

Ezekiel's Commissioning to Service 1:28b-3:11

The vision of God in chapter one had led Ezekiel to worship; falling down on his face, he hears a voice commanding him to rise. As God speaks to him, the Holy Spirit stands him to his feet just as He energized the living beings and the wheels in Ezekiel 1 to move at His will (1:12, 20-21). As we will see, the Spirit will control Ezekiel's actions throughout his ministry.

Ezekiel 2

1:28(b) . . . And when I saw it, I fell on my face and heard a voice speaking.

2:1 Then He said to me, "Son of man, stand on your feet that I may speak with you!"

2:2 As He spoke to me the Spirit entered me and set me on my feet; and I heard Him speaking to me.

His First Commissioning Speech – 2:3-7

God has two purposes in verses 3-5. First, He informs Ezekiel of the difficulties of his ministry. Second, He encourages him in the execution of it:

2:3 Then He said to me, "Son of man, I am sending you to the sons of Israel, to a rebellious people who have rebelled against Me; they and their fathers have transgressed against Me to this very day.

2:4 "I am sending you to them who are stubborn and obstinate children, and you shall say to them, 'Thus says the Lord GOD.'

2:5 "As for them, whether they listen or not-- for they are a rebellious house-- they will know that a prophet has been among them.

"Son of man" is used in reference to the prophet Ezekiel about 90 times (DNTT, III, 613). It is an expression used to contrast the frailty and weakness of man as a creature to the majesty of the eternal God (Alexander, 761; Feinberg). The title no doubt reminded Ezekiel of his inadequacy to perform spiritual tasks, and his need to depend on the enablement of the Spirit to do the work of God.

Four times in this narrative God says that He is *sending* Ezekiel (2:3, 4; 3:6, 11); God is commissioning Ezekiel to deliver a message for Him. This is the most crucial distinction between true and false prophets; the most serious charge that could be raised against a true prophet was "Yahweh has not sent you" (Jer. 43:2).

In verse 3, God calls Israel a rebellious *nation* (NAS – "rebellious *people*"); the Hebrew word used for nation is *goy* (גוי), which in the OT is a term consistently used of the gentile nations, not the people of

God. "Apart from their faith in and fidelity to Yahweh, Israel is just another 'heathen' nation" (Block, 118; Hos. 1:9; Jn. 8:39). They are a rebellious people.

Though Israel will not respond to Ezekiel's message, as long as he remains faithful and speaks the words of God they will know that a prophet has been among them.

2:6 "And you, son of man, neither fear them nor fear their words, though thistles and thorns are with you and you sit on scorpions; neither fear their words nor be dismayed at their presence, for they are a rebellious house.

2:7 "But you shall speak My words to them whether they listen or not, for they are rebellious.

Calling Ezekiel "son of man" a second time signals a change in focus from the nature of Ezekiel's ministry (2:1-5) to the preparation needed to fulfill it. The first element in Ezekiel's call is a call to see God and be humbled (chapter 1). Second, it is a call to speak God's words (2:7), and not fear men or lose heart (2:6-7).

God told Ezekiel, "I am sending you to the Israelites, to a rebellious nation, a people that are obstinate and stubborn"(2:4). The imagery of thorns, thistles and scorpions are metaphors for the people's hostility and resistance to the prophet. In spite of their attacks, God promises His divine protection. Ezekiel should not fear them or their words.

Ezekiel had only one task to do – proclaim to this rebellious house the words of God; "Say to them, 'Thus says the Lord GOD'" (2:4, 8; 3:4, 11, 27). The prophet has neither the freedom to choose who he will speak to or what he will say. "It was always the lot of a prophet to bring a message which opposed the ungodly, a voice which the people did not welcome" (Feinberg, 24).

"You must speak my words to them, whether they listen or fail to listen" (Ezek. 2:7). . .

