

# Old Testament Lessons

OT Stories That Teach Us About God and Faith

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## I. Introduction

A. Within the realm of Protestant churches, when an unbeliever become new believer, it is customary to get him involved in a church, and if not a church, then a home group or Bible study. From there, the new believer is exhorted to attend the meetings, read his Bible, pray regularly, and get involved in some form of Christian service – whether it be service in the church or a para-church organization or some other form of service that seeks to help those in need and hopefully present them with the gospel of salvation.

1. This is a path that many new believers have traveled. However, in my opinion, there is one major weakness to this path, and that weakness is a biblically based emphasis on putting in the necessary time and effort to make observable progress in growth toward godliness. In other words, the common path for the new believer places an unhealthy emphasis on Christian service and a noticeable lack of emphasis on spiritual growth.

2. And yet, according to Paul, spiritual growth is essential to Christian service – as stated in **2 Timothy 2:19-21**, “The firm foundation of God stands, having this seal, ‘The Lord knows those who are His,’ and, ‘Everyone who names the name of the Lord is to abstain from wickedness.’ [20] Now in a large house there are not only gold and silver vessels, but also vessels of wood and of earthenware, and some to honor and some to dishonor. [21] Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from these things, he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified, useful to the Master, prepared for every good work.”

B. Therefore, today we will look at Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Esther – three OT individuals who got actively involved in (*Christian*) service to God.

C. Prayer

## II. Three calls to godly service, three responses, three results

A. Isaiah’s response to God’s call to (*Christian*) service.

1. **Isaiah 6:1** . . . In the year of King Uzziah's death I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the temple. [2] Seraphim stood above Him, each having six wings: with two he covered his face (*to keep from seeing God, for as God said to Moses, "You cannot see My face, for no man can see Me*

and live!" **Exodus 33:20**), and with two he covered his feet (*a show of humility*), and with two he flew (*used for serving God*). [3] And one called out to another and said, "Holy, Holy, Holy (*implies the Trinity*), is the LORD of hosts, the whole earth is full of His glory." [4] And the foundations of the thresholds trembled at the voice of him who called out, while the temple was filling with smoke. (*The trembling doorposts and smoke filled temple are manifestations of God's presence just God manifested His presence to Israel in the cloud by day and pillar of fire by night. And so Revelation 15:8 says, "And the temple was filled with smoke from the glory of God and from His power." So Isaiah did not see God, but he did see clear manifestations of God's presence.*)

2. [5] [And in response to the discernable presence of God], Isaiah said, "Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts."
  - a. As with all of us, the nearer Isaiah drew to God, the clearer he saw God's holiness – which in turn caused him to more clearly see his own sinfulness, and even his hypocrisy.
  - b. Let me explain. The nearer we draw to God by dying to self, putting away sinful practices, and putting on Christ-likeness, the more clearly we see and understand the holiness and goodness and faithfulness of God which results in more clearly seeing our own unholiness in thought, word, and deed.
  - c. But beyond that, in seeing God and hence himself more clearly, I believe Isaiah saw the discrepancy between what he taught or said about God and godly living **and** how he lived day after day. In other words, he realized he was not living up to what he knew and taught. And he knew this was true for the rest of the Israelites as well.
3. [6] Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a burning coal in his hand, which he had taken from the altar with tongs. [7] He touched my mouth with it and said, "Behold, this has touched your lips; and your iniquity is taken away and your sin is forgiven." (*Isaiah had the integrity, the humility, and the courage to get honest about his current spiritual condition, and God responded by graciously providing the remedy.*)
4. [8] Then I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?" Then I said, "Here am I. Send me!"

