



Prisoners of Hope

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The end of an old year and the beginning of a new one is not just a reminder, but also a parable, of the Cross and the Resurrection, of death and new life, of leaving the old and starting anew.

During the last few years, between Christmas and New Year, I have routinely returned to two particular writings of two very different authors. One was a poet; the other, a prophet: Alfred, Lord Tennyson's Ring Out, Wild Bells and Zechariah chapter 8.

Ring out, wild bells, to the wild sky,
The flying cloud, the frosty light
The year is dying in the night;
Ring out, wild bells, and let him die.

Ring out the old, ring in the new,
Ring, happy bells, across the snow:
The year is going, let him go;
Ring out the false, ring in the true.

Ring out the grief that saps the mind,
For those that here we see no more,
Ring out the feud of rich and poor,
Ring in redress to all mankind.

Ring out a slowly dying cause,
And ancient forms of party strife;
Ring in the nobler modes of life,
With sweeter manners, purer laws.

Ring out the want, the care, the sin,
The faithless coldness of the times;
Ring out, ring out thy mournful rhymes,
But ring the fuller minstrel in.

Ring out false pride in place and blood,
The civic slander and the spite;
Ring in the love of truth and right,
Ring in the common love of good.

Ring out old shapes of foul disease,
Ring out the narrowing lust of gold;
Ring out the thousand wars of old,
Ring in the thousand years of peace.

Ring in the valiant man and free,
The larger heart the kindlier hand;
Ring out the darkness of the land,
Ring in the Christ that is to be.

Tennyson's poem enables me (especially when I read it aloud) to focus on the things that I need to leave behind with the old year – falsehood, grief, injustice, strife, faithlessness, coldness, pride, slander, hatred, disease, lust, greed, war, and darkness. It also reminds me of the virtues that I need to welcome and nurture in my life – truth, joy, justice, good manners, music and dance, love, peace, kindness, and Christ Himself.

Reading Zechariah 8 at the doorway between the old year and the new enables me to focus on – and claim! – God's promises, and to respond to His summons for the new year.

In the passage, there are ten repetitions of the formula, 'Thus says the Lord of host'. All these can be grouped under three heads: the coming of fruitfulness; the call to fearlessness; and the command to faithfulness.

The people of Israel had been living in disobedience and rebellion against God. In response, God's presence and glory

had departed from Israel. As a consequence, the people of God find themselves in deep waters in every aspect of life – spiritually, the glory of God has departed from their midst; politically, they are vanquished, insecure and unstable; economically, they are deficient and dependent; socially, they are a curse and byword among their neighbours.

But God promises a renewal of their lives through a set promises that talk about the coming of fruitfulness in every area of life. This begins with the foundational promise: the coming of spiritual fruitfulness in the form of God's presence and fullness. In verse 3, God says, 'I have returned to Zion and will dwell in the midst of Jerusalem.' In other words, God promises the restoration of the spiritual life of His people through His return and dwelling in the midst of His people. And this restoration of the spiritual life of the people of God will be manifest in all other aspects of life.

The first manifestation is physical fruitfulness in the form of longevity and posterity. In thinking and talking of physical blessing for God's people, there are two errors that one can commit. The first is to think that God's blessing always takes the form of physical life – that God's people will never be sick, or that they will never die young. The second error is to say that God's blessing never includes the physical aspects of life.

Both of these extremes are errors. Bad things do happen to God's good people – indeed, the worst of things happened to the best of God's people, Jesus himself. And yet, the Bible is full of God's promise of physical blessing. This is undeniable. God's will is that His people should live healthy, vibrant lives, and that they live a full and fruitful life physically. Verse 4-5 says, 'Old men and old women shall again sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each with staff in hand because of great age. And the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in its streets.'

Political fruitfulness in the form of stability and security is the second manifestation of God's presence with a people. Verse 10-12 says: 'For before those days there was no wage for man or any wage for beast, neither was there any safety from the foe for him who went out or came in, for I set every man against his neighbour. But now I will not deal with the remnant of this people as in the former days, declares the Lord of hosts. For there shall be a sowing of peace.'

There was a time when, because of political conflict and strife, the people of God were insecure. But God promises political security and stability: children will play safely in the streets (v.5). Even if there was a time when God's people were not earning their dues in full – because of extortion,

robbery, corruption, violence and injustice – that will no longer be the case (v.10); travellers will feel secure when they pass through the land (v.10); and neighbours will no longer be at each other's throats (v.10). 'For there shall be a sowing of peace' (v.12). God's will is that His people live a stable, peaceful, and secure political life. Political conflict and strife that rob people of community and coexistence is not God's will.

