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FOCUS ON YOUR PURPOSE!

Today's Text: Ezra, Chaps. 4-6

Extracts:

Now when *the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin* heard that the descendants of the captivity were building the temple of the Lord God of Israel, ...(they) tried to discourage the people of Judah. They *troubled them in building, and hired counsellors against them to frustrate their purpose* all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius king of Persia [Ezra 4: 1, 4-5]

So Zerubbabel... and Jeshua... rose up and began to build the house of God which is at Jerusalem; and the prophets of God were with them, helping them [Ezra 5: 2]. ...And they built and finished it according to the command of Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes king of Persia [Ezra 6: 14].

*In the movie, **Coming to America** (1988), the 21-year old crown prince of an imaginary African kingdom of Zamunda (played by Eddie Murphy) decided to break with tradition that required him to marry the wife chosen and prepared for him by his parents. Instead, he chose to go to America to look for the love of his life, a wife that he could respect for her intelligence. In order to achieve his purpose, he disguised his high status, moved into the worst part of Queens in New York, and picked a job as a cleaner in a fast-food restaurant. There, after enduring every kind of humiliation, he befriended the self-willed and egalitarian daughter of his employer. They fell in love and by the time the girl knew the prince's true identity, it was too late to change her mind! They got married and lived happily ever after.*

Why was the young prince able to achieve his purpose, what he had set out to get? It was because he focused on his purpose. He paid a high price for it, though. For example, he had to move from a palace to a slum. He had to take a menial job that he did not need. He had to bear insults from people who were not qualified to be his servants back home. But all that was nothing compared to the prize that he had put on his purpose. In the end, he succeeded and he was happy.

The trouble with most of us is that we do not even know what we want. Where we do, it may not be what we want for ourselves but what has been chosen for us. As a result, we are not committed. At the slightest challenge, we are ready to give up and try something else. That is why many of us have behind us a graveyard of unfulfilled dreams and promises, which are now giving us stress and nightmares. The good news is that there is a way out! In today's lesson, we shall use the story of the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem by the returning exiles from Babylon to understand the subject and how to achieve success.

1. Whose purpose is your purpose?

There is the story of a teenager who was at loggerheads with his anxious mother over his future. He was lazy, hated school and study, but enjoyed eating! One day, his mother was so frustrated that she shouted at him, “Go and study!” and he retorted, “I don’t want!” His mother struck back, “Go and join your lazy friends on the streets!” and he hit back, “I don’t want!” Exasperated, his mother said, “Do *whatever* you please!” and his reply followed immediately, “I don’t want!”

Here is an interesting paradox (inconsistency). The teenager does not know what to do with his life and does not want anyone to tell him what to do! So, what is he then going to do? We all face similar circumstances in different aspects of our lives. Let us take a few examples:

- We are completing high school and faced with the choice of what to study at college;
- We are newly married and deciding whether to have children at all, or if to have, when and how?
- We are deciding where to settle down finally and buy a home;
- We have just picked a job with an organization and thinking whether to make a career there or not;
- We are currently unemployed and deciding whether to look for another job or set up an own business;
- Yes, we were brought up in a Christian home but we are deciding whether to remain in church or forget about religion or God

In such and many other aspects of life, whatever we choose to do depends to a large extent on our *purposes*. In other words, what do you want to achieve? It is that target that influences your choices. For example, the Chinese say that the journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step. However, *unless and until you choose direction*, you cannot even take that first step! Therefore, the purpose that you choose may be the beginning of success or failure.

How do we choose our purposes? How did you arrive at the kind of spouse to marry, the profession to choose, or the career to pursue? The likelihood is that your purposes were determined by others or by yourself or by God.

a) *My purposes were determined by others*

Parents, teachers, peers or role models may influence our choices. Some of us found themselves doing something because it was popular or politically correct or lucrative. It may have nothing to do with what they love! There is the story of a Lagos mother who wanted to answer to the title, “Mama Lawyer!” (Lawyer’s mother). Her only son loved music but she would not hear of it. Since she was going to pay the school fees, he went along with her. A three-year law degree programme took him six years (he repeated

every class!) and he dared not go to the Law School for the practice licence because there was no way that he could pass! His mother got her wish but the young man was a huge failure as a lawyer.

