

When God Commissions

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'Now it came to pass in the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, in the fifth day of the month, as I was among the captives by the river of Chebar, that the heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God' (Ezekiel 1.1).

THE personal, spiritual applications of the call of Ezekiel to prophetic office are surely intended for God's people in all generations, to the very end of time, and the first chapter of *Ezekiel* contains several matters of immense importance to us. It is primarily about how God commissioned his servant and opened his eyes to great matters that would drive him on throughout his life. All true believers should be aware of a personal commission to the service of the Lord.

Many Bible-believing Christians, sadly, do not seem to have realised that each one has a personal commission. It is quite common to come across Christians, and I am sure we have such friends in our midst at the Tabernacle, who know the Lord, walk with him, have trusted in Christ, have a testimony, and can speak of God's goodness to them across the years, but yet have no realisation of their commission. They think of themselves in a very humble way as recipients of the grace of God, but not as having received a special call to the service of Christ. We are not talking about a call to preach necessarily, or to exercise some very distinctive service, but a commissioning that led them to be wholly dedicated to the Lord to bring forth fruit and place him first in all things. It is not universally the case that believers can say: 'God has saved me and commissioned me, though I am not fit or worthy, to put him first lifelong, and to obey and honour him in everything I do, until I am called home.' Ezekiel was a priest, and had been taken into captivity by the Babylonians along with 10,000 others about 598 BC, and moved from Jerusalem to a location southwest of Babylon. He was twenty-five at the time and appears to have been in the land of captivity for five years before the Lord laid upon him a tremendous burden – his prophetic call.

The opening words of the chapter – 'Now it came to pass in the thirtieth year' – are most commonly understood to refer to Ezekiel's age when called. He says he was at a settlement by the river of Chebar, a waterway off the great Euphrates. He describes how, for him, 'the heavens were opened' and he saw visions of (or from) God.

Thinking firstly of a call to ministry, we observe that Ezekiel was living among the people. He was not someone parachuted in from Jerusalem to minister to these captives; he was one of them. They knew him and he understood them: he had been closely observed by his fellow captives, tilling fields for survival, and sharing in raising the heavy tribute demanded by their overlords. He clearly lived an exemplary life among them.

By his commissioning he would have an immensely unpopular ministry among them, calling them to repentance, but they would not be able to reject him on account of his character. They would not be able to say, 'We know him and his background. We know what kind of a hypocrite he is.' He was someone who had earned standing among them, who was unblameable. Also, he had suffered as they had suffered, having been seized in an invasion, not knowing what would become of him. Like them, he had to start life all over again in the barren area of a prisoner settlement, scratching a living from the earth.

Also, after five years the prophet knew the sins and failings of the people, their attitudes and their excuses. He knew well their refusal to accept the chastisement of God, and their foolish belief that fallen Egypt would come to their aid. Their trust was in earthly solutions to their sufferings, not in their glorious God.

When God called Ezekiel, he called a proven man who had learned to work and who had stood the testing of faith. Today there is often no proving of the would-be preacher. He may have never won

a soul, persisted faithfully in youth or Sunday School work, or even spent time in secular employment. He may have never learned to work hard and may have no idea how people generally think or reason.

Sometimes he has never been recognised by his church for his service to Christ, and never properly assessed or approved by them. He has gone upon his own whim to seminary and in due course another unproved man will proceed unscripturally into pastoral charge. How far we have drifted from the way the Lord acts in the precedents of the Word!

Privileged but wicked times

We notice also that several of the 'greater' prophets ministered as contemporaries. Jeremiah and Daniel lived at the same time, and we might conclude these were great days, privileged times. But they were dreadful days of rebellion and unbelief. It is of comfort to us to know that some of God's greatest instruments exercised their long ministries (Ezekiel's lasting at least 22 years) in times when both church and society at large lived in utmost unbelief and wickedness.

Ezekiel's vision came from above, from God, and this applies to us also. There would never be great waywardness in churches or foolish innovations if every believer had at some time been struck with a deep conviction that everything we know or do in the spiritual realm must come from God's Word, and never from the imagination of mere men. So much has entered church life in the last fifty years which comes not from Heaven, from God's Word, but from the ideas of fallen men. Endless authoritative directives and proposals flow from charismatic teachers, and very many of them eventually get into sounder churches. It is so bad in these last days that even reformed pastors are unashamed to say they are 'progressive', which means they adopt and promote the ideas of men and support worldliness in churches. Ezekiel, being overwhelmed by revelation, would cleave to the Word of God alone.

We read that, 'the word of the Lord came expressly unto Ezekiel' (*Ezekiel 1.3*), and this is a way of translating the Hebrew sense which indicates that the word came to him in a very personal way, and also that it came with great certainty that God had spoken to him. It was a very commanding call, and it came with a burden of responsibility.

Have readers ever experienced this? You were reading your Bible or listening to a sermon, or meditating, and suddenly a realisation came to you – 'I am a commissioned man, a commissioned woman, to serve the Lord with all my strength until I see his wonderful face. I am called to be his and his alone; to be a servant of the Saviour of the world.' The thought was overwhelmingly solemn and came as an immovable burden, not an unpleasant or intolerable burden, but something you could not shake off. You were bound to obey, and it filled you with love and indebtedness. You were a Christian, but never before had you felt the full responsibility of being a servant of Christ. It is said of Ezekiel, 'and the hand of the Lord was there upon him.'

