

COMMENTARY ON EZEKIEL CHAPTER 3

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INTRODUCTION

Ezekiel was a priest (Ezekiel 1:3) but never served in that office, as he was still a young man at 26 years when he was taken captive during the reign of Jehoiachin (2 Kings 24:10-16). However, services in the office of the priesthood were to begin at age 30. But before he could reach that age the Babylonian invasion occurred. Daniel was taken captive in the first captivity during Jehoiakim's reign (605 BC), about eight years before Ezekiel was also taken captive (597 B.C.). Ezekiel was contemporary with Jeremiah and Daniel. Jeremiah was an old man who spoke to the remnant that remained in the land; Daniel spoke in the court of the king of Babylon; Ezekiel spoke to the captives at river "Che'bar" of Babylon who had been brought from Jerusalem.

The name Ezekiel means "God will strengthen" or "God will harden." Like Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1:1) and Zechariah (Zechariah 1:1; cf. Nehemiah 12:4, 16), Ezekiel was a priest and a prophet (Ezek. 1:3). These three "priests and prophets" prophesied during the exilic or postexilic periods. Ezekiel's priestly background explains in part his emphasis on the temple in Jerusalem, the glory of the Lord, the actions of Jerusalem's priests, and God's future temple.

The date for Ezekiel's ministry can be determined by noting the chronological notations in his book (1:2; 8:1; 20:1; 24:1; 29:1, 17; 30:20; 31:1; 32:1, 17; 33:21; 40:1). All Ezekiel's prophecies are arranged chronologically (starting with "the fifth year of the exile," 1:2, and ending with "the twenty-fifth year of our exile," 40:1, except the prophecies introduced in 29:1, 17). These two variations may be explained by the fact that they are grouped topically as part of the prophecies against Egypt in chapters 29-32. Ezekiel's ministry began "in the fourth month on the fifth day" of "the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiachin" (1:1-2).

The book has 48 chapters, 1,278 verses, and 39,401 words. It can be divided into two main parts; chapters 1-24 are about condemnation or judgment on the people and chapters 25-48 are about hope. In this paper, we shall focus our attention on chapter three. This chapter can be outlined as follows: verses 1-3 Eating a scroll, 4-9 Head butting a nation, 10-15 Sitting by a river, 16-21 Ordering a watchman, 22-27 shutting up a prophet.

1-3 Eating a scroll.

vv. 1

The instruction to eat the roll (scroll, in NKJV), is a continuation of the narrative that began in chapter 2. God had already told the prophet to eat what He would give him (2:8). Now God repeated the order, specifically telling him to eat the scroll he had just received. The purpose was so he could then go and preach to the house of Israel. Ezekiel was called to speak God's word (Ezekiel 2:7). Ezekiel was then given a roll (scroll), which contains words/messages of God. This suggests that the words Ezekiel was to preach to the people were to be eaten by him before he was to go before the people. Indeed, Ezekiel would be full of the scroll after eating that scroll. He would then be "preaching from the overflow" of God's word.

vv. 2

Ezekiel was obedient to God. He opened his mouth and God filled his mouth with the Word. God's messenger must first internalize God's truth for himself, then preach it. It is a great honor to be a spokesperson for the Lord, but we must be able to handle both the bitter and the sweet.

"A hand stretched out and handed Ezekiel a scroll that didn't have any good news written on it, because it was filled on both sides with "words of lament and mourning and woe"

(Ezek. 2:10 NIV). Perhaps it contained the messages that are recorded in chapters 4 through 32, God's judgments on Jerusalem and the Gentile nations. (See the suggested outline of the book.) God commanded him to eat the scroll, and it tasted sweet like honey (Ps. 19:10; 119:103), although later he tasted bitterness (Ezek. 3:14), not unlike the apostle John (Rev. 10:8–11). It's a great honor to be a spokesperson for the Lord, but we must be able to handle both the bitter and the sweet," (Wiersbe, pg 21).

vv. 3

As Ezekiel ate the scroll, it tasted as sweet as honey. Though his message was one of judgment, it was still God's word. The sweetness came from the source of the words (God) rather than the content of the words (judgment). This same thought was expressed by David (Psalm 19:10), Jeremiah (Jeremiah 15:16), and the Apostle John (Revelation 10:9-11). The instructions to eat the scroll was not just for the mouth but it came with meaning. Eating not only implies internalizing but digesting and assimilating until the whole of the message permeates the man.

