

EAT THE SCROLL

SERIES: KNOWING THE GOD OF
JUSTICE AND HOPE



Catalog No. 20170917
Ezekiel 3:1-21
2nd Message
Paul Taylor
September 17, 2017

Ezekiel 3:1-21

There is a common occurrence in my household. My wife will ask me to do something simple. I'll say yes. Words of acknowledgement and agreement will leave my body. But later—maybe it's a few seconds, or maybe it's a few minutes—I'll realize that there was no understanding and agreement in my head. I'll have said yes, but I realize that I have absolutely no idea what I just agreed to.

A similar thing happens to my children. I'll be working on something, and they'll come up and say "dad." And I'll hear it. Somewhere in some background processing portion of my brain, I'll have heard them. And I intend to respond. But it's like I enter a time warp. In my mind, it's only a millisecond. But in the real world, several moments have passed, and I'm just standing there not responding. Until they say it again. And again. Finally, I'm able to snap out of it.

I worry that this is becoming more common for me. As life gets fuller and more complicated, am I becoming less able to hear a simple instruction, process it, remember it, and act upon it?

I worry that this might be happening for a lot of us. Is focus becoming harder? Is listening becoming more challenging? Are we getting worse at listening?

If so, what does that mean for how we relate to God? How are we able to do what God asks us to do? If we have such a hard time listening, can we listen to God? If we have such a hard time following through, how do we follow through with what God wants us to do?

Last week we kicked off our series in the book of Ezekiel titled *Knowing the God of Justice and Hope*. The title picks up on a repeated phrase in the book that attributes virtually all of God's actions to the goal "that they may know that I am the LORD."

Last week we talked about how the main vocation of the prophets is to make sense of the present. To bring God's perspective to bear on the events in our lives. The prophets help us to understand what is going on around us in light of who God is?

But if I have a hard time remembering what my wife said to me seconds ago, how can I possibly hope to listen to God? And how can I possibly represent God's perspective to the world if I can't even listen myself?

It's dangerous to speak for God before you've listened. Christians have done a lot of damage in the world when they've done that.

In our passage this morning, we'll learn the key to listening well. We'll see God offer Ezekiel a meal that helps him to really grasp what God wants him to understand. We'll be challenged to eat that meal for ourselves. This morning is an invitation to eat the scroll.

If you were here with us last week, you heard the opening vision of the book of Ezekiel. It was a fast-paced, frenetic, imagery-rich vision of God arriving to visit his people in exile. He was riding on the ultimate war chariot. And he was coming in judgment. The vision ended with Ezekiel saying, "I fell on my face, and I heard the voice of one speaking" (Ezekiel 2:28b).

This morning we will read what that voice said. God will give Ezekiel instructions for what he wants him to do. It will not be an easy assignment. But God will enable Ezekiel to fulfill this mission. He will give him what he needs to be faithful.

This morning we'll see God give Ezekiel a mission and a meal.

As we look at these things, we'll recognize some of our own mission in the task that Ezekiel receives. We'll see that his challenges are also our challenges. Because of that, we'll learn that the meal God gives Ezekiel might just help us too.

We don't want to hear God ask us something, say that we'll do it, and then immediately forget. We don't want to hear God calling us and just acknowledge it somewhere in the back of our minds. We want to pay attention, to listen, and to be faithful. Let's read how Ezekiel can help us to do that.

Prepared to Listen

Ezekiel is on his face, about to hear this voice speaking from heaven. But before God gives him the instruction, God prepares Ezekiel. Notice what God does.

Ezekiel 2:1-2:

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.

This is a tender moment. Remember the awesome and dangerous power of God that we saw in the vision last week. God was coming as a warrior. But before speaking, he reaches down and helps him to his feet.

It reminds me of Psalm 3:3, where Psalmist says, “You, O Lord, are ... the lifter of my head.”

I like this picture because it shows God asking Ezekiel to do something: stand on your feet. But in the same moment, “as he spoke to me,” the Spirit works within him to help him up. Even before we get to the main instruction, we’re seeing something about how God interacts with his servants. He gives us tasks, and he empowers us to perform them.

Maybe you’ve heard the phrase, “God doesn’t call the equipped; he equips the called.” This is what we see happening here. This is one of the major themes of the passage this morning.

Has God been trying to get your attention? Is God preparing you to listen to something? Are you prepared to listen to God? Are you prepared to listen?

About a year ago, in the space of about two weeks, our dog was sprayed by a skunk in our backyard. Both times, it played out like a slow-motion train wreck. I opened the back door. The dog started to go out. I saw that there was something out there. And I yelled for the dog to stop running. In a panic. As loud as I could. I did everything I could to get that dog’s attention.

