

The Secret of Godly Ministry

Most modern churchgoers are pre-occupied with earthly success. In every area of life they want to be filled with positive features: full health, prosperity, financial security, an affluent life-style, a peaceful life, large numbers in their church, a new car every three years, several foreign holidays every year, and so on. The pursuit of personal happiness drives them and they mistakenly believe that the Gospel encourages them to follow this goal. Their own satisfaction becomes an idol that traps them. It is no surprise that there is a famine of the word of the Lord in these churches.

Today many Christians are so ill-taught that they have no means of discerning God's providence in their lives. They believe that good things mean God's favour or direction and bad things result from Satan's persecution. They have little understanding that God is totally sovereign over everything in their life, good and evil, and that care must be taken in our daily choices. Open doors in our lives are often not to be entered, while hindrances are often to be persisted against. A good circumstance does not mean that something is right, and a bad circumstance does not necessarily indicate God's anger. Wisdom arises from the fear of God and discernment comes from knowledge of the truth. We must never be directed by the whim of circumstances, but must make sober decisions based upon Biblical principles.

Sometimes God tests us by giving us a positive or prosperous prospect to avoid, while he sometimes shows us a hard road that he wants us to travel down. When Paul was told by a genuine prophet (Acts 11:27-28) of affliction ahead in Jerusalem (Acts 21:10ff.), his companions sought to divert him; but he went to Jerusalem nevertheless because he knew what God's will was. Happiness is not a valid goal and suffering is not spiritually harmful.

Modern Christians seem to have never read God's word, which not only *never* encourages us to seek happiness as a goal, but tells us that we must expect a life of problems. Here is a small sample:

- In the world you will have tribulation. (Jn 16:33)
- We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God. (Acts 14:22)
- We told you before when we were with you that we would suffer tribulation. (1Thess 3:4)
- All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution. (2 Tim 3:12)
- [Moses chose] rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin. (Heb 11:25)
- The same sufferings are experienced by your brotherhood in the world. (1 Pt 5:9)

The testimony of the true Gospel is that believers are long-suffering, patient, peaceful and joyful in tribulation. There is no testimony in avoiding suffering, but there is in being victorious in it.

- I am exceedingly joyful in all our tribulation. (2 Cor 7:4)
- So they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name. (Acts 5:41)
- And not only *that*, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope. (Rm 5:3-4)
- Yes, and if I am being poured out *as a drink offering* on the sacrifice and service of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all. (Phil 2:17)
- I now rejoice in my sufferings for you. (Col 1:24)
- My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials. (Jm 1:2)

So, suffering is a principle in the development of the Christian walk. This is just a plain fact. Do we see this in history? Absolutely. Everywhere, from ancient Biblical history through to the modern history of the church, at all times the most godly people lived in afflictions and the most blessed times of refreshing from God was experienced amidst great suffering. Did the Reformation involve affliction? It certainly did. Most of the Reformers knew not whether they would survive the fatwahas placed on them by the pope. Even if they avoided assassination they laboured under the most difficult circumstances, surrounded by illness, difficulty, slander and persecution. Men like Calvin wore themselves out in their 50s as a result of their difficult and hard labours.

The same has been true in most periods of special grace; the spread of the Gospel occurred in times of affliction while the men God raised up bore the brunt of suffering. RM M'Cheyne and David Brainerd were dead before they were thirty. Augustus Toplady, Henry Martin and Blaise Pascal were dead before they were forty. William Tyndale and Ulrich Zwingli died in their forties. WC Burns, John Knox. John Wycliffe, James Thornwell, Gresham Machen, TJ Frelinghuysen, Jonathan Edwards, Adoniram Judson and Charles Spurgeon died in their fifties. In this they follow a common Biblical pattern (though there are exceptions); even the Lord himself had finished his course on Earth in his early thirties. Most of the disciples died relatively young, some of them (such as James) were killed at a very early age (Acts 12:2). Stephen died young and Paul cannot have been very old when he was martyred in the mid-first century.

The Lord never promised his disciples an easy life, or even a happy one [the 'easy' yoke of Matt 11:30 means 'fit for use, virtuous or good', not 'without effort or difficulty']. For much of church history the church was persecuted and life expectancy for most believers was short. Many women and children in Reformation times chose death rather than go to a Roman mass. But I have explained all this many times and need not prolong this point further. My argument here is about ministry.

