

## REWARDING A FAITHFUL ASSISTANT

**Today's Text:** Jeremiah Chap. 45

### Extracts:

The word that Jeremiah the prophet spoke to Baruch the son of Neriah, after he had written these words in a book, ... saying, "thus says the Lord, the God of Israel to you, O Baruch: You said, 'Woe is me now! For the Lord has added grief to my sorrow. I fainted in my sighing, and I find no rest.' Thus, you shall say to him ... 'Do you seek great things for yourself? Do not seek them; for behold, I will bring adversity on all flesh,' says the Lord. 'But I will give your life to you as a prize in all places, wherever you go'" [Jer. 45: 1, 2, 3, 5]

*During my recent trans-Atlantic travel by British Airways, I had the privilege to watch the movie, **The Devil Wears Prada** (2006). It is about a fashion editor in a major magazine who was a self-centred, self-seeking boss. She terrorized her assistants with her uncaring attitude. For example, on one occasion when a new assistant was reporting her inability to obtain the document that the editor badly and urgently needed, she responded, "The details of your incompetence do not interest me!" The young assistant who herself was looking for a ladder with which to climb to the top in the fashion industry was a budding journalist. She knew next to nothing about fashion and had in fact never read the magazine she was now working for. Her boss tried her usual antics on the new self-willed assistant in an attempt to get her to quit, but they did not work. By the time that the young assistant realized what meeting her boss's demands was doing to herself, she had ruined her valuable relationships with her family, boyfriend and close friends.*

*The fashion editor did not care about her assistants and, therefore, she had no plans to develop them. In your own sphere of influence, you have assistants. They may be your immediate deputies, subordinates or secretaries. They could be younger people that you are mentoring. They could be your domestic help. All of them are hopefully helping you to succeed in your work. What plans do you have for their future? Do you know that that master-servant relationship will one day end? What parting gift will you be proud to pass on?*

*In today's study, Baruch, the faithful scribe who wrote down all of prophet Jeremiah's messages from God, was worried about his future after Jeremiah. Let us find out how his case was handled and the lessons that we can learn from it.*

## 1. Why some bosses look uncaring

If you ever find yourself in a position to supervise the work of others and command their obedience, you are a boss. In some cases, you may have the power to reward and punish such assistants. In other words, you have the authority to hire or pay their wages or promote them or recommend them for same. When they misbehave or they work below expectation, you have the authority to punish them, such as by firing. At the same time, you may be an assistant to a higher boss. Even where you are the President of the country or CEO (Chief Executive Officer) of a business or organization or department, you are still accountable to a higher authority. God requires believers to be subject to those who have authority over them because “the authorities that exist are appointed by God (and) whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God” [Rom. 13: 1-2]. To whom much is given, much is expected. If bosses need the support and cooperation of their assistants to achieve their own set targets, what plans do they in turn have for assistants who have put in dedicated and faithful service?

Towards the end of the movie that we had earlier referred to (*The Devil Wears Prada*), after the second assistant had rediscovered herself and had the audacity to resign, her boss gave her a parting hand shake and said, “I guess we are two of a kind!” Was that sarcasm or a compliment? Was that all she could do for an assistant who had given her such faithful service? Why do some bosses seem uncaring?

There are several possible explanations, some of which are as follows:

### a) *The bosses may be patently selfish!*

Some bosses are only users. They tend to see their assistants as unfeeling ladders to be climbed to success. They hardly care about other people’s feelings because they are fully consumed by self-centredness and selfish pursuits. They hardly know that they are hurting others. They are abusive and unappreciative! When success comes, they claim all the credit and benefits. When failure knocks, they put the blame on everyone else but themselves. If they do not have the limelight, then nobody else should! They are ruled by envy.

Take the case of Saul when he was the king of Israel. After David had killed the Philistine giant, Goliath, the king brought him into the palace as captain over some of his men of war [1 Sam. 18: 2, 5]. David served him faithfully and wisely. However, as they were returning from war, the women sang David’s praises above the king’s. It displeased him and he said, “They have ascribed to David tens of thousands, and to me they have ascribed only thousands. Now what more can he have but the kingdom?” From that day, he marked David for closer scrutiny [vv. 6-9].

Some bosses do the same thing by going after the long-term interests of the assistants they feel threaten them. They frustrate them, deny them pay raises or promotion or even sabotage their work so as to put them in trouble!

b) *The problem may be with their assistants!*

Some bosses may be quite good in that they are always thinking of how to mentor their assistants, to make them better in life. At the same time, the assistants are ambitious and impatient. All they think about is how to displace the boss so that they can take over! Such people withhold vital information from their bosses so as to render them ineffective or discredited. They go behind their bosses' backs to give them a bad name.

