

July 5, 2015 – Ezekiel 2:1-3:3 (Epistle: 2 Corinthians 12:1-10 Gospel: Mark 6:1-13)

God Sends Us to Speak His Bittersweet Word

What gives you the right to tell me what I should or shouldn't be doing? That can be the response we get when we try to share what God's word says with someone. It may lead us to wonder, what does give us the right? The call of Ezekiel to his ministry as the Lord's prophet gives us the answer.

Ezekiel's call is similar to the one Isaiah received. When the LORD called Isaiah to be His prophet, He appeared to Isaiah in the temple surrounded by the seraphs (see Isaiah 6). The Lord also appeared to Ezekiel when He called him. Ezekiel's vision of the Lord with the four cherubs and the four wheels is recorded in chapter 1. There Ezekiel tells us that when he saw "*the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord*" he fell on his face (Ezekiel 1:28). That is why chapter 2 opens with the LORD telling Ezekiel, "*stand on your feet*" (v. 1).

Ezekiel was a priest who lived among the captive Israelites in Babylon (which is also called the land of the Chaldeans) (Ezekiel 1:1, 3) some hundred years after the time of Isaiah. Here in chapter 2 God calls Ezekiel to go and speak His word to the people. The word that God gave Ezekiel to share was bittersweet, and the same is true of the word that God gives us to share as He sends us to be His witnesses and to make disciples.

There are a number of similarities between what God called Ezekiel to do and what God has called us to do. Ezekiel was sent by God. While we have not received a direct commission from the mouth of God in a vision, as Ezekiel did, we have Jesus' instructions to go and make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:20) and to be His witnesses to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8) and preach the gospel to every creature (Mark 16:15). We are no less sent by God than was Ezekiel. Instead of a vision, God sends us through His word that has been written for us in the Bible.

Ezekiel was sent to speak God's words. He was sent to say: "*Thus says the Lord God*" (v. 4). God told him, "*You shall speak My words to them*" (v. 7). That's very important. Ezekiel was not to bring his own words to the people, but the word of God. In the same way, we are sent to speak God's word to the world. While we do not have a message from God through direct revelation, we have the revealed, inspired word of God recorded for us in the Bible for us to share with the world. The word that we speak is also the word of the LORD.

When you read the Old Testament, you see the phrase "*Thus says the Lord*" over and over again followed by a direct message from God¹. Ezekiel could say: "*Thus says the Lord*" because the Lord sent him and gave him the words to say. When we share what the Bible says, we too can say, "*Thus says the Lord*", because we too are speaking God's word. Thus says the LORD: "You have sinned against me." Thus says the LORD: "I forgive you all your sins because I sent My own Son as the perfect sacrifice for your sin."

The LORD here warns Ezekiel: "*I am sending you...to a rebellious nation that has rebelled against Me; they and their fathers have transgressed against Me to this very day. For they are impudent and stubborn children*" (vv. 3-4). Twice more He tells Ezekiel that the people are rebellious (vv. 5, 7). Is that any different from us? We too are sent to a rebellious people, for each of us by nature rebel against God. We all have turned away from God and followed our own way.

1. there 418 occurrences of this phrase in the New Kings James Version

And we all have sinful flesh that rebels against God and His word. And the people with whom we will share God's word are no different.

But God tells Ezekiel: "*do not be afraid of them nor be afraid of their words*" (v. 6). And that is the same thing that God tells us. We should not be afraid because it is *God* who sends us with *His* word. God repeats the command "*do not be afraid of their words*" and then adds: "*or [be] dismayed by their looks*" (v. 6). Dismayed by their looks? Do words and looks seem to be things that we – or Ezekiel – should worry about? You probably know the nursery rhyme: "Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never harm me." So why should we care about their words or their looks?

But isn't that what we are so often worried about? Isn't that why it is often so much easier not to share what God's word says than to risk getting a dirty look or having someone say something against us? Not only that, we are often worried what people might *think*, much less do or say. We are not alone in this. Evidently Ezekiel was prone to this fear as well, as God here encourages him not to be afraid of the people's looks or words. And God encourages us as well to not be afraid.

On the news we see that it can be much more than harsh words and looks that we may receive from rebellious people. We hear of and see various persecutions and beheadings that Christians around the world experience. Ezekiel also faced more than just word and looks. God told him, "*though briars and thorns are with you and you dwell among scorpions; do not be afraid...*" (v. 6). God was with Ezekiel and He is with us also. "*So we may boldly say: 'The Lord is my helper; I will not fear. What can man do to me?'*" (Hebrews 13:6, see also Psalm 56:11, 118:6).

In this commission, God twice tells Ezekiel something that I find very interesting. In verse 5 He says, "*As for them, whether they hear or whether they refuse...yet they will know that a prophet has been among them.*" And in v. 7 God says, "*You shall speak My words to them, whether they hear or whether they refuse.*" No matter what the response would be, Ezekiel was still to go to the people and proclaim God's word. The same is true for us. People may listen to us or they may refuse to hear what God has to say, but God still wants us to tell them what He has done for them in Jesus Christ.

This also shows that neither Ezekiel nor we are responsible for making people listen. We are to speak God's word whether people hear or refuse to hear. Of course we are not to share God's word in an arrogant or condescending manner. We are to speak the truth in love. But the reception we get depends not on our eloquence (or lack there of) but on the stubbornness of the hearers and on God opening their ears.

