

"I SAT WHERE THEY SAT"

"Then I came to them of the captivity at Telabib, that dwelt by the river of Chebar, and I sat where they sat, and remained there astonished among them seven days." Ezekiel 3:15.

Ezekiel was just starting in that noblest of all callings, that of a preacher. For this task he had made great intellectual preparation. But God held him back until he had done one other thing, namely, put himself in the place of those to whom he was to minister, in order that he might learn the art of sympathy.

Ezekiel was called to his important work in days that were extremely dark and which also forbade men to entertain much hope for the future. Nebuchadnezzar had come up with his armies, ravaging their country and leaving it waste and desolate. He had sacked the city of Jerusalem and destroyed the Temple, which for generations had been the pride and joy of every pious Jew. Large numbers of the population had been marched off as hostages of the king and taken to Babylon. It seemed that a final and irrevocable blow had been struck at the people of God.

It was to these people that Ezekiel was commissioned to go as God's messenger in a time of great crisis. This commission was one from which the prophet shrank in fear and trembling, as well he might when he stopped to consider its awful responsibilities. There they were, the heirs of God's great promises, in captivity eating the bitter bread of dependence. They looked up for help, but the heavens seemed to be as brass. Their voices sank to silence as they endeavored to sing the Lord's song in a foreign land. They were swallowed up in despair and hopelessness, refusing to believe that anything wonderful and inspiring was ever going to happen to them again. The future; what was the future to them? It was a meaningless succession of tomorrows; a darkened plain unilluminated by a single ray of light. Their thoughts were fixed upon the past, the good old days, the like of which they never expected to see again. They remembered the land as it had been when they had gathered the figs and the grapes and the olives, but now the vineyards and the olive groves were destroyed by the aggressor. They also remembered the days when they had worshipped in the Temple on Mount Zion, how they had gone up at the appointed seasons to appear before the Lord their God in His holy place. While the Temple had stood they had felt reasonably secure, but now it lay in ruins and it seemed that their last vestige of hope was gone.

But God was not unmindful of His people. He called and commissioned Ezekiel to carry to them His message of rebuke, warning, encouragement, comfort, and cheer. It was little wonder that Ezekiel sought to evade the commission which God gave him, especially when he could not be given any assurance that his efforts would meet with any favorable response, but rather the contrary. God told him, "They will not listen unto you, for they will not listen unto Me." Nevertheless, God wanted him to go, for however reprobate people may be, or however much they may have flouted the laws of God, they are never to be given up as hopeless cases. In fact, wherever and whenever there are men and women in the depths of despair and hopelessness God always wants one of His messengers to go and to tell them of the wondrous possibilities the future may still have for them if only they will accept Christ as their Saviour and seek to do the Lord's will instead of their own.

And what a mission it was that Ezekiel was called and commissioned to undertake! It was a mission to reinspire hope in despondent hearts, and to rekindle their love to God against Whom their hearts were hardened. As such it called for a sympathetic understanding of their woeful lot, a genuine concern for their well-being, and at the same time a courage to urge them to stand upon their feet and face the facts of life however hard and bitter they might be. Such was the difficult mission which this prophet was called to undertake.

Ezekiel had heard the voice of God. Wondrous visions had been granted to him. He had been singled out as the one whom God would have to pass on to His people the divine message. Was he not, therefore, fitted to begin his God-given task? No, not yet. Something else was necessary. The divine hand had been laid upon him. He was in touch with God, but if he was to speak effectively to his fellow exiles it was absolutely necessary for him to be in touch with them also. He was not prepared to enter upon his great life work until he had learned the important lesson of sympathy. It was mandatory that he go down among the children of the captivity, understand their circumstances, sit where they sat, put himself in their places, and see with their eyes. Then, and only then, could he hope through the Divine Spirit to win them with his words for God.

When Ezekiel at length undertook to go on the mission to the captives of Israel, it was with many misgivings and with much bitterness of spirit. But the great thing to observe is that he went. Having received the call and commission from God, he felt that he could not refuse. It is characteristic of the great men of God that when they have received a call from God, when they have become conscious of His sacred purpose, however reluctant they may be at first to acknowledge it, once they have received and recognized it, it becomes something more dear than life itself.

Instead of going straightway to his brethren in captivity and denouncing their apostasy with slashing words, he went down quietly and took his place among the despondent exiles by the river of Chebar. His doing so indicated that he was anxious to understand how the lantern of life appeared to them. His statement, "I sat where they sat", introduces us to the noble and challenging duty of regarding life from a point of view other than our own.

It was not in any patronizing spirit that Ezekiel approached the wretched captives. He went to them as a man under authority bearing a message from Almighty God. In their hour of darkness and despair, his only thought was how best he could help them. But it was a difficult task indeed. Their hopes were dead. They were far from the land which they loved. As they thought of its home comforts and general felicity, they could not refrain from contrasting that bygone happiness with their miserable condition in exile.