The sweetness of taste in the mouth is in reference to how people receive preaching in general. They love it and appreciate the delivery, but sometimes they find it difficult to practice them. The sweetness of God's word has been experienced by others before Ezekiel. The psalmist wrote, "How sweet are thy words unto my taste! yea, sweeter than honey to my mouth!" (Psalm 119:103). To good-hearted and obedient servants, the wisdom from above would indeed be desirable and pleasant.

4-9 Head butting a nation.

vv. 4

After receiving God's word, Ezekiel was told to proclaim it. His hearers were to be the house of Israel. Ezekiel's message was for the entire "house" (i.e., people) of Israel, though he specifically proclaimed it to a small portion of that household that were at river Che'bar in Babylonian captivity. The house of Israel refers to all the Israelites—both the northern ten tribes and the southern two tribes. Ezekiel's mission was to all the "sons of Israel." The dispensationalist

idea of the “ten lost tribes” is not biblically supportable. Second Chronicles specifies that a number of Israelites from the northern kingdom had moved down to Judah in the days of Hezekiah after the Northern kingdom was taken (2 Chronicles 30:18). It is worth noting that Ezekiel was not to speak his own things but the word of the Lord. He was to preach the word and not some fables.

vv. 5

After defining the composition of Ezekiel’s audience, God emphasized one of the things that Ezekiel had in common with that audience: they shared the same language. The phrase that is used refer to a difference in language is “people of a strange speech and of an hard language.” The same expression “strange speech” is found in Isaiah 33:19 where the context is of a language that one “canst not comprehend.” Any language a person does not understand or speak can be described as a strange or difficult language.

vv. 6

Ezekiel faced no such hurdle. His message was not for some distant land with an exotic language; it was for Israel. Though going to another culture and nation would have been difficult because of the language problem, the results elsewhere would have been more rewarding. Had Ezekiel gone to another nation, they would have listened to him. Amazingly those who knew nothing of the true God of the universe would have been more responsive than those who claimed His name.

The apostles indeed were sent to many people of a strange speech, but they could not have done any good among them if they had not had the gift of tongues. A Time will come after Ezekiel’s days that God will give power for unlearned people to speak and or interpret hard

languages. Indeed, Jesus was right when He said, “I am with you always even to the end of the world” (Matthew 28:20b emphasis mine).

vv. 7

At the onset God warned Ezekiel not to expect dramatic results from his ministry (2:3-5 cf. Isaiah 6:8-13; Jeremiah 1:11-19). In contrast with the open reception Ezekiel would receive from other nations, Israel was not willing to listen to him. She would reject him because she had rejected God. The people were not prepared to listen or respond to Ezekiel because they were not willing to listen to God. Their spiritual deafness was acquired over long years of exposure to, and rejection of God’s word given by the prophets. This does not imply that every Israelite had rejected God, for Habakkuk, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel were all ministering faithfully. God was referring to all parts of the land of Israel rather than every Israelite.

vv. 8

Taking God’s message of judgment to an unyielding people was a tough task. God encouraged Ezekiel by offering him the needed strength. The prophet needed not to worry about the weight of his assignment. God promised to make him as unyielding and hardened as they were. The word for “hardened” (קָטַן) is the same word that forms part of Ezekiel’s name—יְהוֹקָאֵל, “God will strengthen” or “God will harden.” When he heard his name, he was reminded of God’s promised strength. God never asks a man to do what he cannot do. God accepted no excuse from Moses because there was no deficiency or weakness in Moses that God could not fix (Exodus 4:1-17). If Ezekiel exhibited any reluctance in his heart, God acted promptly to reassure him. God told him that his audience would be stubborn, but Ezekiel was strengthened even harder.

vv. 9

“Adamant”, (*shamiyr*) means a stone. So, God told Ezekiel, like a stone, He has girded Ezekiel’s mind harder. God kept reminding Ezekiel that He is his protection. Ezekiel must not let their threats, or angry looks, stop him from bringing the message that God sent to them. God gave Ezekiel a “hardness” to surpass the people and sustain his ministry as prophet to the exiles.