The basis of ministry

Having established that happiness and ease is not an important constituent of real Christian living, I want to discuss a neglected aspect of training in Christian ministry. In the church, teaching ministry is chiefly the role of elders; some who are not yet elders, but who are gifted, will teach as they develop an eldership role; but leadership and ministry is formally allotted to elders. This is an ancient custom and was evidenced in the Jewish synagogue; it is a natural thing to do. 'Elders' means what it says. An elder is a man who has been around and learned from many years of experience, particularly in the family. His many years give him wisdom that young men have not yet learned. Much of this wisdom not only arises from practical experience, but from difficult experiences; indeed affliction often provides a better training in wisdom that is not found by other means.

God's choice of older men for leadership is significant. It means that God trusts ministry to men who have experience, not to men who have been trained and educated in a classroom. In fact, none of the disciples were formally trained in religious affairs by Jesus, though many contemporary disciples of rabbis were schooled in this manner. Paul is the apostolic exception here; yet his training was done by rabbi Gamaliel and Paul later counted this as rubbish (Phil 3:8). What counts in God's eyes is spiritual experience; men who have had dealings with God; men whose heart is committed to his word.

Now this is the absolute basis of ministry, but good ministry needs more.

The development of prophetic ministry

It is one thing to give an exposition of scripture that edifies God's people (all God's people are able to do this), but it is another that powerfully speaks for God in the exposition of God's word. This is what the Lord's people really need. Didactic teaching is very important and is the means of establishing folk in truth; people need training in doctrine and Biblical analysis. However, people also need invigorating teaching that grips their heart and inspires them to great things. Some have called this 'logic on fire'; others have called it 'divine unction'. It matters not what it is called but what matters is that it is so rarely found today.

Prophetic preaching is when people feel that God is speaking to them directly as the word is expounded. They are not only built up in having the truth explained, they feel the impact of truth in their souls and are changed thereby. Now this is not emotional at all (emotional preaching is mostly superficial), it is a spiritual edification that arises from the gift of God in the teacher applied by God's Spirit. But how does this come about?

The forgotten element of divine training in a minister is suffering. Powerful teaching ministry only comes about through the minister having learned through very difficult circumstances whereby he has come to a complete end of himself and is utterly dependent upon the Lord in very real terms. Far too many preachers today are too comfortable and affluent. They have had a comparative life of ease and provide ministry as if it were a job they were trained to do. It may be very professional, very elegant, very analytical, very Biblical – but it has no power. What is needed is all those things with the fire of God setting the words ablaze in people's hearts. This cannot be taught, it must be learned by endurance over time.

The way to powerful ministry is through suffering. God is more interested in the trained heart than just a quick mind. Speaking for God in teaching is more than an intellectual pursuit; it is an expression of the Spirit of God through a gifted man. A trained mind is fine, but a godly teacher's reliance must not be upon himself, but on Christ. A teacher must feel utterly untrustworthy about himself and at the same time absolutely dependent upon Christ in him. This results from much suffering. The confident and gifted Moses was unable to lead out the children of Israel, but a wounded, old, meek Moses who had struggled for decades in the wilderness away from his people was able to serve as a mighty prophet. The religious professional Paul did not come into his apostolic calling in fulness until he had been alone for three years in Arabia and Damascus and then ministering away from the Judaeian churches for fourteen years. Here his religious training was worn away and he received revelation directly from the Lord through personal trials (Gal 1:15-2:1). Only after this did Peter and John endorse his ministry to the Gentiles.

Does scripture confirm this principle of suffering? Yes it does. See:

- Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep your word. (Ps 119:67)
- *It is good for me that I have been afflicted, that I may learn your statutes.* (Ps 119:71)
- I know, O LORD, that your judgments *are* right, and *that* in faithfulness you have afflicted me. (Ps 119:75)
- Blessed *is* the man whom you instruct, O LORD, and teach out of your law, that you may give him rest from the days of adversity, until the pit is dug for the wicked. (Ps 94:12-13)
- They will seek my [The Lord's] face; in their affliction they will earnestly seek me. (Hos 5:15)
- For they indeed for a few days chastened *us* as seemed *best* to them, but he [God] for *our* profit, that *we* may be partakers of his holiness. Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. (Heb 12:10-11)

As the psalmist states, affliction leads to learning God's word and obeying it from the heart. Our affliction arises from God's faithfulness to us to ensure that we learn of him and become the sort of people he can use. Suffering primarily brings us closer to God in our hearts and burns away the dross in our lives; the superficialities that we normally cling to mean nothing in a time of deep trial – but God means everything.

