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Homiletics: Studies on the Old Testament Texts

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HOMILETICS

Studies on Old Testament Texts

SEXAGESIMA

Is. 55:6-11

The Text.—This text has power to shake us, pastors and lay members, to the core of our being. This will be especially true if we catch the climate of thought in Jeremiah 23.

Purpose of the Holy Ghost seems to be that we desire earnestly to let God's Word accomplish God's work in us. "Seek ye the Lord while He may be found; call ye upon Him while He is near. Let the wicked forsake his way . . . and let him return unto the Lord." We are far from being what we could be and would be if God had His way with us and the purpose of His Word were fully achieved in us. God has given us so much light, and yet all of us must confess to so much darkness. "We are really much worse than others because we ought to be much better." Amen. If we had higher respect for God, truer love, deeper reverence, we should desire to be everything God wants us to be. Perhaps all of us are guilty of two daring and destructive lines of reasoning: 1. We fail in earnest asking and seeking to learn what God wants. 2. We fail to be concerned about what we need, a deeper and truer life in the Word. It's the old black game of the devil, making God little and ourselves big. Our grievous shortcomings are due to the failure to let God's Word do God's work in us.

There's a general resurgence of interest in religion all around us, but it's still the exception to find a Bible-loving, Bible-oriented Christian who trembles at the Word and who earnestly and sincerely prays like David: "Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my thoughts; and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting."

George Santayana observes: "The only true dignity man still possesses is his ability to get disgusted with himself." True penitence over living at such a poor, dying rate while the life-giving Word is everywhere around us will lead to a new life.

And we shall always find God in His Word. We must never separate God and His Word. Through His Word He is near us. We need not dig into the earth to draw Him up or climb into heaven to draw Him down (Rom. 10:6-8, Deut. 30:11-14). When God is so near us, it is

our holy privilege to welcome Him into warm, receptive, responsive, ready hearts. Every sin against God is first a sin against His Word.

It is possible to trifle too long with God's Word. He can take His Word away. He can send a famine of the Word (Amos 8:11,12). Some have kept the Book on the shelf so long, some families have lived a Wordless, Godless life so many years, that now their hearts are cold as a block of cement and the Word holds no further relish for them. They retain its form in their memory, but they have lost its power.

God shows our desperate need of coming over to His side, the side of the Word, of the Spirit, of truth, of faith and righteousness. "My thoughts are not your thoughts." This simply says: Our thoughts and ways are evil, earth-bound, incapable of lifting life to God, giving hope for heaven (Is. 59:7; 65:2). The masses are following their own ideas of God, their own devices, their own flesh drives. "There is a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death" (Prov. 14:12). Man who lives in his own light lives in darkness. If he looks into God's mirror long enough, he will see the beast Self, for basically man is a self-seeking, self-serving person.

But God's thoughts about us are not our thoughts about Him. "I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the Lord, thoughts of peace" (Jer. 29:11). His thought is to bless, lift, heal, help, cleanse, forgive, cherish, save. Because of his guilt complex which follows him as a shadow, man wants to get away from the thought of God as set forth in the Word. Invariably he comes up with an idea of God which approves his own ways. It's a deadly game. It leads to tragic defeat. But God's thoughts hold out a refreshing promise. And these thoughts are in the Word, which men should hear until they find the secret of joy and peace and power in God.

"My word . . . shall accomplish that which I please." God's Word does His work. The Word is not only given by a miracle; it also works miracles. This Word is not to be categorized, classified, and then stored in a vault. God's Word is a real sword to be used for a real fight, a real medicine to cure a real sickness, a real food to feed a real hunger, a real power to beget a real life, a real spring to quench a real thirst, a real spiritual dynamic to give a real second birth, a real faith, and a real heaven. That's the purpose of the Word, and that will be accomplished if the Word has its way. But some stumble at the Word. "The Word preached did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in them that heard it" (Heb. 4:2). Exhortation to earnest Christians: Let the Word be the Word. Let the seed take root, sprout, grow, bring forth fruit.