In periods of revival and prosperity, the preacher may be viewed with respect, his faithfulness and insight lionized. But in declining times, those who truly speak for God will be taunted and threatened. The pressures to dilute what God says become enormous. Clever exegesis to make the text say what it really doesn't, selective silence to leave out the painful bits, hermeneutical cleverness to remove the bite and sting of Scripture, all become de rigueur, so that we can still be accepted and even admired. But God is aware of the danger. From his perspective, success is not measured by how many people Ezekiel wins to his perspective, but by the faithfulness with which he declares God's words. Anything less participates in the rebellion of this "rebellious house" (Ezek. 2:8). This calls for godly courage that drives out fear (Ezek. 2:6-7) (Carson, For the Love of God).

Carson applies this to our situation, He says:

Of course once again, it is always crucial in a fallen world to declare all of the counsel of God. But it is especially important in declining times for three reasons:

First, it is important because in declining times it takes special courage.

In revival times it is a wonderful thing to go out and preach. When the culture is against you, however, it takes a certain amount of courage; hence, the warnings not to fear.

Secondly, it is especially important in declining times because it is also the means by which God does His work, whether it is the work of judgment or a work of revival and renewal. It is by the word of God. Al Mohler . . . is wont to say, “For the Christian, optimism is naïve but pessimism is atheistic.” That is exactly right. Optimism is naïve because we believe in the fall. We do live in declining times. Let’s not be innocent or silly about the evil around us. On the other hand, God’s hand is not short in that He cannot save. Pessimism is, frankly, atheistic. It simply assumes that God can’t or won’t act. But God condemns by His Word. He judges by His Word. And He saves and transforms by that same Word . . .

But there is a third reason why it is especially important in a declining culture. In a culture where most of the people have inherited a Judeo-Christian worldview, a Judeo-Christian framework, then what we meant by preaching the gospel tended to be a sub-set of the biblical big picture. Up until twenty or thirty years ago, the vast majority of evangelism that was done in North America was along these lines: We simply assume that ninety to ninety-eight percent of our hearers knew something about a Judeo-Christian framework. Even if we were talking to an out-and-out atheist, the atheist was not a generic atheist. The atheist was an atheist that disbelieved in the Judeo-Christian God. He wasn’t a Buddhist atheist; he was a Christian atheist. And thus his categories were the categories of the inherited Judeo-Christian culture . . . But now, suddenly, we are dealing with people for whom none of the original givens are any longer givens. And what do we do? Those who are still involved in evangelism know that there is only one thing to do. That is, to start farther back [he means by this that we need to start at a more fundamental level] . . . What it means, then, to teach and to proclaim, *to bear witness to all of the counsel of God*, to teach all the words of God faithfully in declining culture becomes a much more embracing thing than in a time when many, many, many of your compatriots share your worldview and your vocabulary . . .

Finally, it is a call to empathize with God’s perspective and be unyielding (2:8—3:15). (Carson, The Spurgeon Fellowship Journal Excerpts from a Sermon – Fall 2007):

As Feinberg says, "Besides the local application, God still works in all the contemporary world despite the indifference and rejection of Him which is prevalent. *May we today fortify ourselves with the same resources by which Ezekiel was encouraged in his ministry. Futility was not then and need not be now a barrier to service for God*" (p.26).

2:8 *"Now you, son of man, listen to what I am speaking to you; do not be rebellious like that rebellious house. Open your mouth and eat what I am giving you."*

2:9 *Then I looked, and behold, a hand was extended to me; and lo, a scroll was in it.*

2:10 *When He spread it out before me, it was written on the front and back, and written on it were lamentations, mourning and woe.*

Ezekiel was admonished to listen to God and not be rebellious like the nation. His first test of submission was to eat what the Lord gave him. Ezekiel was no doubt expecting some sort of food, but he was given a scroll. The scroll was full (it was written upon front and back), and the contents had lamentations, mourning and woe.

The scroll was probably made of papyrus, for vellum (animal skin scrolls) was much less common and when it was used, it was only written upon one side. The ability to write on the front and back of vellum wasn't developed until after the beginning of the Christian era (Block, 124).

Ezekiel 3

3:1 *Then He said to me, "Son of man, eat what you find; eat this scroll, and go, speak to the house of Israel."*

3:2 *So I opened my mouth, and He fed me this scroll.*

3:3 *He said to me, "Son of man, feed your stomach and fill your body with this scroll which I am giving you." Then I ate it, and it was sweet as honey in my mouth.*

Ezekiel is told to eat the scroll with the words of God on it. Whether he eats a scroll or it is part of the vision is hard to tell.

