

Allan MacRae: Ezekiel Lecture 3

We had Roman numeral II, section A, under "Ezekiel's First Vision." And then B under that was supposed to be "The First Message." That should be Ezekiel 2:1-3:14. This is the first message that we have recorded here that the Lord gave. Up to there we had a message that he gave, but it was a message that he gave in the form of seeing things rather than of hearing things. It did say in chapter 1 that there was a voice. He says at the end of the chapter in 1:28, "I heard the voice of one speaking." Then chapter 2 goes on and tells what the voice said to him. But this extensive vision is the longest vision that we have at the beginning of any prophetic book. I believe it was because of the very difficult situation in which Ezekiel was. As we have noticed, Ezekiel was in exile. He had been taken off into captivity. There among the exiles they were longing to go back to Jerusalem and to the whole land of Judah. They were expecting that the return would happen soon. They remembered how when Sennacherib attacked Jerusalem, the prophet Isaiah had said, "God is going to protect this city. Sennacherib will never go back to this city; I will send him back to his own land without his conquering you. I am going to protect you," he said, "as birds flying." "I will protect Jerusalem". Now some today think that "birds flying" is a prediction of airplanes. But of course, we must not read modern conditions into the words referring to an earlier period. As "birds flying" referred to that which was simply beyond their reach. Through God's power, in ways they could not control, God was going to protect them.

Now these exiles say, "How soon are we going to go back? How soon are we going to be delivered?" God has a message: he is not going to deliver them, but rather that he is going to destroy Jerusalem. He is going to cause nearly all of the rest of the people to be sent into exile. That was a very hard thing for these people to hear. They probably thought that Ezekiel is a traitor. He is one that is not true to his nation. He is a prophet of pessimism, a prophet of despair.

Isaiah was a prophet of optimism. But the two came in different situations. In one case God said, "I will deliver the city" and in this case, God is going to destroy the city.

So Isaiah had some very difficult times to go through. But Ezekiel's situation was far worse than Isaiah's ever was because he was going against the strong feelings of all the people, not just the kings and the nobility, as Isaiah had to go against at times.

So Ezekiel was in a very difficult situation and we, therefore, have this very long picture in chapter 1 in order to impress on Ezekiel that although the Babylonian power is very great, and it seems absolutely beyond what you could resist, yet God's power is greater; and if God says that he is going to allow the Babylonian power to succeed rather than that he's going to overcome it, then you must recognize that God has his purposes, which are far above anything that we can see. So he showed this wonderful vision of God revealing himself in activity in the world with these four living creatures, each of them having the four faces. Ezekiel gives this great description of what he sees here at his own level.

Then his eye looks up and he sees that which looks like ice; that white firmament above them. Then above that he sees a sapphire throne, and then far above that he sees what looks like the figure of a man and he hears a voice speaking. We see God revealing himself, God acting in human life, but God's purposes are separate. We must attempt to discover them; we must attempt to bring our lives to align with them. We must realize God's tremendous power and his impressive wisdom.

It was desirable to give this long, stunning picture of the glory of God in order to condition Ezekiel for the difficult task that he had to go through. If we properly understand this picture, it can condition us and help to give us an idea of God's power and of his glory that can help us in what situations we may have to face in our lives.

That is when Ezekiel fell face-down and heard the voice of one speaking. And then we have Ezekiel's first message: chapter 2, verses 1-8. In this message we have it reiterated that, "I am sending you to a rebellious people; I am sending you to a people that is hard-hearted; I am sending you to people that are rebelling against me." That's the way God characterizes the people to whom Ezekiel has to go. Ezekiel knows that he has a message that these people don't want to hear. They want a formal religion; they want a religion that assures them that they can trust God that everything will go well. But here

they have a message from God that, "you have disobeyed God, you have been rebellious, so God is punishing you and he is going to punish the nation further. He is not going to free you to go back and protect Jerusalem. He is going to even let Jerusalem be destroyed!" In this situation he calls on Ezekiel to stand on his feet. He says that he will speak to him and his message is that you are going to have a difficult task, you are going to go to an obstinate, stubborn, and rebellious people. But he says, "Do not be afraid of what they say". He says, "Though you have briars and thorns and live among scorpions, don't be afraid". Well this great emphasis on "Don't be afraid" can give us the idea that perhaps Ezekiel tended to be afraid. I think any of us would be under those circumstances. But I think it is important in understanding the next few chapters to realize the attitudes that Ezekiel must have felt.

