

Hardheaded for the Gospel

Ezekiel 2:9-3:11 (NIV)

⁹ Then I looked, and I saw a hand stretched out to me. In it was a scroll, ¹⁰ which he unrolled before me. On both sides of it were written words of lament and mourning and woe. ¹ And he said to me, "Son of man, eat what is before you, eat this scroll; then go and speak to the people of Israel." ² So I opened my mouth, and he gave me the scroll to eat. ³ Then he said to me, "Son of man, eat this scroll I am giving you and fill your stomach with it." So I ate it, and it tasted as sweet as honey in my mouth. ⁴ He then said to me: "Son of man, go now to the people of Israel and speak my words to them. ⁵ You are not being sent to a people of obscure speech and strange language, but to the people of Israel—⁶ not to many peoples of obscure speech and strange language, whose words you cannot understand. Surely if I had sent you to them, they would have listened to you. ⁷ But the people of Israel are not willing to listen to you because they are not willing to listen to me, for all the Israelites are hardened and obstinate. ⁸ But I will make you as unyielding and hardened as they are. ⁹ I will make your forehead like the hardest stone, harder than flint. Do not be afraid of them or terrified by them, though they are a rebellious people." ¹⁰ And he said to me, "Son of man, listen carefully and take to heart all the words I speak to you. ¹¹ Go now to your people in exile and speak to them. Say to them, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says,' whether they listen or fail to listen."

The year is about 593 B.C.; Ezekiel is 30 years old. About 5 years earlier he had been ripped away from his homeland. Instead of taking on the priestly duties that he was born into, God had something else for him. "Then I looked, and I saw a hand stretched out to me. In it was a scroll, which he unrolled before me. On both sides of it were written words of lament and mourning and woe." And he said to me, "Son of man, eat what is before you, eat this scroll; then go and speak to the people of Israel." (2:9-3:1) God commissioned Ezekiel to be his spokesman, his prophet.

Although in a foreign land, God's didn't commission Ezekiel to learn a foreign language and speak to a foreign people. The Lord said to Ezekiel: "Son of man, go now to the people of Israel and speak my words to them. You are not being sent to a people of obscure speech and strange language, but to the people of Israel—not to many peoples of obscure speech and strange language, whose words you cannot understand..." (verses 4-6a) Maybe this would have been a bit of relief - relief that Ezekiel wasn't going to have to learn a foreign language but could speak with his people in a language he knew, customs he knew, beliefs that he knew.

Have you ever considered being a foreign missionary? I know that some of you have done mission work, even gone out of country to do so. Some of you have done these missions through organizations connected with our national church body such as Kingdom Workers or WELS Mission Journeys. If that's something that piques your interest, I encourage you to check those out.

But I have a confession to make. Although I studied Spanish for 7 years between high school and college, I told the Seminary President during my senior year exit interview before becoming a pastor that I did not want a mission call where I would have to learn another language. Although I knew that I could learn other languages and do okay in them, for me it was frustrating to share the Good News of what our God has done in other languages. I have a hard enough time doing it in English, let alone in a secondary language. Thankfully, there are many pastors who are gifted at learning other languages and excel at them, just as some of you have that gift for languages. God graciously gives different gifts to different people in the body of Christ.

Having confessed that, let's talk about living in Utah. The vast majority of people here speak English, but, when it comes to talking with most of our neighbors about God and what he has done for us, it's a different language - one that often feels obscure and strange and leads to misunderstandings and false agreements. I try to be mindful of biblical jargon, but here in Utah you pretty much have to break down every biblical concept in order to achieve true understanding and correctly communicate God's Word.

I say, "By grace, Jesus died for my sins. He is my Savior. That's how atonement works," but what is heard? One person understands sin only as a conscious decision to do something wrong or to knowingly avoid doing what is right when I mean what the Bible means, namely that sin is anything that we think, say, or do – whether knowingly or ignorantly – that is not in line with God and his perfection and thus separates us from God and merits our deaths. One person thinks that grace is the power that God gives to people to save themselves after they have done everything that they can do, but I understand grace from God's Word as completely unmerited, unearned, undeserved, one-sided love shown by God to us which caused him to act on our behalf, namely to live perfectly for us in our place and sacrifice his life in place of ours. You say "Savior" or "salvation" or "atonement," and one person thinks that you mean that Jesus conquered physical death so that you will be raised from the dead, that Jesus paid your debt of sin but that you also have to pay him back while I mean that we are rescued from any and everything wrong we have ever done, all our sins, and will live with God entirely and only by the works of Jesus Christ and that we can't and aren't even allowed to pay him back.

