

Baruch

The LORD encourages a discouraged secretary

Dedicated to my fellow brothers and sisters who actively serve the LORD, particularly those engaged in “full-time” ministry.

Baruch was secretary and personal assistant to the well-known prophet Jeremiah. God used them to bring His message to the southern kingdom of Judah, a nation that had become idolatrous and morally decadent. For more than 40 years (627BC to 586BC) Jeremiah warned that unless they repented, God would severely punish them. During this time, three powerful nations fought for world dominance, Assyria (whose capital was Nineveh), Babylon and Egypt. Israel and Judah could not avoid conflict since they lay geographically in the middle of these 3 powers. The hearts of men and women in Judah were hardened against the Lord, and punishment looked now inevitable. These were sad days. Jeremiah lamented and often wept. Interestingly, God took special notice of one particular man who was very discouraged, Jeremiah's secretary, Baruch. He had worked very hard and was expecting something positive to happen, but now he was saying to himself, “Woe to me! The LORD has added sorrow to my pain; I am worn out with groaning and find no rest” (Jer. 45:3).

National newspapers show special interest in the rich and powerful, royalty, politicians and well-known actors, sport or music stars. Our God, however, takes a loving interest not only in His visibly-active and well-known servants, but also in each one of those many invisible servants, those who work behind the scenes, those who pray, who give, who clean, who prepare, who support, who serve, who organize, who translate, who help, who repair, who multiply and broadcast the message God has given others... Our God cares for the spiritual wellbeing of ‘assistants’ and ‘secretaries.’ Noticing that Baruch was discouraged, God gave Jeremiah a personal prophecy for Baruch: “This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says to you, Baruch...” (Jer. 45). Sometimes we also need correcting, comforting and encouraging!

Why was Baruch discouraged?

Have you ever felt discouraged? Sometimes discouragement creeps in slowly as a new challenge becomes repetitive, our efforts encounter apathy, or we begin to doubt the value of what we are doing. Sometimes discouragement arrives fast and cuts deep, when we encounter serious obstacles, frustrating setbacks or strong opposition. We recognize that important expectations will now not be fulfilled, and perhaps never will be! Serving God by assisting a prophet like Jeremiah was no easy

task. Let us consider a number of factors that must have, from time to time, contributed towards Baruch's periods of frustration, weariness and discouragement.

1. The message: Given Judah's stubborn disobedience, the prophesies Baruch had to write were mainly about judgement and punishment, such as "If you fight against the Babylonians, you will not succeed," "The anger and wrath pronounced against this people by the LORD are great," and "The king of Babylon would certainly come and destroy this land and cut off both men and animals from it" (Jer. 32:5, 36:7, 29). It is a great temptation to modify God's message to bring it in line with what "itching ears want to hear" (2 Tim. 4:3). It is a joy to deliver a message about God's approval and blessing. But sometimes, if we are to prove faithful, we shall need to communicate God's disapproval or judgment. This is no pleasant task!

2. The audience: The Lord was hopeful: "Perhaps when the people of Judah hear about every disaster I plan to inflict on them, each of them will turn from his wicked way; then I will forgive their wickedness and their sin" (Jer. 36:3). But the audience rejected God, the message and the bearers of God's message. "They made their faces harder than stone and refused to repent" (Jer. 5:3). The king of Judah gave orders "to arrest Baruch the scribe and Jeremiah the prophet" (Jer. 36:26). Sometimes the messenger's motives are questioned, he is falsely accused and even threatened with death, because he is "not seeking the good of these people but their ruin" (Jer. 38:4). Very few audiences are as positive as those in Thessalonica who received Paul's teaching "not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God" (1 Thes. 2:13).

