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Obedience under Attack: Jeremiah 1:4-10

I have never served in the army. The closest I came was being included in the ballot as a 20 year old which could also have sent me to Vietnam, but for once I was thankful for being lucky in love but never in competitions. But despite never joining the army I do know that the army is very much about discipline and about obedience, but obedience at two different levels.

The first level is what is pumped into you during basic training. It's all the rules you are expected to follow, standards you are expected to reach, and attitudes you are expected to adhere to during your life in the army. A daily obedience that reveals how much of a soldier you are.

The second level of obedience relates to the orders you are given to carry out as a trained soldier. These vary from something very small and minor to a hugely important mission, depending on your superiors.

The Christian life also has these same two levels of obedience. The ongoing obedience which is the basis of us following Jesus. As Jesus said in John 14:15 "If you love me you will keep my commandments". And then the obedience required when the Lord tells us to go, to do, to speak, to say. To perform a specific mission, whether it lasts for a short time or a lifetime.

Both are non-negotiable; Jesus wants our obedience in both areas. But it's that second level of obedience that we are focusing on this morning. Something Ephesians 2:10 mentions when it says(CEV version):

¹⁰God planned for us to do good things and to live as he has always wanted us to live. That's why he sent Christ to make us what we are.

It's also something that it is surprisingly good for us, for every act of obedience is one of those interesting blessings that God delights to bestow upon us. That's the really positive side of obedience that Paul never lost sight of. He always used terms like striving towards the prize that was set before him and being obedient to the high calling. He knew that the hard side or cost of being obedient was very much a factor of life here on earth, but the blessing he saw in front of him was more than worth it. For that blessing was to see how God had used his obedience to move people into a relationship with Himself through the Gospel of Christ Jesus.

You see when God takes OBEY and links it with us He promises that He will make it mean:- Outcomes Beyond Eternity.....YOURS. That's His promise and we really need it, because being obedient to God's persistent inner voice will involve overcoming certain negative factors that so easily arise in us.

Take Jeremiah for instance. He heard God's call alright and he had a fair idea of what might be involved but his immediate reaction was far from positive. Look at Jer 1:6..... ⁶ **"Ah, Sovereign LORD," I said, "I do not know how to speak; I am only a child."**

To be told that God had chosen him to be His prophet was an honour that he wasn't sure he wanted. He comes across as a man overwhelmed by the anxiety of it all. He's sure that he's too young to be a prophet and he is convinced that he won't be up to the job. He's major worry is that he won't know what to say.

And I can sympathize with him, for when God called me into the ministry I felt exactly the same. And it was real for me. Indeed, there were others around me who also felt that I was too young and wouldn't have what it takes and I reckon Jeremiah had those people near him too. But God's answer was a classic. Applied to Jeremiah then—to me some decades ago, and you today if you feel the same way when God prompts you. v7-9:(CEV)

"Don't say you're too young," the LORD answered. "If I tell you to go and speak to someone, then go! And when I tell you what to say, don't leave out a word! I promise to be with you and keep you safe, so don't be afraid."

The LORD reached out his hand, then he touched my mouth and said, "I am giving you the words to say,

Basically God says, I made you and know all about you, including your age. And when I send you I will be with you and give you the words that you need to say. Believe me that doesn't dispel all the doubts and worries.....I still often feel that I can't handle this job God has given me. But that's God's point. He demands my obedience because He desires to make me able, effective, and to keep me safe.

Then think about Ananias. His story is told in Acts 9. He was the one that God sent to lay hands upon Saul the persecutor of Christians after Paul had

seen the risen Jesus there on the Damascus Road. When God told him about the task He had for him to do, Ananias was willing but fearful.

