

The Ministry According to Ezekiel

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The message of Ezekiel may be divided into two parts, separated by the fall of Jerusalem in 596. In the few years prior to that calamity, he felt called to continue the work of Jeremiah in proclaiming the ultimate destruction of the city and collapse of the State. Again and again he reviews the history of Israel and Judah, and again and again drives home the conclusion that their sins have merited the destruction that is to befall them. Since he judges the whole of their history in the light of the later Deuteronomic standard, it is not surprising that he finds them so sadly lacking. It is to this period of his ministry that his most bitter denunciations belong, as it is to this time also that his unpopularity belongs. If the bitterness of his denunciations seem hard, let us remember that he was, in fact, performing a valuable pastoral duty. He was seeking to prepare his fellow countrymen for the blow that was to fall, and was seeking to justify the ways of God to men. He reminds them that the destruction of the temple is not the same thing as the defeat of Yahweh. His picture of Yahweh leaving the temple and sitting on the Mount of Olives to watch its destruction, may be a trifle anthropomorphic for us. But at least it declared that in the defeat of His people, Yahweh Himself was not defeated.

After the fall of the city, his message became one of hope and confidence. Here speaks the wise pastor. Looking upon his people he sees that their need is for reassurance, and that need coincides with the message that he has received from God. In face of the calamity which must have well-nigh broken their spirit, he declared that Yahweh was to gather Israel back again into the Promised Land, that Ephraim and Judah were to be re-united, and that the Kingdom was to be restored. But there was to be a difference. His reviews of history reveal clearly enough that he felt the trouble with Israel to have been the failure of the secular power to enforce true religion. Henceforth, Israel is to be more a church than a nation. Supreme authority is to be vested in the religious leaders, and the supreme ruler is to be a priest-king, invested with both ecclesiastical and secular power. It is significant that in his blue-print of the new order, which is drawn with great precision of detail, the nation's life is to be centred literally as well as figuratively around the Temple. Thus

he bids his fellow-exiles lift up their hearts with hope. Yahweh has not deserted his people and the future is to be more glorious than the past.

Ezekiel spoke, as all the prophets spoke, to the needs and conditions of his own time. Yet there is an assumption behind all that he has to say which is greater significance than the local and temporary. The key to Ezekiel's preaching ministry is his conception of the greatness and holiness of Yahweh. His glory had been sullied by the sin of His people, and the shame had to be wiped out and restitution made. The redemption which was to come, this too is inexplicable apart from the greatness of Yahweh, for it was to come for the vindication of His holiness, and to give glory to His Holy Name. Moreover, it was to be all His doing. The house of Israel was broken and dead. No apter simile could be conceived than that of the valley of dry bones. It represented exactly the situation in which Israel found herself. Her hope utterly cut off, unable to move her lifeless soul to return to God. She could be revived only by the creative act of God, and when the wind of God blew, then would His people revive. This is Ezekiel's word to his world; God is supreme in judgment and in redemption.

This was no new conception in the history and religion of Israel. Indeed the greatness of Ezekiel does not lie in the fact that he was an innovator. That he clearly was not. His greatness lies rather in the fact that inspired by his vision of the transcendence of God, he was able to take the gems of truth laid up in store by those who had gone before him, and apply them to the circumstances and conditions of his own time.

A few illustrations of the way in which he did this will make a profitable study in the technique of sermon-making! Some generations earlier, Isaiah of Jerusalem had developed the idea of the righteous remnant of Israel, which was to be the true nation. Later still the idea was to be invested with an even richer meaning by the Second Isaiah but here, in the hands of Ezekiel, it has already become the means by which Yahweh, the Holy and the Great, will preserve a people fit for His possession. To demonstrate the doctrine of the remnant with vividness the Prophet shaves his hair and divides the cuttings into portions, scattering and destroying some, but preserving a portion. So will God deal with Israel. This, for Ezekiel is no theoretical doctrine, but among people who themselves have felt the judgment of Yahweh, the meaning of his act becomes plain and clear.

