

## THE WAY OF FAITH, PART 8: MINISTRY BY GOD

Isaiah 41:17-20; John 7:37-39; Luke 15:1-20 (NASB)

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4 December 2011

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Have you ever found yourself exhausted or discouraged in ministry? Why is it so easy to do that? A number of years ago my wife, Barbara, and I decided to take a week of vacation after our denominational General Council. Council was in Phoenix, Arizona, and we found a wonderful Christian camp and ranch up in Snowflake. One of its attractions was a small stable of horses. What we did not know was that the owner of the camp had fallen off and broken ribs, and in a fit of caution he had not allowed the horses to be ridden for a year. We talked him into it.

Fortunately there was an experienced ranch hand to help us. So off we went through the desert, with just enough riding experience to put us barely in control of jet black Shiloh and buckskin Pockets. The first thing we experienced was that these horses wanted to run. They had been cooped up for a long time, and the open desert was intoxicating to them. We wrestled with the reins and got them to walk and trot, but it was a battle from the start.

As we rounded a turn my horse Shiloh eagerly desired to see a new calf in a nearby pen so, with no instructions from me, he went over there. Before we got there I saw the calf running straight at us directly into the strands of barbed wire separating us. Shiloh spooked and immediately reared up on his hind legs. I felt like the Lone Ranger, only without the control!

We went deeper into the desert and passed a very large desert pasture to our left with some mares. Shiloh really wanted to see the mares, so of course we went over there. I pretended that I was doing it on purpose. Suddenly, over the hill at full gallop careened a huge stallion who looked angry that we were socializing with his mares. Again we did the Lone Ranger thing up in the air--Hi ho, Silver!--and I failed to fall off once again.

The real challenge came as we set off down a road through a huge open area with little but sand, rocks, and scrubby high-desert plants. Once Shiloh and Pockets got side by side, it soon became impossible to keep them at a trot. I pulled the reins as hard as I could, shouted "whoa!" and prayed—to no avail. Soon we were racing shoulder to shoulder, flat out across the desert at full gallop. What happened then is a story for another day, but both of us nearly fell off. We got scared enough to make it hard to get back on the next day.

And all this in the Arizona desert heart. We drank all of our water over several hours of riding. The horses returned lathered from snout to tail. The saddle blankets were completely soaked through. We groomed them and put the tack out to dry in the sun. I walked Shiloh on a lead line back to the paddock where the horses were kept. We ambled over to a huge water basin filled to the brim. I unclipped the lead, expecting him to stick his head into the water and inhale.

Not. No inducement on my part could make Shiloh drink. Simply not interested. I suppose that he had sucked down five gallons early that morning and still did not want any more.

Very often I think we conceive of ministry for Christ in similar terms of results— getting the horses to listen to our guidance, keeping them from hurting themselves, and making them drink. When people are broken, we want to try to fix them. When they have needs we want to meet them. If they are not growing in Christ we want to make them grow. If they fail we feel that we have failed. There is a massive Christian literature to support the view that it is all up to the one doing the ministering. That's the default position. Have you ever looked at a ministry that was not going well and thought: "What's wrong with those leaders? Why don't they just work harder and fix it?"

This default understanding is a prescription for exhaustion, discouragement, and burn out. Because this is such a prevalent problem in ministry our District Superintendent, Jeff Miller, made it the subject of his sermon at one of our annual conferences. If the "just work harder" theory is wrong, what exactly are the terms of genuine Christian ministry?

## ONLY GOD CAN MEET SPIRITUAL NEEDS

To answer this question we turn to a moment in the history of Israel under the ministry of Isaiah the prophet. The following words are directed to the nation Israel, but they point to an enduring commitment of the Lord toward all who believe: **"The afflicted and needy are seeking water, but there is none, /And their tongue is parched with thirst; /I, the LORD, will answer them Myself, /As the God of Israel I will not forsake them"** (Isaiah 41:17).

