

Ezekiel 1:28 -3:27 “The Watchman of the Rebellious House”
Psalm 81; 2 Corinthians 2:12-17

Children,

what does it mean to be a watchman?

Nowadays we have these fancy cameras and “security guards”

who watch the monitors (talk to Mr. Kling if you want to know how that works!).

But in the old days they had watchmen.

The watchman would stand on guard,

looking out from his tower.

If he saw an enemy coming, he would raise the alarm –

blow the trumpet –

wake everyone up.

That’s his job.

He may not be very good at fighting, or talking, or farming, or anything else –

but as long as you have a good and faithful watchman,

no one will be able to surprise you at night.

Ezekiel is called as a watchman.

He is supposed to warn Israel about a sneak attack.

Who is going to attack?

The Babylonians? No.

The Egyptians? No.

God.

God is going to attack his people.

And so God posts Ezekiel as a watchman!

If God is going to attack his own people by night,

why would he post a watchman to warn them?

Yeah, because he wants them to repent!

Remember Jonah?

Why did God send Jonah to preach destruction to Ninevah?

Because he wanted Ninevah to repent!

Well, God has called me to be a watchman, too.

Because Christ is coming to bring judgment upon the earth.

And he has called all men everywhere to repent.

That’s part of the point of Psalm 81.

The trumpet that blows in verse 3 is plainly a trumpet of warning,

as well as rejoicing,

calling Israel to listen to the Word of God.

Psalm 81 and 2 Corinthians 2:12-17

Paul echoes the same theme of the coming judgment as Ezekiel, and says
“we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved
and among those who are perishing,
to one a fragrance from death to death,
to the other a fragrance from life to life.”

Notice that we are the same aroma either way –
we are the aroma of Christ.

But that aroma has two different effects.

For those who are being saved, the fragrance of Christ is the aroma of life.
But for those who are perishing, it is the stench of death.

This is a good reminder that for those who are perishing
the beatific vision of the glory of Christ holds no beauty.
For them, the presence of our beloved Savior is sheer terror.

But of course, that is where we all start!

Ezekiel himself was a priest – he had been trained until his 25th year for the priesthood –
and though he had a clear grasp of the purpose of the temple and the priests,
when he actually saw God, he fell on his face.

There is a pattern here in Ezekiel 2-3 that we must see:

The Glory of the LORD appears (ch 1)

The Spirit of God enables Ezekiel to stand and hear the Word of the LORD (2:1-2)

E is commissioned to speak the Word of the LORD to a rebellious house,
and is warned not to fear them, but to fear God (2:3-3:11)

The Spirit returns E to the exiles for seven days (3:12-15)

E is commissioned as watchman for the house of Israel,
and is warned that he must not fail to warn the people (3:16-21)

And again the Glory of the LORD appears (3:22-23)

and the Spirit of God enables Ezekiel to stand and hear the Word of the LORD (3:24-27)

Notice that both times when the Glory of the LORD appears,

Ezekiel falls on his face both times –

both times the Spirit of God must enter him
before he can hear the Word of the LORD.

And both times he says that “the hand of the LORD” was upon him (1:3 and 3:22)
a phrase he also uses in 3:14, when the Spirit lifts him up and takes him away.

1. The Glory of the LORD and the Spirit-Enabled Hearing of the Word (1:1-2:2)

1:28 Such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord. And when I saw it, I fell on my face, and I heard the voice of one speaking. 2:1 And he said to me, “Son of man, stand on your feet, and I will speak with you.” 2 And as he spoke to me, the Spirit entered into me and set me on my feet, and I heard him speaking to me.

“And he said to me” (Finally, God speaks!)

This phrase is used 41 times in Ezekiel.

God will speak to Ezekiel 41 times.

Only five times will Ezekiel respond.

Here in his commissioning, Ezekiel will be utterly silent.

Unlike Moses, Samuel, Elijah, and Isaiah,

Ezekiel is not given any opportunity to reply.

There is no dialogue here.

All he does is look, listen and eat.

What Ezekiel is being told – and what we need to hear –

is that the voice of the LORD will accomplish God’s purposes.

God’s word is powerful.

And when the voice of the LORD calls him to rise,

the Spirit – the *ruach* – enters him and sets him on his feet.

We saw last time that the Spirit – the *ruach* – was the motor power driving the four living creatures.

The same Spirit – the same breath – the same wind –

that drives the chariot of God,

also lifts up Ezekiel.

Right here at the beginning of his ministry,

Yahweh makes it clear to Ezekiel that the power of his ministry is nothing less than the power of the Spirit of God.

