

Ps 93:1,4  
 Ps 85:2,3  
 Ps 119:16,17  
 Ps 50:1  
 Hy 64:1,2,3,4  
 Ezekiel 2,3  
 2 Corinthians 5:12-21  
 Ezekiel 3:26,27

Yarrow, March 27, 2011

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

The vision that Ezekiel described in chap 1 was overwhelming to the extreme. “The appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD” was so awe-inspiring that Ezekiel fell on his face in adoration for such a God (1:28).

Scarcely has Ezekiel seen the vision and fallen on his face when he “heard a voice of One speaking.” The One speaking turns out to be God, the One seated high above the throne on the firmament, carried by the four living creatures. What this God of glory says? Chaps 2 & 3 give us numerous words from the mouth of the Lord, but God’s message to Ezekiel climaxes in the closing words of chap 3: the God of glory takes total control of Ezekiel’s tongue. The Lord remembers His covenant with the exiles, wants the gospel of God’s redemption to continue to come to His rebellious people, and so binds Ezekiel’s tongue in order to achieve this purpose. That the God of glory does this gives to the exiles enormous responsibility – and comfort.

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

## **THE GOD OF GLORY BINDS EZEKIEL’S TONGUE FOR THE GOOD OF HIS PEOPLE.**

1. The nature of the binding.
2. The reason for the binding.
3. The fruit of the binding.

### **1. *The nature of the binding.***

“No man,” writes the apostle James, “can tame the tongue” (James 3:8). That’s because the tongue gives expression to what is in the mind, the heart (cf Mark 7:21f). The human mind, the heart, is depraved, desperately corrupt, thinks evil things, plots evil things. So –whether we intend it so or not– the tongue spews forth evil things, the tongue cuts into other people’s hearts, causes so much pain. It’s something we can all relate to, whether we be parents or children, older or younger, office-bearers or not.

We read in our text, now, that the Lord God determined to *cut the link* between Ezekiel’s mind and his tongue. Ezekiel’s mind, though renewed by the Holy Spirit, was not perfected, did not receive perfect wisdom and insight. So the man thought wrong thoughts, reached wrong conclusions, could say things in hurtful ways. In His wisdom God saw that that reality could hinder the prophet’s work among the exiles of Babylon. So God cut the link between Ezekiel’s mind and his tongue. Vs 26: “I will make your tongue cling to the roof of your mouth, so that you shall be mute,” unable to talk. This wasn’t to be a once-off thing either; instead, the binding was to last into the indefinite future. In fact, we read in Ezekiel 33 that more than seven years later God unbound Ezekiel’s tongue to that he could speak freely again (vs 22; cf 24:27).

We're not to think, though, that Ezekiel did not utter a word in the course of these seven years. I read in chap 6, for example, this instruction from God to Ezekiel: "Son of man, set your face toward the mountains of Israel, and prophesy against them, and say..." (vss 1f), and there follows a sermon that Ezekiel has to deliver. It's clear: the man had to speak. But it is as God says in vs 27 of our text: "when I speak with you, I will open your mouth, and you shall say to them, 'Thus says the LORD God.'" That is: when God had a word to say to the exiles, *then* God would release Ezekiel's tongue so that God's word would come out of the prophet's mouth. But once the sermon was delivered, Ezekiel would be mute again, unable to speak.

What, in practice, brothers and sisters, does this mean? This: Ezekiel could not express his own thoughts! The point is important. Would every word from God go down well amongst sinful people? We know the answer. Sinful hearts do not by nature want to hear God's words, and certainly not His admonitions. What Paul said to Timothy was true for the exiles too: "the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth" (2 Timothy 4:3f). As we'll see in a moment, that was indeed the case amongst the exiles too. That reality made the temptation very real for Ezekiel to make the word God gave him more palatable for the hearers. Some explanation, some alteration, whatever..., just to take the sharp edges off, to make the word less offensive, sugar-coat it.... But the Lord won't have it, and so He takes that temptation away from Ezekiel; the prophet can't utter a word except the specific words that God Himself gives him to say.