10-15 Sitting by a river.

vv. 10

The fact that God calls Ezekiel, ‘son of man,’ is a reminder to Ezekiel that he is a man, and not God. Ezekiel’s strength comes from God. This is in the same sense as eating the words of God. The words of God must be received into the innermost being of Ezekiel. The words God wants him to speak will come in his ear and in his mouth. The prophet was not to be selective in his message but to speak the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27). But Ezekiel himself must first receive the message before he would be qualified to deliver it. When Jeremiah tried to quit preaching, he could not because God’s word was in his heart like a burning fire (Jeremiah 20:9).

vv. 11

Just as Ezekiel received the word, He must preach it. He must go to the audience that God had identified the “house of Israel” (vv. 1, 4, 5, 7). Here God called them “the children of thy people” indicating those that are of the same nationality. This expression more likely showed the kinship between Ezekiel and the audience to whom God sent him. God told Ezekiel, for the third time (2:5, 2:7, 3:11), to speak to the people whether or not they listen. God continued to send the

message because He truly cared about them. Even in foreign land while they were sitting by the river, He sent words to them. God explicitly stated this principle in other passages: “And the LORD God of their fathers sent to them by his messengers, rising up betimes, and sending; because he had compassion on his people, and on his dwelling place” (2 Chronicles 36:15). Same is the situation today, people hear the truth but willfully reject the truth.

vv. 12

The role of the Spirit in this ministry is clearly indicated. The movement began when the Spirit lifted him up. The “Spirit” who transported Ezekiel was the same One who had entered into him (2:2). This was the Holy Spirit who divinely enabled God’s servants in Old Testament times. Several times the Holy Spirit transported Ezekiel (mentally rather than physically; cf. 8:3; 11:1, 24; 37:1; 43:5) to various places to give him information. However, it will not be awkward or unheard of if he was actually transported to a different location by the power of the Spirit (cf. 1 Kings 18:12; Mark 1:12; Acts 8:39).

vv. 13

It was certainly after that moment that he observed the wheels and the “living creatures” with wings, and heard noises associated with what he saw (Ezekiel 1:5-24). It was in that glorified environment that the voice of God instructed him. The significant point is that the events were “real” to Ezekiel, even as real as the taste of the scroll in his mouth.

vv. 14

The prophet was lifted up by the Spirit and was swept away to his destination. He was angry, not because of being sent on this mission, but on account of the sins of the people that triggered the need to go. Ezekiel was so dumbfounded and perhaps shocked by the degenerate state of his brethren, coupled with the frightening task that lay before him. He surely was thankful that the strong "hand of Jehovah" was sustaining him.

vv. 15

In this verse, Ezekiel was back to the site where he was when his remarkable experience began (1:1-3), but now he returned with a new perspective. The preparation God gave him was indeed remarkable. Ezekiel recounted "to them of the captivity" the actions he took upon his return: "I sat where they sat and remained there astonished among them seven days." The character of the vision he had just seen and the awesomeness of the task before him left the prophet speechless. Ezekiel needed time to collect his thoughts and prepare himself for his ministry, so he sat at the river side at Chebar for seven days. This seven can be symbolic (to mean complete time) or a literal seven which seem to be the case.

16-21 Ordering a watchman,

vv. 16

Ezekiel had perhaps behaved like Job's friends and sad quietly for seven days (Job 2:13). Ezekiel may have been waiting on the Lord as to when he could start his preaching work. On another hand, he could have been overwhelmed with what he went through and dumbfounded, not knowing where to begin till the word of the Lord came to him.

vv. 17

When the seven days of distress and reflection ended, he again received a message from Jehovah. It was a commission with a new emphasis that of a "watchman" and his message would be a warning from the Lord to listless Israel. The description the Lord gives to him makes it more intense in the sense that he is a watchman and hence if he fails to sound the warning who else could? God told him, "give them warning from me." To emphasize the charge, God said He has made Ezekiel a watchman unto the house of Israel. The watchman was to be on the watch tower to sound an alarm when adversaries are coming.

vv. 18

There is a serious responsibility for the watchman. He must warn the wicked of their sins and the fatal consequence of continuing therein with no evidence of repentance. If the watchman neglects his duty in this regard and the sinful person is lost, the negligent teacher will be held accountable. There were both wicked and righteous individuals living at Chebar. Both kinds of people needed to hear God's warnings of the coming calamity and have the opportunity to change their lives. Ezekiel's success or failure as the watchman will result in four things, and these are discussed here and in the subsequent verses. First, if Ezekiel do not warn them, the wicked shall perish but his blood would be required from Ezekiel.

