

Bible Study Lecture Notes: Week III & IV (5/20 & 5/27)

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### **The Prophet: The Way of the Pilgrim**

We have discussed how the Prophet is a foreshadowing of the Incarnation. He is an instrument of God's grace in a unique and compelling way that transforms those in close proximity to him. Those who accept his prophecy are strengthened by grace, while those who reject his prophecy are condemned by grace. Either way, the world is being transformed to be able to receive God Incarnate. Therefore, the Prophetic Word is sacramental. It is a means of grace that, one way or another, leaves an indelible mark upon the recipient and sets the stage for salvation.

In speaking about the Prophet as an instrument of God's grace, our initial focus is on what he does and on how what he does affects the rest of us. We tend to differentiate in our minds what he does from who he is as if the story of the Prophet is really about the Prophetic Word that he speaks into the world *and not the Prophet himself*. Nevertheless, the Prophetic Word is always linked to the charism of the Prophet himself. God can raise a prophet from among the rocks, so the fact that He does not do that, but instead provides the gift of prophecy to specific persons, tells us that who those persons were mattered to the prophetic work that they did. This is very important if we remember that the Prophet not only sets the stage for the coming of the Lord, but his life is also a foreshadowing of the Lord's life. Now, with the Incarnation, Jesus does not simply bring God to us. He is God. Similarly, the Prophet does not simply bring God's Prophetic Word into the world. He is that Prophetic Word in the flesh. This means that the Prophet is not just fulfilling a vocation, which is to say, a job that God has asked him to do. Rather, the Prophet is responding to a personal call. He is transformed by that call and gives his life to that call, and that means that in the end his life is indistinguishable from that call. The Prophet, therefore, is his Prophetic Word. Those who refute his Prophetic Word come to realize that logical refutation alone will not suffice. Since the Prophet is indistinguishable from his Prophetic Word, they must kill him in order to refute him. In this way, the Prophet foreshadows the Christian Martyr – not simply in dying for God's Word but in the sense that his dying is itself the final expression of his

Prophetic Word. Stated another way, the Prophet gives one last voice to his Prophetic Word by dying for it, just as the Christian Martyr's death confers grace upon the faithful.

Because the Prophet is indistinguishable from his Prophetic Word, therefore, just as a Prophetic Word changes the world that hears it, so a Prophet is changed by the Prophetic Word that he is speaking to the world. This is analogous to prayer: The person who prays changes the world and is also changed by his own prayer. Even when the object of a prayer is someone totally different from the person making the prayer, such as a petition to God, or an act of intercession for some other person, every prayer is deeply personal, for the person who prays is not the same person he had been before he had offered up that prayer. So, the Prophet is a work in progress. His call is to be a Pilgrim. He is on his way to Christ Jesus, just as the world that is being transformed by his Prophetic Word is transformed in such a way as to be on a pilgrimage to God. The Prophetic Word is not only changing the world here and now. It is also guiding the world into the future, a future that for some will be blessed, but for many others will be damned. Now, the fact that the Prophet's life may be defined as a pilgrimage to God does not mean that the Prophet is less of a Prophet now than he will be when he reaches the end of his journey. The Prophet is completely a Prophet from the moment he accepts God's call. What it does mean is that the distinguishing character of a Prophetic Ministry is to be moving toward God from the moment of the call. This is another way of saying that the Prophet was the incarnation of Israel's pilgrimage to the life of Christ Jesus, just as Christ Jesus is the Incarnation of our pilgrimage in and through Him into the Father. This is a key point: Jesus is not just the Incarnation of God. He is the Incarnation of our return to God. We can define the Incarnation in this way because the Prophets beforehand had incarnated in themselves God's outreach to man and, just as importantly, man's response unto God. Whether we talk of God's outreach to man, or man's response to God, in both cases what we are seeing is a pilgrimage: God is coming to us. We are going to Him. By the Prophet we see that we are God's pilgrimage destination, just as God is our pilgrimage destination. Notice how this parallels Creation/Salvation/Revelation: God reaches out from in Himself, so that we reach out to Him from in ourselves. Notice how this parallels the Philosophical *Dasein*: Our being is in the fact that we reach out to what we are not and, just as importantly, that *otherness* to which