The scenario is that the people of God were in tremendous need, and it is crucial to understanding this passage to see that they were praying about their need. From where does their answer come? Can Isaiah, the anointed servant of the Lord, meet their need? No, he cannot. The Lord answers their call himself. And what will he do? He says: **"I will open rivers on the bare heights /And springs in the midst of the valleys; /I will make the wilderness a pool of water /And the dry land fountains of water"** (Isaiah 41:18). Where there is no water to be found on earth, in the middle of bare heights and dry lands, the Lord gives rivers, springs, pools, and fountains!

The spiritually thirsty who seek the Lord will not only find their thirst quenched, but they will find themselves swimming in the abundant provision of God. All around them the evidence of God's answer to their need will be seen: **"I will put the cedar in the wilderness, /The acacia and the myrtle and the olive tree; /I will place the juniper in the desert /Together with the box tree and the cypress"** (Isaiah 41:19). These beautiful trees do not grow where there is no water—nothing grows!

You can see the logic which is developing. You and I cannot make trees grow. We cannot supply water to turn a desert into a lush forest. In the same way we cannot meet spiritual needs directly. We cannot supply the spiritual energy—the water—which produces the results. What we can do is believe God and take our needs and the needs of everyone to the Lord in prayer. We can do the part God has assigned to us: lead them to the water. And the Lord himself will quench their thirst. He will meet our needs, and the needs of those to whom we minister. As long as we know that we cannot meet any spiritual need in our humanity, we understand the first rule of ministry: only God can meet spiritual needs, and he has promised to do so.

Why has God set it up this way? The next verse in our passage in Isaiah tells us: **"That they may see and recognize, /And consider and gain insight as well, /That the hand of the LORD has**

**done this, /And the Holy One of Israel has created it"** (Isaiah 41:20). Ministry is a means to glorify God, and if he permitted us to meet the needs of people we would get the glory, not him. Instead he has set it up so that we receive, as commentator Geoffrey Grogan wrote, "the complete fulfillment of every spiritual need in Christ Jesus," (*Expositors' Bible Commentary, Isaiah, in situ*) and in no other way.

## THE PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY OF MINISTRY

This teaching from the first covenant becomes massively expanded through Christ, as he said in John 7:37-39: **"Now on the last day, the great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried out, saying, 'If anyone is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture said, 'From his innermost being will flow rivers of living water.' But this He spoke of the Spirit, whom those who believed in Him were to receive; for the Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified"** (John 7:37-39).

The universal human need which the Lord is addressing has not changed here from the words of Isaiah. Every person desperately needs water--and does not have any! We hear from the lips of Christ himself the essential nature of personal responsibility in ministry. The thirsty one must come to Christ, believe, and drink. No one can do this for anyone else. Beautiful sabbath Shiloh had blown gallons of water out his sweat glands in our race across the desert, but he was not interested in drinking it back in. I assume that he drank when he was ready, but I did not see it.

What a beautiful picture we are given of not only sufficiency in Christ but abundance: **"rivers of living water"** meeting the spiritual needs of the inner self. No fear of having too little or running out! There is no concept that we help people by giving them a major dose of Jesus with a little of ourselves mixed in. Jesus taught this truth in the familiar story of the prodigal son and the forgiving father: **"And He said, 'A man had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the estate that falls to me.' So he divided his wealth between them. And not many days later, the younger son gathered everything together and went on a journey into a distant country, and there he squandered his estate with loose living. Now when he had spent everything, a severe famine occurred in that country, and he began to be impoverished. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would have gladly filled his stomach with the pods that the swine were eating, and no one was giving anything to him. But when he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men'''"** (Luke 15:11-19).

