

# ***“God’s Preacher”***

**EZEKIEL 3:1-21**

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If you have been with us over the past several weeks, then you know that we have been looking together at the various acts of worship that we participate in on the first day of every week. We started by studying what the Bible teaches about the Lord’s Supper. We looked at one of the earliest accounts which is actually found in 1 Corinthians 11, a passage that was written only about 22 years after the Lord’s death and resurrection. We learned that we are to be considerate of each other, we are to think about the Lord’s death on the cross, and we are to very carefully examine ourselves so that we do not partake in an ***“unworthy manner.”***

And then, over the past two weeks, we have studied a two-part series on the prayers that we offer together as a congregation. We looked at a rather brief section of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 6. We learned that our public prayers are to match what we actually do in real life – if we pray for the sick, we’d better be helping the sick, and so on. We learned that we are not to attract attention to ourselves as we pray, we learned that we are to avoid meaningless repetition; and then last week, we looked at a sample prayer – not a prayer that we are to actually pray, but a template; and the template tells us that we have the privilege of addressing God as ***“Father,”*** we ask Him for our daily needs, we pray for the kingdom (the church), and we also pray for forgiveness. And then we closed by looking very briefly at the word ***“AMEN,”*** a word we all say together after each prayer, expressing our agreement with each public prayer that is offered.

This morning, I would like for us to continue by looking together at a third act of worship that we participate in together as a group as we consider the preaching of God’s word. And for our text, I would like for us to think together about a passage from the Old Testament book of Ezekiel, and the passage is found in Ezekiel 3. As we look at this passage from Ezekiel, we will be looking together at a very courageous man who was called upon to preach the word of God during an extremely difficult time in the history of God’s people. In a series of three raids spaced several years apart, God’s people were slowly but surely being taken away into Babylonian Captivity. Daniel and some of the other young men were taken away first in 606 BC. Ezekiel was taken along with many of the other nobles, the royal family, and the skilled workers in 597 BC. The final attack came in 586 BC as the Babylonians destroyed the city of Jerusalem, left it in ruins, and took away just about everybody who hadn’t been taken previously. The prophet Ezekiel, then, was taken in that second raid, and in the middle of it, Ezekiel was given the mission of preaching the word of God. He spoke to his fellow captives in Babylon, and he also wrote letters back to be delivered to those who were still in Jerusalem. And so, as you can see, Ezekiel was in a rather difficult situation.

As we study the importance of preaching in God's plan, I would like for us to look together at the mission that God gave to Ezekiel, and then I would like for us to consider several basic ideas that apply to the preaching of God's word that happens in our worship assemblies today. But first, let us please look together at Ezekiel 3:1-21,

***1 Then He said to me, "Son of man, eat what you find; eat this scroll, and go, speak to the house of Israel." 2 So I opened my mouth, and He fed me this scroll. 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.***

***4 Then He said to me, "Son of man, go to the house of Israel and speak with My words to them. 5 For you are not being sent to a people of unintelligible speech or difficult language, but to the house of Israel, 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; 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. 8 Behold, I have made your face as hard as their faces and your forehead as hard as their foreheads. 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." 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. 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. '"***

***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." 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. 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. 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.***

***16 At the end of seven days the word of the Lord came to me, saying, 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. 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. 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. 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. 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."***

Again, let us please try to find just a few ways we can apply this passage to our situation today.

I. **One of the first things we notice (in the first three verses) is that THE PREACHER IS TO BE A CONSTANT STUDENT OF THE WORD OF GOD.**

I think we've all had some rather strange dreams, but in this particular vision, Ezekiel is told by God to eat the scroll of God's word! That right there is a strange vision! And yet when we look at it carefully, we find that God is using symbolic language. In fact, we have a similar picture in the book of Revelation as the apostle John was also told to eat the scroll. Now, whether Ezekiel literally ate the scroll or not, I do not know, but we do know what the picture means. Before Ezekiel could preach to the people, he had to eat the book – he had to know the word of God, he had to have it inside first before he could teach it to others. He had to incorporate the word of God into his own life. He had to know it and do it. He had to absorb it.

It seems that there is a message here for anybody who preaches to God's people today, and that is: Preachers need to study! If you haven't found something to write down on Point #1 yet, I might suggest writing "Preachers need to study." Today, like in the time of Ezekiel, preachers must also eat the word of God before preaching it to others. Those who speak to the congregation need to study. Unlike the way it happened in Bible times, we no longer have the direct hotline to God. God no longer miraculously speaks to the preacher, but that communication now comes through the written word. And yet even back then, even the apostle Paul also knew the importance of study. As Paul was in prison waiting for his own execution, he wrote to the young preacher Timothy and said (in 2 Timothy 4:13), "***When you come bring the cloak which I left at Troas with Carpus, and the books, especially the parchments.***" Here he is about to be executed, and he wanted to study. He wanted Timothy to bring the books and the papers he needed so that he could read and learn more about the word of God.

