

Isaiah 19 - The Danger of Misplaced Dependence

INTRODUCTION:

Sunday morning. The worship team had finished and the congregation was seated, anxiously awaiting God's Word. But Charles Stanley approached the pulpit that morning without a sermon. No Word from God. Sunday morning. Hundreds of people watching. No sermon. He had studied the Word all throughout the week...Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday...and received no Word from God. Now here he was, nothing to preach.

I don't know about you, but that's the opposite of the situation I hope to find myself in as I enter the ministry. I envision myself as extremely successful as I take on a ministry position in the future. Don't get me wrong, I expect ministry to be a challenge endeavor, but between my education at DTS and my strong work ethic and some good resources at my disposal, I figure that I'll do pretty well. I don't expect to fail. In fact, I am confident that if I am just given the right opportunity, I'll prove myself.

How about you? Are you anxious to take the next step beyond DTS? Are you hoping to prove yourself and the value of your education? Are you confident that success awaits you in your future endeavors?

If so, then I am glad you are here with me today. We need to have this talk. You see, God pulled me aside recently and made me aware of a crucial factor that I needed to be aware of when it comes to success in ministry. He showed me that our mentality, can actually guarantee the opposite result from what we are expecting! This approach to our future ministry may be causing God to thrust us toward failure.

With so much knowledge and so many resources at our disposal, the tendency can be for us to feel prepared to succeed—and rightly so in many respects. But the direction of our trust is what will determine our success or failure, not our knowledge, our resources, or our hard work. Focusing on our knowledge, resources, and hard work in the midst of challenging situations only makes the problem worse when our dependence is misplaced. We need to understand that God actually thrusts us toward failure when our mentality is incorrect in this respect. We need to understand that the direction of our trust is paramount in determining our success or failure. [Pause]

Today I want to challenge you to avoid trusting in your knowledge, resources, or work ethics—to recognize that God crafts life's circumstances in a way that drives us toward dependence upon Him and away from those things. My assertion is that spiritual failure precedes failure in life and ministry. True Failure, is failure to depend on God.

This is a lesson we can learn from Isaiah 19 as it describes Egypt's past devastation and their future deliverance. Through the text, we will see these two events separated by a shift in the direction of their dependence. And we will learn that Failure is unavoidable when dependence is misplaced [1-15], but God is intimately involved in the affairs of those who depend on Him [16-25]. [Repeat]

BODY:

Chapter 19 of Isaiah is an oracle regarding the nation of Egypt, per verse 1. As is often the case in Isaiah, the first fifteen verses describe the devastation of one of Israel's enemies, Egypt. Uniquely, they never describe evil actions for which Egypt is being judged. Rather, the purpose of God's devastation of Egypt is announced twice, at the beginning of each section of the text, first in verse 1 and then again in verse 16. Note the key concept in these verses, trembling. Trembling is what people do when they are without hope in a situation. When there is nowhere to turn. They tremble. Israel trembles in fear when the Lord comes down on Mount Sinai. Isaac trembles before Esau when he realizes that Jacob has stolen the blessing from his eldest son. And Egypt trembles before God, because they recognize that they have nowhere else to turn. That's what God's judgment in verses 1-15 accomplishes. It destroys all the things that Egypt trusts in.

In verse 2, God causes dissension at every level of their society, thwarting the counsel Egypt seeks as they turn to their spiritual leaders. Verse 3 reads, "*and the spirit of the Egyptians within them will be emptied out, and I will confound their counsel; and they will inquire of the idols and the sorcerers, and the mediums and the necromancers.*" Then God thwarts the counsel of Egypt's wise men, giving the Egyptians a harsh ruler in verse 4 and causing the economy of Egypt to crash at every level by drying

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up the Nile in verses 5-10. These events prove the wisdom of Egypt's counselors to be foolish. As verses 13 and 14 read, *"The princes of Zoan have become fools, and the princes of Memphis are deluded; those who are the cornerstones of her tribes have made Egypt stagger. The Lord has mingled within her a spirit of confusion, and they will make Egypt stagger in all its deeds, as a drunken man staggers in his vomit."*

Without unity, under an oppressive ruler, and economically devastated, Egypt trembles. They finally come to a place where all the things they depend on are proved useless. God drives them there because their dependence is misplaced. As the section concludes with a summary of this destroyed dependence in verse 15, *"There will be nothing for Egypt that head or tail, palm branch or reed, may do."* In essence, the prophet is saying that there is NOTHING left for the Egyptians to depend on. [Pause]

The question we must ask from the text at this point is, "If God will do this to an enemy nation when their dependence is misplaced, what can we expect of Him as our Father?" [Pause] Can we really expect to succeed in ministry—to have God work through our human efforts to change lives—if we are depending on our knowledge or resources or hard work, rather than Him? I am pretty sure that God would rather drive us into utter failure than allow us to succeed in this respect. After all, in the New Testament His Spirit drives Jesus, the one who trusts Him the most, into the wilderness to be tempted. He also gives Paul the "thorn in the flesh" to ensure that he relies upon God's strength, rather than his own.

