he emphasized that the less prominent gifts are given more prominence by Christ. As members of the body we are all necessary. All of us have the same Spirit living in us. He has given us gifts and appointed us to the neighborhoods, schools, and the workplaces where we find ourselves. Therefore, none of us can pronounce ourselves useless in ministry because of our gifts. When the Almighty God has deemed us valuable to his work, it is arrogant to deny that we are.

TOO LATE

Perhaps you are a person who says, "I made a mistake years ago. I was a leader in a ministry at one time, and I felt that God wanted me to go into some kind of service. Instead, I went to business school, and somewhere along the way I sold out. I didn't listen when I had the chance, and now it's too late. I shouldn't have married when I did, I shouldn't have married who I did, we shouldn't have moved to where we did. I had my chance, I didn't seize the opportunity, and therefore it's too late."

When we partake of the Lord's Supper we drink from a cup representing the blood of Christ shed for the forgiveness of sin. We eat bread which will sustain us wherever we are called to go. It doesn't matter whether we made a bad choice, or ten bad choices at various forks of the road in the past.

The message of Bob Smith's life is that an engineer can be called by God to remarkable international ministry, as Bob was. The message of Ezekiel is that a man who loved God, but was isolated and denied opportunity in

the expected place, was called into service. The message of Christ in us is that you and I are qualified to serve the Lord because of who he is. Whatever our gifts, whatever our past failures, whether men give us permission or not, it does not matter. As Ezekiel was appointed as a watchman, we also have an appointment to usefulness.

I would like you to consider the pastors and elders of this church. From outward appearances this group does not have an exceptional track record. Both now and in the past we have had pastors and elders who have had no accredited theological training, some have been denied degrees from colleges on technicalities; one never went to college at all. Individuals have been orphaned, divorced, never married, have suffered crippling bouts of self-doubt, have attempted to resign (but refused the opportunity to resign), wondered at their abilities, stepped on toes, and have experienced struggles in family life.

Yet again, the issue that remains is not external qualifications, degrees, or authority from a human organization, but the calling of God.

WORDS FOR EZEMEL

Chapter 2 and 3 are Ezekiel's ordination message, spoken by God from his chariot/throne:

"Son of man, stand on your feet that I may speak with you!" And as he spoke to me the Spirit entered me and set me on my feet; and I heard him speaking to me, saying, "Son of man, I am sending you to the sons of Israel."

The spirit entered Ezekiel, empowered him to stand before the glory of the Lord, and the Almighty gave him a message to speak. Later in chapter 2 he was told to eat a scroll, and we see the importance of the scriptures in the life of God's servant.

In ordaining Ezekiel, God brought the prophet from the extraordinary spiritual heights of his vision back down to the "hard knocks" nature of his ministry:

"And I am sending you to them who are stubborn and obstinate children; and you shall say to them, 'Thus says the Lord God' As for them, whether they listen or not--for they are a rebellious house--they will know that a prophet has been among them. And you, son of man, neither fear them nor fear their words, though thistles and thorns are with you and you sit on scorpions; neither fear their words nor be dismayed at their presence, for they are a rebellious house. But you shall speak My words to them whether they listen or not, for they are rebellious."

WE ARE APPOINTED BY GOD

In conclusion, we must be ever aware that the details of our lives are no accident. We live where we do, know what we know, have the friends that we have, and work at a particular job because God has appointed us to it. We may feel like we are living on the dusty plains of Babylon by an irrigation canal, a place of uselessness, but such feelings are a lie. Effectiveness in honoring God through our service depends on our vision of God, what we believe about him rather than what we believe about ourselves or external circumstances. Either he is majestic, sovereign, merciful, and faithful, or he is not. Ezekiel's faithfulness to the ministry to which God called him was dependent upon his view of God.

Lastly, we are not here to please people but to please God. It may be that we are unable to measure what comes from our ministry. The issue is faithfulness and the willingness to take up the responsibility to serve in the ways that God presents to us.

Returning to the first verses of the first chapter of the book of Ezekiel, we are told it was the 30th year of Ezekiel's life. The fact that he was 30 was not so critical, he could have been 17 or 53. We're told that he was by the river Chebar among the exiles, under the thumb of a foreign empire. He could have been in San Francisco, Chicago, or New York. In verse 2 we are told it was the fifth year of King Johoiachin's exile. Secular history is always measured by the rise and fall of nations and their leaders. It could have been 1989,

the first year of George Bush's presidency. Those specific details taken by themselves are not what matters. What matters is the last phrase of verse one: "The heavens were opened and I saw visions of God." That is what impelled this man into a life of useful ministry. He saw God as he'd never seen him before. Our view of God will also shape what we become.

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