However, there are also success stories where professionally trained school counsellors help young people to choose their careers, based on their aptitude scores. Nevertheless, success is not guaranteed as long as we are relying on human judgment, which can never see too far.

b) *I determined my purposes by myself*

Some people are inner-directed. They know what they want and can go for it. They may produce excellent success stories in the process. For example, some children who grew up in abusive homes have overcome all the odds to achieve stardom by listening to the voice within them. However, if the voice within is that of a demon, it could be a different story. Many suicides and killers also heard an inner voice telling them that they were doing the right thing! After all, “there is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death” [Prov. 16: 25]. If the inner-directed is not following the voice of God within him/her, there is the possibility that they could be misled.

c) *God determined my purposes*

Human beings have been created for God’s pleasure [Rev. 4: 11]. He is the Lord who chooses labourers for His vineyard [Matt. 9: 37-38]. Therefore, if He chooses our purposes, they will be *best* for us because that is the only way that we can glorify Him. We may not like the choices that He makes for us but *what can be better?* Amos loved being a farmer but God called him to become a prophet [Amos 7: 14-15]. Who remembers today his fellow farmers? Paul was going to be a successful lawyer, having studied under Gamaliel, LL.D. [Acts 5: 34; Acts 22:3], but God called him to become the Apostle of the Gentiles [Acts 9: 15]. Who remembers Paul’s legal mentor today?

We learn from the forgoing that *God-determined purposes are easier to fulfill than those imposed on us by ourselves or other people*. The story of the Jewish exiles makes this conclusion clearer.

2. The returnees focus on their purpose

The mandate that King Cyrus gave to the exiles that had volunteered to return to Jerusalem was *to rebuild the temple and restore worship of the true and living God there*. Zerubbabel and the other leaders were determined that that purpose be achieved against all odds [Ez. 4: 2-3]. But what was in there for the people? God promised them through Haggai the prophet that if they completed His house

before paying attention to their personal needs, that He would grant them economic prosperity [**Haggai 1: 6**]. He also promised Zerubbabel and his team, “Be strong... for I am with you....According to the word that I covenanted with you when you came out of Egypt, so My Spirit remains among you; *do not fear*” [**2: 4-5**]. God is careful to assure that He gives us our earthly needs as we achieve His purposes. That is in line with the promise of Jesus to the modern believer that if we seek first God’s kingdom and His righteousness, *all other benefits* shall be added [**Matt. 6:33**].

The moment that God’s purpose [i.e., preparing the ground for the Messiah to come to earth for the salvation of the human race] was at stake, Satan was bound to be attracted to “steal and to kill and to destroy” [**Jn 10: 10**]. Therefore, we can understand the opposition that the returning exiles faced to take their attention away from their purpose. Opposition came in the following forms:

a) *Destructive helpers!*

The current residents came to the returnees and offered to “let us build with you, for we seek your God as you do, and we have sacrificed to Him since the days of Esarhaddon king of Assyria who brought us here” [**Ez. 4: 2**]. O yea? How come the temple was in ruins? Their aim really was to warm their way into the project and either delay or stop it or even kill the purpose! The returnees refused their help and continued alone.

That sounds familiar. You are trying to raise funds to complete your church building. Some wiz kids come up with the “brilliant” idea where the proceeds from the expensive fundraising ceremony will hardly be enough to pay the launching bills! Are you familiar with friends who will easily give you a loan to pay court fines but not for your children’s school fees? Watch out for the help you are receiving in pursuit of your purpose!

b) *Ignorant experts!*

The enemy “hired counsellors against them to frustrate their purpose” [**v. 5**]. To be a counsellor, you must be knowledgeable about the subject. In the case of the rebuilding process, these could have been local architects and skilled construction workers, among others. They would be brought in to warn the returnees about the environmental impact of restoring the temple, the material mixes for durability of the structures, the colour schemes for neighbourhood beauty, etc! The fact is that such experts knew *nothing* about God’s plan. How can a promiscuous confirmed bachelor cum marriage counsellor advise you about husband-wife fidelity? If it was so easy, why was he not married? Any way, the returnees were not moved. They continued with their work.

c) *Legal constraints*

If moral suasion could not stop their progress, the enemy then resorted to legal and administrative means to do so. The enemy petitioned King Artaxerxes, one of the latter kings who succeeded Cyrus, to make an order to stop the reconstruction. The petition was based on half-truths and twisted facts, some of which were as follows [**Ez. 4: 6-16**]:

- That Jerusalem was an evil and rebellious city and its destruction was to eliminate that tendency;
- If allowed to be restored, the people would stop paying their taxes to Babylon, thus jeopardizing the king's revenue base;
- That since they the king's officers in that province were paid from Babylon, it would be an additional burden on his dwindling resources;
- That the king should check the records of past rulers who had ordered the destruction of Jerusalem, and he would have no choice but to order the work to stop.

