

Receiving God's Word

Ezekiel 33:30-33

A breaking news bulletin reported that a car was going the wrong direction on the freeway. One viewer remembered that his wife was on that freeway and became worried. He called her cell phone to warn her. When she answered, he said, "Be careful, dear, there's a car going the wrong way on the freeway." Frantically, she exclaimed, "One car! There's hundreds of them!" When God's will is known, wisdom obeys. Fighting His will is as risky as driving against traffic.

From the moment Israel first entered into a covenant with *JEHOVAH*, they knew that they must obey His Law or He would punish them. But, they seldom did obey. After the reign of Solomon, Israel was divided into two kingdoms. Because of rampant idolatry and wickedness, the ten tribes that constituted a northern kingdom of Israel were destroyed by Assyria. Judah, the southern kingdom, continued to slide morally. From time to time, a good king tried to reverse the damage done by many evil kings, but the downward slope was just too steep.

On the world stage, the Babylonians emerged as the next great global power, overthrowing the mighty Assyrian city of Ninevah. Judah resisted the advancing influence of Babylon for several years until Nebuchadnezzar himself, the king of Babylon, marched on Jerusalem and carried away the king, his family and most of the influential citizens of Jerusalem. Among these was a prophet and priest named Ezekiel. Judah continued to exist as a nation for some years under Babylon's watchful eye as the exiled king's uncle acted as king. As life in exile goes, the Jews in Babylon had it pretty good. They were free to travel within limits and to engage in commerce. Still, there was a need for the people of God to repent and to return to Him with their hearts.

Jeremiah called the citizens of Jerusalem to repentance as he prophesied a thorough destruction of that city. At the same time, Ezekiel preached a similar message to the Jews in Babylon. His ministry kept the exiles informed of happenings in their homeland, but he also appealed to their hearts. The fact that God sent a prophet to Babylon along with the first wave of exiles proves that while repentance would ideally be a national thing, in reality, it is always about individual hearts. The Jews in Babylon would not experience firsthand the horror of Jerusalem's destruction, but they were still culpable for God's coming judgment because of their own sins. In Babylon and Jerusalem, every Jew faced a decision to return to covenant faithfulness to *JEHOVAH*.

Zedekiah, the uncle of the exiled king acting as king in Jerusalem thought he saw a chance to throw off Babylon's yoke through an alliance with Egypt – really bad idea. Nebuchadnezzar leveled Jerusalem. Before Jerusalem was destroyed, Ezekiel was dismissed by many of his countrymen. But, when a man escaped the devastation of Jerusalem and reported the fall to those in Babylon, Ezekiel had irrefutable credibility. Not only had Ezekiel foretold the fall of the city, he had also foretold that the announcement would come from a man who had escaped with his life. The people were now eager to hear from Ezekiel, and that is where we take up the story.

³⁰"As for you, son of man, your countrymen are talking together about you by the walls and at the doors of the houses, saying to each other, 'Come and hear the message that has come from the LORD.' ³¹My people come to you, as they usually do, and sit before you to listen to your words, but they do not put them into practice. With their mouths they express devotion, but their hearts are greedy for unjust gain. ³²Indeed, to them you are nothing more than one who sings love songs with a beautiful voice and plays an instrument well, for they hear your words but do not put them into practice.

³³"When all this comes true – and it surely will – then they will know that a prophet has been among them." – Ezekiel 33:30-33

Sadly, even the new enthusiasm for Ezekiel's message would not prove adequate to bring about repentance. Had life in Babylon been too good for the exiles? In our text, I am reminded of a number of truths about how we are to receive the Word of God. They are timeless truths. Even when people are at a station in life when they are prone to hear and welcome God's Word, that alone is not all God requires. No one has really received God's Word until he has obeyed it.

I. God Has Always Made Himself Known to Men

A. Ezekiel Was About to Face the Most Promising Audience of His Preaching Career

Before the fall of Jerusalem, most of Ezekiel's ministry had taken place under some kind of a "muteness" imposed on him by God. In chapter three, God said:

... ²⁶I will make your tongue stick to the roof of your mouth so that you will be silent and unable to rebuke them, though they are a rebellious house. ²⁷But when I speak to you, I will open your mouth and you shall say to them, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says.' Whoever will listen let him listen, and whoever will refuse let him refuse; for they are a rebellious house." – Ezekiel 3:26, 27

