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Isaiah 50:4-10

4th Message

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THE THIRD SERVANT SONG: THE SCHOOL FOR DISCIPLES

SERIES: GREAT EXPECTATIONS

After Jesus was raised from the dead, he appeared to Mary Magdalene and the other Mary and told them to tell the disciples to go to Galilee, where he would meet them. So the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain Jesus had directed them and Jesus appeared to them and said,

“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matt 28:18-20 ESV)

If making disciples is our supreme task as followers of Jesus, it is essential that we know what's involved in the process. Is every Christian to be a disciple? What is the goal of discipleship? Who will teach me? How much of the learning process depends upon me? What difficulties should I expect along the way? Is there any outside help I can count on to get through the course? Are the results secure?

Isaiah addresses these questions as he writes about Israel's ideal servant in the third of his four servant songs. The song has all the elements of a university catalogue. We are given the *goal* of the servant's education, the *faculty* of the school, the *prerequisites*, the *course requirements* and the servant's *graduation speech* where he shares the secret to his success. In conclusion, *exhortations* are given those interested in applying to the school.

I. The Goal of his Education (Isa 50:4)

The Lord God has given Me the tongue of disciples,

That I may know how to sustain the weary one with a word.

He awakens Me morning by morning,

He awakens My ear to listen as a disciple. (Isa 50:4 NASB)

A. To learn to speak – “the tongue of *lemudim*” (“disciples”)

What should the goal of our education be? When our nation began, higher education was designed to enlighten the minds and imaginations of students with great literature, history, theology, foreign languages, rhetoric, arts, math and sciences, so that with critical minds, appreciative hearts, and inspirational vision graduates would prove to be godly servants to their communities, regardless of their field. Sadly over time, the vision became dim and increasingly secular, until today the bottom-line for many students is securing a prestigious job that pays well.

If prestige or money was the goal of Jesus' education, he would have graduated at the bottom of his class. The goal of the servant's education is to learn how to speak: “The Lord God has given me the tongue of disciples.” God created the universe through speech. The apex of his creation was humankind who were gifted with speech so that they could exercise dominion on the earth in his image. The gift

of speech is what makes us most human, reflecting the divine image – which perhaps gives women a decisive lead.

In a 2004 article in *Psychology Today*, Rhode Island psychiatrist Scott Haltzman observed “the average woman uses 7,000 words a day and five tones of speech. The average man uses 2,000 words and three tones.” His conclusion, “Men are talk-impaired, relatively speaking.”¹ There is the story of one husband who, taking the offensive, pointed out to his wife that the study proved that she talks too much. She replied, “Well, I have to repeat everything.”

Regardless of our sex, acquiring the skill of godly speech does not come easy. The term “disciples” (*lemudim*) is derived from the verb *lamad* meaning “to learn,” “to be instructed,” and conveys the idea of being “trained as opposed to being formally instructed by word or lecture.”² Training involves rigorous repetition and discipline until a skill becomes part of a person's nature. Thus a disciple is more an apprentice than a student. His or her task is not acquiring objective knowledge, but through an intimate association with their teacher, they experience his ways and embrace his character. As Jesus said, “A disciple is not above his teacher, but everyone when he is fully trained will be like his teacher” (Luke 6:40).

B. In an appropriate manner—“to sustain the weary one with a word”

When God called Jeremiah to be his spokesman, he objected that he was young and did not know “how” to speak. God responded that he would put his exact words into Jeremiah's mouth, powerful words that would pluck up and break down nations, “to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant” (Jer 1:10). God was faithful and confirmed all of Jeremiah's words. Kingdoms were overthrown and plundered, and Israel was carted off into exile. With the servant comes the dawn of a new age of forgiveness and grace; it is now time “to build and to plant.” Thus Isaiah writes,

“Comfort, comfort my people,” says your God.

“Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,

and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed.”

(Isa 40:1-2 TNIV).

As John Oswalt observes, “God does not send his Word into the world to destroy the world but to save it (John 3:17).”³ The servant's words are life-giving words, healing words, forgiving words; for he has been trained “to know how to sustain the weary one with a word.” Unfortunately, we have lost this ability. We live in a world where we are inundated with speech from all corners of the planet. Our technology has given us the capability to multiply our unedited thoughts, personal conversations, and raw emotions and post them in emails, blogs, tweets and Facebook. Yet for all our speech, when was the last time you had a conversation where you connected with someone in a significant way? A conversation so life-giving that the pull to be in some other place completely left you, and you wanted

to remain where you were to savor the moment? When was the last time? Can you remember?