In this way, we're not in the same boat as Ezekiel. When he said sin or salvation or atonement or grace, they all were working with the same concepts and definitions. When we use those words, many people around us understand something different. Has this frustrated you when you have tried to share the Good News of what God has done for you? Has it made you want to smack your head against a wall because you feel like you are talking to a wall? Has it caused you to lose your patience, get upset, and build barriers instead of bridges with our neighbors? Has it made you give up entirely on sharing what you believe God has done for you because they just don't get it?

Even though Ezekiel was preaching to a people who use the same religious language as he did, that didn't make sharing God's Word easier or even less frustrating. God told him: "But the people of Israel are not willing to listen to you because they are not willing to listen to me, for all the Israelites are hardened and obstinate." (verse 7) They are like brick walls as they hardheadedly refused to listen to God's Word and would do so even with Ezekiel preaching it.

Then what was the point of commissioning Ezekiel? Why send him to speak God's Word to the Israelites if they weren't going to listen? Wouldn't this make Ezekiel frustrated? Would the people hurt Ezekiel as he proclaimed God's Word to them? How would God fix this?

The Lord told Ezekiel, "But I will make you as unyielding and hardened as they are. I will make your forehead like the hardest stone, harder than flint. Do not be afraid of them or terrified by them, though they are a rebellious people." (verses 8-9) God's solution was foreshadowed in Ezekiel's name, a name that means "God is strong" or "God strengthens." God would make Ezekiel even more hardheaded, even more stubborn, in preaching the Gospel, the Good News of what God has done for us.

This commissioning of Ezekiel shows us God's grace - his one-sided, unearned, unmerited, undeserved love for stubborn people that he would continue to bring his Word to them in spite of their stubborn, hardheadedness to not listen. The sweet as honey message that he would give is that God remains true to his promises even when we don't. God unilaterally came to us, made the promise to crush Satan, to take away our sins, to live a perfect life and fill us with his perfection, a perfection he lived for us in our place. He would sacrifice his life on the cross to pay for all our sins so that we would no longer be separated from God. And God will not let us pay him back at all for him doing this. Instead, we are saved, meaning that we will not just be resurrected on the Last Day to face judgment, but that all our sins - past, present, and future - are removed from us so that we know God will judge us as "not guilty," completely on the basis of what he has done for us - his life, his works, his perfection, his unwavering devotion. This is grace, atonement, salvation. This is the sweet as honey Good News, the Gospel, that Ezekiel was to hardheadedly preach.

Still, some of the Israelites in exile hardheadedly rejected this message. That's why God's Word was also a message that brought lament and mourning and woe as the people remained separated from God because of their sins - all the things that they thought, said, and did knowingly or unknowingly contrary to God's perfect Word and will. As they hardheadedly refused to listen, they would be separated forever from God. This is what Ezekiel was called to hardheadedly preach whether the Israelites listened or failed to listen.

With that sad, frustrating truth, why work so hardheadedly with the religious language barrier here in Utah, understand and more clearly communicate God's Word? Because some will listen, and God will change their hearts. Later in this prophecy given to Ezekiel it's recorded that the Lord will give people a new heart. He will remove from them their hardheaded hearts of stone and instead give them hearts of flesh, hearts that believe that God has substituted himself for us and has done everything so that we are clothed with his perfection right now. This is why we hardheadedly preach the Gospel, even when people hardheadedly refuse to listen.

To help us to preach God's Word hardheadedly, we pray that God would do for us as he did for Ezekiel: Fill us up with your Word - both with the laments and the sweet as honey Gospel. Give us patience as we learn and navigate a language that isn't ours. Make us as hardheaded as Ezekiel to preach your Word so that others can know that you, Lord, have already accomplished everything for them and fill them your perfection. Make us not afraid to hardheadedly preach this message. Change the hearts of those that we talk to, that the language barrier would be overcome, and that hardheaded hearts would be changed, and people would taste your Word, your Gospel, to be as sweet as honey knowing and believing that you have already accomplished everything for them. Amen.