And notice what the Spirit does –

the Spirit enables him to hear and receive the Word of God.

2. Ezekiel Commissioned and Warned: Do Not Fear the Rebellious House (2:3-3:11)

Ezekiel’s commissioning consists of two speeches (2:3-7 and 3:4-11),

between which is “sandwiched” as it were the honey-flavored scroll (2:8-3:3).

I want you to see some key themes here in 2:3-3:11:

1) in both speeches, God emphasizes that Ezekiel is *sent*:

“I send you to the people of Israel” (2:3)

“I send you to them” (2:4)

“You are not sent to people of foreign speech...but to the house of Israel” (3:5)

“If I sent you to such, they would listen” but Israel will not (3:6)

2) in both speeches, God emphasizes the obstinacy of Israel:

Israel is impudent and stubborn (2:4)

They “have a hard forehead and a stubborn heart” (3:7)

3) in both speeches, Ezekiel is warned not to fear them:

“be not afraid of them, nor be afraid of their words...Be not afraid of their words nor be dismayed at their looks” (2:6)

and “Fear them not, nor be dismayed at their looks” (3:9)
4) in both speeches, God identifies Israel as a rebellious house
In the first speech they are called “nations of rebels”
and four times God says they are “a rebellious house” (2:5,6,7,8).
This is echoed in 3:9.

So both speeches have a similar structure:
I am sending you
to a stubborn people.
But do not fear them
because they are a rebellious house.

Let’s look a little more at the first speech:

3 And he said to me, “Son of man, I send you to the people of Israel, to nations of rebels, who have rebelled against me. They and their fathers have transgressed against me to this very day. 4 The descendants also are impudent and stubborn: I send you to them, and you shall say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord God.’ 5 And whether they hear or refuse to hear (for they are a rebellious house) they will know that a prophet has been among them.

There is an interesting contrast in verse 3 between Ezekiel and the exiles.
He is the “son of man” – literally, the son of Adam.
They are the people of Israel – literally, the sons of Israel.

Ezekiel has received a “spirit” – a “ruach” – just like the first Adam.
In the beginning God breathed the breath of life into Adam.
Here in Ezekiel, God breathes his spirit into Ezekiel.

Last time, we saw lots of creation imagery in Ezekiel 1.
And here in Ezekiel 2 we see the “creation” of a new Adam,
a theme that will return in the climactic scene of the dry bones in Ezekiel 37.

As such “Ezekiel...is to be the founding member of a new community,
empowered by the infusion of the divine Spirit to a life of radical obedience” (Duguid 69)

All this will come together in the resurrection of Jesus, the last Adam,
and in his resurrection, he constitutes us as the Spirit-empowered community –
the new humanity – that lives out of his resurrection life!

But the problem in Ezekiel’s day, is that God has an insubordinate family (v4)
The sons (the descendants) are
impudent (lit “hard of face”)
and stubborn (lit “hard of heart”).
These hard-faced, hard-hearted sons are not living like God’s family!

But God says that Ezekiel should not be afraid of them or their words (v6-7).

6 And you, son of man, be not afraid of them, nor be afraid of their words, though briers and thorns are with you and you sit on scorpions. Be not afraid of their words, nor be dismayed at their looks, for they are a rebellious house. 7 And you shall speak my words to them, whether they hear or refuse to hear, for they are a rebellious house.

Notice that the point is *not* that Ezekiel will get a great response.

Ezekiel's call is to speak the Word of the Lord to the rebellious house,
whether they hear – or whether they refuse to hear.

Oh, and by the way, don't be surprised when they refuse to listen!

With a message like this,

Ezekiel may be tempted to back out of his prophetic calling!

So Yahweh warns him – don't be rebellious like them!

And he gives him an object lesson in obedience: (read)

8 "But you, son of man, hear what I say to you. Be not rebellious like that rebellious house; open your mouth and eat what I give you." 9 And when I looked, behold, a hand was stretched out to me, and behold, a scroll of a book was in it. 10 And he spread it before me. And it had writing on the front and on the back, and there were written on it words of lamentation and mourning and woe. 3:1 And he said to me, "Son of man, eat whatever you find here. Eat this scroll, and go, speak to the house of Israel." 2 So I opened my mouth, and he gave me this scroll to eat. 3 And he said to me, "Son of man, feed your belly with this scroll that I give you and fill your stomach with it." Then I ate it, and it was in my mouth as sweet as honey.

Why does this papyrus scroll of woe and lamentation taste sweet?

Papyrus is not naturally sweet!

