

The Ministry According to Ezekiel.

EZEKIEL was called upon to minister in the things of God in times of peculiar difficulty. The commonly accepted and almost immemorial traditions of his people were shaken to their foundations, and his people were called upon completely to re-orientate their view of God and of life. The times were not unlike our own. Social change was taking place rapidly. Many of Ezekiel's contemporaries felt themselves to be out of their depth and, by the events which overwhelmed them, cut off from the security of the past. In spite of many similarities, it is not easy for us to appreciate what the events connected with the Babylonian exile must have meant to Jewry, but it cannot fail to be of value and of interest to us to examine the ministry of one who was called to pass through the midst of these events as the servant of God.

In the year 605 B.C., the battle of Carchemish resulted in the defeat of Egypt by the Babylonian army. Judah, which hitherto had been allied with Egypt, achieved a lightning transference of allegiance. But eight years later, in 597, inspired no doubt by intrigues from Egypt, Judah revolted. The judgement of Nebuchadrezzar was swift. The king, his nobles, and many prominent citizens were deported to Babylon, and Zechariah a younger son of Josiah, was set up by the Babylonians, as a puppet monarch in Jerusalem. This lasted for a few years, and then, following another revolt in 586, Nebuchadrezzar made a final end by the destruction of city and temple. It was through these events that Ezekiel lived. He was born in Palestine, probably somewhere about 620 B.C. There is evidence that he was greatly influenced by Jeremiah and the Deuteronomic school of historians. For some reason, he was among those who were deported in 597, and it was in Babylon that he received the call to the prophetic office. For the rest of his life, he remained there, exercising a pastoral ministry to the exiles, both before and after the Fall of Jerusalem.

Around the book that bears his name, many critical battles have been fought. It is no part of our purpose to join in those battles. It seems reasonable to accept the findings of Prof. G. A. Cooke, in the *I.C.C.*, that the book is substantially a unity and that, in the main, it comes from the hand of Ezekiel, although there are places where the hand of a later editor can be detected.

It was by the banks of the Kebar canal in Babylonia that Ezekiel received his call to the ministry. In the first and following chapters, he describes in some detail the vision that he received and the commands that Yahweh laid upon him. Ezekiel had an overwhelming spiritual experience, and there was revealed to him something of the wonder and glory of Yahweh. He saw Yahweh, the God of all the earth, riding in his chariot across the sky; he saw Yahweh, seated upon his eternal throne. Before such wonder he fell prostrate to the ground. But God commanded him to stand upon his feet, for he, Ezekiel, was to be commissioned and sent, by this great God. It is impossible to overestimate the impression that this vision made upon the mind and character of Ezekiel. The doctrine of the transcendence of Yahweh is at the root of all that Ezekiel has to say, and there can be no doubt that this inaugural vision set the tone of the whole of his ministry.

After the vision came the charge and the commission. If we are to understand Ezekiel's view of his ministry, we must examine his charge in some detail. God makes it plain that He requires not paralysis, but service. "Stand upon thy feet, Son of Man, and I will speak with thee." No wonder that he was abased before God! He who would declare the counsel of God to his day and generation must perforce recognise his great unworthiness before God. There is not one of us who does not continually feel his unworthiness to receive and pass on the commands of God. Indeed, without that sense of inadequacy, our ministry would be valueless. Not a great deal is said explicitly in *Ezekiel* about the *hesed*, the graciousness of Yahweh, but it is implied here. This great God deigns to use Ezekiel the unworthy, asking from him obedience and loyalty. It is not otherwise in every age. Ezekiel would have understood the graciousness and the challenge that lay beneath the words of Our Lord when from the sea-shore He bade the disciples to bring also of the fish that they themselves had caught. He bids us to stand upon our feet, conscious as we are of our unworthiness, and to serve Him with the strength that He Himself will give.

The office to which he was called, was the pastoral office. Perhaps more specifically in the case of Ezekiel than in that of any other Old Testament prophet, there is the recognition of an office that is essentially pastoral. He was called to be a watchman over the House of Israel—to act as pastor to the captives in Babylon. Throughout his book we can see how in fact he performed this office. Constantly he was consulted by "the elders of Israel," by which presumably is meant the leaders of the Jews, appointed or confirmed in their authority by the Babylonian authorities. As a watchman for Yahweh, it was his duty to take note of the signs of the times, and to interpret contemporary

events in the light of the revelation of God that had been vouchsafed to him. It was his duty to make plain to his fellow captives those things that Yahweh was about to do, and to show to them what was his will. The exercise of the pastoral office makes demands upon our sympathy, and there are times when, in reading the oracles of Ezekiel, we wonder at the apparent lack of sympathy which appears in them. A great part of his message was denunciatory. Like his predecessors, and perhaps with better reason, he is not squeamish in the judgements that he passes upon his contemporaries and, let this be said, if he were to be a faithful watchman, there was much in the life of his time that he had to denounce. Moreover, Ezekiel was as hard on himself as he was on others. Yet if we imagine that Ezekiel was lacking in sympathy, we grossly misread the facts. For he had the truest sympathy—a *sympatheia*—for he shared the situation and had fully entered into the experience of the exiles to whom he ministered. Many preachers have at least one sermon on the text which does not appear in the R.V. "and I sat where they sat." Ezekiel, by sharing the lot of those to whom he was sent, was qualified to minister to their needs with sympathy and understanding. It was not always so. We may trace the experience of sharing through which he passed, and see what a tremendous difference it made to his attitude and outlook. Selected verses from chapter iii. go like this :

" (And the Lord said) : ' Son of Man, get thee to them of the captivity, unto the children of thy people. . . . ' So the Spirit liften me up and took me away, and I went in bitterness and in a spirit of hot anger . . . Then I came to them of the captivity . . . and I sat where they sat, and remained there astonished among them."