But it didn’t matter. Nothing was going to distract her from what she was focused on. She ran toward the skunk and got sprayed with a direct hit. Twice. In two weeks. You would think she would have learned her lesson.

Sometimes we are like that. We’re so focused on what we’re doing and where we’re going that it seems almost impossible for God to get our attention. Sometimes we don’t really pay attention until there is a crisis.

Is God trying to prepare you to listen? Do you want to hear? It’s been said, “There is none so deaf as he who does not want to hear.” Do you want to hear? Are you ready to listen?

The Unappealing Task

After preparing him to listen, God gives Ezekiel his mission. But before we look at that, let’s remember our historical context.

The Northern tribes of Israel had already fallen to Assyrians 130 years earlier. Twelve years earlier, the southern tribes, headquartered in Jerusalem, had begun to be conquered. Some people had already been deported and taken into exile in Babylon: that’s Ezekiel and his fellow exiles. But the end of Jerusalem was still coming. The first part of this book happens during this moment, during the gradual fall of Jerusalem.

God explains that he is giving Ezekiel a message for them.

Ezekiel 2:3-7:

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. 6 And you, son of man, be not afraid of them, nor be afraid of their words, though briars 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.

This is a difficult assignment. Ezekiel is given a message for his own people. These are his fellow Jews—the ones who were deported along with him. But Ezekiel is told right away that they aren’t going to listen

to him. His fellow Jews are described with the words “rebellious,” “impudent,” and “stubborn.” We read later in Ezekiel 3 that the foreign nations around him have a better chance of listening to him than his own people.

Imagine this assignment at work. You’re supposed to advocate for a project. You design it. You pour yourself into it. You build it. You are supposed to sell it. But you are told up front that no one will ever buy it. This project will be shuttered and locked in a closet. Your precious work will die in obscurity. Some of you are saying, “How did you know about my job!”

Not a very attractive task. Reading Ezekiel makes it very clear that God does not give out easy tasks to his people. Following him is not about being comfortable or pampered. This should not be a surprise to us. Just look at the kinds of things that God asked his son to do. Should it be any surprise to us that God calls his people to sacrifice? To do things that seem impossible?

But notice that it’s okay with God that no one will respond to the message. God isn’t sending Ezekiel to persuade anyone. He’s simply sending him to proclaim the truth. The goal is the proclamation, not the reception. Ezekiel’s goal will be to get the message out, not to make sure it’s received.

This is completely contrary to modern marketing methods. The goal is not just to get your message out there. The goal is to get people to act on your message. Marketing calls this “conversion.” That’s a familiar term, isn’t it? So advertisers talk about “conversion rates” and “click conversion rates.” Everything is focused on the sale.

God doesn’t seem concerned about conversion rates. He wants his messenger to be focused on proclamation. That’s all. Get the message out there. Expect that it won’t be received. But don’t worry: that’s not your concern.

We might assume if that is the case then the message isn’t all that important. But God tells Ezekiel that when he speaks, he is to declare, “Thus says the Lord GOD.”

Most of the prophets declare, “Thus says the LORD.” That’s “YHWH”, the personal name for the God of Israel. But 122 times, Ezekiel says “Thus says YHWH Elohim.” He adds the more general term for gods.

Ezekiel and Daniel were the only two Old Testament prophets to receive the word of God outside of the land. So In the land of Babylon, Ezekiel wants to make the

source of his words clear. This message is from a god, but not the gods of Babylon. This is from “YHWH Elohim.” YHWH is the God of gods. The one God over all others.

It wasn’t that long ago that we passed a great milestone as a family. Our kids were finally old enough that we could do what every parent dreams of: send them to the store. We live close enough to a Safeway that they could walk or bike or scooter. And I remember the first time we sent them, with a little cash to buy milk or eggs or something that we needed.

And they were nervous. It’s a huge responsibility as a kid for the first time, leaving your house, carrying money, finding the right thing to buy, talking to the cashier, and getting it home safely. That’s a great responsibility.

Now imagine that the God of the universe has put you in enemy territory and given you a message of judgment to deliver to his own people. “Thus says YHWH Elohim.” This is huge. This is the responsibility given to Ezekiel.

God has given Ezekiel a difficult message from the God the universe for people who won’t respond.

Again, God’s tenderness shows. In four different phrases, after giving him this mission, God encourages Ezekiel not to be afraid. “Be not afraid.”

God said this to Abraham in Genesis 15:1. “Fear not, Abram. I am your shield.” God said this to Abraham’s son Isaac in Genesis 26:24. “Fear not, for I am with you.” When the calling of God passed to Jacob, Isaac’s son, God said this to him in Genesis 46:3. “Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for there I will make you into a great nation.”