Perhaps Ezekiel remembered the words of Jeremiah (15:16)

"Your words were found and I ate them,
And your words brought me joy, and delight for my heart;
For I have been called by your name,
O Yahweh, God of hosts."

God's word is sweet –

even his words of woe and judgment.

Remember what we saw in 2 Corinthians 2.

We are the aroma of Christ.

Christ is the one who is coming in judgment against the whole earth!

And to those who are being saved, that is sweet news!

To those who are being saved, we rejoice to hear that Jesus is coming!

That he is going to make everything right!

That he will overthrow the oppressor –

that those who murder and rape and steal will not get away with it forever!

That is sweet news!

But there is something else we need to see in Ezekiel's honey-scroll:
The prophet now "carries in his own body the word of God" (Block, 126).
The word of Christ *dwells* in Ezekiel.

We are called to let the word of Christ dwell in us richly.
Psalm 19 says that the words of God's law are "sweeter than honey."
We need not only to "taste" God's word,
but we need to digest it, meditate on it, ruminant on it,
like a cow chewing the cud.

In verse 4, we then hear Yahweh's second commissioning speech:

4 And he said to me, "Son of man, go to the house of Israel and speak with my words to them.

Remember to speak my words!
You do not get to choose your message.
You are to speak the word of the Lord –
as 1 Peter 4:11 says,
the one who speaks is to speak the very words of God.

The message of the digested scroll must issue forth from him.

5 For you are not sent to a people of foreign speech and a hard language, but to the house of Israel— 6 not to many peoples of foreign speech and a hard language, whose words you cannot understand. Surely, if I sent you to such, they would listen to you. 7 But the house of Israel will not be willing to listen to you, for they are not willing to listen to me: because all the house of Israel have a hard forehead and a stubborn heart.

In verses 5-7 the LORD tells Ezekiel that even though the Babylonians are all around,
he is not sent to the Babylonians.
He is sent to the rebellious house of Israel.
Ironically, if God sent him to the Babylonians, "they would listen to you."
But Israel will not listen.

There is a remarkable similarity between Ezekiel's situation and ours.
Some of you may be called to go to peoples of foreign speech.
But most of us are called to go to the rebellious house of Israel.
After all, most folks around here have been baptized,
or at least have some sort of church background.

And some of them – perhaps many of them – will not listen.
And as God says in v7, the reason why they will not listen to you,
is because they will not listen to him.
People who are living in rebellion against God
rarely like to hear that they are in rebellion!

But God promises that he will harden Ezekiel for the challenge.

I said in the first sermon that Ezekiel's name means "may God strengthen."

But the verb "to strengthen" is the verb used here, translated, "to harden."

Three times in verses 8-9 you hear the language of "hardening" –
as God promises that he will make Ezekiel's forehead
hard enough to withstand any head-butts he may receive!

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 have I made your forehead. Fear them not, nor be dismayed at their looks, for they are a rebellious house."

[By the way, this is *not* the word that is used of "hardening" hearts.

When Pharaoh "hardened" his heart – that is a different word entirely.

It is instead the word used of God's "mighty" arm that brought Israel out of Egypt.

God will strengthen Ezekiel's face so that he can withstand any opposition.]

Verse 11 reminds us that only God can change the heart: (read)

10 Moreover, he said to me, "Son of man, all my words that I shall speak to you receive in your heart, and hear with your ears. 11 And go to the exiles, to your people, and speak to them and say to them, 'Thus says the Lord God,' whether they hear or refuse to hear."

It is not my job, as a preacher, to change peoples' hearts.

It is my job to receive the word of the Lord with my hear, and hear with my ears,
and then go and speak to the exiles and say 'thus says the LORD God'
whether they hear it or not.

The message must be digested, internalized, embodied, and lived.

The calling is not to success, but to faithfulness.

It is true that there are many *faithless* small churches.

Smallness is no sign of faithfulness!

Rather, faithfulness demands that we *go to the exiles*, to your people, and speak to them.

And of course, Jesus has extended this mandate.

It is not enough to go only "to your people" –
we must go to all nations!

But in the particular place where God has put us –

in this location in northern Indiana and southwest Michigan –
there are lots of rebellious children,
there are lots of straying sheep.

3. Seven Days (3:12-15)

We come now to the center of the narrative in verses 12-15.

The same Spirit that raises him to his feet when the glory of the LORD appears

(2:2 and 3:24)
now lifts him up (3:12 and 3:14).

12 Then the Spirit lifted me up, and I heard behind me the voice of a great earthquake: “Blessed be the glory of the Lord from its place!”

