
WHETHER THEY LISTEN OR NOT

Ezekiel 2:1-3:4

July 11, 2021

I can paint a wall, but I can't paint a picture. I have seen quite a few episodes of Bob Ross, but I can't make happy little trees appear next to a happy little stream, so I don't. If you need help painting a wall, I am your man. If you need a portrait painted, well, don't even bother asking because I won't even try. Today we meet an unqualified man who was given a nearly impossible task, but was empowered by the Lord to do it. Let's talk about a man named Ezekiel.

As the kingdom of Assyria faded as a world power in around 650 B.C., it left the door open for a new world power to enter the scene. This was the nation of Babylon. Babylon's arch enemy after defeating Assyria was Egypt and if you know your world geography, you know that in between Babylon and Egypt is a small nation called Judah. Babylon finally defeated Egypt in the battle of Carchemish and used the opportunity to clean up on the rest of the people in the area, including Judah in 605 B.C. This is when our friend Daniel of lion's den fame was taken as a captive to Babylon. In the years that followed, foolish kings of Judah tried to free themselves from Babylonian rule only to be crushed time after time. It was after one of these uprisings that a man named Ezekiel was taken captive to Babylon as well. The rest of the nation of Judah would join him there about ten years later.

That is the historians view of world events of the day, but we have the privilege of God's Word. There God reveals to us what is really happening behind the scenes. God was using the nation of Babylon to discipline his people. In the books of prophets like Isaiah, we learn that God's people were disloyal to him and rebellious. They worshipped the false gods of the nations around them. They were not kind to the poor and the widow. If they did not repent and turn back to him, then they would be taken from the land God promised to Abraham's descendants and they would be disciplined for their sin. Ezekiel lived through that discipline.

God had plans for Ezekiel during the Babylonian exile. In the reading today, God tells Ezekiel his plans. After giving Ezekiel an amazing vision which dropped Ezekiel onto his face on the ground in awe and reverence, God spoke to him. "Son of man, stand up on your feet, and I will speak with you." God is calling Ezekiel to be a prophet, him out of all the people in exile, but God wants him to remember something. Though he was receiving an amazing privilege, he was still a human being. He was a sinful human descended from Adam and on who inherited Adam's sin and was a sinner in his own right. He was a frail human being who brought nothing but weakness to the task. Yet God would strengthen him for the work by the Holy Spirit.

God called Ezekiel to go to the people of Israel and tell them what God says. It sounds easy, but it was going to be a very difficult task for this reason. The people had learned nothing from the whole ordeal of being conquered and taken captive. The Israelites were in Babylon because they were disloyal, brazen-faced and hard-hearted. When Ezekiel went to them with God's Word, they would be disloyal, brazen-faced, and hard-hearted. About 900 years before, after God rescued the nation of Israel from slavery in Egypt, the people stood before God at Mount Sinai and promised to be faithful to God, but throughout the years to follow, most were exactly as Ezekiel describes them, disloyal, brazen-faced, and hard hearted. God says their fathers have rebelled against me and their children follow in the parent's footsteps.

2600 years hasn't changed mankind for the better. You and I act like the children of our Israelite fathers more than we would like to admit. God has called us in faith to be loyal and faithful to him, yet we struggle. What idols pop up in your life and become more important to you than God? What is more important to you than God? What is it that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God? What is it that is so central and essential to your life that if you should lose it, your life would feel hardly worth living? We all have them and struggle to keep God above them. What sin, if called out because of it would cause you to go brazen-faced. It would cause your face muscles to go taught and your teeth to clench as you exclaim, "Who are you to judge me?" What part of your life or life-style would cause your neck to go stiff if you were challenged on it? We all have them. We all struggle with them because we are every bit as much the son of man as Ezekiel and any of the other Israelites.

The amazing thing about God's call to Ezekiel is that he even makes it at all. Why should God give any time or thought to those who, generation after generation, were disloyal to him and hard-hearted and stiff-necked? He does it because he is faithful to his promise. He told Abraham that one of his descendants would be a blessing to all the people of the world. He promised that a son of Jacob would rule over all the world in grace and peace. He promised that one of David's descendants would come and rule forever. God promised that a Savior would be born from Israel. God loved the people he had chosen and God would be faithful to the promise to send the Savior of the world from them. My brothers and sisters, God's faithfulness to his people in Ezekiel's day means our salvation. This is your salvation history and we rejoice in God's faithfulness to his promise.

This doesn't mean Ezekiel's job would be easy. When he speaks God's Word to the people he would receive unkind looks. He would hear unkind words. It would be like he was stuck in a briar patch or be surrounded by scorpions, but would sting him with their thorns and stingers. Ezekiel is not to be intimidated by them or stop speaking God's Word because of the pain and difficulty. This wouldn't happen to Ezekiel only. Look at Jesus himself in the gospel reading. There the people of his hometown took offense to him and rejected his message.

In a wonderful picture, Ezekiel saw a hand stretched toward him with a scroll in it. The scroll was unrolled and the words on it were words of laments, groaning and woe. Sometimes what God's Word has to say to us isn't pleasing. It points out our sin. It condemns our unfaithfulness. It tells us that rejection of God means an eternity in the suffering of hell. But this message of God's law is needed to call us to repentance and away from our rebellious, brazen-faced, hard-heartedness. It was a message that the Israelites needed to hear and so do we.

God told Ezekiel to eat the scroll, so Ezekiel opened his mouth and ate the scroll. This scroll filled with laments, groaning and woe tasted sweet as honey in his mouth. When we eat something, it becomes a part of us. For Ezekiel, God's Word would be his message. Ezekiel received God's message and would speak that message to others. Whenever we receive God's Word by the power of the Holy Spirit, what was bitter to us becomes sweet as honey.

Brothers and sisters, let's eat the scroll. I don't mean that you should go home and eat your Bible one page at a time, it is the symbolism of making God's Word a part of our very fiber, both in its law and the good news of the gospel. The Psalm writer in Psalm 119 says it best, "How sweet are your sayings to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth." Or the Apostle Paul said, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly." We used to pray about God's Word in the old Lutheran Hymnal at the end of worship, "May we so hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them." Maybe we have lost something when it was changed to "take them to heart."

"Whether they listen or not." This was Ezekiel's call, to speak the truth of God's Word to the people, whether they listened or not. God is faithful to his promise and he would continue to see that his Word is preached and spoken in the world. It is my call as a pastor. It is your call as a Christian. We are to eat it and speak it. We will do it today in the middle of briars and surrounded by scorpions. The world is getting increasingly hostile to God's Word and those who share it. We will continue to be faced with the challenge of staying faithful to God's Word in its laments, and woes as well as its message of forgiveness and peace.

Just as the Holy Spirit raised up Ezekiel to embrace the task before him and digest God's Word, so also God has given to Holy Spirit to us, to believe his message which is as sweet as honey to us. So the Holy Spirit can and will change hearts in the world around us. A faithful remnant eventually returned from captivity in Babylon and God's plan to send a Savior continued. Now God's promise to continue to gather his people into the church will continue until Jesus returns again. For now, we are charged with eating the scroll and sharing the Word, whether they listen or not.