3. The type of work: A Scribe's job was slow and meticulous. Small writing mistakes were difficult to correct and often required the redoing of the whole manuscript. We are told that "while Jeremiah dictated all the words the LORD had spoken to him, Baruch wrote them on the scroll" (Jer. 36:4). After months of writing, Baruch read the message out in the temple. Some took his scroll to the king. "Whenever Jehudi had read three or four columns of the scroll, the king cut them off with a scribe's knife and threw them into the brazier, until the entire scroll was burned in the fire" (Jer. 36:23). All that work gone up in flames! Baruch had kept no photocopies, no computer backup! Then "Jeremiah took another scroll and gave it to the scribe Baruch" and they started all over again (Jer. 36:32). What a discouragement for Baruch! Couldn't Jeremiah do his own writing? Couldn't Jeremiah just preach his message without having to write it and then read it? Couldn't God communicate more efficiently using angels, dreams or visions? The outcome of our labour does not always yield what we expect. At times it may feel like a complete waste! If, like Archippus, we are tempted to stop and give up, may we also take to heart Paul's words of encouragement: "See to it that you complete the work you have received in the Lord" (Col. 4:17).

4. The lack of status: In those days, not many could read and write. Sometimes even kings had to be read to because they could not read for themselves. Knowing how to read and write could open the door to lucrative and influential positions. Such people were considered cultured and intellectual. What had Baruch achieved with his professional education? Jeremiah was a Temple secretary. If he had a 'business

card,' his office address would impress most: "Upper Courtyard, The Temple's New Gate, Jerusalem" (Jer. 36:10). If you asked Elishama and Jehudi about their job, they would look at you with confidence and satisfaction and say 'we are Royal secretaries.' They had a very large office at "The Secretaries Chamber, Royal Palace, Jerusalem." (Jer. 36:12, 20,21). And Baruch? After all those years of study and hard work, Baruch was still only the secretary of a melancholic and unpopular prophet! No one seems to thank him or express admiration for his dedicated work. Sometimes we can also forget that "it is the Lord Christ you are serving" (Col. 3:23-24). This alone is what gives significance and dignity to the Christian ministry.

5. The bleak future: We know that Baruch was a visionary type who was serving God but also dreamt of "great things" for himself (Jer. 45:5). Baruch knew and must have been encouraged by the story of Joshua, who for many years served Moses as his personal assistant. One day God told Moses, "Take Joshua... Give him some of your authority so that the whole Israelite community will obey him" (Num. 27:18-20). Joshua had 'made it!' Baruch also knew the story of Elisha, who for many years served Elijah as his personal assistant. Elisha asked Elijah for a great thing, a "double portion of your spirit." Soon Elisha begun to perform his own impressive miracles and gained public recognition: "The company of the prophets... went to meet him and bowed to the ground before him" (2 Kings 2:9-15). Elisha had 'made it!' And what about Baruch's future? Jeremiah's prophesies painted a sad and depressing collective future. There was no important, respected or stable job Baruch could aspire to! Why was the future of Baruch so bleak compared to that of Joshua and Elisha? When Peter fell into the temptation of comparing his own future with that of another disciple, he was lovingly told to mind his own business! The Lord has a different task, ministry and future for each servant. "Jesus answered, '... what is that to you? You must follow me'" (John 21:21-22).

6. The sacrifice: Baruch's service led him to accompany Jeremiah in many difficult and painful situations. They were both identified with God's message. They were jointly ridiculed and rejected, jointly hungry and cold, jointly falsely accused and threatened. The king commanded: "Arrest Baruch the scribe and Jeremiah the prophet" (Jer. 36:26). The path of obedience has its joys but also its pains. Unjust suffering is particularly difficult to accept, and yet we are told that, "it is commendable if a man bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because he is conscious of God" (1 Peter 2:19-20). Sometimes our ministry will require abstention from legitimate blessings. The Lord instructed Jeremiah, "You must not marry and have sons or daughters in this place" (Jer. 16:2). What did Jeremiah feel when he saw happy children playing or a husband lovingly embracing his wife? Once Peter also became conscious of the heavy price he was paying and asked, "We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?" Jesus replied, "Everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life" (Mat. 19:27-29). The Lord sees and will always reward generous and cheerful sacrifice.