"By Babel's streams they sat and wept
When Zion they thought on.
In the midst thereof they hanged their harps
The willow trees upon."

Their worst sufferings, however, lay not in the physical hardships that had to be endured. Their worst torture was the fear that the God of their fathers had deserted them. They could not understand why He, Who had blessed Abraham and his seed, had permitted such suffering to come upon them. Courageous faith had almost vanished from their midst. They had about concluded that His arm was shortened and His hand

grown weak. With them in that condition and state of mind, Ezekiel was God's chosen instrument to lift them out of their despair and hopelessness, to infuse a new spirit into their minds, a new courage in their hearts, and to put a new song in their mouths; and all of this through a renewed faith in God's power to save and to bless them.

When Ezekiel came upon the settlement of captives, he laid aside all rank and prestige and sat down with them. Like a true patriot, he found the troubles of his countrymen occasions of personal mourning. As a tender-hearted man, he was pained at their moral shame and peril. Their grief silenced his voice. The fearful spectacle of their distress overwhelmed him with amazement. He simply did not know what to say. Astonished as he was, he said nothing.

Sitting where they sat he gained insight and sympathy. He learned their particular difficulties, and he gained their point of view. He put himself in their places; heard with their ears, saw with their eyes, and sat where they sat. He gained their confidence and prepared them to listen to God's message through him.

Does that not show us that even in everyday life we may influence people by our presence and personalities, and make them happier, braver, and more able to tackle their difficulties? Sometimes a casual conversation may have tremendous consequences. What is the nature of our contact with people? Do people leave us feeling that the world is a hateful place, and that high ideals are of no avail? Or, do we reveal the Christian spirit, so that they leave us with a new vision and a renewed faith in God? One of the professors at Harvard University once sought an interview with Phillips Brooks concerning a difficulty that had worried him. He was a young man then, so he very carefully selected the correct words to express his thoughts. When at last the interview took place he spent a most enjoyable hour with Dr. Brooks. On his way home it dawned on him that he had entirely forgotten to ask about his problem. But, he said, "I did not care. I had found out that what I needed was not the solution of a special problem but the contagion of a triumphant spirit."

In our dealings with mankind, sympathy is the great lesson we all need to learn. If we would help, teach, uplift, and comfort our fellowmen, we can only hope to do so along the line of sympathy. The hardest heart can be unlocked, but the key to it is that of sympathy. Have we not all felt the influence of this most tender, and most persuasive quality?

How can we learn this divine art? We must try to put ourselves in the place of others to realize in some measure their circumstances, their limitations, and their difficulties. Then, we shall be prepared to treat them in a manner infinitely more tender, more sympathetic, and more kind. Life is poor and empty unless we are prepared to share its joys and sorrows with others. One can never bless and help humanity by sitting apart in selfish isolation. One can help others only as he sits with them, gets beneath their burdens, and helps to lift them.

All of us need to keep reminding ourselves that we must be considerate of others and sympathetic with them. As far as possible we must try to realize what others are passing through -- to sit where they sit. Personal, first-hand experiences give us the ability to comfort and to help. As we go about our daily duties, let us realize that there are hidden burdens and sorrows in the lives of those whom we meet. The man or woman who does not have a son in the military forces can never

quite understand the strain upon the father and mother who have. Months ago one dear mother's heart was broken by the loss of her son. All of her friends sympathized deeply with her at the time. One of those friends recently lost her own boy. She made her way to the mother who was first bereaved, and, when the tears would let her, said: "I thought I understood when I sympathized with you. But, I did not. I do now." She was sitting where the other sat.

Try to imagine what the presence of a godly man like Ezekiel meant to the sick and sorrowing and hopeless ones. His presence, his prayers, his sympathy, his counsel, and his hopefulness must have meant so much to them. Have you learned from experience that you can help people most by going to them and, if need be, by sitting with them? You can render a wonderful service by going into a room where a shut-in stays, and sitting down a little while and saying some heartening things and maybe rendering some needed service. Did it ever occur to you that some sick person is looking for you, and is terribly disappointed because you do not come? Go, I beseech you, and sit there where such a one sits, and, if possible, say or do something that will give that dear one new heart and hope. Christ said, "Inasmuch as ye did it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye did it unto Me."

"I sat where they sat." How looks the world from the windows of the sick room? How does it look to him whose every breath is one of pain? How does it look to him who knows he will never be well again? How does it look to the one who is imprisoned by disease and knows he will never go out again from the narrow precincts of the sick room until he is taken out to the yet narrower house in the cemetery? We who are well and strong need frequently to put ourselves in the place of the sick and suffering. If you really want to help somebody, then sit where he sits.

May God help us, His children, to do whatever lies in our power, to speak the friendly and encouraging word, and to perform the kindly deed. He alone knows how great is the need and He alone knows how far the fragrance of such may spread.

Down in the human heart, crushed by the tempter,
Feelings lie buried that grace can restore;
Touched by a loving heart, wakened by kindness,
Chords that were broken will vibrate once more.