The act of eating symbolizes the idea of receiving into the heart (Feinberg, 25). It shows that Ezekiel needed to do more than just hear and understand the word of God; he had to *assimilate* the message he would proclaim (Alexander). The word of God had to be a part of him before he could proclaim it to others.

The contents of the scroll were bitter (mourning, woes, and lamentations), but it was pleasantly sweet. His experience was very much the same as the prophet Jeremiah who 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" (Jer. 15:16).

“The point of the vision is that God’s words become sweet to Ezekiel simply because they are God’s words. God really does know best; he knows what is right. Therefore, even when his words pronounce judgment and calamity, there is a sense in which the prophet must be empathetic to God’s perspective” (Carson, For the Love of God).

3:4 Then He said to me, "Son of man, go to the house of Israel and speak with My words to them.

3:5 "For you are not being sent to a people of unintelligible speech or difficult language, but to the house of Israel,

3:6 nor to many peoples of unintelligible speech or difficult language, whose words you cannot understand. But I have sent you to them who should listen to you;

3:7 yet the house of Israel will not be willing to listen to you, since they are not willing to listen to Me. Surely the whole house of Israel is stubborn and obstinate.

3:8 "Behold, I have made your face as hard as their faces and your forehead as hard as their foreheads.

3:9 "Like emery harder than flint I have made your forehead. Do not be afraid of them or be dismayed before them, though they are a rebellious house."

3:10 Moreover, He said to me, "Son of man, take into your heart all My words which I will speak to you and listen closely.

3:11 "Go to the exiles, to the sons of your people, and speak to them and tell them, whether they listen or not, 'Thus says the Lord GOD.'"

Again, Ezekiel is told that he is to speak *God’s words* to Israel. He must not alter the word of God based on the response of the recipients; he is to speak all that God says, nothing more, nothing less.

Although Ezekiel is in Babylon, the problems he will face won’t be due to language difficulties. He is not being asked to reach the Babylonians by speaking Aramaic, nor is he being sent anywhere else where he must learn another language. Rather, he is being called to speak to the people who are of the same culture as he is. Even so, “he will find them unwilling to listen to him, precisely because they are unwilling to listen to God” (Ezek. 3:7; Carson, For the Love of God).

But God prepares people for the ministry to which He calls them. If the people will not waver in their stand against God (3:7), God promises to make Ezekiel as determined to proclaim the truth as the people are to resisting it.

“Behold, I have made your face as hard as their faces and your forehead as hard as their foreheads. Like emery harder than flint I have made your forehead. Do not be afraid of them or be dismayed before them, though they are a rebellious house” (Ezek. 3:8-9).

Instead of being hardened *against* God, he will be unswaying in his loyalty *toward* God. The very name "Ezekiel" means "God hardens."

God prepares His people for the task He calls them to do (Exo. 4:10-15; Jer. 1:4-19):

3:12 Then the Spirit lifted me up, and I heard a great rumbling sound behind me, "Blessed be the glory of the LORD in His place."

3:13 And I heard the sound of the wings of the living beings touching one another and the sound of the wheels beside them, even a great rumbling sound.

3:14 So the Spirit lifted me up and took me away; and I went embittered in the rage of my spirit, and the hand of the LORD was strong on me.

3:15 Then I came to the exiles who lived beside the river Chebar at Tel-abib, and I sat there seven days where they were living, causing consternation among them.

Verses 14 and 15 give the fulfilment of what Ezekiel is called to do in verse 11. Verses 12 and 13 tell of the manner he was transported to the place he was told to minister.

Ezekiel was lifted up by the Spirit. The word for "Spirit" is ruach (רוּחַ). "The basic idea of ruach is 'air in motion.' . . . In living beings the ruach is their breath, whether of animals (Gen 7:15; Psa. 104:25, 29), men (Isa 42:5; Ezek. 37:5), or both (Gen 7:22-23) . . . The "breath" of God may be a strong wind (Isa 40:7; Isa 59:19; cf. Num. 11:31)" (TWOT). Though here, ruach (רוּחַ) is speaking of the Spirit of God, the thought of "wind" is not foreign to the context; Ezekiel was lifted up by the Spirit like a leaf caught in a gust of wind.