The point comes out clearly in what's written in the middle of vs 26. Our translation says that Ezekiel will "be mute and *not be one to rebuke them.*" It's an unhappy translation, if only because Ezekiel's whole prophecy is one enormous rebuke against Israel. We get the flavor of the word the Lord uses here, though, when we consider how Job used the same word. Job laments that there is nobody to stand between himself and God. He says: "Nor is there any 'mediator' – that's the word used in our text– between us, Who may lay his hand on us both" (9:33). You see: Job wants somebody who will lay one hand on God's shoulder and the other on Job's, and sort out the difference between the two. God uses the same word in our text to describe what Ezekiel may not do; Ezekiel may not place himself between God and the exiles, as it were with a hand on the shoulder of each, in order to promote understanding and work out their differences. As spokesman for God, this means in practice that Ezekiel is not to make any alterations to the words God gives him; Ezekiel is instead to give that word to the people as God has given it, *straight*.<sup>1</sup>

That's also the reason for God's command in vs 24. Ezekiel has to "go, shut yourself inside your house." He has to live on an island, as it were, not interact with the people, and so not be influenced by the people. He is to be God's pure and unadulterated mouthpiece, so that God's word comes to the people unaltered, unpolished, *straight*.

The same message comes out in the instruction about the scroll. End of chap 2: God showed Ezekiel a scroll completely covered with writing, "on the inside and the on the outside," and then God caused Ezekiel to eat that scroll. The point was: Ezekiel had –literally!– to *internalize* the words of the scroll. Why? So that the words he would afterwards say would be the words of God. Not his own words were to come out of his mouth, not his own thoughts about God's words were to come out of his mouth; his mouth was to speak only the direct words God gave him to speak. That's the purpose of eating the scroll, that's the nature of the tongue-binding God imposed on Ezekiel.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf TDOT, VI, 66.

For our part, brothers and sisters, we have questions about why God would claim Ezekiel's tongue in such a radical manner. We understand that every prophet must speak God's words only, may not add to them or take away from them. It is true today too of all who are called to speak God's word – including preachers from the pulpit or elders and deacons in the homes. But why would God go *so far* in claiming Ezekiel's tongue? The question becomes more pressing when we recall that no other prophet in Scripture was treated in this manner; no one else lost the personal use of his tongue for the duration of his ministry (though cf Lev 10:3b).

Admittedly, we might wish that God would enforce such a radical binding on His ministers today. In the midst of all the questions God's people face in our secular and technologically advanced society, we wouldn't mind it if the minister could speak only words that came directly from God. Then we'd have a guarantee that any word coming out of his mouth was 100% flawless. It'd make things easier for ministers too; they wouldn't have to spend money on books for study.... But God in His wisdom hasn't organized things in this way; ministers need to study, and their words can include error. That's why Paul tells Timothy and Titus, for example, to make sure that they speak faithful words (cf 1 Tim 4:6; 2 Tim 1:13; Titus 1:9; 2:1). That's also why the church has decided long ago that ministers are to sign a Form of Subscription, and therein promise to preach and teach only in agreement with Holy Scripture, as confessed in the Three Forms of Unity.

But that reality drives the question to the fore again: if none of the other Old Testament prophets and none of the New Testament apostles had their tongues bound as Ezekiel did, why did God bind Ezekiel's tongue so radically? That's our second point:

## **2. The reason for the binding.**

The answer to the question *why* lies in the specific situation of the exiles. We learned last week from chapter 1 that these exiles had been carted off to Babylon five and a half years ago from their homeland around Jerusalem (cf Ezekiel 1:2). The reason for the exile was the people's refusal to listen to the warnings of the prophets and repent of their self-styled worship of their covenant God (cf 2 Chronicles 36:15ff). In agreement with His promises in Deuteronomy 28, the LORD expelled them from their inheritance and sent them away from the temple – where the gospel of redemption was proclaimed through the sacrifices. In a word: the exile occurred because of hardened sin amongst the people.

