

EXPERIENCING GOD'S WORD – JER. 15:16

Practicing the Presence of God #6

One of the most unusual experiences in the history of Russian theater happened several decades ago during a matinee showing of *Christ in a Tuxedo*. *Christ in a Tuxedo* is one of the most sacrilegious plays ever written. One of the icons of Russian theater, an actor named Alexander Rostovzev, had been cast in the part of Jesus. In this specific scene, the script called for Rostovzev to read 2 verses from the Sermon on the Mount in the gospel of Matthew, then strip off his clothing and cry out, *Give me my tuxedo and top hat*. Up until this part of the scene on this unusual day, everything had gone along at a normal pace. Then it came time for Rostovzev to read from the Bible and quote his lines. But as the actor began to read from the Holy Scriptures something very unusual happened. *Blessed are the poor in spirit; for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are they that mourn; for they shall be comforted*. Rostovzev began to tremble as he read the words. And instead of dropping the Bible and crying out for his tuxedo and top hat as the script dictated, the actor continued reading. *Blessed are the meek; for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness; for they shall be filled*. Now the other actors were becoming visibly nervous. Some coughed trying to get Rostovzev's attention. Others cleared their throats or whispered under their breath. But Rostovzev was not to be deterred. It was as if he were in another world – a world where there was only him and the Bible that he was holding in his hand. *Blessed are the merciful; for they shall obtain mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart; for they shall see God*. Rostevzev continued reading the

entirety of the Beatitudes before he reverently closed the Bible. Then he made a statement that he had remembered from his youth in the Russian Orthodox church – *Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom.*

Needless to say, the whole rhythm of the play was thrown off. But the actors and actresses made it through that matinee somehow. But for the rest of his life, Alexander Rostovzev would claim that it was at this moment, while he was playing the part of Jesus reading from the Sermon on the Mount in this sacrilegious play, that he placed his trust in the Lord Jesus Christ as his Savior and was born again into the family of God.

Now this is not how salvation is supposed to happen. This is certainly not the methodology that is taught in Evangelism classes in Bible colleges. But such is the power of God's word. As a two edged sword, God's word has the power to cut to the heart and soul of a person in a moment's notice. And it certainly did in the life of Russian actor Alexander Rostovzev.

I want to talk with you this morning about experiencing the power of God's Word as we practice the Presence of God in our lives. We have been looking at this subject of practicing the presence of God during these past Sunday mornings. We have already seen how an awareness of God's continuing presence with us should affect our worship, the way we treat others around us, the purity of our lives, our service for the Lord, and even how we view our enemies. Now this morning, we want to see how practicing the presence of God in our lives should affect the influence that God's word should have upon us. I would invite you to turn to the 15th chapter of Jeremiah as we address this subject this morning.

Jeremiah was certainly a prophet who practiced the presence of God in his life. Jeremiah was a man who was called to a most difficult ministry under the most trying of times. For some 42 years Jeremiah preached in Judah. Never once in all of that time did he see any encouraging signs. He didn't ever see any sign that the nation was heeding his message and turning from its destructive course. In fact, God told Jeremiah from the beginning that the people weren't going to listen to him. God told Jeremiah that his life and ministry was going to be a most difficult one. That he would be ridiculed and scorned and persecuted. God told Jeremiah he could never marry and have a family because of the hardships that he would have to bear during his lifetime. But Jeremiah was faithful to his calling in the midst of great danger and difficulty. One of the sustaining factors in allowing Jeremiah such consistency as a prophet was his awareness of God's continuing presence with him and the power of God's word in his life. Even though God doesn't speak to us in the very same way that he spoke to Jeremiah some 2,600 years ago for Jeremiah was receiving the very words from God to be written down in an inspired form so that we might have the Bible to read and study, God does continue to speak to his people today. He mainly speaks to us through His inspired Scriptures. And many of the principles that Jeremiah experienced, receiving strength from God's word in his life, continue to apply today as we received strength from the Lord through His word.