Such an awareness of our commission comes as a very profound experience, and you remember it for years.

From that great moment, Ezekiel was profoundly solemn and earnest. A sense of compulsion entered into him. He became a deeply serious man from that time on. We like people who are warm in nature and have a sense of humour. That is uplifting and pleasant. But we do not want people to be shallow and trivial, as so many are in this Twitter age. When the hand of the Lord was upon Ezekiel he became deeply devoted, serious and industrious, the sure marks of a commissioning by God.

With the hand of God came (we see it in verse 4) a tremendous sense of God, and certainly Ezekiel would need this, just as we all do in these times of intense unbelief. We are told that he looked – 'and, behold, a whirlwind came out of the north, a great cloud, and a fire infolding itself.' He realised that this depicted (at first) not God, but the Babylonian troops, who would attack and bring down Jerusalem. The whirlwind was an obvious symbol of destruction, terror and alarm, and seven years later Jerusalem was indeed destroyed. But the vision of the whirlwind immediately turned into a vision

of God, to signify that the Babylonians, wicked as they were, were God's instrument of judgement. The sense of God's immensity and glory came from the dazzling brightness about the cloud, and from the inward rotation of this great ball of fire, depicting the self-fed, self-controlled power of God who needs no combustible material to fuel the flames that represent his holiness and might. Amber was the emerging prevailing hue – 'And out of the midst thereof as the colour of amber, out of the midst of the fire.' The colour of amber in *Ezekiel* denotes the divine being, the majesty, holiness and the power of God. The prophet's commission came with an overpowering sense or realisation of the might and authority of God, and that is exactly what we need, and what is missing from the nominal evangelical world of gimmickry and of doctrine without obedience. How much we need to be overwhelmed by that sense of the Lord's sovereignty and purity, so that we obey him and his commands and render all to him. Obedience is surely the greatest need of the hour.

With this sense of God came a new sense of his justice, as we read in verse 5 – 'Also out of the midst thereof came the likeness of four living creatures.' Here are the great cherubim of justice (who appear in *Revelation 4-6*) that surround the throne of God and apply his justice.

'Out of the midst thereof came the likeness of four living creatures. And this was their appearance; they had the likeness of a man.' We note the words 'appearance' and 'likeness'. The record is at pains to show that the prophet did not actually see God or the cherubim of justice, but a likeness only, and he knew that the vision gave him symbols. He knew that God is invisible and immortal, and the cherubim were representations of God's angelic agents of justice. 'Appearance' and 'likeness' appear as terms repeatedly. But the vision was enough to create in the prophet the most profound awe, with revulsion at lightness before God.

These cherubim are shown as having 'the hands of a man' or labour for God, 'the face of a man' or intelligence, 'the face of a lion' or invincibility surely, 'the face of an ox' or strength, and 'the face of an eagle' or the ability to see everything, just as an eagle flies high and gets a comprehensive view of all below.

Serious people

God, who sees all, will be true to his holy nature, and will carry out his perfect judgement. In this vision Ezekiel is made aware that the time of judgement for Judah and Jerusalem has come, and that it will be invincible and accurate. The prophet needed to see this, and so do we, and it makes us serious people.

Among ourselves we may enjoy many happy activities and conversations that cheer our hearts, but when we consider the unsaved world we are serious people because we have not only felt our commission to reach a lost generation, and received a sense of God and his might and majesty, but we have had imparted to us a strong sense of his justice and judgement. We cannot help but lift up our eyes to see crowds, thousands upon thousands of people, who are under the judgement of God. Many believers, however, throw that realisation away by watching depraved entertainment for hours on television and allowing themselves to accept and enjoy godless behaviour. They lose their horror of the plight of sinners and rather identify with their lifestyles.

When we see churches adopting the ways of the world and compromising with worldly culture, we must say – You cannot do that because God will hold you to account. He is the pure and holy One who hates all that is distinctively characteristic of rebellious society.

When Ezekiel was commissioned (like any young man called to minister God's Word) he was wholly conquered by a sight of the holiness and power of God, and from that moment set aside and apart from the sin-tainted things of this world. Such a man today would repudiate any vestigial worldly idolatry, destroy all possessions that kept the world in his heart, and be entirely for the Lord. For Ezekiel, that awesome sense of God never left him all his life.

If it leaves preachers today they are doomed as instruments of God. They cannot preach as they should. They cannot maintain the message that calls out of the world. They will in crucial matters be

drawn aside. They may continue faithful to doctrines, but their task of keeping a flock of God unspotted from the world will no longer be honoured and maintained.

Alongside the irresistible realisation of God's power and holiness, Ezekiel was given a glimpse, a sense, of God's all-seeing eye. He saw it in the wheels of the living creatures – 'like unto the colour of a beryl: and they four had one likeness: and their appearance and their work was as it were a wheel in the middle of a wheel.' And they had eyes situated around what we would call the rims, the eyes of the omniscience of God and of the cherubim of justice.