God may choose to put "Murphy's Law" into effect over your ministry, where one thing after another goes poorly. Kinda like that time you got your car back from the repair shop, only to have something else on it break on your drive home. If your church follows the pattern of Egypt, then:

- Counsel will cause dissension: Your staff will look for ministry advice all over the place but no one will be able to agree within the church.
- The leadership will become oppressive: You'll fall under the influence of a harsh elder/bishop/pastor.
- The Congregational economy will crash: Congregants of all statures will lose their jobs and be unable to tithe and major repairs will suddenly be needed to the building.
- Ultimately the leadership will look foolish in the midst of organizational failure.

So before you take that next step into a larger ministry role, you need to ask yourself: where might you be depending on something other than God in your life? You may seek to rely upon your academic training or some dynamic mega-church model, just as Egypt trusted in the wisdom of its spiritual and political leaders, rather than listening for God's direction. As the New Testament attests, God often uses the foolish things of this world to trump the wise. He may wish to proclaim His most impactful message through the garbage man who attends your church, rather than through you. Let Him. Don't forget to set your agenda aside when God prompts you to do so. Let Him work outside of the box, when it seems He desires to do so. Depend on God to provide the direction for your ministry.

You may seek to please a few wealthy congregants in your church because they provide a substantial portion of your church budget, just like Israel was tempted to trust in Egypt's support when their part of the world was in turmoil. Don't let the financial security they provide let them deter you from doing the things that allow the Holy Spirit to move in your congregation and community. Depend on God to provide the finances for your ministry.

Don't make Egypt's mistake. Don't depend on your knowledge, resources, or work ethic to provide success. Those things must always defer to God's guidance. Egypt's devastation was unavoidable because their dependence was misplaced. Our failure is unavoidable when our dependence is misplaced. Nationally, Organizationally, and Individually—when we depend on things other than God, we invite Him to drive us to devastation. God crafts life's circumstances in a way that drives us away from depending on things other than God. Spiritual failure precedes failure in life. True Failure, is failure to depend on God. Failure is unavoidable when dependence is misplaced. [Pause]

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The shock factor of the second half of this chapter cannot be overlooked. While Israel would have expected God's judgment on Egypt, they could not have anticipated the result—that Egypt AND ASSYRIA would one day worship alongside them. This is one of few remarkable, jaw-dropping passages of Scripture that should leave us in utter awe of God's capacity for doing the unexpected and undeserved. And it teaches us that God is intimately involved in the affairs of those who depend on Him. [Repeat]

God's judgment on Egypt has stripped them of their dependence upon everything else, and left them **trembling** before God and His people, as verse 16 and 17 remind us. But with nowhere else to turn, Egypt turns toward God and His people. The repetition of the phrase "in that day" as well as the transition from poetry to prose help distinguish this change in tone. The phrase appears again in verse 18, where Isaiah tells us that the Egyptians adopt the language of God's people in Canaan. Verse 23 speaks of the Egyptians and Assyrians worshipping together. And verse 24 gives each of the three nations a covenant name from the Lord, with Egypt taking the title "my people" that is normally reserved for Israel.

Perhaps most instructive for us however, are verses 19-22, where Egypt experiences deliverance—their pattern of devastation is ended. Read along with me, and let's hear the shift in dependence that ultimately changes Egypt's destination. *"In that day there will be an altar to the LORD in the midst of the land of Egypt, and a pillar to the LORD near its border. It will become a sign and a witness of the LORD of hosts in the land of Egypt; for they will cry to the LORD because of oppressors, and He will send them a Savior and a Champion, and He will deliver them. Thus the LORD will make Himself known to Egypt, and the Egyptians will know the LORD in that day. They will even worship with sacrifice and offering, and will make a vow to the LORD and perform it. The LORD will strike Egypt, striking but healing; so they will return to the LORD, and He will respond to them and will heal them."*