It is important to remember that the Hebrew *ruach* can mean Spirit, wind, or breath, and the biblical authors often play on those various meanings. Here you could read it that “a wind lifted me up” – since it is clear that the *ruach* blows Ezekiel away in verse 14.

Ezekiel is “blown away” by what he sees and hears!

The benediction in verse 12 seems a bit strange in light of everything that has happened. Ezekiel hears a voice – or sound – in verse 12, and then explains that it was the sound of the wings of the living creatures... and the sound of a great earthquake in verse 13. So the statement, “Blessed be the glory of the LORD from its place” seems a bit odd.

It is entirely possible that the original read, “as the glory of the LORD rose from its place.” (It would only require one letter to be mistaken for another).

Either way, it is true that the glory of the LORD was returning to its place,

But the sound that he hears is said to be:

13 It was the sound of the wings of the living creatures as they touched one another, and the sound of the wheels beside them, and the sound of a great earthquake. 14 The Spirit lifted me up and took me away, and I went in bitterness in the heat of my spirit, the hand of the Lord being strong upon me. 15 And I came to the exiles at Tel-abib, who were dwelling by the Chebar canal, and I sat where they were dwelling. And I sat there overwhelmed among them seven days.

When he was in the presence of the LORD,
Ezekiel found the word of the LORD to be sweet to his taste.
Now, in the presence of the exiles,
he finds bitterness and he is “angry in my spirit” –
you could translate v 14 “embittered in the fury of my spirit.”

We are not told why.
All we are told is that Ezekiel feels great bitterness.
And as he sits among the exiles for seven days, he sat there as one stunned.

Some have said that Ezekiel is resisting the call of the LORD –
since he sits silently, and does not speak.
But the LORD had told him that he was only to speak the word of the LORD,

and as yet, he has been given no specific message to the exiles.

Why, then, is there this seven day delay?

The timing is important.

In Exodus and Leviticus we are told that a priest was to undergo consecration for 7 days, and on the eighth day he would enter his priestly service.

And we are told in verse 16 that it was “at the end of seven days” that the word of the LORD came to Ezekiel again.

This time, there is no glorious chariot –
no cherubim with the glorious appearance –
just the “Word of the LORD.”

2. Ezekiel Commissioned and Warned: Do Not Be Silent (3:16-21)

16 And at the end of seven days, the word of the Lord came to me: 17 “Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel. Whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. 18 If I say to the wicked, ‘You shall surely die,’ and you give him no warning, nor speak to warn the wicked from his wicked way, in order to save his life, that wicked person shall die for his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand. 19 But if you warn the wicked, and he does not turn from his wickedness, or from his wicked way, he shall die for his iniquity, but you will have delivered your soul. 20 Again, if a righteous person turns from his righteousness and commits injustice, and I lay a stumbling block before him, he shall die. Because you have not warned him, he shall die for his sin, and his righteous deeds that he has done shall not be remembered, but his blood I will require at your hand. 21 But if you warn the righteous person not to sin, and he does not sin, he shall surely live, because he took warning, and you will have delivered your soul.”

Verses 16-21 is very similar to the language of Ezekiel 33:1-9.

As such, the watchman theme will bracket the judgment oracles of the book.

(Aren't you excited to hear that we have 30 chapters of judgment coming up?!!)

Trust me!

The Word of the LORD is sweet!)

God is coming in judgment against his rebellious house –

but he is still gracious:

and so he posts a watchman to warn against his assault!

Because the only way to defend against the coming judgment is to repent!

And God says that both the wicked and the righteous can be saved!

Now, what does Ezekiel mean by “the wicked” and “the righteous”?

Throughout Ezekiel, “the wicked”

“is one who holds Yahweh the covenant Lord in contempt
and displays this attitude by willful violation” of God’s law.

He is part of the covenant community (the “House of Israel”)

“but...he has set himself in opposition to it.” (Block, 145)

In contrast, the “righteous”

“is one who holds Yahweh in highest respect and expresses that disposition by joyful compliance with the covenant stipulations.” (Block, 146)

What about this “stumbling block” in verse 20?

What does it mean that God puts a “stumbling block” before the righteous?

Is God trying to trip you up?!

Note that the context is when a righteous person turns from his righteousness.

In modern lingo, when a faithful Christian (an upstanding church member) turns from his righteousness, then God may well put a stumbling block before them.

In other words, God may well say,

“Okay, what do you prefer: your ways, or my ways?”

To give you some examples:

If you are “struggling” with pornography,

God may send you a real, live test.

Will you repent and live?

Or will you fall into judgment and die?