Many of us have great trepidations about simply witnessing to people, about telling people about God's power, when we have nothing to fear in the sense of physical attack or anything like that. We don't have that to fear, and yet we hesitate; we don't speak out as we should. Well, in Ezekiel's situation, it is quite natural that he would have tremendous fear. So God warns him, "Don't fear," he says. "Don't be afraid or terrified by them, even though they are a rebellious house. Speak my words to them, whether they listen or fail to listen. It's not your responsibility to get the accomplishment; it's your responsibility to give the message".

There are missionaries who have labored for years sometimes and presented the Word of God faithfully and had hardly any result, as far as they could see. Then the missionary has retired and someone else has taken his place, and the harvest has just flooded in. The first missionaries had been planting the seed, and planting the seed, and planting the seed in great difficulty. They had been faithfully following the Lord even though the harvest didn't necessarily come while they were there to see it. So God wants Ezekiel to have that attitude of plugging forward--plugging forward and standing for God despite the great difficulty.

Then at the end of that chapter, we begin what I will call C, "The Scroll". That's chapter 2:8b to 3:3. I don't quite know why they made a chapter division at this point. As

you know, the chapter divisions are not in the original. The chapter divisions were put into the Hebrew Bible about 300 years ago. And they were copied into the Hebrew Bible from the Latin Bible, except in places where the Jews thought the Archbishop perhaps hadn't made the right division at the right place. And so maybe one chapter out of every ten in your Hebrew Bible has a chapter that starts in a different place than the English Bible does, which is based on the Latin Bible. An English archbishop in the 12th century put in those chapter divisions. There is a tradition that when he used to ride horseback making his calls, that as he rode along letting the horse pick where its feet would go, he was looking at his Latin Bible and marking in the places for the new chapters. Some people think that when the horse stumbled, he marked the wrong place. Well, whether that is true or not I don't know, but to have the chapter end with this brief little section about the scroll and have it continue just a couple of verses into the next chapter makes me think that something like that must have happened in this particular place.

Ezekiel was told then in chapter 2, verse 8, "Do not rebel like that rebellious house". You notice how even Ezekiel is warned that way. We can never take for granted our loyalty for the Lord. Peter who thought that "Even if everyone else forsakes you, I will never forsake you," he was the one who lost his courage and denied the Lord. And so the Lord tells Ezekiel, "Don't you be rebellious as they are. Open your mouth and eat what I give you. And I looked up and saw a hand stretched out and in it was a scroll." Now a scroll as you know would be what we call a book, only it's in a different form. Our books are what we call the codex form. All books until the time of Christ, or maybe a little later, were in the form of scrolls; a long sheet of paper that was rolled around a stick at each end. So you could turn the stick and there would be columns and you would read a column and then another and another and that was the regular form. Then some poor people who couldn't afford paper wrote on a little blackboard, a little thing like a slate. They used to have a great many of them when I was a boy. I don't know if they still have them or not. But you could write on it or you could erase it. They had these little four corner things that we wrote things on and then erased it. Well, they began writing on that sort of thing and then somebody used two or three of them and they were fastened

together at one end. So the poor people used several of these together and that made our book form. The book form gradually replaced the scroll just after the time of Christ, but they used the scroll form only for the most important things. But in Ezekiel's time, all the writing was on scrolls.

So God told Ezekiel to, "Eat what I give you. And I looked and saw a hand stretched out to me and in it was a scroll which he unrolled before me. On both sides of it were written words of lament and mourning and woe." Ordinarily a scroll was written on just one side of the page you unroll, but this was on both sides.

So he was given this scroll and chapter 3 goes right on, "And he said to me, 'Son of Man, eat what is before you. Eat this scroll. Then go speak to the house of Israel.' So I opened my mouth and he gave me this scroll to eat. Then he said, '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."