Some of you know that my dad taught high school speech and English for about ten years before he started preaching full time, and my dad always mentioned an old rule for public speaking – the basic rule is that you need to spend about 30 minutes in preparation for every minute of speaking. When you think about it that way, a 30-minute sermon would require roughly 15 hours of preparation. That's two full workdays. In my own life, I normally set aside Thursday and Friday for sermon preparation. Of course, there are usually interruptions (phone calls, emails, visits, etc.), so that sermon study time normally oozes into a good part of Saturday. That is the eating of the scroll that God is talking about in the opening verses of Ezekiel 3. Study is incredibly important.

Several years ago, a number of young preachers were able to ask questions of an older man who had been preaching for many years. One of the young men asked this question, "What would you do if you knew for certain that the Lord would return in three years?" The older preacher gave this answer, "I would study the first two years, and I would preach the third year." That is a profound and very wise answer, and it should remind us of how important it is to study the word of God. Ezekiel, then, had to take the word of God into his life before he could turn around and preach it to others.

II. **There is a second basic idea in this passage (as it relates to preaching), and that is, if they are to be effective and if they are to preach in a way that pleases God, PREACHERS NEED TO BE AT LEAST A LITTLE BIT STUBBORN!**

In the passage, we find that the people were not going to listen. In verses 5-6, the Lord tells Ezekiel, though, that there would not be a language barrier – that was not going to be the problem! But in verse 7, the Lord says the problem is that the people would not be "***willing***" to listen. In fact (according to the end of verse 7), the Lord says that the entire nation is "***stubborn and obstinate.***" So, God knew that the people would not

listen, but in spite of this, God wanted them to hear the message. So, instead of just giving up, God sent Ezekiel, and (in verses 8-9) God made the preacher even more stubborn than they were! Notice, ***“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.”*** God would make the preacher’s head hard like emery. Most of us know what emery cloth is. Emery cloth is basically sandpaper that you use on metal! Emery cuts metal! Most of us know what an emery board is. An emery board is what you use to file your fingernails. In other words, in order to reach out to hardheaded people, God is sending a hardheaded preacher! So, if you’re looking for something to write in the blank, I might suggest, “Preachers must be stubborn.”

Sometimes parents will come to me and will tell me how stubborn their children are, and when they come to me with those concerns, I will often think of this passage. Do you have a stubborn hardheaded child? Then you might want to encourage that young man to become a preacher! There are times when God needs a tough and stubborn hardheaded man to stand up to a tough and stubborn hardheaded generation. We think about Moses, for example. Moses was a rather stubborn and hardheaded man. But God needed that to reach out to the people of Israel at that time. Only a stubborn man could have put up with a lot of what Moses put up with. We think about Isaiah. Isaiah was horribly persecuted for preaching. The rabbis say that during the reign of King Manasseh, the king had Isaiah placed inside a hollow log, and then that log was cut in two with a large saw. Can you imagine that? That is the kind of audience that Isaiah was dealing with. We remember Jeremiah and how he was thrown into an old cistern and left there to die. He was put there for bringing a negative message. Thankfully, Jeremiah was rescued by a good friend, and when the king learned of it he called for a private meeting with the prophet. Do you know what Jeremiah said to the king? “You are all going to die!” You see, God needs some stubborn and hardheaded preachers. Concerning these preachers, the writer of Hebrews said this in Hebrews 11:37-38, ***“They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were tempted, they were put to death with the sword; they went about in sheepskins, in goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, ill-treated (men of whom the world was not worthy), wandering in deserts and mountains and caves and holes in the ground.”*** We see the same thing in the New Testament. People were always rebelling against the message and trying to kill the messenger. John the Baptist, murdered! Paul, murdered! Peter, murdered! James, murdered! All of these were killed because of their faith and because of their preaching. God needs stubborn preachers.

Truth does not change with the latest shift in the latest opinion poll. Those who are offended have their own way of resisting – maybe they will avoid talking to the preacher on their way out the door, maybe they will talk about the preacher behind his back, maybe they will walk out during the sermon, maybe they will cut their contribution, maybe they will find some other way of retaliating – but the Lord says: Yes, people are going to do that, so I need a preacher even tougher than they are! I need a preacher with a head made of emery! So, first of all, then, the preacher needs to study God’s word, and secondly, he needs to be at least a little bit stubborn.