Jeremiah 15 begins with God's decree of judgment for His people because of their sinful wickedness. "Even if Moses and Samuel tried to intercede with me on their behalf, I would not be swayed," God says in the first verse. "I am

going to bring great devastation to them through battle, famine and captivity.” Now this was not an encouraging thought to Jeremiah. For we must remember that Jeremiah had been called to be a prophet, a preacher. Now he was being reminded that it didn’t matter how well he prepared, it didn’t matter how eloquently he preached, it didn’t matter how fervent he was in his presentation, the people weren’t going to listen and change their ways for they were headed for destruction. How discouraging! How could this man Jeremiah continue on? How could he continue to prepare and deliver a word from the Lord? Where would he receive strength for the ministry of the day? Verse 16 comes as an almost parenthetical thought giving the answer to these questions.

JER 15:16 *When your words came, I ate them;
they were my joy and my heart's delight,
for I bear your name,
O LORD God Almighty.*

Jeremiah found strength and nourishment in the word of God. I see a 3 fold process to his finding that strength and nourishment that I would like to discuss with you this morning. For we will also find strength in our lives through God’s word as we practice the presence of God in our daily lives.

First, notice with me the **discovery of God’s word**. *When your words came . . .* the verse begins. The whole process of Jeremiah finding strength through God’s word began with God delivering his word to Jeremiah so that the prophet could discover them for himself.

Now it is important that we realize that this part of the process is somewhat different for us than it was for Jeremiah. For whereas God’s word

came to Jeremiah at various times through various means like dreams and visions and oral communication, today God has already given his word to us through the inspired Scriptures. I would say that almost every single person in this Sanctuary this morning has a copy of the bible that he or she can call their own. If you don't have a Bible of your own, see me after church and I will make sure you get one. So it's not a matter of us waiting for God's word to come to us today for we already have it. But there is a principle here that is still valid for our consideration. We find strength and comfort and encouragement and correction and so much else that we need in life as we find it in God's word – but we first must be diligent in seeking out the Word of God.

It is interesting to note how the enemy has changed his methodology today. Before the printing press had been invented in the 15th century, copies of the Bible were scarce because they were all hand printed. So while people lived a much more leisurely pace to their lives, they didn't have the availability of the Bible that we have today. But now, with the capacity of printing presses to spit out thousands of copies of the bible in a day, almost everyone in our nation who desires a Bible of their own can have one. But now the enemy tries to make our lives so hectic and filled with activity that we don't think we can squeeze in time for personal Bible study. This is a misnomer – but it is one that the enemy has convinced many of, even many Christians.

Jesus once gave 2 brief parables about a treasure hidden in a field and a beautiful pearl. In both cases, the wise man sold everything else that he owned so that he could find that hidden treasure and pearl. He sought after that which

was so valuable to the point where he was willing to sacrifice everything else for it.

God's word is certainly the greatest treasure and most beautiful pearl that we have. A person is wise to sacrifice all lesser priorities in his life so that the greatest treasure can be secured.

I shared with our people on Wednesday night a powerful visual illustration that I saw someone use some time ago. This teacher had a large empty pickle jar on his desk surrounded by various sized rocks and stones and 2 smaller jars, one containing sand and the other water. He first put all of the largest stones into the pickle jar until the final stone came to the mouth. *Is this pickle jar full?* he asked us. *Yes*, most of us agreed in unison. Then the teacher began to sprinkle the smaller stones around the bigger ones. They kept falling down filling in the large holes around the bigger stones. Soon he had all of the smaller stones in the jar as well. *Now is the pickle jar full?* He asked us. Only about half of the group said, *yes*, this time. The teacher then continued as he took the smaller jar of sand and poured it into the pickle jar. The sand, of course, streamed down the rocks filling in all the smaller spaces left around the smaller stones. After all of the sand was put into the pickle jar, the teacher asked, *Now is the pickle jar full?* By now we were all getting smart to what he was doing so few said that it was. And sure enough, he then poured the water into the pickle jar soaking into the sand until the whole jar of water as well went into the bigger jar.