The Day and Its Theme.—The text may well be in the mood of Lent. The Gospel, on the Sower, supports the truth that God through His Word longs to bring us His rich blessing. We would all be truer, more victorious, more achieving Christians if we would let the Word of God dwell in us more richly and accomplish its intended purpose in us. God longs for a 100-per-cent harvest. To this end we are to hear the Word of God more sincerely, faithfully, appreciatively, and with a greater sense of responsibility, knowing that in His Word God Himself is coming to us, to help us, to make us whole, and to win us totally to Himself.

Goal and Purpose.—To show the hearer that he has often been in rebellion against the Word. Every Christian ought to see clearly that the Word of God will do great things in us, for us, through us, if we do not stop its purpose or limit its power by unbelief and rebellion. What sweet, holy and heavenly things will come into our lives if the Word has its way with us!

Sins to be Diagnosed and Remedied.—Every earnest Christian may ask himself questions such as these: What is keeping me from being a better, truer, stronger Christian, a more dedicated church member? How can I be a more consecrated father, mother, brother, sister, neighbor? The answer is: Let the light of God's Word come through to your heart, your tongue, your finger tips. Never halt the flow of God's Word, or crush its glow, or set yourself against its holy purpose.

Opportunities for Explicit Gospel.—The sweetness, goodness, power of the Word is all derived from the holy sacrifice of the living Word, the Son of God, in whose redeeming grace the thoughts of God toward us were most essentially expressed.

Illustrations.—There is the case of the person who day after day lets the shadows of life fill his soul, allows the problems and tensions of this imperfect life to occupy his thinking, and fails all the while to draw on God's power or let God speak to Him. This shows a want of love for God, of trust in Him, of confidence in His power. Pity the person who always tries His own way first and makes it impossible for God to help him because he doesn't ask and seek for help. How quickly the transformation can take place! How ready God is to help! The entrance of His Word gives light. In the Word we see how friendly He is, how willing, how strong. Truly, we discover experimentally that His Word is a quickening, lifting, refreshing power. It drives out worry, bitterness, fear, anxiety, and gives God back His rightful place in our life.

Outline

Let the Word Be the Word

I. Claim all the blessings the Lord offers in His Word

A. God wants you to have what He offers

B. We desperately need what He wants us to have

II. Our own light is darkness

A. Life without God is nothing but death

B. God's Word always gives light and life

Los Angeles, Calif.

C. W. BERNER

QUINQUAGESIMA

Ps. 40:6-10

The Text.—Psalm 40, listed as a psalm of David, was written in recognition of divine deliverance. It falls into three main sections: vv. 1-5, praise for past deliverance; vv. 6-10, a pledge of grateful self-dedication; vv. 11-17, a petition for future deliverance. The psalm throughout has an autobiographical ring. But the question for the interpreter to decide is this: Who is speaking—the psalmist or Christ through the psalmist? Even though the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews had not made the reference explicit, the second section would irresistibly remind us of Him who said, "My meat is to do the will of Him that sent Me" (John 4:34; cf. Luke 12:50). See Heb. 10:5 ff., where vv. 6, 7 of our psalm are loosely quoted from the LXX. That need not, however, rule out an original reference to the psalmist himself. If the Antitype was really prefigured in the type, then great David and his greater Son could both be speaking. That is, at any rate, a defensible position. Even Spurgeon recognized that "it would not be a violent wresting of language to see both David and his Lord, both Christ and the Church," in this psalm. He, nevertheless, interprets the entire psalm Christologically, and only so, in keeping perhaps with the older tradition. He says of his method: "We shall let the sun shine, even though this should conceal the stars." Certain details in the exegesis must thus await the interpreter's decision as to a general approach. V. 7 is especially crucial. "Lo, I have come," Christologically interpreted, would refer to the Incarnation. It might, however, simply indicate readiness for service and so be generally applicable. It would be the equivalent of "Here I am." See 1 Sam. 3:4, 8; 2 Sam. 19:20; Is. 6:8.) "In the Volume of the Book," etc., is somewhat obscure, as witness the embarrassment of the commentators. As applied to Christ in Heb. 10:7, it undoubtedly refers to the O. T. prophecies.