Acts 9 tells us he was a disciple or follower of Jesus. Acts 22 further informs us that he was a devout Jew who kept the law and was well thought of by the Jewish authorities. He knew about Paul—knew about his passion against those like him who believed in Jesus. And he knew why Paul was coming to Damascus. If this Paul discovered that Ananias was a Christian then not only would his reputation suffer but his life would be at risk too. So despite the fact that God gave him his assignment in a vision, Ananias was less than ready to go with it without letting God know the associated problems for him. Look what Ananias tells God in Acts 9:13-14.....(The Message)

¹³⁻¹⁴Ananias protested, "Master, you can't be serious. Everybody's talking about this man and the terrible things he's been doing, his reign of terror against your people in Jerusalem! And now he's shown up here with papers from the Chief Priest that give him license to do the same to us."

The Message (MSG)

Once again he presents good reasons for staying at home—but God simply lets him know that the obedience he requires is non-negotiable. God already knows the beginning and the end of the matter. Ananias' name is on the job sheet and no one else will do.

He was obviously frightened, who wouldn't be; but he overcame that fear and became an obedient part of God's master Plan for the spreading of His Gospel.

These two men were attacked by feelings of anxiety and fear, yet they overcame them in God's strength in order to be obedient, and it may be that right now God is calling you to follow their example. Is worry or fear stopping you from being obedient? From being involved in the work He has placed your name upon.

But of course there are many other negative feelings that can hit us when God places a task on our heart.

Think for instances about the 12 disciples of Jesus on that day when He asked them to give the crowd of 5,000 + people, food to eat. Luke tells us in Luke 9 that Jesus had just sent the Twelve out on a mission to preach, heal, and cast out evil spirits and it was after that we read in Luke 9:10-

The apostles came back and told Jesus everything they had done. He then took them with him to the village of Bethsaida, where they could be alone.

So after what was no doubt and arduous and tiring mission, the 12 now have the opportunity to spend some down time with Jesus by themselves. But unfortunately that didn't happen. The very next verse informs us:-

but the crowds learned about it and followed him. He welcomed them and spoke to them about the kingdom of God, and healed those who needed healing.

Now this was not what those disciples had in mind. They had come to that remote place to get away from the crowds and to spend some quality time with Jesus. They wanted to share more about their mission and receive some acclaim from Jesus for what they had achieved.

But they couldn't do anything about it. They knew Jesus' passion for talking to people and healing them. So they waited till late afternoon and then they approached Jesus with what they reckoned was a reasonable request: v11

"Send the crowd away so they can go to the surrounding villages and countryside and find food and lodging, because we are in a remote place here."

And Jesus' response is to give them a job to do. "You give them something to eat".

I'm sure we can all empathize with the 12 at this point. They were tired and weary and all they wanted was to be with Jesus. The last thing they needed was another mission. To be obedient at that moment was tough, and not only because the task seemed close to impossible and the resources they had at hand, a boy's lunch pack, were ridiculously inadequate.

It was tough I reckon because of the way they felt inside. Feelings of annoyance with a crowd who didn't know when to leave them alone and go home. A crowd that were just there for what they could get in terms of entertainment or healing. Annoyance with Jesus for allowing it to happen when He had promised them time alone with Him. Annoyance at being asked to do something that was not really necessary when they had just spent several exhausting days on the road ministering in His name.

There will be times when we will all have to overcome similar feelings of annoyance in order to be obedient and to do what Jesus asks us to do.

(From "Talking to My Father" by Ray Stedman part 2)

Many years ago, an elderly missionary couple returned from Africa to retire in New York City. As their ship steamed into New York harbor, they reflected on their bleak situation: They had no pension, for they belonged to no missionary board. Their health was broken. They were defeated, discouraged, and fearful about the future. And they couldn't help comparing their circumstances with those of a fellow passenger who also had boarded the ship in Africa--President Teddy Roosevelt, who was returning from one of his big-game hunting expeditions.

As the ship pulled into the harbor, past the great city and the Statue of Liberty, the people on the ship could hear a band playing on the dock. A huge crowd had gathered to welcome the returning president from his hunting trip in Africa. The old missionary turned and said to his wife, "Dear, something is wrong. Why should we have given our lives in faithful service for God in Africa all these years? This man comes back from a big-game hunting expedition and everybody makes a big fuss over him, but nobody gives two hoots about us."