What is the moral of this lesson? The teacher then asked us. One person shot up his hand and responded, *You can always fit more stuff into the space as*

long as its smaller, he answered confidently. No, that's not it, the teacher replied. The moral is this. If you want to keep the bigger, most important priorities in your life, you have to put them there first. If we would have poured the water, sand and smaller rocks into the pickle jar first, we could have only been able to fit one big rock into it. We had to put the big rocks in the jar first. If we put the most important priorities in our lives first, the lesser priorities will always find a way to fill in the time. But if we don't put the most important priorities into our lives first, then we will never be able to get them in.

There are few higher priorities in the Christian's life than hearing the word of God. This is one of the big rocks that we have to get into the pickle jar first. It is my recommendation that every Christian take the time of day that he or she is most alert and receptive – and this is different for each of us, some being morning people and others night people – and schedule time during that slot everyday to seek out the Word of the Lord every single day.

But now we must move on to a **2nd point – that is the devouring of God's word.**

When your words came, I ate them;, Jeremiah wrote. The difference between discovering the Lord's Word and devouring it is the difference between a farmer having grain in his silo or bread at his table. The farmer plants the seed and watches the grain grow. Then the farmer at harvest time seeks out his crop, doesn't he? The farmer gets on his combine and goes out into the field and harvests his crop. And then the grain is shipped up into the silo by conveyer belt. But the grain still isn't ready for human consumption, is it? The grain has to be ground and made into flour so that it can be baked into a loaf of bread. It

is only when the loaf of bread is baked that a person can eat the grain. Only then does the grain bring nourishment and strength to his body.

So it is that we must not only seek the Word of God out, but we must also digest it into our lives if we are to gain the spiritual nourishment that we need. This takes work – hard work at times. Sometimes we have to read passages over and over again until the meaning sinks in. Sometimes we have to look up the meanings of words to grasp its full significance. Sometimes we have to consult cross references in our Bibles to compare Scripture with Scripture. Sometimes we need to do word studies with our concordance or look up some cultural idiosyncrasy in our Bible dictionary. Digesting the Word of God is more than just having a devotional thought for the day. Digesting the Word of God is finding the full meaning, mining the gold, digging for that buried treasure, diving for that beautiful pearl. This can't be done hurriedly or impatiently. We must be willing to spend time and energy in studying God's word. But this is the surest path to spiritual strength. Just as there is no shortcut to physical fitness, so there is no shortcut to spiritual fitness. Just as time must be spent in the weight room or on the track to gain physical fitness, so time must be spent in God's word to gain spiritual strength. But that strength is there for everyone who desires it and is willing to digest it.

It was just a couple of weeks ago that Corretta King, the widow of Martin Luther King, passed away. Some months before her passing, another central civil rights figure named Rosa Parks passed away. In both of these passings, we heard a great deal about their courage and strength of character and commitment. But what we didn't often hear was the commitment of their

spiritual lives that gave them their courage and strength of character. Rosa Parks maintained a deep, spiritual communion with God from her years even as a child. This gave her the courage and strength needed to stand up to the injustices that she faced. Listen to her own testimony in her autobiography published by Zondervan entitled *Quiet Strength*.

Daily devotions played an important part in my childhood. Every day before supper, and before we went to service on Sunday, my grandmother would read the bible to me, and my grandfather would pray. We even had devotions before going to pick cotton in the fields. Prayer and the Bible became a part of my everyday thoughts and beliefs. I remember finding such comfort and peace while reading the Bible. Its teaching became a way of life and helped me in dealing with my day-to-day problems.

If we spend daily time discovering and feeding upon God's word, it will give us the courage and strength that we need to stand for our convictions in life as well.