Throughout the gospels, Jesus never had a conversation that did not connect. In all his encounters, you never hear a cell phone going off, pulling people into another place. Jesus' words always found their mark, "piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Heb 4:12). For a religious Nicodemus, Jesus shatters his watertight conceptions of the kingdom with a mere image of birth, the necessity to be "born from above;" to an abused and outcast Samaritan woman, his invitation of "living water" becomes irresistible; to a hungry and exhausted crowd he offers "true bread" that satisfies; to a guilt ridden, oppressive tax-collector, Jesus invites himself to be a guest of his generous hospitality and calls him "a son of Abraham;" and to a hemorrhaging woman who was brave enough to grab the fringe of his prayer shawl, he crowns her with the title "Daughter."

Jesus never patronized people with pat answers or theological slogans. Rather, he imparted just the right word embedded in a spirit of grace that was appropriate to the need of the individual. Paul expected the same for his disciples; "Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, so that it may give grace to those who hear" (Eph 4:29).

II. The Faculty of the School (Isa 50:4b)

He awakens Me morning by morning,

He awakens My ear to listen as a disciple. (v. 4b NASB)

The source of a school's greatness is its faculty and the faculty-to-student ratio. It is of little value if a school boasts of a faculty of world class scholars, but the students have little access to them. At *Lemudim University* there is a faculty of one and the faculty-to-student ratio is one-to-one. The imagery evokes the memory of the boy Samuel, who was awakened out of his sleep by the voice of the Lord calling him. It took several times before the boy could distinguish the Lord's voice from that of his mentor, Eli the priest. After the third time Samuel mistook God's voice for Eli's, Eli discerned that it was indeed the Lord who called him and instructed him to say, "Speak, LORD, for your servant hears" (1 Sam 3:9). This became the legacy of every prophet in Israel, and so it would be for Israel's ideal servant. As Isaiah further explains, this gift of a one-on-one tutorial is our legacy as well, for in the New Covenant "all your sons shall be taught by the Lord" (Isa 54:13).

Note the responsibility the Lord takes for the servant's training. First, he takes the initiative to rouse him from sleep "morning by morning." "Morning by morning" suggests that God's word was his first and constant priority; there were no days off or vacations from the inspired word. Then once the servant is awake and alert, the Lord removes any impediments to his hearing, so that the servant is attentive and eager to obey what is being taught. There is no use speaking to someone who isn't listening. Unlike Israel, the servant has a heart, as the psalmist writes, that "delights to do your will, O my God; your law is written in my heart" (Ps 40:9).

This explains why Jesus often sought a desolate place to pray in the early morning hours (Mark 1:35). The primary work of prayer is listening, not speaking; Jesus needed silence and seclusion to hear the Father's voice. It was not easy to find seclusion; but he did. Thus he could make the claim, "For I did not speak on my own initiative,

but the Father himself who sent me has given me a commandment, what to say, and what to speak. I know that his commandment is eternal life; therefore the things I speak, I speak just as the Father has told me" (John 12:49-50). We must follow his example.

III. The Entrance Requirements of the School (50:4b)

He awakens My ear to listen as a disciple. (v. 4b NASB)

College entrance requirements are becoming more demanding each year. Following in the footsteps of my mentor, David Roper, I once sought admission to Berkeley to take some postgraduate courses in Ancient Near Eastern studies. When one of the administrators looked at my transcript from Stanford, she abruptly shut me down and said that I had none of the required courses and was not qualified to compete at a graduate level. When I responded that I didn't come to compete but to learn, she replied that I would have to go back to undergraduate school and take a whole list of courses before applying. The rejection stung, making me feel insignificant.

At Lemudim U there is only one requirement to enter the school – a willingness *to hear* God's word (in Hebrew "to *hear*" means "to be attentive in order to *obey*"). Are you teachable? Are you willing to obey God's word? If we are honest and have any awareness of Israel's dismal record at keeping promises, we have to admit, "I'm not sure I can make that promise." If you feel hesitant, the good news of the New Covenant is that obedience, like faith, is a gift of grace. When Jesus ventured into the gentile area of Tyre and Sidon, the crowd brought to him a deaf mute and begged him to heal him. Mark records his response.

And taking him aside from the crowd privately, he put his fingers into his ears, and after spitting touched his tongue. And looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened." And his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. (Mark 7:33-35 ESV)

Like the deaf mute, we are incapable of hearing ("*obeying*") God's word, making it impossible to impart life-giving speech to others. But if we will just come to Jesus and ask him to remove our deafness, he will make us a new creation, miraculously opening our ears to hear God's word, coupled with a willingness to obey it. Once we are able to hear, we will then be able to speak life-giving words to others. Entrance into the school has nothing to do with your intellectual abilities or academic achievements. It comes down to just one thing: a desire to be attentive and to obey.