we have reached out is responding back to us. If Descartes said, “I think, therefore I am,” and if Heidegger said, “I am in and reaching out to the world that is not me, therefore I am,” then we can say in consideration of the charism of the Prophets: “I am on pilgrimage to God, and God is on pilgrimage to me, therefore I am.”

### **The Prophet’s Call: “Here am I”**

Genesis 22:1: *And it came to pass after these things, that God did tempt Abraham, and said unto him, Abraham: and he said, Behold, here am I.*

Isaiah 6:8: *Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? Then said I, Here am I; send me.*

The Hebrew word *Hineni* (*Hee-Nen-Nee*), which is translated as “He am I,” combines the words *Hinen*, meaning “behold,” and *Ani*, meaning I. The connotation is “behold, it is I, the fullness of who I am, responding in the affirmative to you.” This is more than the statement that means, “I am physically present.” Rather, it means, “I am with you and for you, whatever it is you ask me to do.” Proximity and Commitment are interconnected. Just as God is the God who is with us, so we His people are with Him wherever He is. Responding to God’s Call with *Hineni* is a verbal attestation to a covenant relationship. Of course, we must walk the walk, not just talk the talk, for the covenant relationship to be efficacious to our salvation. We fail to do that, which means that God will end up walking the walk for us in our place. Nevertheless, we do need to make an indivisible verbal attestation of proximity and commitment to God as an expression of our will being submitted to His for God’s salvific work to proceed. God does all the heavy lifting, but He acts on us to this end if we let Him. *Thy will be done* expresses our submission of our will to His, our loving sacrifice to Him, and this begins with the “Here am I” response we make to His Call.

### **The Prophet’s Pilgrimage: The Dark Night of the Soul**

The Prophet’s Ministry is a pilgrimage to God: His own personal pilgrimage, and also the world transformed by his Prophetic Word into a world that is on pilgrimage to God (“Make straight the

way of the Lord” refers to the coming of the Lord unto man, of course, but also refers to the fact that the earth is being swept and reconstructed in such a way as to be able to receive that same Lord, which is to say, that the earth is on pilgrimage to where it must be for when the Lord does come). Now, the Prophet’s Ministry is a pilgrimage to God for two reasons: First, the Prophet is a sinner in need of sanctification, so his soul is moving toward God. Secondly, even without sin, the Prophet’s Ministry is an image of the *economia* of the Holy Trinity, and we know from God’s self-revelation that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit *are reaching out* unto one another in eternity. This selfless reaching out for the other is love, and this love is paralleled in the act of a prayer and in the Prophet’s Ministry. *Reaching out* is sacrificial in nature, as we orient our minds and our hearts toward someone other than ourselves, but it is also the act of learning about *the other* and, in so doing, about ourselves. Thus, *reaching out* entails giving all, but also getting all (Luke 6:38: *Give, and so it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap*). *Reaching out* is our pilgrimage into new domains of the mind, the heart, and the soul, for there is always something new about *reaching out* to a person principally defined by the fact that he is *the other*).