The Day and the Theme.—On this Sunday a pastor will invite his congregation to enter once again into the fellowship of Christ's suffering. The Gospel, with our Lord's word "We go up to Jerusalem," sets the dominant mood for the service. Our text, as the suggested outlines indicate, is admirably suited to pre-Lenten meditation.—The Introit ("Deliver me in Thy righteousness") reminds us of Luther's agonizing struggle with the "righteousness of God." In our text God's "righteousness" is set in the context of His gracious will in Christ, as evidenced by the parallel words: "faithfulness," "salvation," "loving-kindness," and "truth." "Christ comes to set men free" suggests the service theme (see Collect). Just so. He frees us from fear, as Luther discovered, and frees us for joyful obedience. The Christian's response to the Lenten Gospel is a life dedicated to the will of God. This states the *goal and purpose of the sermon*.

Sin to Be Diagnosed.—Lenten sacrifices symbolize the dedicated life. They may also symbolize our readiness to substitute religious observances for religion's first requirement: an open ear and a believing, yielding heart.—Part IV of the first outline suggests various misconceptions of the "will of God." First, there is the man who claims to trust God's will and makes that an excuse for a careless and reckless transit through life. Then there is the man whose trust manifests itself as bloodless resignation, the man who prays, "Thy will be done," with a sigh rather than a shout. Or there is the man whose God is a Juggernaut, an irresistible will forcing him into unwilling submission. All of these responses indicate a faulty relationship to God, who in Christ has proved that His will is both a gracious and a victorious will, a will that can be victoriously affirmed and accepted and done. This section of the sermon may to some seem important enough to merit almost exclusive attention. V.8 would then be central, and the theme might be "Doing the Will of God."

Opportunities for Explicit Gospel.—Christ, actively engaged in procuring salvation for men in accordance with His Father's plan, must be the focal point of the sermon. The preacher must beware, however, of using Christ's response to God's will merely as an example for imitation. Christ *is* the will of God actualized. His absolute surrender to His Father is the enabling ground for our self-dedication. The argument does not run: "As He, so we"; but "Because He, therefore we."

Illustrations.—Recall the frequent prophetic antithesis between outward sacrifices and inner dedication. The Epistle for the day, especially in its opening verses, enforces the same idea.—Luther's discovery of the true "righteousness of God." No matter which outline is followed,

Christ (more especially, Christ in His Passion) will be the great Illustration. Sayings of our Lord and incidents from His Passion are too numerous to cite. Moreover, they will readily suggest themselves to the preacher if he keeps his purpose in mind, i. e., to draw his hearers into the fellowship of Christ's sufferings.

Outlines

The twofold interpretation of the psalm is reflected in the double outline. In the second outline the psalm receives a strictly Christological interpretation. In each section of this sermon the thought will move from the particular reference to Christ to the general application in the life of the hearer. If the first outline is followed, the sermon will move rather from the general to the particular. Christ will then appear in each section as the supreme illustration rather than as the sole prophetic fulfillment of the psalm. The preacher may feel that the first outline speaks somewhat more directly to the needs of his pre-Lenten congregation.

1

God's Purpose for You During Lent

- I. That you may have an ear to hear His Word
 - A. Special sacrifices of self-denial may be commendable
 - B. But they are no substitute for an open ear
- II. That you may have a heart to receive his forgiving love
 - A. The plan of salvation was conceived in the heart of God
 - B. The fulfillment was promised in the Volume of the Book
 - C. In Christ, God has faithfully fulfilled His plan and carried out His righteous purpose
 - D. God's forgiving love is now available to every receptive heart
- III. That you may have a tongue to proclaim His salvation
 - A. Salvation has been prepared for the great congregation of sinners
 - B. Salvation becomes accessible in the act of proclamation
- IV. That you may have a will to affirm His purposes for your life
 - A. Not in careless bravado
 - B. Not in passive resignation
 - C. Not in fatalistic or despairing acquiescence
 - D. But in joyful acceptance
 - E. And active participation

2

Christ Our Example for Lenten Self-Dedication to the Will of God

- I. In His firm purpose to seek the will of God
- II. In His joyful readiness to accept the will of God
- III. In His eagerness to proclaim the will of God
- IV. In His determination to do the will of God

Seattle, Wash.