As he was being lifted from the ground he heard the wings of the living creatures and the sound of the wheels which he had seen earlier in his vision of God (1:24); therefore, he spontaneously proclaimed, "Blessed be the glory of the LORD in His place."

He was then transported from the river Chebar to the exiles who had settled at Tel-abib near the river.

Verses 14 and 15 describe Ezekiel's emotional state. He was emotionally spent. He had seen the glory of God which was draining, but he had also been called to a difficult ministry, and had felt the strong hand of God on him. He was embittered and angry. The text doesn't say why, but most commentators believe he was angry with God's call on his life; he did not want to deliver such a distasteful message to an unreceptive audience. This would certainly not be a successful ministry in the eyes of men. Jeremiah had similar feelings. In Jeremiah 15:17 he confessed, "I did not sit in the company of revelers, nor did I rejoice; I sat alone, because your hand was upon me, for you had filled me with indignation."

God did not console him. Instead, He pressured him with a strong hand.

3:16 At the end of seven days the word of the LORD came to me, saying,

3:17 "Son of man, I have appointed you a watchman to the house of Israel; whenever you hear a word from My mouth, warn them from Me.

3:18 "When I say to the wicked, 'You will surely die,' and you do not warn him or speak out to warn the wicked from his wicked way that he may live, that wicked man shall die in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand.

3:19 "Yet if you have warned the wicked and he does not turn from his wickedness or from his wicked way, he shall die in his iniquity; but you have delivered yourself.

3:20 "Again, when a righteous man turns away from his righteousness and commits iniquity, and I place an obstacle before him, he will die; since you have not warned him, he shall die in his sin, and his righteous deeds which he has done shall not be remembered; but his blood I will require at your hand.

3:21 "However, if you have warned the righteous man that the righteous should not sin and he does not sin, he shall surely live because he took warning; and you have delivered yourself."

At the end of a week Ezekiel yielded to God and was set apart for His work.

The parallel passage is Ezekiel 33:1-20. The work of the watchman is set forth in 2 Samuel 18:24-27 and 2 Kings 9:17-20. The watchman's primary responsibility was to observe from a watchtower at the wall of the city and warn the people of coming danger; he was to call the soldiers to arms and the citizens to take cover. In a similar way, Ezekiel was to be the one to warn the people of God's coming wrath (3:17).

In the Mosaic Law there were blessings and curses. If the people obeyed, they would receive the blessings that God intended for them. If they disobeyed, they would receive God's curses which were intended to draw them back to God. Israel, in her state of rebellion, was facing more of God's indignation. It was a sad state when exile and affliction did not make the peoples' hearts any more responsive to God. But God in His mercy did not give up on His people; He did not leave them without warning of impending danger, but appointed a watchman for the nation. Though greater trials would come if they did not repent, God's intent was to call sinners to repentance and faith through Ezekiel.

Ezekiel was not responsible for the results of his ministry, but he was responsible to do all that God had called him to do; a failure to act would place the blood of others on his hands. Two cases are presented as illustrations: the case of the wicked and of the righteous, both who turned away from God.

(1) The wicked are those who had no desire for God and held the law in contempt. An example of what this is speaking of is in Ezekiel 5:6-8 where God says, "'But she [Jerusalem] has rebelled against My ordinances more wickedly than the nations and against My statutes more than the lands which surround her; for they have rejected My ordinances and have not walked in My statutes.' Therefore, thus says the Lord GOD, 'Because you have more turmoil than the nations which surround you and have not walked in My statutes, nor observed My ordinances, nor observed the ordinances of the nations which surround you', therefore, thus says the Lord GOD, 'Behold, I, even I, am against you, and I will execute judgments among you in the sight of the nations.'"

Ezekiel, as the appointed watchman for the rebellious house of Israel, was to warn the wicked that they would die if God declared, "You will surely die"(3:18). If Ezekiel warned the wicked and the wicked did not turn from their wickedness, they would die in their iniquity, but Ezekiel would not be held accountable in any way, for he warned them as God had told him to do (3:19). If he failed to tell them God's words and they died, he would be responsible for their death, for he was not fulfilling his responsibility as watchman.