7. The 'silence' of God: From time to time events combined to make Baruch feel quite desperate. "Woe to me!" he cried, "The LORD has added sorrow to my pain; I am

worn out with groaning and find no rest” (Jer. 45:3). It is bad enough when we find ourselves groaning, feeling worn out and continuously restless. But desperation begins to grab our soul when we entertain the thoughts that our God is cold, detached and passive. Worst still if we begin to conclude that God is actually adding sorrow to our pain, that our life would be better without Him. Such thoughts have demonic origin and are designed to make us doubt our heavenly Father’s power, wisdom or goodness. If entertained, the downward depressive spiral will surely accelerate. When we are tired or sad, our minds are weak and more vulnerable to satanic attack. We are to identify the origin of such lies about God and reject them firmly in the name of Christ. It is quite possible that we may not understand God’s timing or why He allows, does or doesn’t do something. But let’s not allow our own limitation to cast doubt on the LORD’s power, wisdom or goodness. “You will keep in perfect peace him whose mind is steadfast, because he trusts in you” (Is. 26:3).

God’s response to Baruch’s discouragement

Sometimes we can see our brother’s pain when we look him in the eye. Mother’s are usually good at detecting signs of distress among their own children. Our loving heavenly Father sees our circumstances, actions and motives, He hears our words and inner thoughts, He senses our emotions. It is a great comfort to know that, “nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare...” (Heb. 4:13), or as David would sing, “You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar... Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O LORD” (Psalm 139:2-4). Baruch’s gloom and discouragement had its origin in defective thoughts. In a short, direct and personal message, the Lord encourages Baruch to think the truth, to understand and believe reality as it really is.

The LORD said to Jeremiah, “Say this to him [Baruch]: ‘This is what the LORD says: I will overthrow what I have built and uproot what I have planted, throughout the land. Should you then seek great things for yourself? Seek them not. For I will bring disaster on all people, declares the LORD, but wherever you go I will let you escape with your life’” (Jer. 45:4-5). This message has three parts.

1. The LORD corrects Baruch’s view of reality.

Baruch had done what he was told to do, he had worked hard, and yet the results were very disappointing. The sacrificial efforts of Jeremiah and Baruch were simply not changing the world around them. Was all this work worth it? Should they continue? Were they being ‘wasted’ on this job? Baruch experiences internal turmoil and feels sorry for himself: “Woe to me! The LORD has added sorrow to my pain; I am worn out with groaning and find no rest.” The LORD sees Baruch’s inner struggle and begins by directing Baruch’s eyes away from himself. The world is not about ‘you.’ What happens and doesn’t happen does not rest on ‘your’ shoulders. “This is what the LORD says: I will overthrow what I have built and uproot what I have planted, throughout the land.” Notice the repeated “I.”

The LORD can build and plant with or without Baruch. That is true. It is reality. The LORD may invite us to participate in some part of His great project, but it remains ‘His project.’ It is the LORD himself who provides us with gifts, who calls us to serve,

who energizes our efforts. But it is also the LORD who determines if it's time to build or to overthrow, time to plant or to uproot. Humans are not the centre of the universe. Our heavenly Father loves us, cares for us and delights in us, but 'we' and 'our efforts' are not central in God's plans. It's all about the Lord Jesus Christ, His work, His glory, His glorious eternal future! "For by him [Jesus Christ] all things were created... all things were created by him and *for him*... so that in everything *he* might have the supremacy" (Col. 1:16-18). Dear fellow servant, capture the big picture, view reality through God's eyes, picture yourself and your sacrificial labours as a small part of God's global and eternal plan. Jeremiah prayed, "O great and powerful God, whose name is the LORD Almighty, *great are your purposes* and mighty are your deeds" (Jer. 32:18-19). In time, on schedule, God will work out His purposes.