For a long five years the people in Babylon could reflect on the cause of their exile. But see, when God comes to Ezekiel five and half years after the exile began, the Jews in Babylon were as self-righteous as ever! Sorrow for the sins that caused God to spew them out of their inheritance? Admission of guilt that the exile was their own fault? None of it! Just look at the term the Lord uses to describe the exiles. Twice in our text God labels the children of Israel “a rebellious house” – and the term comes back repeatedly in the two chapters we read as well as throughout the book. “Rebellious”: the term captures the notion of a deliberate, willful decision to disobey. More, the term reflects a surprise. Given what God had done for Israel, one should expect humility and obedience – gratitude. God established His covenant of grace with Israel, so that He would be their Father and they His children for Christ's sake. He'd also demonstrated recently that He does not tolerate His children breaking His covenant with Him; hence the exile. Works like these on God's part should prompt humble *gratitude* or humble *obedience*. But there

was none of that among the exiles. Even God's work of sending them into exile did not produce repentance; it produced instead *rejection* of God's punishment. That's rebellion.<sup>2</sup>

The Lord uses other words to add color to this rebellion. Chap 2: 4: "they are *impudent* and *stubborn* children" (cf 3:7). The words Ezekiel uses here present a picture of hard faces and hard hearts, unemotional, steel. Hence the warning to Ezekiel in 2:6 not to be "dismayed at their looks" (also 3:9). We get another sense of the people's hardness in the first part of vs 6. God tells Ezekiel that the people speak words that are going to feel to Ezekiel like "briers and thorns", words that will make him think he's dwelling "among scorpions" – such is the sting of their words. The mouth reveals what's in the heart; their words will be hard, hurtful because their hearts are *hard, tough, calloused, unbreakable!* In fact, so hard-headed, so hard-hearted are they, says God to Ezekiel in 3:7, that Ezekiel's work in their midst will bear no fruit; "the house of Israel will not listen to you..., for all the house of Israel are impudent and hard-hearted." See there, congregation, the spiritual health of these exiles.

Talk about discouraging for Ezekiel! Ezekiel –one of these hard-hearted exiles!– has seen their stunning vision of the glory of God in chap 1, and then he gets told directly after he's seen this vision that God is sending him to the children of Israel to speak God's word to his fellow exiles. But whatever enthusiasm the vision may have given Ezekiel God immediately takes away with His message that the people are simply going to reject whatever Ezekiel says, because they're "a rebellious house," are hard-faced and hard-hearted; in fact, their words will sting and if looks could kill Ezekiel would be dead in a day. How discouraging! No wonder –3:14– that Ezekiel went "in bitterness" and "in the heat of [his] spirit" – literally: boiling with rage. That God gave him such an impossible mandate: how could He! That's why –vs 15– Ezekiel, when he got back to the captives at the River Chebar, sat there "astonished" (says our translation) for seven days; the word means literally 'devastated'.

And if that's not bad enough, congregation, consider the following two points yet. What's the message that Ezekiel has to speak to the people? The scroll: he had to eat it, had to internalize it, because he had to feed back its message to the people. But what was the message? Chap 2:10: "written on it were lamentations and mourning and woe." Talk about a devastating message! To hard-faced and hard-hearted people Ezekiel has to be prophet of doom and gloom!

In the second place, look at the charge God gave to Ezekiel after sitting there in his devastation for seven days. "Son of man," says God in 3:17, "I've made you a watchman for the house of Israel." A watchman: we're to think of the man standing in the lookout tower on a walled city, keeping an eye on the enemy outside. His task is to report back accurately to the people inside the city walls as to what the enemy outside is doing. The watchman, then, was the cities' first line of defense.

So God made Ezekiel a watchman. That's to say: there's an enemy outside the city, and the survival of those inside depends in first instance on Ezekiel. Who the enemy is? None else, beloved, than God Himself! There's a wicked man, and the God of Ezekiel 1 is coming against that wicked man in judgment; God wants his life on account of his sin. Ezekiel's task is to warn that man of God's coming. But who is that wicked man?! Ezekiel is sent not to heathen people but to the house of Israel (3:4ff). *And the people of Israel will not listen!*

Do you sense, beloved, something of the incredibly difficult task the Lord laid upon Ezekiel's shoulders? Given the hardness of the people, how tempting, *how tempting* for Ezekiel to alter the warning, or to keep his mouth shut! How tempting, how tempting to let those hard-

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<sup>2</sup> Cf TDOT, IX, 7f.

headed and hard-hearted exiles perish in their rebellion! But the Lord makes plain right away that Ezekiel may not keep his mouth shut, for if Ezekiel refuses to cry out a warning to that wicked man, then, sure, that wicked man will perish, but *God will require the wicked man's blood – from Ezekiel* (vs 18). And to require someone's blood from Ezekiel's hand is to say that Ezekiel has earned the death penalty himself (Gen 9:6). He *may* not keep his mouth shut, Ezekiel *has to* labor for the repentance of one and all, whether he feels like it or not, even if God has foretold that he will see no fruit on his labors.