"Dear," his wife replied, "you shouldn't feel that way. Try not to be bitter about it."

"I just can't help it," he replied. "It's not right. After all, if God is running this world, why does He permit such injustice?" As the boat neared the dock, as the sound of the band and the cheering of the crowd grew louder, he became more and more depressed.

That night the man's spirit just broke. He said to his wife, "I can't take this! God is not fair! We don't even know anyone to help us, or where to go. If God is faithful, why doesn't He meet our need?"

"Why don't you ask Him?" said his wife.

"All right," said the man. "I will." He went into the bedroom and prayed for a while. Later, when he emerged from the bedroom after talking it over with God, he seemed completely changed.

"Dear, what happened?" asked his wife. "What has come over you?"

"Well," he said, "the Lord settled it with me. I went in and knelt beside the bed and poured out my feelings to Him. I said, 'Lord, it's not fair!' I told Him how bitter I was that the president should receive this tremendous homecoming, when no one met us as we returned home. And when I finished, it seemed as though the Lord put His hand on my shoulder and simply said, 'But you're not home yet!'"

So already we have seen that at times we may have to overcome feelings of anxiety, fear, and annoyance to be obedient, and this is just a small sample. But there is one other that I want to mention because it is just so common. It's the feeling of "is it really worth doing".

It relates to those many tasks that the Lord lays upon our hearts that fall into the category, as far as we are concerned, of being basic, repetitious, boring, ongoing and seemingly unproductive.

Like the task that the Lord gave to His disciples when he came to a well just outside the village of Sychar. He stayed behind, we are told in John chapter 4, and sent His disciples away into the town to buy food. They were obedient in that they went and bought the food, but no doubt wondered afterwards whether their act of service had in fact achieved anything as far as Jesus was concerned. For John tells us that when they came back with the food Jesus refused to eat it, despite their urging, and made some comment about 'having food to eat that they knew nothing about'. This left the 12 completely confused and John 4:33 tells us that:-

his disciples said to each other, "Could someone have brought him food?"

The encouraging thing for us is that we know the whole story of what was happening that day in Samaria. We know that Jesus met with a Samaritan woman and changed her life forever, and it was of upmost importance that he be alone when He spoke to her or she would never have opened up to Him, or probably even gone near Him if He had been surrounded by His burly disciples.

So the disciples may have thought that their basic act of obedience achieved nothing for Jesus. He didn't even eat the food they went and got. But we are privileged to see that there was a lot more happening than met the eye, and their simple act of going to buy food was part of something that led to one woman's conversion.

It's the small tasks; the basic acts that are done within every fellowship weekly for the sake of Christ's kingdom, that are the greatest challenge to obedience. And one reason for that is because we see only the act and not what God may be doing through the act. The cleaning of the church and the looking after of the grounds may be what Jesus uses to draw someone into

this place. The music practice that produces songs that are sung well and clearly also allows the Lord to touch a needy heart with just one line of a song well sung, that one person really had to hear that morning. The pre-service information and pictures on the overhead; the warm greeting and nicely offered cuppa; the loving teaching of the children that will happen even if only one child is present—Jesus is doing more through these basic, repetitive, and oft demanding acts of obedience than we may ever know.

(From Illustrations for Biblical Preaching by Michael P Green, Baker Press May 1990 page 332)

Many years ago a humble pastor served a church in a little English country town. His ministry was quiet, and few souls were brought to Christ there. Year in and year out, the work became more and more discouraging. It was only years later that the faithful minister found great joy in the knowledge that one of those he had won to Christ was Charles Haddon Spurgeon, a man who was later used by God to bring multitudes to His Son. Humble service is rewarded now and certainly will be rewarded even more when Christ comes.

That true story reveals the major truth about any act of obedience that the Lord leads us into. That God is in charge of how it will be used. And during those times when what the Lord asks of us causes anxiety, fear, annoyance or questions concerning its value, let us remember the privilege of obedience. That when we say Yes to God, He uses our response, whether we see it or not, to increase His kingdom.