

November 11, 2018 – Ezekiel 2:1-3:3 – Pastor Peter Evensen

God Sends Us to Speak His Bittersweet, Powerful Word

What gives you the right to tell me what I should believe? 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 was a priest who lived among the captive Israelites in Babylon (which is also called the land of the Chaldeans) The Lord called to Ezekiel go speak His word to the people. When The Lord called Ezekiel, The Lord appeared to Him in a great vision. 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).

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 powerful, 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) to be His witnesses to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8) and preach the gospel to every creature (Mark 16:15). You 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, you 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 God. Ezekiel could say: "*Thus says the Lord*" because the Lord sent him and gave him the words to say. When you share what the Bible says, you too can say, "*Thus says the Lord*", because you 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 have followed our own way. 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 than we are!

But God tells Ezekiel in v. 6: "*do not be afraid of them nor be afraid of their words*" (v. 6). And that is the same thing that God tells you. You should not be afraid because it is **God** who sends you 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? (literally "their faces") 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, making a face, 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. Our brothers around the world also face persecutions. Ezekiel also faced more than just word and looks. God told him (v. 6), *“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 you also. *“So we may boldly say: ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not fear. What can man do to me?’”*

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 you. People may listen to you or they may refuse to hear what God has to say, but God still wants you 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 thereof) but on the stubbornness of the hearers' hearts 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 in v. 8, *“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 in 3:1, *“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 in 3:3, *“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. “Feasting” on God's word is what equips us to share God's word.

And that is what you do each week when you come to church and hear the scripture readings and listen to the sermon. That is what you do when you attend Bible study, and read the Bible throughout the week. You are “filling your 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. Do you 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 you life and enable you 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, to read it and hear it throughout the week.

When Ezekiel ate the scroll he said, *“it was in my mouth like honey in sweetness”* (v. 3:3) In v.

10 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. It tells us that there is no one righteous, no one who does good (Romans 3:10-12). And it tells us that our sin brings us death – both physical death, and, after that, eternal everlasting death in hell.

But it is sweet because it tells us that God loved the world so much that He sent 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. 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 the ammunition we need to put to death the deeds of our sinful flesh by the Holy Spirit. And it guides and shows us how God wants us to live to express our thanks 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). The natural man thinks they are good enough to go to heaven. The natural man doesn’t think they need a Savior. So the gospel is foolishness to them.

Given how bitter the world finds our 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 in us, but in God’s word.

Jesus said, “*Repent, and believe in the gospel*” (Mark 1:15). Is that something any of us, ourselves, can do? No! 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. We see this demonstrated here so beautifully in Ezekiel’s call. At the beginning of chapter 2 Ezekiel is flat on his face before the Lord because he knows 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 in v. 2: “*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. Ezekiel received another demonstration of the power of God’s Word in Chapter 37 in the account of the valley of dry bones where God told Ezekiel to speak His word to the dry, dead bones and they became living people again. That is a great picture what we are doing when we speak God’s word. We are speaking to people who are dead. And God, through His Word, makes them alive.

God has made us alive through power of His word. The same power that allowed Ezekiel to stand before God, allows you to stand before God. The same power that allowed Ezekiel to believe and trust in God's salvation, allows you to believe and trust in Jesus. The same power that was in the words Ezekiel spoke is in the words that you 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 you to faithfully and confidently speak His word, for it is He who has placed His Word in you. Amen.