Do God's great preachers evidence this? Absolutely. Jesus himself suffered all the time he ministered on Earth. His time of humiliation was one of opposition, persecution, slander, rejection and difficulty. The Lord did not even have anywhere to lay his head. He is the teacher above all others, and he suffered more than anyone else.

Paul's ministry is the most powerful of all the apostles, and Paul's sufferings are too well known for us to list them in detail here. He did not only suffer harsh persecution, but was slandered, mocked, rebuked, disappointed, betrayed, abandoned, and ridiculed. He suffered physically (hunger, thirst, punishments), he suffered psychologically (worry for the churches, sadness, strife). Paul even said that he once despaired of life itself.

All the apostles suffered and virtually all were martyred for their work. The only one to escape this was John, who lived till the close of the first century. But John also knew great suffering. As well as the normal afflictions accompanying apostolic ministry (persecution, rejection, rebuke etc.) he was exiled on Patmos. Note that his greatest revelation came, not when sitting comfortably in affluent Ephesus, but in his time of suffering while living in a cave on a rocky, barren, desolate island in the Aegean Sea. Patmos did not even have any trees, so bare was the countryside; but it was here that God gave him the apocalypse which explains all God's purposes, and man's opposition, until the end of time.

Charles Spurgeon referred to the value of trials producing character and ministry many times; for example in this meditation from Faith's Cheque Book:

I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak comfortably unto her. (Hosea 2:14)

He promises to draw us apart, for there He can best deal with us, and this separated place is not to be a paradise, but a wilderness, since in such a place there will be nothing to take of our attention from our God. In the deserts of affliction the presence of the Lord becomes everything to us, and we prize His company beyond any value which we set upon it when we sat under our own vine and fig tree in the society of our fellows. Solitude and affliction bring more to themselves and to their heavenly Father than any other means.

When thus allured and secluded the Lord has choice things to say to us for our comfort. He "speaks to our heart," as the original has it. Oh, that at this we may have this promise explained in our experience! Allured by love, separated by trial, and comforted by the Spirit of truth, may we know the Lord and sing for joy!

Conclusion

The point of this paper is not to go out and seek suffering to get a better ministry, but to learn from God, cling to God, and get discernment. This comes by experience in learning good from evil (Heb 5:12-14), and experience involves afflictions. It is a mistake to seek happiness as the means of guidance, just as it is a mistake to consider hard times as evil or enemy action. My purpose here is to affirm the sovereignty of God in our lives, in the good and the bad, and to encourage you to seek God's will. It is vital to thank God for all things (1 Thess 5:16-18), including suffering, and to learn to be faithful and reverent in the worst of times. It is in the times of tribulation that we learn to hold fast to God; in these times we grow strong. Spiritual education occurs more in affliction than in prosperity.

In his early days Jacob was a deceiver and was thus well-named. Though he had the birthright he was not a spiritual blessing to be around. It was only after years of suffering and loss, plus severe dealings with God that left him crippled, that Jacob became a blessing. In his later life, and unable to walk without a stick, Jacob now could pass on spiritual blessing. He could not only accurately predict the history of Israel in his blessing of his sons, but could even bless kings. What had happened before this time? He had suffered and learned not to trust in his cleverness and manipulation of others, but rest in his weakness and dependency upon God. That is the secret.

We only bear fruit as we abide in Christ (Jn 15) and times of affliction teach us to cling to Jesus above all else and to always put on the new man. The best ministry comes from those who have deeply suffered and have learned that their only task is to let the sap come from the vine through the branches. These men not only speak about Christ, but speak for Christ. This is prophetic ministry and it is the need of the hour.

Do not despise the chastening of the LORD. (Heb 12:5; Prov 3:11; Job 5:17 [Anything repeated three times in scripture is important!])

Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us. (2 Cor 5:20)

If anyone speaks, *let him speak* as the oracles [‘utterance’] of God. If anyone ministers, *let him do it* as with the ability which God supplies, that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belong the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen. (1 Pt 4:11)

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