

The Comfortable Pulpit

by Richard E. Bieber

The comfortable pulpit is a problem because it lacks the prophetic word, and we can remove the insulation by praying for the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.

Scripture: Jeremiah 1:6

Topics: "Prophetic Ministry", "Holy Spirit"

Description

Richard E. Bieber delivers a sermon on the prophetic power of the pulpit, emphasizing the discomfort that is necessary for the true prophetic word to flow. He contrasts the well-trained but comfortable speaker with the discomfort experienced by biblical prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Elijah, who were acutely aware of their inadequacy in the presence of the Holy One. Bieber highlights the importance of incomplete vision in the prophetic calling, acknowledging that prophets often see only part of God's plan. He concludes by urging for the removal of insulation from pulpits through prayer, allowing the Spirit's discomfort to refine and empower true prophets.

Transcript

The pulpit. The platform of prophets, where the eternal Word finds a human voice. Where Ezra explained the Torah to the returned captives by the Watergate. Where Jeremiah, standing before the Temple, warned of its imminent destruction. From earliest times, the pulpit has been a fountainhead of redemptive power.

But what happens when the pulpit is empty? Oh, it has an occupant speaking words. Eloquent words, perhaps. Stirring words. Entertaining words. Comforting words. Yet the ring of the eternal is gone. The holy fire has departed.

We are looking at a well-groomed, well-fed, well-trained speaker. He knows his business. He understands what the folks are looking for. He is skilled at getting a response. Giving has doubled since this man took over the pulpit. So why is the prophetic word finding no release through him? No one can deny his skill. The man is doctrinally sound. He is a decent theologian. He knows how to express a paradox in clear, understandable terms. And yet...and yet. If, as scripture says, "the testimony of Jesus is the Spirit of prophecy," the testimony is not coming through.

The reason: the man is simply too comfortable.

Too comfortable.

The prophetic pulpit is always uncomfortable. Always. The discomfort may not be obvious. Our Lord Jesus appeared rather comfortable, when compared with John the Baptizer. He wore normal clothes, ate ordinary Kosher food, dined with Pharisees and tax collectors. But comfortable he was not. The Son of man carried a cross within his soul. He was urgent. He knew that he had come to spread fire on earth. He was moving toward a baptism of fire, "and how I am constrained until it is accomplished."

Strange as it may seem to prosperity-addicted evangelicals, certain kinds of discomfort vastly improve the chances of the pulpit delivering a prophetic word. Perhaps the time has come to remove the insulation and permit some discomfort to return to our pulpits.

The most obvious discomfort, a discomfort which has surrounded the pulpit since Israel's earliest days, is the discomfort of the prophetic calling. Bold as Israel's prophets were before kings and princes and the people of the land, they all stood with fear and trembling before the blazing mercy of the Holy One of Israel.

"Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!"

Isaiah 6:5

"Ah, Lord God! Behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth."

Jeremiah 1:6

No joyful volunteering here. No stepping up to the throne with self-assurance. The prophets of Israel never lost their vision of the Holy One commanding them to go forth and speak in spite of their inadequacy. Comfortable? Not in the presence of the living God. These men and women were never at ease in their calling. They lived in the presence of holy love, searching light.

Add to this the discomfort of incomplete vision. The men and women who deliver a prophetic word are given vision. They see the sad state of the church and the growing chaos which surrounds it. Like Jeremiah weeping over his beloved Jerusalem, they see themselves and their people living in the shadow of imminent judgment. But the vision is incomplete.

And there he came to a cave, and lodged there; and behold, the word of the Lord came to him, and said to him, "What are you doing here Elijah?"

He said, "I have been very jealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the people of Israel have forsaken thy covenant, thrown down thine altars, and slain thy prophets with the sword; and I, even I only am left; and they seek my life to take it away."

I Kings 19:9-10

"I only am left!" The vision was incomplete. It is always incomplete. God sees the seven thousand faithful which the prophet cannot see. By this time in his life, Elijah has to be aware that his vision is partial. The only certainty he has is that God is there. What's really going on "out there," what is actually about to happen next, is never clear. It is an uncomfortable place for a prophet to occupy. And it will never be otherwise this side of glory.

Finally, the Lord Jesus lays on his prophets (his disciples) a form of discomfort which the Old Covenant prophets knew nothing about. This "discomfort" is actually our source of supreme comfort. But it puts us out of sync with the world around us in such a way that we walk through life with a strange limp, like Jacob after his encounter with God at Peniel.

Far be it from me to glory, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world."

Galatians 6:14

Paul's crucifixion to the world was not a once-and-done thing. It was a daily discipline, which continuously restored his connection with the Master---and simultaneously ruined his connection with the system of this world, its powers, principalities, even its religious order. Hence, Paul's pulpit was far from comfortable. And yet, for all its lack of eloquence, Paul's pulpit was burning with redemptive power.

When I came to you, brethren, I did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in much fear and trembling; and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and power; that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

I Corinthians 2:1-5

So how do we remove the insulation from our pulpits and allow the discomfort of the Spirit to flow in? We could cut the preacher's salary and take away his perks. This might limit the number of those who want the job. But it would hardly bring the kind of discomfort that refines prophets. The truth is that we can no more engineer a prophetic pulpit than we can orchestrate our friend's salvation.

But we can pray.

When our Lord commands us to "pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest," that prayer surely includes our pulpits. We can pray the Lord of the harvest to put laborers into his pulpits, knowing that he will accomplish this redemptive miracle any way he chooses.

Just remember that when you pray for the man or woman (possibly you?) who stands in the pulpit, you may very well be hastening their discomfort, as the Spirit leads them into the uncomfortable world where authentic prophets have always walked with God.

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