vv. 19

Second, if Ezekiel faithfully discharged his duty to warn the wicked and he rejected the message, he would indeed die in his iniquity, but God would not hold Ezekiel accountable, nor would he suffer the consequences for the wicked person's refusal to repent. Likewise, we must faithfully teach the erring, showing them their lost condition and the path of salvation. However,

we cannot believe for them. We cannot repent for them irrespective of how much we love them and them to be saved.

vv. 20

Third, Ezekiel was to warn the righteous man. If the righteous man turns from his righteousness to do evil and does not repent from his evil ways, that righteous man will die and face eternal punishment and his former righteous deeds would yield no rewards. Jesus told the Ephesian church to be faithful till death (Revelation 2:10). It follows that, if a brother or sister, who once obeyed the gospel and enjoyed fellowship with God's children, returns to a life of sin, they no longer have true hope. He or she has lost his or her salvation and what awaits for that person is "a certain fearful expectation of judgment" (Hebrews 10:27).

vv. 21

Fourth, if Ezekiel faithfully discharged his duty to warn the erring righteous man and that man obeys the message, he would assuredly live, and God would deliver his soul. All these indicate that God will not charge someone's sins against another. The soul that commits sin, the same shall die and that the burden of the sinner is on himself.

22-27 Shutting Up a Prophet.

vv. 22

Just as the spirit took Ezekiel earlier (vv. 14), he is told to arise and go into the plain. The purpose was for God to speak to him. One of the most important things for Ezekiel, or any other minister of God, is to go only where God sends him. The quickest way to fail is to go on his own,

without God sending him. Preachers must preach what God has said, not more nor less. They must speak where God speaks and be silent where God is silent.

vv. 23

In the plain Ezekiel saw the glory of the Lord for the second time. His response was again one of humble submission, he fell facedown (cf. 1:28). The Spirit of God in the wheel is what Ezekiel saw and he fell on his face in total adoration and worship. This is the first time that a man come into the presence of God and consistently they all concluded that man is nothing and empty! Isaiah (Isaiah 6), Daniel (Daniel 10:9), John (Revelation 1:17), etc. The Lord Almighty is indeed glorious deserving our total reverence and worship.

vv. 24

God then placed several restraints on the prophet. The first was a command to shut himself in his house. He was to refrain from open fellowship with the people. Often the leaders came to him at his house to receive God's word (cf. 8:1; 14:1; 20:1). It was a bit confusing to understand why God would ask him to isolate while his task was to warn them. However, God had a reason for him to do this, which He continued to explain in the next verses.

vv. 25

God already gave Ezekiel advance warning that the people would not listen to him. God now revealed something of the character of the captives, concerning the extent to which they would cause Ezekiel to cease warning them. The people were just that stubborn that they would stop their ears, forcibly remove him from their presence, and put him in fetters so they would not have to

listen to his message. Hundreds of years later, the Jews continued harassing God's prophets; example is how they stopped Stephen from speaking in similar manner but instead of "merely" putting ban on him they stoned him to death (Acts 7:54- 60).

vv. 26

God informed Ezekiel of another restriction: his tongue would stick to the roof of his mouth. Ezekiel experienced temporary dumbness so that he could not speak to the people. This dumbness, however, was not continuous (v. 27) or permanent (33:22) but a while. It was a sign to the rebellious house of their sin. This would be a sign to Israel that when Ezekiel did speak his words, they were certainly from God. Having a prophet arrive at the captives' settlement, dwell among them for seven days without saying anything, then shut himself inside his house, surely caused some of them to wonder what this meant and why he did not speak.

vv. 27

Ezekiel's silence was placed on him as an individual. From then on, Ezekiel spoke only when God told him to. God said, but when I speak to you, I will open your mouth. When he was silent, it was because God had not spoken. When he spoke, it was because God had given him a message. As a watchman, he was to open his mouth to say, "Thus saith the Lord God." His message was for all the people, and He sets before them the choice to "hear" or "forbear." The people will either receive the message or reject it. These words are similar to Christ's words in His earthly ministry, "He who has ears, let him hear" (Matthew 11:15; 13:9, 43; Mark 4:9, 23; Luke 8:8; 14:35).

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