WALTER BARTLING

INVOCAVIT

DEUT. 8:1-6

The Text and Its Central Thought.—Our text is part of the second of the three addresses which Moses spoke to the Children of Israel at the end of the forty years in the wilderness, shortly before his death and Israel's entering the land of Canaan. In these addresses, delivered on the east side of the Jordan River, Moses calls to remembrance the ethical and moral precepts of the Law, which the Lord through him had already given the Israelites.

In Ch. 8:1-6 Moses recalls God's dealings with the Israelites during those forty years in the wilderness and uses those dealings as an encouragement to "keep the commandments of the Lord, thy God, to walk in his ways, and to fear him" (v. 6).

The Pulpit Commentary summarizes thus:

That they might be induced the more faithfully to observe all the commandments which had been enjoined upon them so as to go on and prosper, they are called to remember the experiences of the forty years in the wilderness, when God guided them and disciplined them for their good. He humbled them that He might test the state of their heart and affections toward Him, using the distress and privations to which they were subjected as means of bringing out what was in them, and of leading them to feel their entire dependence on Him for help, sustenance, and guidance. Not only by commands difficult to be obeyed laid on men, and by mighty works done in their view, does God prove men (cf. Gen. 22:1; Ex. 15:25); but also by afflictions and calamities (Judg. 2:22; 3:4; Ps. 17:3; 81:7), as well as by benefits (Ex. 16:4). Humbled so as to see his own weaknesses, chastised out of all self-conceit by affliction, man is brought to submit to God, to hear and obey Him; and along with this the experience of God's goodness tends to draw men, in grateful acknowledgement of His mercy and bounty, to yield themselves to Him and sincerely and lovingly serve Him (cf. Rom. 2:4).

The central thought of the text is: God's dealings with man (afflictions, testings, blessings) seek to bring man to serve and obey God.

The Day and Its Theme.—The suggested theme for the day is "God's Lessons in Trials." The text is very appropriate, for it speaks of those lessons, of the purpose of trials, of God's care and blessings in those trials. The Introit presents to us the assurance of God's care in trial for those who are His own. The Gradual likewise speaks of the safety and protection of the child of God in the hands of the Lord. The Epistle, 2 Cor. 6:1-10, mentions one of the purposes of God's dealings with man, namely, that we receive not the grace of God in vain. It likewise gives us an example of this truth—that the purpose of all the tribulations of the Apostle Paul's ministry was that the Corinthians receive not the grace of God in vain. The Gospel, Matt. 4:1-11, reveals that Christ has won the victory over the temptation to evil that beset us in the trials of life. In the Gospel Jesus quotes v. 3 of our text.

At first glance the theme of *Parish Activities*, "The Church Presents Christ to the Americas" (Missions at Home), seems not to fit at all. Yet one of the Lord's purposes in afflicting and testing and blessing us individually and collectively as a church is that we may carry out His command: "Ye shall be witnesses unto Me." A review of our past should lead us to be active in presenting Christ in the Americas.

The Goal and Purpose of the Sermon.—Many, even Christians, have difficulty in appreciating the value of God's dealings with us in afflictions, testing, and blessings. Many see no value in any of these. They are unhappy and discouraged when God permits affliction to come their way. They tend to grumble when the Lord tests them. They often are not strengthened in their godliness by God's blessings. Grimly they declare: "God's will be done," when sickness and reverses cross their paths. They submit to God's will, not because these things come from the love of God but because they feel they can do nothing else but stoically submit. As a result these people are discouraged in following the Lord's commandments and frequently fail to walk in His ways. The goal and purpose of the sermon is therefore to lead the hearers to rejoice even in affliction and testing because they know that also in these the Lord blesses them, and as a result be encouraged to serve and obey the Lord in every way.