God said this to Moses, Joshua, Gideon, David, Elijah, Hezekiah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Daniel. God asks difficult tasks of his leaders, but he also comforts and encourages them.

We need to recognize that God might be preparing us to listen. Then we need to see that God is comforting us so that we don’t panic. God is telling us not to be afraid. Be not afraid.

We need to hear these words because there is much that we could be afraid of. God speaks to Ezekiel about briars and thorns and scorpions and rejection. But we have things to be afraid of too.

Think about Ezekiel's message compared to our own. Ezekiel was given a message of judgment and hope to a nation who had systematically insulated themselves from ever again listening to God.

We are given a message of hope and life. The judgment has been carried out, not on us, but on God's very son. Our message is about forgiveness and restoration. But it does involve repentance. It does involve turning away from self. Submitting to someone higher than us. Releasing our agenda. Asking for that forgiveness. And then receiving it from God.

In many ways, our mission is similar to the one given to Ezekiel. In 2 Corinthians 5:20, Paul says "Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God." We speak the message of God. And it's a huge responsibility to do so.

There are so many barriers for people in that message. There is so much that makes the Gospel difficult for people in our culture to hear. So many reasons for them to shut their ears and turn away.

The lure of money. The swell of pride. The promises of self-sufficiency. The past mistakes of Christ-followers. The complacency of comfort. The demands of the workplace. Old hurts and new fears. Questions about the character of God.

I sometimes drive around and see the swarms of people moving into the Bay Area, and my heart just breaks. How many know Jesus? How many know the freedom of forgiveness in Christ? How many know the intimacy of a relationship with God? How many know the support of a community centered on Christ?

There is life—real, rich life—available through the Gospel of Jesus. Why do so few see it and respond? Why does the message of God so often seem to fall on deaf ears?

These must have been the same questions that Ezekiel asked. God had given him a difficult message from the God of the universe for people who won't respond. But God tells him not to be afraid. And that isn't all. He also gives Ezekiel a special meal to help him be faithful.

Eat the Scroll

Read the curious meal that God offers Ezekiel:

Ezekiel 2:8–3:3:

“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 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.

When God reaches out his hand, he usually does so in judgment or discipline. But here, God is offering Ezekiel a curious meal. “A scroll of a book.” He spread it before him, like you might have a meal spread before you. This scroll was probably leather. It was written on both sides, which would have been unique for a leather scroll.

Of course, it's also unique to eat a leather scroll. Imagine a food blogger posting on their Instagram account, this picture of a leather scroll on a plate. It's not even a vegan meal. This is a crazy request from God.

It's clear that God wants whatever is on this scroll to get inside of Ezekiel. He says “eat this scroll”, “feed your belly”, “fill your stomach” with it. These are the kinds of words that people in the Ancient Near East used to refer to the core of who you were.

When Psalm 40:8 says, “your law is within my heart,” the literal word there is “stomach.” When Proverbs 20:27 says that the spirit searches “the innermost hearts,” the literal word is “belly.” The ancient view is that your head didn't make decisions, your stomach did. It's similar to how we might speak of our “gut instinct.”

God wants these words to get inside Ezekiel, to the place where he operates at a deep level.

Unfortunately, on top of eating a leather scroll, the words on the scroll aren't even that pleasant. These are “words of lamentation and mourning and woe.” But as we continue in the book of Ezekiel, we realize that this is what this book is full of. Lamentation and mourning and woe.

So the picture becomes clear. God wants Ezekiel to internalize these words before he can proclaim them. Ezekiel has to digest the message before he can deliver it.

If the mission God has given to us is similar to the mission God has given to Ezekiel, perhaps this meal could benefit us as well. We have to recognize this critical step in delivering the message of God. We can't proclaim what we don't know. We can't talk about something that hasn't changed our life from the inside—from within the very depths of who we are. We can't deliver a message that we haven't digested.

So that leaves us with the question that this passage begs of us: how will we internalize the message of the Gospel? How will we get the Gospel within us? How will you eat the scroll?

I went through a period in college where I was all about delivering the message of God. I was living with a bunch of non-Christians and my constant goal was to share the news of the Gospel with them. But to be honest, I was miserable. I hated it. I was so stressed about convincing people to come to know Christ.

Finally, I wondered why I was doing it. Why was I trying to convince people to believe in something that made my life miserable? Why would they want to believe something that made people into miserable, guilty, overburdened, anxious followers? I hadn't internalized the good news of the Gospel. I hadn't eaten the scroll.

This is what we need to do. Let me assure you that this will be your single greatest strength as you try to deliver the message. If you believe it, if you live it, if your life is really modeled after following Jesus, then this message will be a part of you.