- a. God was looking for someone to fill a job opening, and Isaiah, having been cleansed from his previously overlooked sinfulness and hypocrisy, now had the confidence to say, "I'll go, send me!"
  - b. It is important to see that Isaiah's confidence was the good kind of confidence, for it came from a humble recognition that apart from God's purifying work in his life he would still be a man of unclean lips, and apart from God's continued work in him, he would not be a useful vessel.
  - c. Now it is common in today's churches and Bible schools to present Christian service as a way to do great things for God and in so doing, change our world. And if that is your expectation, listen carefully as I continue reading Isaiah's story.
5. [9] {God} said, "Go, and tell this people: 'Keep on listening, but do not perceive (*the truth or true meanings and warnings of what is said*); Keep on looking, but do not understand (*or make sense of what you see so as to be able to make the right use of it*).' [10] Render (*or cause*) the hearts of this people (*to be*) insensitive, their ears dull, and their eyes dim, otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and return and be healed." [11] Then [Isaiah] said, "Lord, how long?" And [God] answered, "Until cities are devastated and without inhabitant, houses are without people, the land is utterly desolate, [12] the LORD has removed men far away, and the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land. (*Would you volunteer for a Christian service position or activity knowing that you were expected to persevere at a task that emptied the church rather than filled it?*)
  6. [13] Yet (*all the Israelites will not be driven out of the Land*), [God will leave] a tenth portion in it, and it will again be subject to burning (*or subject to God's displeasure and wrath over their sin if they continue sinning*), like a terebinth or an oak whose stump (*which is still able to be burned*) remains when it is felled. The holy seed (*Abraham's seed*) is its stump."
    - a. God was sending Isaiah to a highly religious, biblically knowledgeable, yet hypocritical, sin-sick and self-ruled people who were likely to reject Isaiah's message as harsh, unloving, too focused on sin and what man has to do. They wanted to hear about God's grace, His imputed righteousness, and that He would change them even though they wanted to keep sinning.
    - b. The reality is, there was nothing glamorous, nothing world changing, and nothing that would equal the world's standards

of success in the Christian service God was offering Isaiah. He wasn't going to be popular or respected. Very few would buy his book. No one would invite him to be a conference speaker. In fact, Isaiah would gain no greater stature or acceptance than Jesus Christ, who he prophesied would be "despised and forsaken of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And like one from whom men hide their face He was despised. No one esteemed Him" (**Isaiah 53:3**).

7. What is your expectation of Christian service? Do you expect it to be glamorous, world changing, and successful by the world's standards? Do you expect it to bring you recognition, respect, and praise? To serve as Isaiah did, you need self-honesty about your sinfulness and hypocrisy, observable progress in spiritual growth, humble confidence, and most of all, you need God working in you, through you, empowering you, and using you.

B. Jeremiah's response to God's call to (*Christian*) service

1. **Jeremiah 1:1** . . . The words of Jeremiah the son of Hilkiyah, [who was one] of the priests [at] Anathoth (*AN uh thawth*) in the land of Benjamin, [2] to whom the word of the LORD came in the days of Josiah the son of Amon, king of Judah, in the thirteenth year of his reign. [3] [And the word of the Lord continued to come to Jeremiah] in the days of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah, king of Judah, until the end of the eleventh year of Zedekiah the son of Josiah, king of Judah, until the exile of Jerusalem in the fifth month.
  - a. Like Isaiah, Jeremiah had the task of exposing Israel's sinfulness and warning them about God's coming judgement. Jeremiah served in this capacity until Judah and its capital city of Jerusalem were conquered and its residents carried off into exile by the Babylonians. Or in other words, until he lost his congregation.
2. [4] Now the word of the LORD came to me saying, [5] "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I have appointed you a prophet to the nations." [6] Then I said, "Alas, Lord GOD! Behold, I do not know how to speak, because I am a youth."
  - a. Jeremiah recognized his youthfulness – or in other words, he realized he lacked adequate preparation, experience, and wisdom for the job. He knew he wasn't equipped to speak for God in ways that would produce God's desired results.

- b. However, God knew this too, which is why God had His eye on Jeremiah before he was conceived, and why God anointed Jeremiah as a prophet, empowered him, promised to give him the words to say – just as He gave Jesus the words to say, and why God exhorted Jeremiah to be courageous when speaking rather than fearful.
  - c. It is my experience that many young Christians believe they are ready to lead and teach. They speak with confidence about the way the church should go, what it should do to grow, how Christians are to live, what constitutes God-pleasing worship, who should lead, who should teach, and what should be taught.
  - d. And though they may be right about some of these things, they don't appear to hold their convictions from the standpoint of a Jeremiah like recognition of their youthfulness or newness in the faith. In other words, they don't seriously consider the probability that they lack adequate preparation, experience, and wisdom.
  - e. My point is that there is a difference between being cleansed by God before volunteering (*such as Isaiah*), or being chosen by God from the womb (*like Jeremiah*), and having a youthful confidence that you are ready to lead the church or you know what the church needs to become more than it is.
3. [7] But the LORD said to me, "Do not say, 'I am a youth,' because everywhere I send you, you shall go, and all that I command you, you shall speak. [8] Do not be afraid of them (*the sinful Israelites who won't like Jeremiah's God-given message*), for I am with you to deliver you," declares the LORD. [9] Then the LORD stretched out His hand and touched my mouth, and the LORD said to me, "Behold, I have put My words in your mouth. (*God touched Isaiah's mouth to cleanse him, and Jeremiah's mouth to fill it with His message*) [10] See, I have appointed you this day over the nations and over the kingdoms, to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant."
4. Jeremiah is proof young Christians can serve God, that they can be actively involved in Christian service, and that God selects some of them for service even before they are conceived. But Jeremiah is also proof of what the young Christian's mindset, attitudes, and view of self is to be if the young Christian – and yes even older Christians – are to be used by God to accomplish His purposes.