Wow. Doesn't that almost sound as if we are reading a passage in the book of Judges? And yet God is working that pattern for Egypt, rather than Israel. His purpose in devastating them was ultimately redemptive—bringing them to Himself. Egypt—and Assyria (modern day Iraq) will one day worship the Lord on a national scale. In 1979 Iran established an oppressive government sought to impose "pure Islam" on their people. The result of that oppression has been to have many people turn away from Islam after suffering under the cruelty of their government. Some hope the same series of events might also be taking place in Egypt as their government shifts toward imposing a strictly Islamic code upon their citizens. [Pause]

Egypt's story reminds me of the experience of Jim Lovell from the Apollo missions to space. On one of his wartime flight missions, a series of events kept him from being able to find his aircraft carrier. The lights were off on the carrier so that it could avoid detection. His radar had been jammed. Someone else in the area was using the same homing signal frequency. And when he turned on his map light, the cockpit's lighting completely shorted out, making his instruments unreadable. Running low on fuel and lacking instruments, with almost all hope lost, Jim was facing the doom of ejecting from the cockpit, likely giving both the chopper and his life to the sea. And that's when he saw his salvation—a bright green glowing path on the sea. Florescent algae churned up by the carrier's props, leading him straight to his ship. Something he would never had seen, had the lights not shorted out. That's what happened to Egypt. When at last God's judgment darkened all the other options for them to consider, they saw the path home. They saw God.

If dependence is that important to God, then we need to model that dependence personally and organizationally. It needs to be woven into the fabric of who we are and what our church is, so that the attractiveness and enticement of wisdom, resources, and work ethic don't draw us away from God and cause us to be driven toward spiritual failure. My advice to you is, follow Egypt's example and cry out to God. Don't neglect prayer. It is the most powerful, passive expression of our dependence upon God that we can make. It needs to be a both daily discipline for you personally, and for your church collectively. If you are not praying daily, you are probably depending too much on your own means of accomplishing the task God has given you. Prayer has a tendency to remind us to depend on God. It's as good a discipline for us—reminding us to depend on Him, as it a means of ensuring that God hears our pleas. Daniel had three set times of prayer a day for his life. Let's start with one for us, and one for the church body. Round up the staff during the workday if that works for you, or set a meeting time for the congregation. Pray.

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My second applicational thought comes from the context: God is doing something near Israel, not in Israel. Often times, God is working mightily nearby, and we need the encouragement that seeing Him at work in the world provides. My challenge for you is to worship with and support God's people in other gatherings. As a local pastor, interact with other pastors in the area. Support and rejoice with them as God works among their congregation. As a member of the body of Christ, support and rejoice as you watch God at work in the peoples and nations of the world. The example of one nation's change of dependence and deliverance, like Egypt's, might remind you to renew your dependence on Him, as Israel was called to do through Isaiah's prophecy.

When Egypt cried out to God, He sent them a deliverer. If God will do that for those who were once His enemies, how much more will He do for His church when we cry out to Him? When we depend on Him, He will refine our knowledge, supply ample resources, and strengthen us in our hard work to make great advances for the kingdom. He who has already sent us the ultimate deliverer in Jesus Christ is thrilled to empower us as we advance His kingdom. When Egypt gave their whole hearts to worship God, He drew them into an intimate relationship. God is intimately involved in the affairs of those who depend on Him. [Repeat]

CONCLUSION:

Remember that failure is unavoidable when dependence is misplaced. [1-15]

Remember that God is intimately involved in the affairs of those who depend on Him. [16-25]

God crafts life's circumstances in a way that drives us toward dependence upon Him. He usually acts in such a way that we could not have succeeded without His intervention. If we maintain that perspective, we can avoid Egypt's mistake. We can avoid being driven into failure in order to learn that lesson.

When Charles Stanley stepped up to the pulpit that Sunday morning without a sermon, he was not relying upon his own skill or resources. He was relying on God. It was an act of dependence. Charles would be the first to tell you that he had studied hard all that week. He would tell you that he could have written and delivered a sermon, if he had wanted to. He was skilled at writing, and he had more than enough resources to use in putting one together. But he wasn't there to give a speech. He was there to speak God's Word, and God had not yet given him a Word to speak. As he opened his Bible that morning, He felt the Spirit come. And He spoke, a Word from God.

On a rare occasion in Charles' life, God arranged the circumstances to ensure that His servant was still depending on Him. May we also pass this same test.

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