IV. The Course Curriculum: Rejection 101 (Isa 50:5-6)

The Lord GOD has opened My ear;

And I was not disobedient

Nor did I turn back.

I gave My back to those who strike Me,

And My cheeks to those who pluck out the beard;

I did not cover My face from humiliation and spitting.

(vv. 5-6 NASB)

A. The pain of rejection

There is good news and bad news about the curriculum. The good news is that to graduate you only have to take one required course; the bad news is, you are not going to like it. The title of the course is: **Rejection 101**. John writes that Jesus "came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him" (John 1:11). Rejection is painful at all levels, but when you are rejected by those closest to

you, it is devastating. Jesus faced rejection from every corner of the nation he came to save, and it did not let up from his birth to the excruciating cross. He was ridiculed by his brothers and thought to be “out of his mind” by his family. In response to his first sermon in Nazareth, all the townspeople tried to kill him. As the psalmist predicted,

**For I endure scorn for your sake,
and shame covers my face.
I am a foreigner to my own family,
a stranger to my own mother’s children;** (Ps 69:7-8 TNIV)

If anyone had idealistic dreams of what following Jesus meant, he immediately brought them down to earth with,

“Foxes have holes and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.” (Matt 8:20 TNIV)

B. The value of rejection

As painful as rejection is, making others deaf to our voice, it mysteriously opens a window into heaven so that we have an ear to hear to God’s voice, who is an advocate for the poor and the oppressed. Far from rendering the servant ineffective, rejection was instrumental in the servant’s training, to give him “a word to the weary.” Rejection is the school that makes us compassionate.

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. (Heb 4:15 TNIV)

C. A new response to rejection

Humiliation and abuse were part and parcel of a prophet’s life and most paid the price with their own blood. But there is more to the servant’s suffering “than a secondary result of obediently declaring God’s Word; it is part of the Servant’s obedience to give himself to these things (cf. John 10:17-18).”⁴

**I gave My back to those who strike Me,
And My cheeks to those who pluck out the beard;
I did not cover My face from humiliation and spitting.** (v. 6 NASB)

We cringe hearing these words, knowing that the blows from the Roman guards were brutal and rough, as they took great pleasure in making sport of another Jew. How did he ever get through it? How do we get through it?

At this point the tone of the servant’s voice takes a dramatic turn from life-giving words to sustain the weary, to bold, confident, challenging words as he faces his accusers in the courtroom. We are now privileged to hear the servant’s *graduation speech*, where he reveals how he succeeded in the course God chose for him.

V. The Servant’s Graduation Speech (Isa 50:7-9)

**For the Lord GOD helps Me,
Therefore, I am not disgraced;
Therefore, I have set My face like flint,
And I know that I will not be ashamed.
He who vindicates Me is near;
Who will contend with Me?
Let us stand up to each other;
Who has a case against Me?
Let him draw near to Me.
Behold, the Lord GOD helps Me;
Who is he who condemns Me?**

**Behold, they will all wear out like a garment;
The moth will eat them.** (vv. 7-9 NASB)

The best graduation speech I’ve ever heard was the 2005 Commencement Address to Stanford graduates by Steve Jobs. Instead of being one of those typical “rah, rah” speeches that applaud graduates for being God’s gift to the world because of their academic achievements, Steve spoke of *failure, rejection* and *death* as the gifts that transformed his life and made him successful. He sounded like a modern day *Qohelet* (the author of Ecclesiastes), bringing young graduates face to face with the harsh realities of life.

No one wants to die. Even people who want to go to heaven don’t want to die to get there. And yet death is the destination we all share. No one has ever escaped it. And that is as it should be, because Death is very likely the single best invention of Life. It is Life’s change agent. It clears out the old to make way for the new. Right now the new is you, but someday not too long from now, you will gradually become the old and be cleared away. Sorry to be so dramatic, but it is quite true. Your time is limited, so don’t waste it living someone else’s life. Don’t be trapped by dogma, which is living with the results of other people’s thinking. Don’t let the noise of others’ opinions drown out your own inner voice. And most important, have the courage to follow your heart and intuition.⁵

Having to look death in the eye gave Steve Jobs a credibility no academic degree could have. As good as the speech was however, it pales compared to the servant’s. The only advice Steve could offer us mortal creatures was to live our own lives. But the philosophy of living your own life falls strangely silent when cancer cuts your life short at the age of 56. By contrast, the servant gives us the only hope that will outlast history. During his trial, Jesus is able to look beyond the grave to his vindication in the resurrection and ascension to the right hand of God. Oswalt comments on how unique his response to humiliation was within his world.