5. To conclude Jeremiah's story I want to say that there is a difference between being used by God to accomplish His purposes and using God to accomplish yours – including such purposes as being seen as important, or being praised, or being in control of something.

C. Esther response to God's call to (*Christian*) service

1. At the time of this story, Esther was the wife and therefore the queen of King Ahasuerus' (*uh haz yoo EHR uhs*), who was probably an early Persian king. **Esther 1:1** says he reigned from India to Ethiopia over 127 provinces. Persia was centered in Iran, and it is probable they spoke Farsi. Esther was a Jew whose parents had died and she was being raised by her uncle Mordecai. You can read how she became queen in **Esther 1:10-2:19**.
2. **Esther 3:1** . . . After [Esther became] queen, the king promoted Haman (*an Amalekite*), to the position of prime minister and gave him authority over all the princes who served the king. [2] All the king's servants who were at the king's gate bowed down and paid homage to Haman; for so the king had commanded concerning him. But Mordecai (*Esther's uncle*) neither bowed down nor paid homage. [5] When Haman saw that Mordecai neither bowed down nor paid homage to him, Haman was filled with rage...and in response sought to destroy all the Jews throughout the whole kingdom.
3. In **Esther 3:8-11**, we learn that Haman worked out a deal with the king to exterminate all the Jews in all the provinces of the kingdom, at no cost to the King. So the king supported Haman's plan.
4. In **Esther 4:1**, we learn that Mordecai learned about Haman's plan, tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the midst of the city and wailed loudly and bitterly. [5] Esther learned about Mordecai's anguish and asked what it was about. She then learned about Haman's plan and what it meant for all the Jews in the kingdom. Mordecai then ordered Esther to speak to the king and beg him to stop Haman.
5. Esther knew that no one could approach the king unless summoned, and if they did, they would be put to death unless the king showed his acceptance of this intrusion by raising his golden scepter. So she was not wanting to take this risk. But Mordecai responded by saying, "Do not imagine that you in the king's palace can escape any more than all the Jews (*Your life is in danger, too*). [14] For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place and you and your father's house will perish

*(If you don't act on behalf of your people, God will provide another, and you and your family will lose God's favor). And who knows whether you have not attained royalty for such a time as this?" (I cannot say for sure, but it is possible God put you here for this reason.)*

6. [15] Then Esther told them to reply to Mordecai, [16] "Go, assemble all the Jews who are found in Susa, and **fast for me**; do not eat or drink for three days – night or day. **I and my maidens also will fast** in the same way. Then I will go in to the king, which is not according to the law; and if I perish, I perish."
7. According to the story, Esther had no direct call from God. She had no vision of God. She didn't even hear God speak to her. Her call to Christian service came from an older believer (*her uncle*) who knew what had to be done and who exhorted her to do it. Now notice her response.
  - a. Esther listened and followed the advice of her uncle who was an older and wiser man of God. She didn't act on her own.
  - b. Esther ask for the community to fast and pray for her, and what she had to do, with the hope that God would save her people.
  - c. Esther herself fasted and prayed – as opposed to worrying or plotting the best possible course of action. She knew God's involvement was the one necessary ingredient for the task at hand. And she knew the way get it was to show how serious she was about needing it – which is why she fasted and prayed.
  - d. Esther made the decision to serve in spite of what it may cost her – which included the possibility of losing her life.
  - e. And finally, Esther went before the king – and as a result, God brought about the salvation of the Jews.

### III. Conclusion

- A. When it comes to Christian service, what matters most to you? I urge you to consider these three stories when deciding what you will make most important.