We puzzle. Given the circumstances, why does God insist on binding Ezekiel's tongue? Why can't he utter his own thoughts, especially his frustrations?? That's our third point:

### **3. The fruit of this binding.**

If people, congregation, are permitted to say what they'd like to say, what can happen? Consider Moses. God, you recall, told him to talk to the rock in the presence of the people so that water might come forth. But Moses was so exasperated at the people's stubbornness that he cried out his frustration: "Hear now, you rebels! Must we bring water for you out of this rock?", and he smashed his staff against the rock in anger... (Num 20:1ff). We understand: the reaction is so human. Who of us doesn't lose it from time to time....

But we also know: what enormous damage the out-of-control tongue can do! James 3: "See how great a forest a little fire kindles! And the tongue is a fire..." (vs 5f). Precisely that destruction, beloved, is what God would prevent from happening amongst the exiles. This people is hard, so incredibly hard-hearted, and so it was so very possible that Ezekiel's exasperation with the people gets the better of him – with all the damage that would result for God and His glory. *God would prevent that*, and so takes claim of Ezekiel's tongue. In the face of the people's hardness, God determines to make Ezekiel harder still (3:8), and the means to make Ezekiel's "face strong against their faces, and [Ezekiel's] forehead strong against their foreheads" is to bind Ezekiel's tongue so that the prophet can speak only words from God. Ezekiel: his name means 'God strengthens' or –also a possible translation– 'God hardens'. We need to understand: here is the *care* and the *mercy* of the Lord to Ezekiel; God prevents him from making the mistake Moses made.

But consider now, brothers and sisters, what the result of such binding had to be for the people. Precisely because God laid such radical claim to Ezekiel's tongue could the people be assured that *every* word coming from the mouth of the prophet was *unambiguously a word from God* – and therefore was without mistake. The people felt rejected by God, forgotten; after all, the temple where God dwelt *and where His word came to His people in the sacrifices* was miles and miles away in Jerusalem – they felt *outside the range* of that word. Such, now, is God's care for His people-in-exile that He raised up a prophet in their midst *who would speak to them direct words from God!* The people forgotten? No – and the evidence lies in the fact that God has come to them in exile, and the proof of His coming lies in the presence of a prophet who speaks only words from God Himself. What delightful comfort, then, for the people!

At the same time: what enormous responsibility! Exactly because Ezekiel speaks *the very words of God* in their midst are the people bound to *accept* that word and work with it. Though miles removed from the temple and the gospel proclamation of the temple, they can never claim that they didn't know God's will for them; Ezekiel would be God's mouthpiece, literally so. So they *must* respond, God puts the ball completely in their court. "He who hears, let him hear; and he who refuses, let him refuse" (3:27). The onus is on the people – as it always is when the word of the Lord comes to any people.

And how shall Israel respond? We've heard it already: "they are a rebellious house." The fact that "they are a rebellious house" points up that God expects no repentance, expects none to appreciate what He is doing in Ezekiel, expects instead that the exiles will reject His mercy to them through the prophet. It's what God said to Ezekiel in so many words in 3:7: "the house of Israel will not listen to you, because they will not listen to Me." Notice, beloved: though God knows that the people will refuse to hear, that terrible response does not stop God from causing His word to come to the exiles! This is His people-by-covenant, and therefore the God-of-glory sends His Word to them *again and again*; they must *hear the Word*, must be called again to repentance. This is mercy, yes.

And exactly because so much is given to them is so much asked of them. They shall hear the word again –mercy– and refuse to embrace it – and that's their responsibility. And therefore the wrath of God shall come upon the people the more severely! Ezekiel as watchman must speak God's word to the wicked exile, must tell him that "You shall surely die" (3:18), and so it shall be; the wicked amongst the exiles *shall* die – judgment from God on their refusal to heed the word. They shall die, and that's why the scroll Ezekiel had to eat was written inside and out with "lamentations and mourning and woe" (2:10).