Or if you “struggle” with taming the tongue,

God may send you a stumbling block

in a juicy bit of information that could destroy someone.

Will you repent and live?

Or will you fall into judgment and die?

God sometimes offers us precisely what *we* want,

in order that we might be forced to decide between Him and me.

And Ezekiel’s calling here is fairly simple:

If you warn the wicked and he repents, he will live.

If you do not warn the wicked and he dies, then his blood is on your hands – you are no better than a murderer.

If you warn the wicked and he does not repent, and he dies, then you’re off the hook.

And if the righteous turn away and sin, you’d better warn them too!

Again, note that the prophet’s job is not to “save” people.

The prophet is to *warn* them.

Only God can change hearts.

Your calling is to be faithful – not successful!

1. The Glory of the LORD and the Spirit-Enabled Preaching of the Word (3:22-27)

22 *And the hand of the Lord was upon me there. And he said to me, “Arise, go out into the valley [plain], and there I will speak with you.”* 23 *So I arose and went out into the valley [plain], and behold, the glory of the Lord stood there, like the glory that I had seen by the Chebar canal, and I fell on my face.* 24 *But the Spirit entered into me and set me on my feet, and he spoke with me and said to me,*

So after seven days, the hand of the LORD came upon Ezekiel again
and he went out into the plain and glory of the LORD appeared to him again.
He fell on his face again.
The Spirit lifted him again.
And the LORD spoke to him again.
And this time he says

“Go, shut yourself within your house. 25 And you, O son of man, behold, cords will be placed upon you, and you shall be bound with them, so that you cannot go out among the people. 26 And I will make your tongue cling to the roof of your mouth, so that you shall be mute and unable to reprove them, for they are a rebellious house.

Many have struggled with this text, because immediately after saying, “go warn the wicked,”
God now says, “I will make your tongue cling to the roof of your mouth,
so that you shall be mute and unable to reprove them...”

If God strikes Ezekiel dumb – then we have a dumb watchman who cannot warn Israel
of the coming judgment.

And that is *part* of the point here!
The message of Ezekiel is that it is too late – judgment is coming!

But then he adds:

27 But when I speak with you, I will open your mouth, and you shall say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord God.’ He who will hear, let him hear; and he who will refuse to hear, let him refuse, for they are a rebellious house.

If we take this literally, then in Ezekiel 4-33, we have *every single word* that Ezekiel spoke
for the next seven years (33:21).

It’s an interesting question:
was Ezekiel mute the rest of the time?

The text of Ezekiel suggests that, with the exception of these handful of prophecies,
dated very specifically,
Ezekiel was utterly silent for seven years.

(Though it is possible that undated instances of “and the word of the LORD came to me”
may refer to other times when Ezekiel was commanded to speak).

Still, imagine being among the exiles!
There’s this really weird prophet
who sits in his house, utterly silent,
only to come out once or twice a year,
with these stark messages of judgment –
and then he returns to his house, and just sits there, utterly silent.

But consider Ezekiel's master:

“Was Ezekiel confined to his house?

Jesus was ‘despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows,
and familiar with suffering’ (Is 53:3).

Was Ezekiel made dumb?

Jesus was ‘led like a lamb to the slaughter,
and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth’.

Was Ezekiel bound with ropes?

Jesus was nailed to the cross and suffered there
not for any transgressions of his own but for ours....

Thus has the greater ‘Son of Man’ fulfilled the ministry of the earlier ‘son of man,’
giving us the good news of the gospel,
which is the antidote to the bad news of our natural state.

What price, then, can be too great for us to play our part
in the great work of the Triune God,

bringing to himself a harvest of men and women
from every tribe, nation, and language group,
that they too might receive eternal life in Christ Jesus?” (Duguid, 86)

The gospel will have one of two outcomes:

either it will open the eyes of the blind by the power of the Spirit,
or it will harden the hearts of the proud by the power of the same Spirit.

If you want to know what this looks like in the church,
then come back tonight!

Because tonight we'll be looking at Paul's exhortation to the Philippians,
as he urges them live as citizens worthy of the gospel of Christ.

We are called to be that faithful house –

“standing firm in one spirit,
with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel.” (1:27)

And Paul says that this unity and solidarity of the church in the midst of suffering
is “a clear sign to [your opponents] of their destruction and your salvation.” (1:28)

If we are going to be a faithful house,

if we are going to hear the word of the LORD and speak it – and do it –
then we need to spend a whole lot more time together,
both in the hearing (studying God's word),
and in the praying (responding to God's word),
and in the doing (going out with God's word to the rebellious house).

[Diaconal Offering]