(2) A second example is given. If a formerly righteous man (a man who appeared to respect the law of God and be a follower of Yahweh) commits iniquity and repudiates the covenant, he will die just as the wicked did. In fact, it says that God will put a stumbling block (an obstacle – NAS) before him. If Ezekiel had not warned him of God's impending wrath, the righteous man's death would be on Ezekiel's hands. But if he warns the man and the man heeds what Ezekiel says, the man will live and Ezekiel will be clear of any responsibility for the man's fate.

The discussion among commentators about what the stumbling block (obstacle – NAS) entails, is quite diverse and speculative. One thing that is clear, is that this is not saying that God would lead the people into sin (cf. Ja. 1:13). Eight of the 14 occurrences of the word found in the OT appear in Ezekiel. Of these, 6 are called "a stumbling block of iniquity." "In such case, the word signifies the occasion for actualizing potential guilt through sinful behavior, such as money (7:19), idolatry (14:3-4), or the influence of persons who practice evil (44:12)" (Alexander, 147). If this is what is intended, then it appears that God brings about the circumstances that allow the person to act out their sin. God does not make them sin, but He brings the crossroads that allow the person to choose for himself which way he will go and act out his desires. The person who sins will be punished (he will die).

It is doubtful that this is saying that Ezekiel is responsible for their eternal destiny; it is more likely that physical death is being spoken of in Ezekiel 3:19-21.

Deuteronomy 30:15-20 says,

- 15 "See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, and death and adversity;
- 16 in that I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in His ways and to keep His commandments and His statutes and His judgments, that you may live and multiply, and that the LORD your God may bless you in the land where you are entering to possess it.
- 17 "But if your heart turns away and you will not obey, but are drawn away and worship other gods and serve them,
- 18 I declare to you today that you shall surely perish. You will not prolong your days in the land where you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess it.
- 19 "I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. So choose life in order that you may live, you and your descendants,

20 by loving the LORD your God, by obeying His voice, and by holding fast to Him; for this is your life and the length of your days, that you may live in the land which the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give them."

Similar ideas of the believer's responsibility to tell others the word of God, and of God's impending doom if they do not repent are found in the NT.

Paul said:

Acts 18:6 "But when they resisted and blasphemed, he shook out his garments and said to them, "Your blood be on your own heads! I am clean. From now on I will go to the Gentiles."

Acts 20:26-27 "Therefore, I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God."

3:22 The hand of the LORD was on me there, and He said to me, "Get up, go out to the plain, and there I will speak to you."

3:23 So I got up and went out to the plain; and behold, the glory of the LORD was standing there, like the glory which I saw by the river Chebar, and I fell on my face.

3:24 The Spirit then entered me and made me stand on my feet, and He spoke with me and said to me, "Go, shut yourself up in your house.

3:25 "As for you, son of man, they will put ropes on you and bind you with them so that you cannot go out among them.

3:26 "Moreover, I will make your tongue stick to the roof of your mouth so that you will be mute and cannot be a man who rebukes them, for they are a rebellious house.

3:27 "But when I speak to you, I will open your mouth and you will say to them, 'Thus says the Lord GOD.' He who hears, let him hear; and he who refuses, let him refuse; for they are a rebellious house.

Verses 22-23 tell us that Ezekiel went out to the plain to receive his final instruction. There he was given another vision of God's glory as he had in chapter 1. When Ezekiel humbled himself before God, the Spirit entered him and prepared him for the message he was to deliver to the exiles.

Verse 25 is probably a reference to the unwillingness of the exiles to let Ezekiel preach rather than a prophecy of him being literally bound with a rope (although either is possible).

According to verse 26, God would also render Ezekiel incapable of speaking except for the things that God tells him to say. "This state of affairs endures until the fall of Jerusalem, about six years away (Ezek. 33:21-22), when his tongue is loosed. This restriction adds weight to the times he does speak. It is also a challenge to everyone who speaks for God. All of our talk and our silences should be so calibrated that when we convey God's words our credibility is enhanced and not diminished" (Carson, For the Love of God).