But still we may be reluctant at times to speak God's word. What God tells Ezekiel to do here can help us as well. He tells Ezekiel, "*Open your mouth and eat what I give you*" (v. 8). Ezekiel then saw God offering him a scroll of a book with writing on the inside and out. And God said, "*Son of man, eat what you find; eat this scroll, and go, speak to the house of Israel*" (3:1). Eating the scroll was preparation for Ezekiel's mission. God told him, "*Son of man, feed your belly, and fill your stomach with this scroll that I give you*" (v. 3:3). This scroll was a visual manifestation of the word of God given to Ezekiel. He was to fill himself with God's word so that he could then speak it to the people.

And Ezekiel wasn't the only one. The prophet Jeremiah said, "*Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart, for I am called by your name, O Lord, God of hosts*" (Jeremiah 15:16). The Apostle John records the following in Revelation 10:8-11: "*Then the voice which I heard from heaven spoke to me again and said, 'Go, take the little book which is open in the hand of the angel who stands on the sea and on the*

earth. So I went to the angel and said to him, 'Give me the little book.' And he said to me, 'Take and eat it; and it will make your stomach bitter, but it will be as sweet as honey in your mouth.' Then I took the little book out of the angel's hand and ate it, and it was as sweet as honey in my mouth. But when I had eaten it, my stomach became bitter. And he said to me, 'You must prophesy again about many peoples, nations, tongues, and kings.'" Here again we see that "feasting" on God's word is what equips us to share God's word.

And that is what you do each week when you go to church and hear the scripture readings and listen to the sermon. That is what you do when you attend a Bible study, and read the Bible throughout the week. You are "filling you stomach" with God's word.

This is a rather interesting image, isn't it? It shows how important hearing and reading God's word really is. It is as important as eating. Remember what Jesus said when He was tempted by the devil to turn the stones into bread. He said, "*Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God*" (Matthew 4:4). A constant diet of God's word will give us life and enable us to faithfully speak His word. Just as you do not eat one big meal on Sunday and then eat nothing the rest of the week, in the same way it is good to continually feed yourself on God's word.

When Ezekiel ate the scroll he said, "*it was in my mouth like honey in sweetness*" (v. 3:3) That is the same thing that the Apostle John reported – it was as sweet as honey in his mouth (Revelation 10:10). But John also found that it was bitter in his stomach. Ezekiel here does not say anything about it being bitter, but he says that a bitter message of "*lamentations and mourning and woe*" was written on the scroll (v. 10).

We, too, share a message that is both sweet and bitter. It is bitter, because God's word tells us that we have all sinned and fall short of the eternal glory of heaven. There is no one righteous, no one who does good (Romans 3:10-12). And our sin brings us death – both physical death, and, after that, eternal everlasting death in hell.

It is sweet because it tells us that God loved the world so much that He send His only begotten Son to take care of our sin by suffering and dying in our place on the cross. Because of Jesus' sacrificial death and the fact that He rose from the dead, God declares you "not guilty" and welcomes you to His eternal glory in heaven.

But even the bitter message of the law, which condemns our sin, is sweet to a believer, as the scroll with lamentations and mourning and woe was sweet to Ezekiel. Our new man delights in the law of the Lord (Psalm 1:2, 119:174). When someone points out our sin, we should be happy that God is calling us to stop doing something that offends Him. God's law gives us ammunition to put to death the deeds of our sinful flesh by the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:13). It reminds the new creation within us how God wants us to live and shows us how to thank God for the indescribable gift of salvation we have through His Son.

But to those who are perishing, even the sweet message of the gospel – that we are saved through Jesus' life, death and resurrection, not by anything that we do – can be bitter (2 Corinthians 2:14-16). It requires a person to acknowledge that they have sinned against God and that they are dead in their trespasses and sins (Ephesians 2:1), and can do nothing save themselves.

Given how bitter the world finds this message, our mission can seem hopeless, but remember we are to go "*whether they hear or whether they refuse to hear*" (v. 5, 7), because the power is not us, but in God's word. We see this demonstrated here so beautifully in Ezekiel's call.

There those who argue that if God commands us to do something, that must mean that we are able do what He asks, otherwise God is telling to do something impossible, and why would He

do that? Jesus said, “*Repent, and believe in the gospel*” (Mark 1:15). Is that something we, ourselves, can do? As I said, by nature we are dead in our trespasses and sins, and a dead person cannot do anything. Jesus Himself said: “*no one can come to Me unless it has been granted to him by My Father*” (John 6:65). We cannot, by our selves, repent and believe. So how can Jesus tell us to do just that?

The answer is that the power is in God’s word – the power is in the command. At the beginning of chapter 2 Ezekiel is flat on his face before the Lord because he know that he is sinful and cannot stand before the Lord. God commanded him: “*Son of man, stand on your feet*” (v. 1). Does Ezekiel obey? He tells us: “*Then the Spirit entered me when He spoke to me, and set me on my feet*” (v. 2). Because Ezekiel himself could not stand before God, with the command God gave the power and ability to carry it out.

We also see this with the scroll. God told Ezekiel, “*eat what I give you*” (v. 8) and “*eat what you find; eat this scroll*” (v. 3:1). What does Ezekiel say? “*So I opened my mouth, and He caused me to eat that scroll*” (v. 3:2). Again, God was the one who was acting. With the command to eat, God caused Ezekiel to eat.

We often talk about the word of God being living and powerful (Hebrews 4:12), but here we see that power in action. The same power that allowed Ezekiel to stand before God, allows us to stand before God. The same power that allowed Ezekiel to believe and trust in God’s salvation, allows us to believe and trust in Jesus. The same power that was in the words Ezekiel spoke is in the words that we speak from God.

So fill yourself with God’s word. Share God’s word without being worrying if a person will hear or refuse to hear. Do not be afraid of their words or looks or whatever else they may do, because God has sent you. Remember that the power is in His word and it will accomplish that for which He sends it.

May God enable us to faithfully and confidently speak His word, for it is He who has placed His Word in us.

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