Westermann says that in the ancient New Eastern culture if someone submitted meekly to public humiliation he was admitting, at least tacitly, that he had done something to deserve the abuse. But this person, after meekly submitting, then turns around and declares that, in fact, he had not done one thing wrong...since the difficulties that befell him are the result not of disobedience, but of obedience, he can be confident of God’s help.⁶

So confident is the servant of God’s help, he knows he will not be disgraced. A tsunami is coming and the servant heads straight into it and nothing can deter him from his course – “I set my face like flint.” He challenges his accusers to step forward and confront him face to face with their accusations. The accusations come, twisted and false, vile and profane; yet Jesus faces them calmly and responds with the simple, profound truth, which infuriated the Jewish council. As Tom Wright observes,

Among the things people saw in him, the things that made the authorities angry, was that he went on telling the truth even when it became first costly, then dangerous, and finally almost suicidal, to do to. Faith and truth, expressed with grace and dignity, are unconquerable.⁷

Finally Jesus is brought before Herod, “the present and precarious ‘king of the Jews’ face to face with the real and coming King.” And to our amazement, “Jesus says nothing, and does no miracles...At this moment, the truth is more eloquently stated by silence.”⁸ Just as

Isaiah had predicted, “he will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets” (Isa 42:2).

This is how the servant got through the course. He was confident that the Lord would vindicate him, regardless of what the world’s powers did to him, because he was in the right. Following in the footsteps of the servant, the apostles experienced the same help. As Paul writes,

At my first defense no one supported me, but all deserted me; may it not be counted against them. But the Lord stood with me and strengthened me, so that through me the proclamation might be fully accomplished, and that all the Gentiles might hear; and I was rescued out of the lion’s mouth. (2 Tim 4:16-17 NASB)

At the end of the song, we are invited to an on-campus interview, where the prophet gives his exhortations to those interested in applying to the school.

VI. On Campus Interview: (Isa 50:10)

**Who among you that fears the LORD
That obeys the voice of His servant?
That walks in darkness and has no light.
Let him trust in the name of the LORD
and rely on his God. (v. 10 NASB)**

The prophet leaves us with an invitation and exhortation. The first thing which the Judge does in this courtroom drama is to redefine what it means to be the people of God. In the Old Testament, a believer was characterized as “one who feared the Lord.” Bruce Waltke notes that the “fear of the Lord” entails both “a rational aspect, an involvement with words of an objective revelation that can be taught and memorized (cf. Ps 34:132ff.) [and] a non-rational aspect, an emotional response of fear, love and trust.”⁹

In the age of the New Covenant the prophet declares that “fearing the Lord” is redefined as “obeying the word of his servant.” The servant is God’s new revelation to Israel and the world. Therefore an individual cannot claim to fear the Lord unless he or she becomes a follower of his servant, Jesus. These were the exact words of the Father to Israel at the baptism of Jesus, and repeated to the three disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matt 17:5): “This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased; listen to him!” It is clear now that in order for Israel to be part of God’s school of discipleship they must come to God through the servant.

Then God asks of those who want to be disciples, who obey the voice of the servant, “Are there some who walk in darkness and have no light in themselves?” A time will come when disciples will enter a dark tunnel and the light they have in themselves will go out. The school of rejection that Jesus went to will become their destiny as well. While he was hanging on the cross, Jesus cried out in despair, “Why have you forsaken me?” Darkness covered the land for three hours. This too will happen to you. But when it does, “Let him trust in the name of the Lord and rely on his God.” Lean on nothing else but the Lord God. You can trust him. The God of the servant will do for you what he did for his servant – he will raise you from the dead.

This is the school of disciples. It is a school that is open to any age. There are no prerequisites apart from a willingness to learn. The cost is exorbitant, but everyone’s way is prepaid by the founder. There is but one course that is painfully difficult, yet every student has access to all the assets of the universe to complete their coursework. And most important of all, the results are guaranteed! Everyone is awarded an A. Why would you enroll anywhere else?

¹ Hara Estroff Marano, “Secrets of Married Men,” *Psychology Today* (July 2004): n.p. online:

<http://www.psychologytoday.com/articles/200407/secrets-married-men>

² H. Merrill “*lamad*,” NIDOTTE 2:802.

³ John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah*, Chapters 40-66 (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 324.

⁴ Oswalt, *Isaiah*, 325.

⁵ “Commencement Address by Steve Jobs,” *Stanford Report*, June 14, 2005 online: <http://news.stanford.edu/news/2005/june15/jobs-061505.html>

⁶ Oswalt, *Isaiah*, 325-326.

⁷ N. T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 272.

⁸ Wright, *Luke for Everyone*, 275.

⁹ Bruce K. Waltke, “*Fundamentals of Preaching Proverbs*,” W. H. Griffith Thomas Memorial Lectures, Dallas Theological Seminary, 2006.