St. John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul*: *The reason why the soul not only travels securely when it thus travels in the dark, but makes even greater progress, is this: In general the soul makes greater progress when it least thinks so, yea, most frequently when it imagines that it is losing. Having never before experienced the present novelty which dazzles it, and disturbs its former habits, it considers itself as losing, rather than as gaining ground, when it sees itself lost in a place it once knew, and in which it delighted, traveling by a road it knows not, and in which it has no pleasure. As a traveler into strange countries goes by ways strange and untried, relying on information derived from others, and not upon any knowledge of his own—it is clear that he will never reach a new country but by new ways which he knows not, and by abandoning those he knew—so in the same way the soul makes the greater progress when it travels in the dark, not knowing the way. But inasmuch as God Himself is here the guide of the soul in its blindness, the soul may well exult and say, “In darkness and in safety,” now that it has come to knowledge of its state.*

With the words of St. John of the Cross in mind, we see that the Prophet's Ministry as a lifelong pilgrimage is an extension of his call. For in both cases, we see the Prophet giving himself totally to God precisely so that he is reliant on God and on no one else. The Prophet lives for situations where he is figuratively blind, unable to be guided by other men, nor even by his reason, and is thus helpless but for God taking him by the hand. The Prophet must be wholly reliant upon God because the Prophetic Word is transforming the world by grace to that stage where at least the remnant of the faithful will find their strength in being wholly reliant on God.

### **The Prophet's Pilgrimage: Wrestling with God**

*Genesis 32:21-30: So went the present over before him: and himself lodged that night in the company. And he rose up that night, and took his two wives, and his two women servants, and his eleven sons, and passed over the ford Jabbok. And he took them, and sent them over the brook, and sent over that he had. And Jacob was left alone; and there wrestled a man with him until the breaking of the day. And when he saw that he prevailed not against him, he touched the hollow of his thigh; and the hollow of Jacob's thigh was out of joint, as he wrestled with him. And he said, Let me go, for the day breaketh. And he said, I will not let thee go, except thou bless me. And he said unto him, What is thy name? And he said, Jacob. And he said, Thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel: for as a prince hast thou power with God and with men, and hast prevailed. And Jacob asked him, and said, Tell me, I pray thee, thy name. And he said, Wherefore is it that thou dost ask after my name? And he blessed him there. And Jacob called the name of the place Peniel: for I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved.*

*Matthew Henry's Commentary: A great while before day, Jacob being alone, more fully spread his fears before God in prayer. While thus employed, One in the likeness of a man wrestled with him. When the spirit helpeth our infirmities, and our earnest and vast desires can scarcely find words to utter them, and we still mean more than we can express, then prayer is indeed wrestling with God. However tried or discouraged, we shall prevail; and prevailing with Him in prayer, we shall prevail against all enemies that strive with us. Nothing requires more vigor and*

*unceasing exertion than wrestling. It is an emblem of the true spirit of faith and prayer. Jacob kept his ground; though the struggle continued long, this did not shake his faith, nor silence his prayer. He will have a blessing and had rather have all his bone put out of joint than go away without one. Those who would have the blessing of Christ, must resolve to take no denial. The fervent prayer is the effectual prayer. The Angel puts a lasting mark of honor upon him, by changing his name. Jacob signifies a supplanter. From henceforth he shall be celebrated, not for craft and artful management, but for true valor. Thou shalt be called Israel, a prince with God, a name greater than those of the great men of the earth. He is a prince indeed that is a prince with God; those are truly honorable that are mighty in prayer. Having power with God, he shall have power with men too; he shall prevail, and gain Esau's favor. Jacob gives a new name to the place. He calls it Peniel, the face of God, because there he had seen the appearance of God, and obtained the favor of God. It becomes those whom God honors to admire his grace unto them.*

As much as the Prophet relies upon God, he also wrestles with Him – not to supplant God, as the devil would try to wrestle with Him if he thought he could acquire God's throne as a result, but rather to be blessed by God *as God would bless him*. This last phrase is key. The Prophet is driven not to make God conform to him but to be blessed by his struggle and hardship in a way that conforms his ministry to God. On the surface, Jacob's night of wrestling with God seems to be presumptuous and impious. Similarly, the Prophets sometimes seem to be impious in their conversations with God (Referring to his unrelenting hardship, Jeremiah castigates God as if He is an unreliable mirage, see Jeremiah 15:18: *Will you be to me like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail?*). Beneath the surface, though, what we see is that in standing his ground Jacob is in essence putting everything he has into his relationship with God. He is not retreating to seek a moment of safety elsewhere. He is not avoiding God to be guided by someone other than God. He is wrestling with God because he would rather be broken by God than saved by anyone else. Similarly, Jeremiah's apparent impiety is actually most pious. For Jeremiah is eschewing all false pleasantries and polite obfuscations. Instead, he is being totally honest with God about what it is he is feeling at the moment. There is no greater piety than to speak honestly to God and, just as importantly, to listen to whatever it is God may say in return.