Here is revealed a significant change of attitude. The righteous indignation with the sins of others, aroused by his perception of the truth, melted into a sympathy and understanding when their situation was fully appreciated. Is it irreverent to picture here the theological student, coming fresh from his studies, and filled with righteous indignation at the sins of humanity, finding with something of shock perhaps, that he cannot truly minister until he, to some extent shares the experiences of his flock? It is only as we sit where they sit that we can truly minister to our people in the things of God. It may well be a point worthy of discussion whether the kind of training we receive does not put rather too much emphasis upon the theological conditions of salvation, and too little upon the need for sharing the joys and sorrows of our people.

Faithfulness and persistence in the proclamation of the

counsel of God were to play a very large part in the ministry of Ezekiel. He had inherited a tradition of persistence. The experience of Jeremiah was no doubt much in his mind. For forty years, or thereabouts, Jeremiah had declared that the sin of Judah would bring the inevitable nemesis of Yahweh's wrath. Whether it should come from the Scythian of the North, or the Assyrian in the East, come it would. But year after year after year nothing had happened. Men had gone on in the same old way unheeding and, in the end, not even listening. When they did listen, they laughed. Kings tried to silence him and, if they had dared, would have killed him. But the response or lack of response to a prophet's message makes no difference to his responsibility for declaring it. This was the lesson that Yahweh taught Ezekiel from the very beginning. Whether they will hear, or whether they will forbear, the responsibility is the same, and an awful responsibility it is. Ezekiel has no doubt about the ability of Yahweh to fulfil both His threats and His promises, and the solemn warning is given that if he fails to proclaim the message, then God will require the blood of the people at his hand. It will be no use advancing the excuse that they would not listen. The office of the preacher is no sinecure. Here is something that will demand patience and persistence, courage and perseverance, and which is impossible apart from the continual support of the Presence of God. For is there anything harder to bear than the knowledge that we are preaching our hearts out to the empty air or, in our day, to wooden benches?

Perhaps there is one thing harder, and Ezekiel found that too. The time came when people did come to listen to what he had to say :

“ And they speak every one to his brother, saying, ‘ Come,, I pray you, and hear what is the word that cometh forth from the Lord.’ And they come unto thee as the people cometh, and they sit before thee . . . and, lo, thou art unto them as a very lovely song of one that hath a pleasant voice and can play well on an instrument; for they hear thy words, but they do them not.”

Most of us, I think could parallel that experience, although there are some of us of whom the most enthusiastic listeners could not say that we are “ as one that hath a very lovely voice ” ! They hear the word, but they do it not. Indeed it was very necessary for Yahweh to make the prophet's forehead as an adamant harder than flint, and bid him not to be afraid. At least for Ezekiel the office to which he was called was not an easy one. It was possible at all, only because, as is repeated again and again, “ the hand of the Lord was strong upon me.” The doctrine of the

transcendant power of Yahweh, and the prophet's consciousness of the greatness of His god were alone sufficient to maintain him in the persistent faithfulness with which he had to proclaim his message. In every generation those who have performed the office of pastor and prophet have been able to do so only as they have realised that "the strong hand of the Lord was upon them."

Ezekiel was bidden to make the message his own. The roll of God's word, upon which is written the doom and the restoration of Israel, is presented to him, and he is bidden to eat it. Thus all the present and past tragedy enters into his soul; so does the future hope and glory, and it becomes his own, so that he may the more effectively make it known to those who are committed to his charge. Some have denied that preaching is "truth, through personality." But there can be little doubt that the emphasis that Ezekiel made and the methods that he used in the presentation of his message, owed much to his personality. The writer is not qualified to discuss at a very deep level the psychology of Ezekiel, but it seems unlikely that the kind of visions he had and continued to have would have come in the precise way that they did come to a man with another kind of psychological make-up. After all, it was the conception of the greatness of Yahweh which had been revealed to him, that he had to make known, and it was through the eyes of the vision that had been granted to him that he saw both the judgement and the hope of Israel. It does not deny the objectivity of the revelation to say that God chose Ezekiel because he was Ezekiel, and because through the kind of personality that Ezekiel had He could best speak to the men of Ezekiel's day. The message passed through the crucible of his own experience, and it came forth to the world, sometimes with a convincing power because of the personality that backed it, and sometimes weakened by preconceived notions, and by the situation of his times. But it was his message, given to him by God, made his own in the experience of living. Preaching must always be like this; it must, both in its content and its method bear something of the personality through whom it passes. We preachers must make the word of the Lord our own. We must allow it to enter into our very beings, that it may transform them, and come forth to the world from dedicated lives.

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(To be concluded)