A good example is Gehazi, the servant of Elisha the prophet. Elisha had been the faithful servant of Elijah. When his master was about to be taken into heaven by a whirlwind, Elisha prayed for a double portion of Elijah's spirit. His prayer was answered [2 Kgs 2: 1-14]. So, Elisha inherited his master's prophetic ministry and did much more than his master before him. Apparently, he began to groom Gehazi to succeed him. That was not to be because Gehazi had his ambitions. After God had healed Naaman of leprosy through Elisha, the Syrian army general offered material rewards which the prophet flatly turned down. However, Gehazi went behind Elisha's back and lied to Naaman that his master had just received some visitors whom he needed to give money and clothing. Naaman gladly obliged him and Gehazi hid the ill-gotten wealth away in his house. The prophet only knew about it because God had shown it to him [2 Kgs 5: 1-26]. You can imagine the bad impression of Elisha that Naaman carried back to Syria, his country!

Many young assistant pastors have rushed to set up their own churches, claiming to have received the unction of the Holy Spirit. Many young apprentices have rushed to set up their own businesses before they have received enough training from their masters. In developing countries, many young professionals in law, medicine, engineering and accountancy (among others) have rushed to set up practice when they have hardly had enough experience in paid and supervised employment. Underlying their moves in each case is a desire for pecuniary gains. Such assistants can hardly be loyal to their bosses and they themselves usually make bad bosses because they may not trust their assistants.

c) *The matter may be out of the bosses' control*

It is possible that the matter of how to reward a faithful servant is out of the control of the boss. For example, a serving Pope (the head of the Roman Catholic Church) has no say in the appointment of his successor.

Therefore, no matter how highly he may regard his Cardinal assistants, he cannot make any of them his successor.

It is even more so if God himself is in charge of the matter. For example, when it was time for Moses to die, God commanded him to appoint Joshua as his successor [**Deut. 31: 14**]. However, Joshua died without a successor. After his death, the children of Israel asked God to give them a leader against the Canaanites. God chose Judah [**Judg. 1: 1-2**]. As successful as Paul's ministry was, there is no evidence that he handed over to one single person. When God has a hand in the matter, we may not be able to know what constitutes an appropriate reward for a faithful servant.

Let us examine which of the forgoing circumstances faced Jeremiah and his scribe, Baruch.

## 2. What script for the scribe?

Baruch was prophet Jeremiah's secretary or scribe who "wrote on a scroll of a book, at the instruction of Jeremiah, all the words of the Lord, which He had spoken to him" [**Jer. 36: 1-4**]. Given the authoritative tone of the book of Jeremiah, some people once asked Baruch, "Tell us now, how did you write these words, at his instruction?" Baruch replied, "He proclaimed with his mouth all those words to me, and I wrote them with ink in the book" [**vv. 17, 18**]. That suggests that he was very close to Jeremiah. When the prophet suffered, so did his secretary. For example, at one stage, Jeremiah dictated a message and sent Baruch to go and read it to king Jehoiakim and leaders in the temple. After the message had been read to the king, he cut the scroll into pieces and cast it into the fire "until all the scroll was consumed in the fire that was on the hearth" [**Jer. 36: 10-23**]. Then, the king's men tried to seize Baruch and Jeremiah, "but the Lord hid them" [**v. 26**]. Therefore, we can appreciate Baruch's significant contribution to the success of Jeremiah's prophetic ministry.

Our story today takes place in the evening of Jeremiah's ministry. God's word through Jeremiah had been fulfilled, in that the king and his disobedient subjects had been taken into exile in Babylon, and the remnants were afraid for their future [**Jer. Chaps. 39-42**]. After Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon had sacked Jerusalem, he charged the captain of the guard concerning Jeremiah, "Take him and look after him, and do him no harm, but do to him just as he says to you." [**Jer. 39: 11-12**]. The said captain set Jeremiah free and told him, "I free you this day from the chains that were on your hand. If it seems good to you to come with me to Babylon, come and I will look after you. (Otherwise), remain here (and) wherever it seems good and convenient for you to go, go there." The captain gave Jeremiah rations and a gift and let him go. Then, he went to Mizpah and lived among the remnants [**vv. 4-6**].