Maybe you worry about having answers to people's questions. Maybe you worry about difficult topics like science or same-sex marriage or the history of the church. Maybe you think that if you don't have good answers to those questions, then you can't talk to anyone about Jesus.

But if you believe in Jesus without those answers, why can't others? If you are a follower of Jesus, then you have enough knowledge of your faith. You might just have enough for someone else to believe. You don't need answers. You need to know Jesus. You need to internalize the Gospel into your life. It needs to be real to you. It needs to change you. It needs to be central to your life.

A few weeks ago, I really blew it at home and lost my temper. I had to apologize to all my children for my outburst. I had to ask them for forgiveness. But I told them: this is why I believe in Jesus. Because I am not okay on my own. And this is why I wanted to become a pastor. I wanted to dedicate my life to telling people about Jesus.

When I made that decision, I didn't think it meant yelling at my children and having to ask for forgiveness from them. But in many ways, that is what living the Gospel looks like. This message of repentance and forgiveness becomes part of us.

Eating the scroll isn't about going to more Bible Studies. It is about living the words of the Gospel. This is how Eugene Peterson describes eating the book,

Reading the Scriptures is not an activity discrete from living the gospel but one integral to it. It means letting Another have a say in everything we are saying and doing. It is as easy as that. And as hard.¹

This is the question for us. Will you eat the scroll? Will you eat this strange message of judgment and forgiveness? Of pain and hope? Of death and life? Will you eat this scroll?

It sounds like a terrible meal. Eating the scroll sounds like taking your medicine. Gulping down disgusting cough medicine. But when you eat the scroll, you'll be surprised at what you find. It doesn't look very appetizing: a leather scroll filled with words of lamentation and mourning and woe. But notice Ezekiel's response to it, "Then I ate it, and it was in my mouth as sweet as honey."

Ezekiel is shocked at what he discovers. This meal is pleasant. The awful-looking meal actually isn't that bad. In fact, it was as sweet as honey.

Do you remember the first time you had sushi? Some of you grew up around here and eating sushi was no big deal. But I grew up Connecticut. The only non-American food we ate was Italian. Spaghetti and meatballs. Once as a kid I remember going out to a Mexican restaurant, and I ordered a hot dog.

The idea of eating raw fish sounded to me as enticing as eating a leather scroll. I couldn't imagine it. But once I got over that and tried it, I found something that shocked me. It was delicious. The flavor of tuna, the texture of hamachi. I love it now.

This is what Ezekiel has found. And it was what we will discover if we eat the scroll that God has put before us. The message of the Gospel is sweet to our souls. It is life-giving. The words that God has given us are freedom and love and peace and wholeness.

That isn't to say that following Jesus is easy. We've seen the kind of impossible task that God asks of his people. But along with the challenging mission comes an empowering meal. God gives us sweet words of comfort and hope and healing. As Peter states in John 6:68, "You have the words of eternal life."

Eat those words. Eat the scroll that God offers and discover sweet words of life.

Conclusion

I think I'm learning to listen to my wife. Or at least to notice when I haven't been listening and ask her to clarify what it is that I just agreed to. I think I'm getting better at listening to my children. I think I'm growing in my ability to hear something and follow through.

I'd like to think that God is teaching us the same thing. That we are being prepared as a people to deliver the message of God to the world. It doesn't happen by trying twice as hard or clever strategies and programs. It happens when we eat the scroll that God has given us.

Six centuries after Ezekiel, someone else would come bearing the title "Son of Man." That individual would not be offered a scroll to eat. But he would be given a cup to drink. His was a cup of wrath. Isaiah called it "the cup of staggering" (Isaiah 51:17). Jesus asked for this cup to be taken away. He didn't want to drink it. He wanted any other option to be possible.

But in the end, he took that cup, and he drank it. He fulfilled the task that God had given him to do.

And because Jesus drank that cup, we can eat the scroll. We can receive the message of the Gospel, to invite the Spirit into our lives to transform us, and to continually grow in our understanding and appreciation of the message of God.

In fact, when we put our faith in Jesus, God himself puts his message of life within us. Ezekiel will describe this later in Ezekiel 36.

Ezekiel 36:26-27:

And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. 27 And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.

The Gospel is not a set of ideas that we agree with. The Gospel is a message that we swallow when we believe in Jesus. We are changed from the inside out. We are transformed. We are made new.

We are given a message to deliver, but first, we must digest this meal. Are you hungry? Will you eat the scroll that God has put in front of you? God has set the table with the message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Sit down. Take it in. Eat the scroll.

Endnotes

¹ Peterson, Eugene H. *Eat This Book: A Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 29 July 29 2009. xii.