The prophet surely needed a vision of the all-seeing knowledge of God, because the judgements to be inflicted upon Judah would threaten to crush his spirit and even his trust. The assurance that God knew all, and that his sovereign and perfect plan took account of all events and could never fail, would strengthen and hold the prophet through the darkest times. When he saw his people defeated and scattered, the temple in ruins, and terrible things taking place, he would know this was not the end of the matter. He needed that powerful realisation, as did Jeremiah, and also Daniel, that God's view encompassed the unfolding centuries, and the rising and falling of empires and armies.

We need a sense of God's supreme knowledge also. We read the history of God's work in our land, of the Reformation, and of times of awakening and revival, and in some respects we find it deeply depressing. In a city like London we see no end of buildings that were obviously once churches, chapels and missions, but have been converted into offices or shops. We walk down some major high streets and see many buildings that were ragged schools or Sunday Schools in former days. We know it from the 'churchy' windows rising above the store fronts.

We think of the nineteenth century and how C H Spurgeon lamented how bad things were in his view even then. There were thousands of people in churches, and God's people thought the situation was bad! What would they make of things today?

The task we have been given

As God's people we need to have a strong sense that God knows exactly what he is doing. He knows when he is going to bring everything to an end, and whether he will send a last revival before the final moment dawns.

If we have received a keen sense of the infallible knowledge and sovereignty of God, we do not try to improve on the task we have been given to simply preach repentance and remission of sin, and to pray for the blessing of the Holy Spirit upon our labours.

In the 1970s the seeker-sensitive church movement began in the USA when a pastor decided to ask unchurched people what they wanted in a church. A questionnaire went out, then research was thoroughly done, and the answers came back saying that people did not want a church that sang stuffy old hymns, or just preached at you and told you that you were a sinner, but one that entertained you, and did not upset you, and did not oblige you to participate in religious activities. So a church was created that would suit the tastes of the unconverted mind.

It became, in earthly terms, a great success, and began to publish widely its blueprint for success. Many churches followed suit, becoming mega-churches where sin was little mentioned and every comfort, recreation and entertainment was available to attract crowds of superficial 'worshippers'. Since then other innovations and experiments have joined the fashionable campaign to 'rewrite church' to look less like the church of the New Testament and to be more amenable to the unconverted nature, or 'the flesh'. An Ezekiel-like commission, a powerful sense of the knowledge and infallibility of God, a realisation that he knows why he has allowed a time of decline, and he knows exactly what he is going to do, and how he will vindicate his Word, would have prevented the hushing-up of the challenge of the Gospel, and the trivialisation and 'worldification' of the church. We need this realisation of the omniscience of God. It is essential.

In the 1980s a leading preacher of the charismatic world declared that the teaching of the Bible is not enough. This would never win a community by itself. You needed alongside it what he called 'a

power encounter'. He claimed (wrongly) that whenever the Lord Jesus Christ preached (or the apostles later) a miracle was also worked. Only miracles would make people listen. You must, he insisted, be able to raise the dead, or to look at people and know exactly what their sins were, and tell them. He would tell the story of how he would sit next to someone on a flight, and turn and tell that person all his or her worst sins. I cannot know whether he made these stories up or whether he was a sadly deluded man, but he had numerous accounts like this. And he was copied widely. There could be no Gospel impact without such clairvoyance or miraculous insights.

Essence of the prophetic call

If we do not have a strong sense of the power and majesty and knowledge of God, then we soon imagine we need something more than the Word and the Spirit. What can we think of? What can we do that will dazzle and move people, causing them to listen to us, and to come to us? Human schemes and gimmicks will be devised to help God out. Without the substance of Ezekiel's vision, our faith will not be enough to weather the ungodliness and hostility of our age. We must have the all-important sense of God and of his power and holiness and all-seeing eye.

So much of the evangelical world has lost its vision of God, and become frightened that if we focus on preaching the Word, we will make no great impact. Traditional biblical methods must therefore be overthrown. *Ezekiel 1* tells us of God's means of ensuring that Ezekiel would remain absolutely faithful to the calling, message and pattern of operation that he would receive. This was the essence of the prophetic call.

The very last verse of *Ezekiel 1* reads: 'As the appearance of the bow that is in the cloud in the day of rain, so was the appearance of the brightness round about. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord. And when I saw it, I fell upon my face, and I heard a voice of one that spake.'

Does this not remind us of the words of the apostle John in *Revelation 1*, 'And when I saw him, I fell at his feet as dead'? Ezekiel fell upon his face and heard the voice of Christ, the pre-incarnate Christ, speaking to him. That is what we need, the voice of the Lord through the Word, so applied to our hearts and minds by the Spirit that we have the deepest possible realisation of the glory, power, holiness, knowledge and infallibility of God, driving us to proclamation, witness and service, and imparting to us utmost trust in him. We will not then feel the slightest taste for or need of the flimsy and incongruous expedients of contemporary worship, worldly attractions, entertainment-style services or any other invention proposed by those who have never tasted an Ezekieline call.