Well if we discover the Word and devour the Word, then we are going to **delight in the Word as well.**

*When your words came, I ate them;
they were my joy and my heart's delight,*

Notice what Jeremiah says here – they (your words) were my joy and my heart's delight. We so often place joy as the target goal of our life. If I were to ask for a show of hands this morning of anyone who wants to be joyful, I don't think that there would be a person who would not raise his or her hand. We all want to be joyful. We all want to be happy. We all want to have a delightful

heart. But we so often forget that the person who has joy as his target will never hit it. Because joy is a by-product not an end in itself.

Jeremiah confessed that God's words produced joy in his heart. This is an amazing statement when the prophet's circumstances are taken into account. Here this man was called to serve the Lord in the darkest days possible. The nation was tumbling towards exile with no hope of reversal. Jeremiah was commissioned to preach a message that no one would listen to or heed. What possible joy could a person find when there was no light at the end of the tunnel. The joy and heart's delight for Jeremiah came from the words of God. So it will be in our lives as well as we discover and devour and delight in the Words of God.

Even to this day, the founding and establishment and domination of the Roman Empire for almost 1,000 years remains one of the most incredible political achievements ever accomplished. At its peak the Roman Empire covered the entirety of what would be modern Europe, a portion of what would today be Russia and all of the Middle East and Northern Africa. To develop and maintain unity and continuity in such a large area without any of the modern communication technologies that we have today is truly remarkable. Today, if an American Ambassador in Afghanistan or Iraq wants to know what President Bush wants to do in a certain situation, he need only email or call and he can have almost instantaneous communications. But that's not the way it was 2,000 years ago. While Rome did improve roads so that its army could move more efficiently from country to country, there was no source of quick communication between the center of government in Rome where the Emperor

lived and the governors who ruled in countries throughout the Empire. How was Rome able to maintain such unity in its empire without any of the conveniences of modern day technologies? The Romans devised a program to train administrators that had never been known before. Every administrator who was destined to govern in any part of the Roman Empire first had to spend enough time in Rome working with the Emperor so that he was able to capture the mindset of the Caesar. Governors were never sent to a foreign land until they first were so indoctrinated in the philosophy of the Emperor that their conduct and perspectives were thoroughly consistent with that of Caesar. They spent years of disciplined study, they learned how to interpret policies and procedures, they were tested over and over again with case study scenarios until the Emperor had the absolute confidence that they would make the same decision that he would have made even though they were thousands of miles removed from his presence. Whenever an actual case scenario came to the attention of Rome from afar, the governors in training were all presented with the facts and asked privately by the Emperor what they would do if they were in that situation. The men who grew to consistently discern what the Roman emperor himself would do were the ones who were given the commissions to govern over Roman territories. And they knew when they were granted that commission that they were to act in the stead of the Roman emperor. If they made just one or two decisions that were contrary to what the Emperor would have done, they were pulled immediately back to Rome for further training or retirement. With this training program, even though none of the technologies that we enjoy today were present, the Roman Emperor had the confidence that

all Roman territories would be ruled just as if he were ruling them personally. He knew that there would continue to be a unity of philosophy and a continuity of rule throughout the entire Roman Empire.

2 Corinthians 5:20 reminds us that every Christian has been called to be an ambassador, a representative of the Lord Jesus Christ.

20 We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us.

How can God be confident that we will represent Him accurately? How can God maintain unity in his church and a philosophy consistent with what He would desire? God has given to us His Word. The Holy Scriptures reveal the character and will of God. And God has given to us His Spirit to help us understand His word.

As we practice the presence of God in our lives, we anticipate the discovery of God's word, we are filled with the nourishment of devouring God's word and we experience the delight and joy that can only come from knowing God better through His word. And as we discover and devour and delight in God's word, we grow in God's grace and we find the wisdom and strength and courage to face every situation that crosses our path.