Ezekiel could not speak unless God enabled him. When a few people came to him, he could tell them of wild visions and share fascinating prophecies, some orally and some through vivid word pictures, but only as God gave him utterance. For seven and one-half years, Ezekiel was not a normal prophet who moved about freely to rebuke when rebuke was in order, to warn of coming events or to call the people to righteousness. But there is a new development in chapter 33:

²¹In the twelfth year of our exile, in the tenth month on the fifth day, a man who had escaped from Jerusalem came to me and said, "The city has fallen!" ²² Now the evening before the man arrived, the hand of the LORD was upon me, and he opened my mouth before the man came to me in the morning. So my mouth was opened and I was no longer silent. – Ezekiel 33:21, 22

Ezekiel was ready to resume a more typical role for a prophet. He was free to speak to any audience he could gather, and there was a buzz in the air. Folks were talking about him "... by the walls and at the doors of the houses, saying to each other, 'Come and hear the message that has come from the LORD'" (verse 30). They acknowledged that Ezekiel spoke for God and they were anxious to hear what he had to say. But Ezekiel had to look beyond this renewed enthusiasm about hearing from the Lord. The fact that he was now popular could have no more influence on him than the fact that he had once been unpopular. The people were ready to listen to God's Word, but that alone would not bring about the authentic repentance that God desired.

B. God's Word Has Never Been More Available to People than It Is Today

Because of man's pride, he tends to respond rebelliously to God's revelation, whatever form it takes. God's divine nature was evident in creation, but men found a way to sin against the creation itself, so God called the nation of Israel into a covenant with Himself. He made Himself known to that nation through prophets, through the Law of Moses and to individuals within that nation through visions, dreams and even angels. The purpose of calling Israel into a covenant relationship was firstly, to clearly demonstrate man's sinfulness, for even a privileged people will rebel, and secondly, to bring into the world Jesus, a Redeemer and a blessing to all mankind.

The Hebrew Scriptures were always regarded as divine, but in the New Testament age and as the Church became more solidly established, sacred writings were collected and through a careful process, it was determined which of them could be linked to the apostolic ministry. These New Testament writings were coupled with the Old Testament ones. This Holy Bible served the church well even though most Christians could not read. With the invention of the printing press, the expansion of literacy through the ages, and now in our era, with the presence of numerous readable translations and audio tapes, virtually anyone can hear God's Word if they so desire.

Today, God can communicate His Word in many venues. The time-tested ones honorably upheld in Scripture are preaching and teaching. But a creative God can also send forth His Word through a variety of gifts given to the church - the encouragement of a friend, the lyrics of a song that can stir our emotions and even teach us, the writings of believers powerfully impacted by the Bible. Who knows, maybe even a movie can be effective. But, the availability of printed Bibles as well as the manifold ways in which truth can be imparted are no guarantee that truth will be received. And, the mere fact that people are stirred mightily by the innate power of the Bible to stir them is no guarantee that they will truly embrace God's Word from their hearts.

II. We Can Hold God's Word in High but Inadequate Regard

A. For Some, Church Has a Social Draw

Again, Ezekiel had a great opportunity to proclaim God's Word. People were talking about him "by the walls and at the doors of the houses", at work, around the water cooler, down at the gym, on the golf course, at the beauty shop. And, they acknowledged that Ezekiel really spoke for God. There are certain preachers in the world today whose name alone can draw an audience. Billy Graham is just about God's age, but he can still fill a stadium. There are churches that everyone wants to "try out" just because they happen to be what's happening in a particular community. They have unique stewardship from God to take advantage of those unique opportunities to present the Bible accurately and clearly. But, they also have a responsibility to communicate that any response to God's truth short of obedience is inadequate in God's eyes.

B. For Others, Church Is a Source of Emotional Energy

Preachers have a knack for inciting strong emotions, but not always for the right reasons. One preacher had just concluded his sermon and sat down when a deacon whispered in his ear: "Just so you'll know, Point #1, Point #2 and all their little sub-points just marched out in a huff." Emotion is most useful when it is incited by the Word itself and not by one man's axe to grind.

For over twenty years, in three churches, I have greeted people at the door after services. People have always been pretty gracious, but I never have any idea of what I might hear based on what was preached. Sometimes, a preacher feels pretty good about what he just shared. He grew personally in his study of the text. He felt he understood, developed and communicated a Word from God in an honorable fashion. Sometimes, the pride trap can cause him to think that he just knocked one out of the ballpark. Those are the times when no one says anything, good or bad.

