

Introduction

Several years ago, I talked with an ardent Barak Obama supporter who said, **"I'm all ears when Obama speaks."** That's an idiom of course that also applies to God and us. We should be all ears when God speaks through his messengers and that's what I'm going to preach about today. Turn to Isaiah 6:8-13.

Prophets Knew

Isaiah was God's prophet to the nation of Judah from 739 to 680 BC. These verses record his commissioning or call.

Look first at verse 8. God asked, **"Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?"** What He asked wasn't as much a question as it was a commission or call and Isaiah accepted it: **"Here I am. Send me."**

The moment he accepted that call, God, explained to him, in the opening line of verse 9, what it was. The words **"this people"** referred to the Jews who comprised God's chosen nation, Judah. Isaiah was to be God's messenger to them. He was to **"go, and tell"** them.

But tell them what? The answer is **"whatever God revealed."** We see that in verses 11—13. In verse 11, Isaiah asked God, **"How long?"** When will the people of Judah finally listen to and obey you? God answered that their land would be ravaged by war, verse 11, and they themselves exiled to foreign lands, verse 12. But a remnant would survive, verse 13, who, despite being persecuted and oppressed, would listen to and obey Him. Those were all future events, which, history confirms, occurred. That illustrates that everything that God revealed to Isaiah and all the Old Testament prophets was always real or true.

Which shows us what the prophets were. They were those who knew. Remember the difference between beliefs and knowledge. Beliefs are assumptions that certain things are real or true. Knowledge is certainty that they're real or true. In those terms, the prophets weren't just divine messengers who believed. They were messengers who knew.

Pastors Must Know

And so are pastors – or at least they should be. It isn't sufficient for pastors to be those who believe. They must be those who know as well. Congregations, including you, have the right to expect that.

We certainly expect that of others don't we? A man with a malignant brain tumor once explained to me why he chose the neurosurgeon he did. It was because **"he knows as much about the brain as anyone in the country."** Notice he didn't say **"believes"** but **"knows."** Suppose a neurosurgeon holds himself out as one who believes a lot about the brain. Or suppose a mechanic holds himself out as one who believes a lot about cars. None of us would go to either would we? It's imperative to us that neurosurgeons, mechanics, attorneys, tax consultants, computer programmers, and others that we count on, know.

Those others include God's messengers, whether they're prophets or pastors. You should expect and demand that your pastor be one who knows – not just believes but knows as well. He doesn't have the authority he needs to speak and lead if he doesn't. Several years ago, Larry King asked a televangelist if there is life after death. To which he replied, **"I as a Christian hope and believe there is."** That isn't a confidence inducing answer is it? Hoping and believing don't give him nearly the authority on the subject that knowing does. Pastors must have knowledge in order to speak to and lead others.

But what is it that they should know? Several months ago, Rich Wardle asked me who is the only player on a losing team to win the World Series Most Valuable Player Award? I answered, **"Bobby Richardson of the New York Yankees in 1960"** and that's true. I know many such things about baseball, too many in fact according to my wife. But that obviously isn't what pastors should know because it doesn't matter.

Notice what Isaiah knew in verses 11-13 – things that were vitally relevant to the people of Judah. And that's what pastors should know – the things that are vitally relevant to people. Their field of knowledge should be real life under God. They need to possess knowledge about

God, the resurrection of Jesus, the Bible, criticism, sex, influencing people for good, overcoming evil, looks, dress, and more. I know, for instance, that casual sex is an oxymoron. I don't just believe that. I know it. Pastors' field of knowledge should be real life under God.

Pastors Must Tell What They Know

But it isn't enough for pastors to know. Like prophets, in verse 9, they must tell as well. They must communicate the fundamental truths of real life under God. And they must communicate them as matters of knowledge when they are. In last week's sermon, I said, "**In my view (in my opinion), we should fast once a week at least.**" I communicated that as a matter of belief. But I didn't say "**in my view**" about other things. I communicated them as matters of knowledge.

Most pastors and congregations think that preaching and teaching have three objectives. It's getting Christians to believe, commit to, and profess things. But achieving those objectives requires manipulating their feelings and actions. So that's what pastors do. One televangelist, for instance, has an organist playing music in the background as he's speaking. The music varies according to the emotions and moods trying to be generated, just as it does in movies. Or a pastor I know has highly charged altar calls that last until enough people have come forward. Those pastors manipulate people to believe, commit, and profess.

But doing that is detrimental. Manipulation produces Christians who commit to and profess things for which they have no serious vision or motivation. Their "faith" is rooted in feeling and will power alone. That in turn makes it a drag on their lives, something that frustrates and/or exhausts them. I know that because I've been there and done that on both sides, as pastor and parishioner.