Sins to Be Remedied.—Grumbling when the Lord permits us to have affliction—using trial and testing as a reason for not following the Lord—refusing and failing to recognize the hand of the Lord in the sicknesses and blessings of life—these are sins common in our lives and need to be remedied if we are to live happy, godly lives. V. 3 b enables us to point out that placing the wants of the body first in our lives is a sin against God, that we should avoid materialism.

Opportunities for Explicit Gospel—The entire text brings out the love and goodness of the Lord. It is a Lord of love and mercy who guides our lives. Although this text does not directly refer to the love of God in Christ, yet its whole tenor points to the Lord in His love. The comparison in v. 5 tells us that we are God's children. Even a cursory reading of the text impresses one with the truth that the motivation of God's dealings with us is His love. His love makes us His children. The statement of v. 3 b gives us ample opportunity to speak of the Word of God. In our sermon we therefore will want to speak specifically of God's love in Christ, especially since this is the first Sunday in Lent.

Illustrations.—The many references of the text to the life of Israel in the wilderness, plus modern parallels, will give many illustrations. Many of the illustrations will be applications of the truth of the text in the life of Israel and in our lives.

Outline

God's Lessons in Trials

I. In His lessons the Lord

A. Humbles us that we may know our dependence on Him

B. Proves us that we may know

1. What is in our heart; and

2. Whether we would keep His commandments

C. Teaches us that man does not live by bread alone but by the Word of God

II. This He does by various methods

A. By leading us according to His way, v. 2 (Israel had to follow God's way, not its own)

B. By permitting affliction to come, v. 3 (hunger, privation)

C. By providing daily with just enough to supply the need, v. 3, 4 (manna day by day, raiment, care of feet)

III. Because of His love for us

A. The Lord wants to bless His children (the Lord wanted Israel to live and multiply, etc., v. 1)

B. The Lord deals with us as His children, v. 5 (chastening)

IV. He has the purpose in mind that we may keep His commandments, walk in His ways, and fear Him.

Rejoice, then, in affliction and trial. See the Lord's goodness. Follow and serve Him.

Springfield, Ill.

LEWIS C. NIEMOELLER

REMINISCERE

GEN. 32:24-29

The Text and its Central Thought. — Jacob's wrestling match at the Jabbok proved a turning point in his life. For that night Jacob received that blessing from God's free grace which he had sought formerly to gain by deceit and cunning.

Living up to his name "Heel-Snatcher," or "Supplanter," Jacob had taken matters into his own hands by driving the bargain for Esau's birthright (Gen. 25:29-34) and had deceived his father Isaac into giving him the blessing (Gen. 27:6-29). Esau's anger forced Jacob to flee. Jacob worked for Laban. His wealth increased. Then God commanded him to return to the land of his fathers (Gen. 31:3). God added the promise "I will be with thee." But when Jacob heard that Esau was coming to meet him with an army of 400 men, he was afraid, because Esau had intended to kill him before. Jacob divided his company and sent a generous present to Esau. Then Jacob prayed (Gen. 32:9-12). He put himself into the hands of God. As the presents went on ahead, Jacob stayed with the company. During the night he took further decisive action. Jacob made his whole family cross the Jabbok in keeping with the plan to meet Esau the following day.

V. 24. Jacob was left alone and no doubt felt how terribly he had sinned against his brother. Jacob knew he was helpless and was the object of Esau's vengeance unless the miraculous power of God saved him. Delitzsch says: "In the face of his meeting with Esau it now comes plainly to view that he does not possess the blessing of his birthright without the stain of sin. On that score he is assailed, not only by his own conscience but also by Jehovah Himself, who makes him feel this. But the faith in the innermost part of Jacob breaks through sin and weakness and tribulation, masters the accusation which, as it were, has taken form in this mysterious man and which hurls itself against him, and by reaching on through the hostile attitude of his opponent grasps his mercy and wrests from him anew the blessing threatened with destruction, which now, with the dross removed, cleansed of sin, glorified, he receives as a divine gift; and that as a gift of grace, yet not without being made to feel the powerlessness of his natural condition by the dislocation of his hip in this faith-conquering battle."