But on those occasions when even I'm not really sure I understood what was just said, and I'm rethinking how I should have developed Point #1 and I'm regretting how I worded point #2 and I'm questioning whether there even was a point to Point #3, someone will say something appreciative in regard to how the message spoke to them. Somehow, with the preacher in the dark, the God's Word scratched an itch, soothed a hurt, sparked an insight to a dilemma or affirmed someone who was agitated about whatever. "Best sermon ever," they tell me."

But, does the mere fact that God's Word has emotive powers wholly independent of any human design mean that the Word has been received as God desires that it be received? No. The whole emphasis of this passage is on obedience. "My people come to you, as they usually do, and sit before you to listen to your words, but they do not put them into practice" (verse 31).

C. For Still Others, Church Entertains the Mind and the Senses

Some people find theology utterly fascinating. Some people are voracious learners who love to learn, and the Bible to them, is interesting. But, in the 17th century Christian classic *Paradise Lost*, the poet Milton depicted Satan and his crew debating deep theological problems in Hell. I have personally known people who bore all the external evidences of being deeply committed to learning God's Word, and then, abruptly, when something else to learn became more pressing, they fell away from the church and poured themselves into the new passion. I believe that the Bible has the power to satisfy any intellectual or philosophical pursuit, and I feel a burden to present it as reasonably as I can. But, an inquisitive mind in such matters will not save anyone.

There is much debate these days about entertainment in the church. A church that is only riveted on entertainment would be very shallow, but who can argue that our eyes and ears are windows into our deeper selves. A song with a powerful message done with excellence and sincerity is usually going to stir people's hearts more than the same song with the same powerful message and the same sincerity executed poorly. Even the human desire to be entertained creates unique opportunities to impart truth. Still, to only accomplish entertainment is not adequate. "Indeed, to them you are nothing more than one who sings love songs with a beautiful voice and plays an instrument well, for they hear your words but do not put them into practice" (verse 32).

III. We Must Honor God's Word in Complete Obedience

A. Why Is the Very Obedience God Demands the Hardest Thing for Us to Give?

Obedience is always hard, for obedience demands that we abandon a sinful past. This can bring about the sneering of friends, who knew you when this new value system meant nothing to you. They knew you when you were one of the boys. They've seen you cut up. Their reaction to you might even become hostile if the new course you embrace convicts them of the old course in which they are still engaged. You don't have to be obnoxiously judgmental to get under people's skin. To simply cease doing what was once your common practice is sometimes all it takes.

Obedience is so hard in part because lip service is so much easier. Verse 31 says, "With their mouths they express devotion ...". For some reason, man has always struggled to see the folly of trying to disguise himself by his words. We can fool men about our piety and our devotion to God, and the most polished deceivers can fool people indefinitely. But we can never fool God.

Obedience is hard because other things are so enticing. Verse 31 continues: "With their mouths they express devotion, but their hearts are greedy for unjust gain." As Christians, we are told to believe that the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil, but that kind of talk just makes us comic cannon fodder for the material world around us that seems certain that money is the most important of all commodities. We say, "Money cannot buy happiness" but our friends quickly point out to us that it can buy luxury, the best food, the biggest house and the nicest car. The joys of obedience, on the other hand, are less tangible. The promises of faith are unseen.

Now, the Bible never condemns wealth. It merely puts its value and its dangers into a very clear perspective. Some people are gifted by God Himself to acquire wealth. Many of us would only get ourselves into trouble if we had too much. But what God wants from all of His people more than anything in the world is that when they hear the Word of God, they put it into practice. Obedience is hard, but far from being a drag on our lives, it is always for our highest good.

“Our Maker so designed us that our nature finds final satisfaction and fulfillment only in a relationship of responsive Godlikeness - which means, precisely, that state of correspondence between our acts and God’s will which we call obedience.” - James Packer

B. Why Is Anything But an Obedient Response to God’s Word Dangerous?

When God’s Word is taught, we can be attentive and respectful and we should be. We can be stirred inwardly and we should be. But does any of that satisfy God’s real objective of bringing us into conformity with Himself? True spiritual health comes not merely by hearing the Word, but by doing it. Where there is little obedience to God’s Word, false assurance is nourished, for we easily confuse the outward mechanics of formal worship and a highly vocal regard for the Word with the reality of faith.

A relationship with God that does not have at its core obedience must be based on something else, and that something else never satisfies for very long. Our newly stirred hearts do not remain stirred. We will soon be looking for the next stirring thing be it the next great song, the next hot public speaker, the next terrific book or even the next great movie. I can be stirred but never truly changed if I do not obey what I know, for obedience is the only real proof of faith in God. “Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says” (James 1:22).

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