Three lines in verse 10 reveal what the job of prophets, and pastors, is. It's to get people to "**see with their eyes,**" "**hear with their ears,**" and "**understand with their hearts.**" Those lines are about knowing. The job of pastors isn't to get people to believe, commit to, or

profess things. It's to get them to know things. Passion (vision and motivation) comes from reality. So that's what pastors should do, define reality. They should present knowledge as knowledge - help people understand and come to know. They should then leave any results beyond that to the supernatural work of God's word and the Holy Spirit in those people. That is the responsibility of pastors.

Ears that Don't Hear

Now let's examine what the responsibility of the congregation, the hearers, is. The hearers in Isaiah's case were the people of Judah, who were, on the whole, in a backslidden condition. They were a wicked and obstinate people living godless lives.

That explains why God instructed Isaiah to tell them in verse 9, **"Keep on listening but do not perceive; keep on looking, but do not understand."** That statement is a rhetorical device called irony. When I finished taking the three-day bar exam years ago, my wife asked me how it was. **"It was a snap,"** I replied. I meant of course just that opposite of what I said, that it was incredibly hard. I was being ironic. Irony is a rhetorical device in which the speaker communicates something by saying the opposite of what he or she means. That's what God was using here in verse 9. He wanted the people of Judah to listen and perceive, to look and understand. But they were so stubborn He knew they wouldn't. They had ears that didn't hear and eyes that didn't see the truth. So, He used irony to drive home that very point to them.

All Ears

He doing so reveals what the responsibility of hearers is when God's messengers speak. They must listen and perceive; look and understand. They must be **"all ears"** in other words. Being all ears means three things of us, each of which I want to explain.

First, it means that we want to know.

Many people don't know things they very well could know because

they don't want to. It's called avoidance. They actually avoid knowledge so they won't have to deal with the responsibilities or upset that knowledge often brings. To know what we can know, therefore, we must first of all want to know it. That is especially so when it comes to our real life under God.

A prosperous Christian businessman and his pastor were discussing how God measures generosity. The pastor said it's by how much of our money we keep. The businessman said it's by how much we give, a less stringent standard. The pastor has done the math, has thoroughly studied what Scripture says about the issue, and began to tell the businessman what he knew. But he cut him off and said: **"You have your opinion. I have mine. Let's leave it at that."** The businessman could have known how God judges generosity by listening to the pastor. But he didn't want to know and so didn't. To be all ears means that we want to know.

It means a second thing. We recognize that it's essential to know. I mean by that essential to our faith.

Many Christians view knowledge as separate from and inessential to faith. Faith to them is a kind of spiritual struggle. The struggle is to maintain belief in and commitment to God and His kingdom with no support from knowledge, or perhaps even against it. A woman once commented to me how heroic a certain biology teacher is to maintain his Christian faith in the face of evolution. Some Christians say, **"just put your hands over your eyes and believe."** She apparently thought that's what the biology teacher was doing. But there isn't anything heroic about that. It's ignorant and even dangerous instead.

The truth is that knowledge is essential to faith. Yes, faith is a gift of God. But as Colossians 1:9 makes clear, knowledge can be as well. And besides, knowledge is a support to faith. I used to believe, assume, Jesus is the smartest person who ever lived. I now know, am certain, that He is. Which makes me far more committed in doing and far bolder in sharing what He says. The more I know, the stronger my faith in God

and His kingdom at hand is. And the stronger that faith is, the more devotedly I live and witness. Knowledge is essential to faith. Recognizing that is directly related to the first requirement because it makes us want to know.

Being all ears means a third thing. We act to know. We do that by thinking deeply and carefully about what is said. This is where a lot of people jump ship because they believe they can't think deeply and carefully. If that's you, listen to what C.S. Lewis wrote: **"God has room for people with very little sense, but He wants everyone to use what sense they have."** He was right. That's all God expects, that you think as deeply and carefully as you can about what is said.

Dallas Willard explains specifically what that means: **"Think matters out to the end – follow the argument – in a carefully attentive and thorough manner."** I'd get more specific. We need to think and do three things: (1) interpret what is said; (2) determine if what is said is true; and (3) identify the implications of what is said.

Let's apply those three things to what I preached last week. First, interpret what I said. Jesus expects His followers to fast on a regular basis. Second, determine if what I said is true. Study the two texts I preached from and others to determine if they teach that. And third, identify the implications of what I said. If we fast, we need to continue fasting. If we don't fast, we need to start. We will do those three things of course only if we want to know the truth about fasting.

Conclusion

I close with a commercial that I saw years ago. A teacher asks a little girl, Ann, to recite the alphabet. She says, **"A, B, C, D, E, F . . . E, F . . . E.F. Hutton."** Whereupon the class quickly gathers around her. Another girl then declares, **"When E.F. Hutton talks, people listen."** That's the way it should be with God and us. Whether it's through the Bible, the Holy Spirit, or human messengers, when God talks, we should listen. We should be all ears, in other words, when God speaks.