Again, Ezekiel's immediate predecessor, Jeremiah, had, through his own bitter experience, been led to a new understanding of the religious relationship. He had been led far from the hitherto commonly accepted notion that the religious unit was the

national group, and from the depths of his own experience he had learned that man stood in a personal and individual relation to his God. Ezekiel, amid the break up of the national unit experienced the truth of this, and made more explicit the development not only of a new religious relationship, but also of a new ethical and moral relationship. Just as the true religious unit is the person, so also is the ethical unit. A person is responsible for his own sins and not for those of another. Indeed he goes so far that his conception is almost atomistic, denying the influence of heredity and environment. But at least this much is plain, that the greatness of Yahweh is such that, reaching out to a man in his sin, it can turn him from his evil ways and cause him to live, whatever may be happening to the world around him.

Ezekiel clearly saw too, the implications for his own time of the teaching of Hosea about God; and he anticipates much of the Christian doctrine of salvation. Redemption is to precede repentance. Looking out upon his world he saw that repentance was far away, and if redemption depended upon that, then redemption was a long way off. But God will not wait until His people repent before He restores them to their own land. In His own good time He will so restore them, and then from the security and safety of the Promised Land, they will turn unto Him. However unduly optimistic this may seem, it does in some measure anticipate the words of St. Paul: "While we were still sinning, Christ died for the ungodly," and it does declare that the initiative in redemption is always God's. When men's hearts are far from Him, and when with the feet of a Gomer they wander far from the pathways of virtue, God is always seeking them out, and it is by His power and by His alone, that they can be restored.

Ezekiel's Messianic teaching stems from his conception of God, and is related to the predicament in which his people find themselves. Although in vision fair, he foresaw a time when ecclesiastical and civil government should be closely allied, he was enough of a realist to recognise that these things were not yet. In the meantime, he has plenty to say about the government, both ecclesiastical and civil. The false and faithless shepherds of Israel are denounced in no uncertain terms. They had been concerned solely with their own power, prestige and possessions, while the flock of God had been neglected and scattered. The shepherds themselves had turned wolves. Such shepherds as these were to be superseded. Yahweh Himself, through His vice-regent would be their shepherd. This is a passage of great beauty, in which the fierce denunciations are matched by the compassion of a great pastoral concern. Yahweh shares that concern, in fact he promotes it. The scattered sheep are to be gathered into one flock beneath the care of the One

Shepherd. This is indeed a noble conception of Messiahship, enriched by his experience of God, and related to the needs of his time.

So one might go on illustrating the truth that Ezekiel's ministry of the Word consisted in the application of truths that he had experienced about God, and all of them stemming from the highest traditions of his people. But it is sufficient to establish the principle, and the principle is this, that the ministry of the Word consists in relating the truth that we have experienced to the needs and situations of our own day. For most of us, as for Ezekiel, that really means seeing anew the relevance of things that are not new.

In short, Ezekiel was not a daring religious innovator. He does not stand like a Jeremiah or a Second Isaiah, on the mountain peaks. He is an illustration—perhaps a somewhat highly-coloured one—but still a true one, of what most of us are. We are not innovators in the realm of theological truth, we are conscious that most of what we have, we have received from those who have gone before, and that all that we have of good has come from God. It is for us like Ezekiel, to understand the implications of the truths that we know for the world of our time. Neither are we men of superlative spiritual perception—we are but servants of God striving with sympathy and understanding to minister to the needs of our people, ready to make the message our own, and by the grace of God persisting in the proclamation of the Word, both in season and out.

It remains only to ask what are the truths which God is seeking to make known to our day and generation through us. What aspect of God's truth needs fresh application in the world of our day? In such a matter as this we must be patient to hear the Voice of God, and be ready to follow the guidance of His Spirit. But Ezekiel has something to say to us here. Do men recognise the holiness and the majesty of God? Can they know true peace until they do? We may not like Ezekiel's way of putting things. After all, his tongue has been silent these 2,500 years and more. Sometimes we may even be repelled by the picture which he paints of a God who seems over concerned for the honour of His Holy Name. Still less can we share Ezekiel's view of a holiness that is contagious and quasi-physical, or the national exclusiveness which pervades much of his thinking. But these things are the local and the temporary, and when all those things have been recounted and set aside, it still seems that in this day of human perplexity and human failure there is laid upon us the necessity to make known to mankind the supremacy of God, both in judgement and in redemption.

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