

BaptistWay: A history of rejected grace

April 24, 2014

- *The BaptistWay lesson for May 11 focuses on Ezekiel 20:1-32.*

The inquiry

Most of us never have heard God speak audibly. Christians talk about receiving an answered prayer through individual circumstances, physical provision and confirming words of other believers. We may not ever have heard God's voice, but we are convinced he hears ours.

This is something I often take for granted. I believe God is omnipotent and omnipresent, even when I do not see or feel him. I wonder, however, how much more thoughtful we might be about our communication with him if we believed certain circumstances and actions would cause God to refuse to listen to us.

This is what happens in Ezekiel 20:1-32. As several elders of Israel approached Ezekiel to inquire of God, he is told to tell them God will not let them inquire of him (v. 3). This should serve us as a great caution.

A small group in our fellowship recently finished going through a study titled *Prayer: Does it Make any Difference?* by Philip Yancey. One session of the study focused on "prayer problems," and included a host of potential struggles, from unanswered prayer to things that block our prayers from being received. This paragraph from the book addressed the latter issue:

"The assurance of answered prayers, still sweeping in its scope, comes with conditions. Am I abiding in Christ? Am I making requests according to his will? Am I obeying his commands? Each of these

underscores the relationship, the companionship with God. The more we know God, the more we know God's will, the more likely our prayers will align with that will."

Rebellion

Israel was not doing any of the things Yancey describes, and God cites this as reason for refusing to hear their inquiry. Of course, this was not a new development; it was something that had been going on for a long time. Ezekiel traces it as far back to their slavery in Egypt. He records God's promise to deliver them (v. 6), as well as his command to rid themselves of idols (v. 7). Their disobedience to this command brought a promise of wrath and anger against them in Egypt (v. 8).

The second act of rebellion Ezekiel cites occurred following their delivery from Egypt into the wilderness. They rejected the laws and decrees God gave them and violated the Sabbaths he commanded them to observe (v. 13). This led to God swearing not to deliver them into the land he had promised (v. 15). Their children continued this legacy of disobedience that ultimately led to God sending them into exile (v. 23) and allowing their own sinful desires to dictate their future (v. 25).

At some point, enough is enough. God's grace makes it possible for us to respond to him, but he ultimately leaves the decision to do so up to us. When we continually refuse, he allows us to face the consequences of our decisions. I've heard it said like this: "God is a gentleman; he does not force himself upon anyone who does not want anything to do with him." I think that's true.

For the sake of God's name

Another aspect in each of these instances of rebellion also deserves our attention. Each time Israel chooses rebellion over obedience in the account Ezekiel relays to the people, God relents from carrying out all the

punishment he promised. A continual refrain explains this—“for the sake of my name.” This phrase is spoken three times (vv. 9, 14, 22). Coupled with this, we see another explanation of God’s forbearance in verse 17: “... I looked on them with pity.” God cannot go against his own character, even when he continually is disobeyed and provoked. That doesn’t mean there are no consequences for sin, but it means God never gives up on us.

Living in the tension

Even after he had given his people over to their sins and refused their inquiry, we see a glimmer of hope in the last verse of our passage: “You say, ‘We want to be like the nations, like the peoples of the world, who serve wood and stone.’ But what you have in mind will never happen” (v. 32). It will not happen because God will not let it. The tension between God’s sovereignty and our free will is unapologetically put on display in this passage. Some feel a need to resolve this tension, allowing one of these to trump the other. Ezekiel allows that tension to stand by clearly pointing out the consequences of Israel’s actions, while also demonstrating God’s unbridled reign over and pursuit of them.

I do not understand how both are possible, but I am thankful they are. Most of us can look back at decisions we almost made or advice we barely took and see how they changed our lives drastically. We may or may not have been seeking God’s will in those instances, but God never will stop seeking us. Let this truth soften your heart to receive his grace today and every day.