### III. **There is a third idea in this chapter, and the application to modern preaching comes with the reminder that THE PREACHER IS TO SERVE AS A WATCHMAN.**

Notice in verse 17, the Lord says to Ezekiel, ***“Son of man, I have appointed you a watchman to the house of Israel.”*** Notice, first of all, that Ezekiel is identified as a ***“son of man.”*** In other words, we have the reminder that the message would not come to the people directly from God, it would not come through an angel, but the message would come through a man, through a fellow human being. But then notice specifically, Ezekiel was to serve as a watchman. That term goes back to ancient times when cities were surrounded by huge stone walls. At night, the gates were closed, and the men of the city were required to take turns standing on top of the wall and looking out for any enemies that might try to sneak up and attack the city at night. They had to

take their turn watching – they were **“watchmen.”** Because they were standing on top of the wall, they could see farther than other people in the city. And if a man saw the enemy coming, he had to sound the alarm; he had to wake everybody up so that they could get ready for whatever was about to happen. If you are looking for something to write in the blank there, I might suggest, “The preacher must be a watchman.”

As a watchman in a spiritual sense, the prophet Ezekiel had to keep an eye out for spiritual danger, and he was required to watch and warn the people that what they were doing was wrong. As I see it, Ezekiel had to look out for two groups. First of all (in verse 18), he had to speak up and warn the wicked. He had to say, “Hey! What you are doing is wrong, and if you don’t stop you will die!” And notice: He was not accountable for whether the people changed their behavior, but he was accountable for giving the warning. Secondly, though, we find (in verse 20) that Ezekiel was also told to warn the righteous. In verse 20, we find that it is possible for a righteous person to sin, to die in that sin, and to have God forget about all of the righteous deeds that might have been done earlier in that person’s life. For that reason, Ezekiel was to warn both the wicked and the righteous.

Generally speaking, though, we know that the people refused to listen to Ezekiel’s warnings. Why, then, did God still require Ezekiel to serve as a watchman? The answer is found in the previous chapter – in Ezekiel 2:5, the Lord says, **“As for them, whether they listen or not – for they are a rebellious house – they will know that a prophet has been among them.”** Several months ago, brother Mike referred to a quote that he saw on the wall in my office. Not long after I started preaching, my dad framed it for me. It comes from John T. Lewis in an article he wrote in the *Expository Review* (November 1995). Mr. Lewis said, “I would rather have thousands say to me at the judgment, ‘We heard you preach and you hurt our feelings,’ than to have just one lost soul to say, ‘I heard you preach, but you did not tell me the truth.’” That is a profound statement!

If I’m standing right here and I see a man with an assault rifle running right at us across that field, I would have to say something. I would have an obligation to warn you. In the same way, the preacher must also warn the church about spiritual danger. And I would add: The warning is not to be the preacher’s own personal opinion, but it is to be the word of God. Remember what we read at the end of verse 17, where God said, **“...whenever you hear a word from My mouth, warn them from Me.”** In fact, over 50 times in the book of Ezekiel do we read the words, **“The word of the Lord came to me.”** In a spiritual sense, then, the preacher is to be standing on top of the wall – it might be sunny, or raining, or snowing – but he is to be constantly scanning the horizon, constantly tuned in to the word of God, and his job is to customize those warnings to whatever is going on at the time.

### **Conclusion:**

God’s preacher, then, must study the word of God, he must be at least just a little bit more stubborn than the people he is preaching to, and he must also serve as a watchman – teaching and faithfully preaching God’s message no matter what. Here we are, nearly 2600 years later, and God is still asking His people to faithfully preach His word. The world around us needs a clear and distinct warning. As a congregation, one way we do this is through the regular preaching of God’s word.

Maybe you are here this morning and maybe you know what you need to do to make things right with God. I don’t know about you, but when I’m not right with God, I can’t sleep. Maybe you’re going through that right now. I don’t know what’s going on in your life. I don’t know your reasons for doing or not doing whatever you need to do. But my responsibility as a preacher is to say, “This is what the Bible says.” The Bible teaches that God sent His only Son as a sacrifice for our sins. We sinned, we deserved to die, we deserved to be separated

from God, but the Lord Jesus took our place on the cross. It is a free offer. It is a generous offer. The Bible teaches that we accept that offer by turning away from our sins. That has to be the most difficult step in God's plan – to see that we have sinned, to feel deep regret, and then to do something about it by turning our lives back to God. At that point, the Bible teaches that we must allow ourselves to be immersed – briefly dipped in water for the forgiveness of our sins. The Bible explains that baptism is our appeal to God for a good conscience and that baptism saves us (1 Peter 3:21). What must we do to be saved? We must repent, and we must be baptized. I would beg you this morning: If this is something you know you need to do, do not let your heart get hard on this issue. Do not get any more hardheaded than your preacher! If we ignore any warning and put off doing what we know we need to do long enough, we lose the urgency, we lose feeling, our hearts get calloused. Please, do not let that happen. There is nothing more we would rather see today than to witness someone being buried with Christ. If you're ready to do it now, let's do it! I'm not sure where we'd go – I'm thinking maybe the beach at Olbrich Park – but let's not let anything come between us and doing what we know is right. If we can help in any way, if you are ready to make that decision, you can let us know as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

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