How many times has the enemy used political or legal manipulations to try to stop your purpose? For example, they go to court with cooked up documents and in your absence obtain an *interlocutory* injunction to stop your progress. Thereafter, they use one gimmick or the other to obtain adjournments to prevent the case from being determined. Meanwhile, you cannot move forward. That was what the returnees' enemy did!

Based on the incomplete facts, the king ordered the work to stop. There was a delay until the second year of the reign of Artaxerxes' successor, Darius II [**v. 24**]. However, the word of God came by two prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, that the returnees should go ahead with the work [**Ez. 5: 2-3**], that the fate of the project would be "not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit, says the Lord of hosts" [**Zech. 4:6**]. As the work resumed, the local governor came and accused the returnees of "contempt of court." Contemptuously, too, the people gave him the names of all those involved in the work [**Ez. 5: 3-5**]. However, because God was with them, the work could not be stopped *physically* [**v. 5**].

Out of desperation, another petition went from the enemy to Darius II. As God would have it, the enemy told the new king that the returnees had based their defiance on an earlier order by Cyrus that had authorized them to build. The enemy asked the king to check the records to confirm if the returnees' claim was true [**vv. 6-17**]. The king ordered the records to be checked which in deed confirmed the story of the returnees! Darius immediately replied the governor as follows [**6: 7-12**]:

Let the work of this house of God alone....Moreover I issue a decree as to what you shall do for the elders of these Jews, for the

building of this house of God: Let the cost be paid at the king's expense from taxes on the region beyond the River; this is to be given immediately to these men so that they are not hindered... Also I issue a decree that whoever alters this edict, let a timber be pulled from his house and erected, and let him be hanged on it...

The governor did as he had been bid and the work was completed speedily under Darius, a project that had dragged on under several kings! Like the governor in this story, some of your enemies may even be the ones to accelerate the release of funds or documents so as to give you the impression that they were part of your success all along!

3. Conclusion: Lessons

Why were the returnees able to focus on their purpose in spite of the enormous odds against them? First, *God Himself determined the purpose*. God will not send you to war for Him without providing you with the weapons [**Eph. 6: 10-17**]. If you are in the will of God, He will redirect your life and earthly purposes to synchronise with His salvation plan. He will tell you who to marry, where to live, what career/profession to pursue, what ministry to run, etc.

Second, the people trusted the word of God by their prophets, Haggai and Zechariah for “surely, the Lord God does nothing unless He reveals His secret to His servants the prophets” [**Amos 3:7**]. Jehosaphat told his subjects, “Believe in the Lord your God, and you shall be established; believe *His prophets and you shall prosper*” [**2 Chron. 20: 20**]. Unfortunately, excess “intellectualism” and Churchianity have hindered many believers’ ability to accept that God is *still* active today through prophets. God’s promise is that in the last days (as we are in already!), “I will pour out of My Spirit on *all flesh*; your sons and daughters shall *prophesy*; your old men [and women] shall dream *dreams*; your young men [and women] shall see *visions*” [**Joel 2: 28**]. If you refuse to benefit from this grace, please, don’t blame God!

If you have watched *The Passion of the Christ*, you will have learnt an important lesson on how to focus on your purpose. Satan used the people, leaders of the church, Roman soldiers and even two of the disciples to distract and detract Jesus from His consuming purpose to die on the cross. In spite of the excessive beatings and His pains and bleeding, He hung on. Three times He fell down and three times He got up. In the end, He achieved His purpose. He “disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it” [**Col. 2:15**]. Now, you can look unto Him, “the author and finisher of our faith” [**Heb. 12: 2**].

Focus on your purpose!