We know that Jeremiah had no family because God had forbidden him to marry and have children [**Jer. 16: 1-2**]. Did Jeremiah move alone to Mizpah or with his scribe? We cannot say. However, we know that Baruch was genuinely concerned about his future. Presumably in his prayers to God, he had said, “Woe is me now! For the Lord has added grief to my sorrow. I fainted in my sighing, and I find no rest” [**Jer. 45: 3**]. In response, God sent Jeremiah to tell Baruch, “Do you seek great things for yourself? Do not seek them; for behold, I will bring adversity on all flesh. ... But *I will give your life to you as a prize in all places, wherever you go*” [v. 5].

Two critical points should be noted here. First, Baruch’s reward for his faithful service to Jeremiah came from Jeremiah’s boss, God. In the words of Jesus Christ, “He who receives a prophet in the name of a prophet shall receive a prophet’s reward” [**Matt. 10: 41**]. Having served Jeremiah faithfully, Baruch would receive Jeremiah’s reward. That tallies with the promise of Jesus when He assured, “If anyone serves Me, him My Father will honour” [**Jn 12: 26**]. The second point has to do with the nature of the reward. God told Baruch not to place any premium on material rewards which cannot satisfy. Instead, He was giving him life as a prize everywhere he went.

Is ‘prize’ as used here a reward or an award? A reward is like a wage, that is, payment for service rendered. An award is a gift, depending on the benevolence of the giver. In the story, it was at the benevolence of God to give Baruch life and protection in place of material well-being, presumably his heart’s desire. When Peter asked Jesus what was the disciples’ reward for forsaking all in order to follow Him, He replied, “Everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My name’s sake, shall receive a hundredfold, *and inherit eternal life*” [**Matt. 19: 27-29**]. Therefore, *Baruch’s reward was God’s gift, which was much beyond what Jeremiah could have offered him.*

### **3. Conclusion: imitate Jesus, your Master!**

In whatever position you find yourself, use it to glorify God. If you are a boss, you are like a shepherd. Would you rather be the hireling who “does not care about the sheep” or the good shepherd who knows the sheep and they know him/her [**Jn 10: 13, 14**]? Remember, whatsoever you do for the least of God’s children, you have done for Him [**Matt. 25: 40**]. Therefore, the only way to be a good boss is to imitate your Master, Jesus Himself. Each time you have to relate to your assistants, ask yourself, “What would Jesus have done in my circumstance?”

When He selected His 12 apostles, they were uncouth little-minded folks from around the Sea of Galilee. In three short years, He trained them to be fishers of men. On His ascension into heaven, He empowered them by the Holy Spirit to spread the gospel abroad. He led them by examples. To teach them humility, for

example, He washed their feet. In deed, His relationship with His assistants is summarized in the following words, “No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing, but I have called you friends, for all things that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you” [Jn 15: 15].

You can relate to your assistants in like manner. For example, try out *today* the following skills:

- Learn to say ‘Thank you!

You owe them compliments and appreciation each time you receive that cup of coffee, that recorded message, that written or verbal report, and so on. Look at some of Paul’s letters. He never failed to compliment those who had helped him and his ministry. For example, he called Priscilla and her husband, Aquila, “my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, who risked their own necks for my life, *to whom not only I give thanks but also all the churches of the Gentiles.*” He asked the saints in Rome to assist a sister in the Lord, Phoebe, “in whatever business she has need of you, for in deed she has been a helper of many and of myself also” [Rom. 16: 1-4]. He affectionately called Luke, his traveling companion and writer of the book of Acts, “the beloved physician” [Col. 4; 14]. When last did you say one nice thing to or about your assistants?

- Mentor your assistants

Those assistants under you may not remain “inferior’ to you for life. In due course, you will need their help when they will have grown big in their chosen spheres of influence. Ask parents or teachers about their wards! Therefore, while the privilege lasts, take interest in helping your assistants to deal with official and personal challenges. Take interest in their welfare and career development. Give them what is their due. Inspire them. Remember, your assistants are other people’s children or parents. As you help other people’s parents and children, so will God provide for your own family members in due course, for in the words of Jesus, “if you have not been faithful in what is another man’s, who will give you what is your own?” [Lk 16: 12].

As a boss, you may not have all it takes to reward your assistant (s). However, if you see your position as a ministry through which to glorify God, He will bless the assistants that you bless, just as He did for Baruch on behalf of Jeremiah. That is the same way that Christ will welcome you, His faithful servant, to heaven one of these days when God finally calls you home.