Was the fruit of God's binding Ezekiel's tongue then only death and judgment? No, beloved, the exiles did not all die. A faithful remnant survived the fires of God's judgment. So it was that many generations later an angel came to one of the descendents of the exiles and told her that the Holy Spirit would come upon her so that she would conceive a child. Her reply? It was, congregation, one of child-like faith: "Let it be to me according to your word" (Luke 1:38). Here is evidence that the word of God is harder than the hearts of men.

And who was her Son? I said earlier that God claimed the tongue of no other prophet in the way He claimed Ezekiel's. It's true. But when the Son of God came into the world, the Lord claimed not just Jesus' tongue, but His whole being. "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory" (John 1:14), and the point here is that God took human nature – mortal, twisted by the fall into sin– and made that a suitable dwelling for the Son of God. So not just Jesus' tongue, but also Jesus' hands, Jesus' feet, Jesus' mind and heart were bound by the power of God to speak and to act and to think only words and deeds and thoughts that come from heaven. Said Jesus, "I have not spoken on My own authority; but the Father who sent Me gave Me a command, what I should say and what I should speak" (John 12:49). Again: "I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me" (John 6:38). What was foreshadowed in the binding of Ezekiel's tongue was fulfilled in the Lord Jesus Christ!

That is why, beloved, the responsibility of the Jews in the days of our Lord was greater than that of the Jews in the days of Ezekiel; Jesus was more than Ezekiel. That's also why the Lord Jesus Christ could with authority repeat the words of our text: "He who has ears to hear, let him hear" (cf Mt 11:15; 13:9; Rev 2,3). For through Jesus *God's own words* came to the people.

But let us make no mistake, beloved: if the Jews of Jesus' day had great responsibility because God's word came to them in the Son of God, our responsibility today is *greater still!* For Jesus spoke before the Holy Spirit was poured out, spoke before He was glorified. But much has happened since He walked the streets of Judea and Galilee. Not only was He crucified to pay for sin, but He's also been received into heaven at God's right hand. From there He has sent His Holy Spirit to earth – with the same fire that accompanied the vision of God's glory Ezekiel saw in chapter 1; with the sound of a might wind also, the same sort of heavenly noise that accompanied the vision of God's glory Ezekiel saw (Acts 2:2). That is to say: the church has seen something of

the glory of the Lord, and that is why every word from God comes with greater responsibility for the hearer than before the Holy Spirit was poured out. That is the more so because the Holy Spirit after His outpouring has laid hold of sinful people so that people speak the word of God. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5 that “the love of Christ *compels*” him to preach, and his point is that Christ’s love for His people is so great that He sovereignly laid hold of Paul on his way to Damascus so that Paul had no choice but to become a preacher of the gospel for the benefit of those chosen to life (vs 14; cf Acts 18:5). That is: Christ through the Holy Spirit claimed not just Paul’s tongue but Paul’s whole being so that Paul *must* preach the gospel (cf 1 Corinthians 9:16). So Paul could even thank God for the Thessalonians because when they received the word they heard from Paul they “accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God” (1 Thessalonians 2:13).

Nor was Paul the only one the Holy Spirit bound. He took hold of all the apostles, with all their talents and their beings, and compelled them all to proclaim the gospel to the ends of the earth. The same is true of those who are called to proclaim the gospel in the course of church history. God takes hold of certain men, uses them to confront sinners with the gospel, so that people may repent and believe. In our midst too the Lord God is pleased to cause that word to come to us all.

That is why, congregation of the Lord, your responsibility to respond to the Word you hear is greater than was the responsibility of exiles in Ezekiel’s day. No, the preacher’s tongue today is not bound to the radical degree Ezekiel’s tongue was bound. But the God behind Ezekiel is the same God who today “mercifully sends heralds of [His] most joyful message to whom He will and when He wills” (cf Canons of Dort, I,3). That is why, though the preacher today has a greater responsibility than Ezekiel had, the plea of the apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 5 remains in force:

“Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ’s behalf, be reconciled to God” (vs 20).

Woe to those who refuse to be reconciled to God, week by week. The word has come, week by week, the God of glory revealed. God has promised that those who refuse to be reconciled to God shall taste the “lamentations and mourning and woe” contained in the book of Revelation (cf Rev 10:9ff).

And those who are reconciled to God? “Blessed are those who do His commandments, that they may have the right to the tree of life” (Rev 22:14).