Keil and Delitzsch Biblical Commentary: *The passage teaches that Jacob merely completed, by his wrestling with God, what he had already been engaged in even from his mother's womb, viz., his striving for the birthright; in other words, for the possession of the covenant promise and the covenant blessing. This meaning is also indicated by the circumstances under which the event took place. Jacob had wrested the blessing of the birthright from his brother Esau; but it was by cunning and deceit, and he had been obliged to flee from his wrath in consequence. And now that he desired to return to the land of promise and his father's house, and to enter upon the inheritance promised him in his father's blessing; Esau was coming to meet him with 400 men, which filled him with great alarm. As he felt too weak to enter upon a conflict with him, he prayed to the covenant God for deliverance from the hand of his brother, and the fulfilment of the covenant promises. The answer of God to this prayer was the present wrestling with God, in which he was victorious indeed, but not without carrying the marks of it all his life long in the dislocation of his thigh. Jacob's great fear of Esau's wrath and vengeance had its foundation in his consciousness of the sin connected with his willful and treacherous appropriation of the blessing of the first-born. To save him from the hand of his brother, it was necessary that God should first meet him as an enemy and show him that his real opponent was God Himself, and that he must first of all overcome Him before he could hope to overcome his brother. And Jacob overcame God; not with the power of the flesh however, with which he had hitherto wrestled for God against man (God convinced him of that by touching his hip, so that it was put out of joint), but by the power of faith and prayer, reaching by firm hold of God even to the point of being blessed, by which he proved himself to be a true wrestler of God, who fought with God and with men, i.e., who by his wrestling with God overcame men as well. And whilst by the dislocation of his hip the carnal nature of his previous wrestling was declared to be powerless and wrong, he received in the new name of Israel the prize of victory, and at the same time directions from God how he was henceforth to strive for the cause of the Lord. - By his wrestling with God, Jacob entered upon a new stage in his life. As a sign of this, he received a new name, which indicated, as the result of this conflict, the nature of his new relation to God.*

In wrestling with God, which is to say, in being blessed by his hardship *as God would bless him*, the Prophet transforms by God's grace what had been established by sin into what will be later conducive to salvation. Jacob's example is telling: He first obtained the covenantal blessing by fraud. God's promise is what it is, but that promise is no longer efficacious unto grace for Jacob and his sons because of Jacob's sin. When Jacob wrestles with God, in essence eschewing any refuge elsewhere, God rewards him with a covenantal promise that is conducive to salvation – his own, but also his sons, hence the new name of Israel. Jacob's trust in God exorcises the sin out from the covenantal blessing. Analogously, in 2 Kings 2:19-22, the citizens of Jericho have been sickened by toxins in their water. Elisha takes a bowl, fills it with salt, and casts the salt in the water spring. The water is purified when Elisha says, *"I have healed this water; there shall not be from thence any more death or miscarrying."* Here, Elisha is not wrestling with God so much as with the devil. Nevertheless, what matters is that he confronts the sin or the sickness head on with no guide nor power but whatever God may provide him. Whether wrestling with God or the devil, the Prophet in essence is saying "Here am I," which is to say, I am putting all that I have into this and am relying on no one else but God to see this through. This is what it means to be a Pilgrim of God in a strange land until there is peace, finally, at the destination.