Hos. 12:3, 4 describes the inward conflict. The real battle lies in tears of repentance and in the fervent supplication of faith. This night brought out Jacob's true strength. His natural strength had to be defeated. His strength of faith, born of repentance, won the victory.

V. 25. Jacob was not to harbor the idea that his physical strength had made him prevail. Accordingly, the antagonist dislocated Jacob's hip and gave him a permanent limp for the rest of his life.

V. 26. Jacob hangs onto the man, and the man cannot leave. Jacob knows this man was no mere man but God, who had appeared in human form. For he asks a blessing. Jacob can hold the man and get from him his heart's desire. The man implies it and then admits it; and Jacob is quick to realize it and act upon it. It was by faith alone, this wonderful spiritual power with God, that Jacob held the man. Jacob wanted God's blessing, which always has deeds not words alone. Even though Jacob had special revelations at Bethel and Mahanaim, yet his fear of Esau so gripped him that he could find no full assurance for his soul. His bad conscience troubled him when he remembered he had craftily snatched the birthright blessing from Esau. The question now turns from Esau to God. The blessing that Jacob needed and wanted was the complete deliverance of his conscience from the depressing guilt and sense of sin and the possession of the covenant blessing as the full and free gift of God to him.

Vv. 27, 28. The change of names signifies the blessing. Jacob receives the new name Israel, "Wrestler with God" or "Prince of God." Jacob contended not in vain. If he had lost, the new name would be inappropriate. Then, too, by wresting the blessing from God, Israel had also won over Esau and his army. Whoever prevails by repentance, faith, and prayer with God, need fear no man.

Vv. 29-30. This ends the conversation. Jacob knew it was God with whom he had wrestled. His request for the stranger's name may have been prompted by a desire for a still fuller manifestation of God. This would explain the refusal, which would mean that the blessing was enough. V. 30 shows Jacob's understanding that his opponent was God, and it supports our conclusion that Jacob's opponent was the Angel of the Lord, the uncreated angel who is the Son before His incarnation. He is called God here, and He bestows a divine blessing on Jacob. The chief lesson from this historical incident is that persevering faith gains blessing from God.

The Day and Its Theme.—Reminiscere, the Second Sunday in Lent, has as its theme a humble, persistent plea for God's merciful help from a devout, believing heart. The Introit reminds us that God must deliver us from our enemies. The Collect confesses our own weakness: "we have no strength." The Epistle exhorts us to purity of heart, while the Gospel visualizes the determined effort of the spirit of evil to defeat the struggle of faith.

The Goal and Purpose of the Sermon.—The goal of the sermon is to develop a strong faith in the people which will not be rebuffed, but confesses, perseveres, and reveals itself as it grows.

Sins to Be Diagnosed and Remedied.—The sins of Jacob are common sins: lack of strong faith and failure to trust in God to work out our destiny; hence self-seeking and craftiness, with a resultant bad conscience and fear of the enemies.

Opportunities for Explicit Gospel.—Believers who persevere in their faith are the spiritual Israel of the New Testament (Rom. 9:16 ff.; Gal. 4:26; Rev. 3:9). The blessing for Jacob was a relieved conscience and a free gift of promise. God gives all believers the same blessings in our Savior Jesus.

Illustrations and N.T. Parallels.—Jesus' struggle in the Garden of Gethsemane; Paul's strong faith, which through adversity and suffering depended entirely on God's grace; perseverance of the Canaanite woman.

Outline Gain the Faith Which Secures God's Blessing

- I. Lack of faith loses God's blessings
 - A. By separating from God's plan
 - B. By burdening our bad consciences
 - C. By heaping up troubles in this world
 - II. Faith secures God's blessing
 - A. By bringing us to trust completely in God
 - B. By making us really repentant over our sins
 - C. By seeing us through adversity and opposition
 - III. Seek to gain a strong faith
 - A. By recognizing your own weakness
 - B. By turning to God, who alone can bless through Christ Jesus
 - C. By wrestling with your enemies until the assured victory
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