The third dimension is economic fruitfulness in the form of productivity and prosperity. In dealing with the question of the material and financial life of God's people, there are, again, two errors that Christians are prone to fall into. The first is to think of material prosperity as inextricably connected to, and as a measure of, godliness. The holier you are, the richer you will be. This is the error of the so-called 'prosperity gospel'. The second error is to measure godliness and saintliness in terms of material want. That is to say, that God's faithful people, especially those in 'full-time ministry', will and should always be poor – the poorer you are, the holier you are. This is the error of what can be called 'poverty gospel'.

And yet, while wealth is not the determinative criterion in measuring the Christian life, the promises of productivity and prosperity are also undeniably there in the Bible. Verse 12 says, 'The vine shall give its fruit, and the ground shall give its produce, and the heavens shall give their dew. And I will cause the remnant of this people to possess all these things.'

God also promises social fruitfulness in the form of testimony and credibility. This is the fourth manifestation. In verse 13, it says: 'And as you have been a byword of cursing among the nations, O house of Judah and house of Israel, so will I save you, and you shall be a blessing.' Again, in verse 23, it says, 'In those days ten men from the nations of every tongue shall take hold of the robe of a Jew, saying, "Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you."'

There was a time when the people of God had come to be considered a cursed people before others. But now God says He will make them a blessing to others. A mark of being a true people of God is to live with a good testimony and credibility before non-believing neighbours. God's will is that His people are a blessing to and are blessed by others around them. God's will is that His people live socially and relationally rich lives in this world. People should say, 'Wow! We hear God is with you and so we want to be close to you.'

It is in the light of these promises – spiritual, physical, political, economic, and social – that God makes his call to

fearlessness: 'Fear not, let your hands be strong.... Fear not' (vv. 13-15).

One of the most repeated divine commands in the Bible is, 'Fear not!' God continually calls His people to boldness and bravery. This is probably so because we humans, by nature, are timid and cowardly. But it helps to know that courage is not the total absence of fear. According to Eddie Rickenbacker, 'Courage is doing what you're afraid to do. There can be no courage unless you're scared.' Similarly, W.T. Sherman says, 'I would define true courage to be a perfect sensibility of the measure of danger, and a mental willingness to endure it.'

None of the heroes and heroines of the Bible would have been able to achieve what they did without courage – Moses, Joshua, Gideon, Daniel, Esther, Ruth, Jesus, Peter, Paul (to give a random list). With all our gifts, opportunities, and abilities, perhaps what we Christians often lack – whatever our spheres, professions, and vocations – is courage: courage to attempt bigger things, courage to make a better difference, courage to do the right, to follow the call, and to stand alone.

According to Zechariah 8, however, the coming of fruitfulness does not happen in a vacuum. The coming of fruitfulness is to be balanced by the command to faithfulness. In verses 16 and 17, God says, 'These are the things that you shall do: Speak the truth to one another; render in gates judgments that are true that make for peace. Do not devise in your hearts against one another, and love no false oath.'

The first aspect of faithfulness is truthfulness. This may take the form of speaking the truth, or of doing the truth, i.e., acting justly. In a word, there should be 'truthing' – in speech and in act. Truth is actually foundational to the nature of the world and way the world meaningfully operates. The flourishing of human lives and society requires truthfulness. When truthfulness is absent, our relationships with one another also break down.

The second aspect of faithfulness is peacefulness. It is not enough to be truthful; true justice is not just about rendering judgments or acting and speaking in ways that are true. Acting justly is about acting and speaking in ways that 'make for peace' (v.16). Verse 19 also says, 'Love truth and peace.'

In Ephesians, the Apostle Paul tells us to speak the truth in love. John also says that Jesus came full of grace and truth. The balance between truth and peace, truth and love, and truth and grace, which the Bible emphasizes, is an

indispensable aspect of speaking and acting justly. Many times we speak the truth to others and about others. But we do it without love, without grace, and without the intent of peace. Other times we are so loving, gracious, and so concerned about not straining our relationships with one another that we fail to be truthful. But without love, truth becomes hard; and without truth, love becomes soft.

This year, maybe we could start by being a little more courageous in what we do. Surely we could be more faithful and truthful. And perhaps we might even pray for, work for, hope for, and watch for fruitfulness in every area of our lives. For, even if we are nothing else, we are still – 'prisoners of hope' (Zechariah 9.12).

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