This young man, as he tried to run his own life in his own way, found himself "impoverished," or thirsty, we might say. That is the condition of every person apart from Christ. We must be careful not to over-interpret every detail of a parable, but I think that it is fair to observe that no one brought the blessings of the father's house to the son, and no one picked him up and carried him home. He sat there in misery and need until he got up and went home of his own accord. You see, no potential blessing of the father's house made any difference until the son accepted his personal responsibility to go to his father. In his moment of illumination the son drew the correct conclusion that even the lowest worker in the father's house had it better than he did outside of the father's house.

No ministry we pursue can get around this reality. We sometimes desperately wish that people would come to their senses and go get the blessing, but after we have done the deeds of faithful ministry there is nothing we can do to make them do this. Paul wrote about this to his disciple Timothy: **"The Lord's bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, having been held captive by him to do his will"** (2 Timothy 2:24-26). We can model the attributes of Christ, we can treat others with kindness, we can be patient, and we can keep speaking the truth with love, but we cannot ultimately make anyone come to their senses and escape the deathtrap of the devil.

How often I wished this were not the case. When a Christian man I was counseling kept falling back into cocaine abuse, when he would go on alcohol binges for days at a time, when he failed to show up for work, when he threatened his family with physical harm, and when he finally blew his brains out with a lever action rifle, I wished that I could have made him choose differently. When church ministries decline, or attendance, or giving, or prayer, or attention to the word of God, I wish I could make people choose differently. But I can't.

#### IF THIS IS MINISTRY, WHAT TO DO?

When Pastor Jeff Miller spoke on this, he made two applications. I think it is worth splitting one of those into two parts. If I really believed that I cannot meet anyone's spiritual needs—that only God can in Christ—then I would reduce the amount of time spent to produce the human side of ministry. I would spend less time trying to do the thing that can't provide water.

Because back of that effort is the fear that I have misunderstood God and the world is waiting for me to get it just right. I am afraid that people will think I am lazy. I am afraid that I will not compare well with another pastor who is doing more things. But, logically speaking, Christians are not widgets and I cannot make more of them by working longer hours, and neither can you. I need to be faithful, but I cannot find any command to do a certain number of ministries, or hours, or days. If I burn all my time trying to do something which cannot possibly work, I have precluded my availability for the only things which can work.

The second part of Jeff Miller's first application is that if I believed that only God can meet people's spiritual needs, I would spend more time in relationships with non-Christians. This is an easy application to defend, because it goes right to the heart of Jesus for lost people. He taught: **"What man among you, if he has a hundred sheep and has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open pasture and go after the one which is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!' I tell you that in the same way, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance"** (Luke 15:4-7).

If you and I can release ourselves from false notions of ministry, we free ourselves to focus on what God is doing, not so much what we are doing. When we reduce the amount of time we spend in

ministries to Christians in order to minister to people who do not yet know Christ, we can know why it is right to do that. It is what Jesus would do.

The third application is that if I genuinely believe that only God can meet spiritual needs in Christ, I would pray much more and much more desperately. Let us not forget that the streams of water in the desert prophesied by Isaiah come as a result of the people of God seeking him in prayer. As a pastor I can create a paddock by installing a fence. I can create a place for horses to drink by installing a basin, even one with its own source of clean water and a regulator to keep it full and fresh. I can turn the water on and pay the water bill. I can lead the horses so their mouths are directly over the basin. I just can't make anyone drink, and neither can you.

That means we need to pray with the absolute conviction that if God does not work, no one will be saved, no one will repent of their sins, no one will seek to grow in Christ, no one will learn the truth of God's word, and no one will learn to love people the way Jesus loves people. We need to pray that people would have a moment of revelation that they have a spiritual need which can only be met by Jesus Christ, and turn to him as their only hope.

So if you are finding yourself exhausted or discouraged in ministry, start by releasing yourself from trying to meet the spiritual needs of others. Release yourself from trying to make people choose things they can only choose for themselves. And then rejoice in letting God be God, because then you can be you in peace without recriminations. God has given us enough to do as mere humans without our trying to do his work for him.

Pray. Love. Share the truth. God will work, and he will bless you. This is ministry according to the way of faith.