2. The LORD corrects Baruch's view of his own mission.

Baruch's frustration with the lack of visible results was moving him to dream of more significant jobs, of better ways of gaining recognition and satisfaction. The LORD saw the intentions of Baruch's perturbed heart and asked him, "Should you then seek great things for yourself?" The LORD sometimes calls, prepares, empowers and entrusts men and women with a great task, 'great' from God's perspective. But when, like Baruch, our focus turns inwards, and we seek some great things for ourselves, the LORD's message is clear, "Seek them not."

As Christians, the LORD does call us to think big and to store up great treasures, but in heaven, "where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal." Why not on earth? Because "where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Mat. 6:20-21). The apostle Paul noticed that we can even engage in Christian ministry driven by wrong motives (Phil. 1:16-17). Selfish motives spoil Christian service and kill happy teamwork. We are urged to, "do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit... Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus" (Phil. 2:3-5).

What talents and abilities have you been given? What is your calling? What is your mission? Once you know what the Lord has given you to do, stick at it. Until the Lord makes it clear that you should change, give yourself "fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain" (1 Cor. 15:58). Sometimes a servant's strategy or method may need to change in the light of observed results, but his heart is not set on great statistics. Our heart's desire is to hear our Master say, "Well done, good and faithful servant!... Come and share your master's happiness!" (Mat. 25:21). Is this still the longing of your heart?

3. The LORD corrects Baruch's view of the future.

One of the factors that contributed to Baruch's depressive thoughts was that he saw no hope for the future. The leaders of Judah continued to ignore God's message and God would soon use the Babylonian army to invade, kill, destroy and take control of Judah. The Lord partially confirmed Baruch's sombre assessment, "For I will bring disaster on all people, declares the LORD." Sometimes God wanted to build and plant. But now He had determined to overthrow and uproot. The fact that God chooses to stop a project, to close a ministry or even to discipline his people does not

mean that God has 'gone' nor that all hope has vanished. In fact, the very acts of overthrowing and uprooting are clear indications that God remains involved, active and in control. As long as we are on earth, such painful changes and apparent setbacks have a purpose. Happily there is always a divine 'but.' The LORD blessed Baruch with a personal promise: "*but* wherever you go I will let you escape with your life."

This personal prophesy was given to Baruch during the 4th year of king Jehoiakim (Jer. 45:1). Baruch therefore received the LORD's promise during the events narrated in the first half of Jeremiah's 36th chapter. In the second half of the chapter, we read that the king rejected Jeremiah's prophesy, burnt the scroll and ordered the arrest of Baruch and Jeremiah. Then comes another divine 'but.' The army searched for them, "*but* the LORD had hidden them" (Jer. 36:26). Baruch was safe. The Lord had begun to fulfil His promise.

What is your view of the future? Is your view dominated by dark thoughts? Do you fear the future? The Lord Jesus never promised us an easy ride on earth, neither a panorama of constant growth and visible success. But He did say "go... And surely I am with you always." (Mat. 28:19-20). He did say, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you." (Acts 1:8). When under spiritual attack, we do know that, "the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world" (1 John 4:4). Our LORD's good promises extend well beyond our short journey on earth. The Lord Jesus said, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms... I am going there to prepare a place for you... I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am" (John 14:1-3). After receiving the 'life assurance' promise, did Baruch ever worry that he might be caught and killed? Maybe, but he didn't have to. God's promises can only be enjoyed if we know them and believe them. Do we really believe them?

Conclusion

Our heavenly Father sees and is concerned about what happens inside each one of us, His public servants and his support servants. Like Baruch, many of us have also been given some small task. Like Baruch, we also sometimes feel weary and discouraged. We don't see the results we long for, and may begin to feel we are 'wasted' on the job. What the LORD look for in all His servants? The only two criteria the LORD uses to assess the effectiveness of every life lived on earth are: obedience and faithfulness. Do you agree? Then let us continue to listen, to obey and to press on. "God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them. We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end" (Heb. 6:10-11).

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