Well, what now is the meaning of this? Did he actually eat the scroll, for that is not impossible? Was it a sort of a vision? Was he in a trance after he saw this and ate the scroll? We don't know. But whichever it was, it shows that the message was so important, and there was so much danger humanly speaking of Ezekiel not fulfilling the task, that God not only gives it to him verbally, but goes through this thing of having him eat the scroll to get this message right into his heart and soul, to get it, you might say, right into the depth of his being. Of course, if we are going to serve the Lord effectively, it is very important that we fill ourselves, fill our mind with the knowledge of the word of God; that we get the whole of the word of God in our minds and in our hearts and be ready to use it for the Lord's purposes so when we are in a particular situation, the Spirit can bring to our attention things that we have already read and studied. I think that it's very vital to remember that that is the way God ordinarily leads in our day.

It is not often; I do not believe today, if ever, that God says, "You go this way, you go that way. You do this, you do that." God works in all things he controls by his providence. But the Devil can speak to us, demons can mislead us. We can have a wonderful dream because God sent it to us. But we can also have it because a demon sent

it to us. We can have it because of something we ate yesterday. So we are not in a position to judge except for the word of God and we know that is true and God leads us through the Word. So he wants us to fill our minds and hearts with it, even as Ezekiel was filled with this scroll. Whether this was a literal act or whether it was a sort of a vision, it at least presents this great important point that Ezekiel must be filled with the knowledge that God wants him to do.

So the scroll I called "C" here, and this point covers 2:8b-3:3. And then capital D; I call it, "The Commission," 3:4-11. And in chapter 3, verses 4-7 God is again stressing the fact that they are a rebellious people. He says, "Do not be afraid of them, or terrified by them though they are a rebellious house." This certainly shows that Ezekiel was not one who didn't have strong feelings. He was not just told what to do and then went ahead and did it, almost like a machine. He was a living, throbbing being who was filled with terror at the thought of facing these people with something that would be so very unpalatable to them. God even said in verse 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 house." So God promises to give Ezekiel the courage, but he has to ask for it, he has to want it. He has to desire to put God first and not his own desires, not his own feelings, not the necessities or the luxuries of his family. Nothing is to be more important than doing God's will and carrying God's message.

So, we have this message given and the last two verses of it, "Listen carefully and take to heart all the words I speak to you. Go now to your countrymen in exile and say to them, speak to them, 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says,' whether they listen or fail to listen." The same thought is reiterated again: it's not your responsibility that they accept the message, but it's your responsibility to try to get the message into their hearts. Yes, to get it into their minds, but also to get it into their hearts. This was the great task that he had and this finishes his commission which I called "D."

Then capital "E," 'The End of the Vision'. That is chapter 3 verses 12-14. "Then the Spirit lifted me up, and I heard behind me a loud rushing sound, 'May the glory of the Lord be praised in his dwelling place.' The sound of the wings of the living creatures

brushing against each other, and the sound of the wheels beside them, a loud rushing sound."

Now, was Ezekiel happy? God had given him a commission to be God's great messenger. He is to go as the herald of the Lord to present the message. He is to go to these people and to tell them what God said. How happy he must be, but now just listen to verse 14. "The Spirit then lifted me up and took me away, and I went in bitterness. And in the anger of my spirit, with the strong hand of the Lord upon me."

Why did he go in anger and the bitterness of his spirit? Was it because Ezekiel felt like the rest of the people? If God really is good, he'll bring us back home. If he's good, he'll put down this Babylonian power. Isn't it awful that God is taking this attitude. Do you think that was Ezekiel's attitude? One of rebellion against God? Now, it is true that God had warned him not to rebel as they did. But we only have that statement once about Ezekiel whereas we have many times about the people being a rebellious nation. So it hardly seems that the reason "he is in bitterness and the anger of his spirit and the strong hand of the Lord upon me," is because of Ezekiel's being disappointed or upset by the message that God had given him. It seems more likely that he is filled with trepidation at the thought of carrying this message and reaching the people with it.

Now I cannot be dogmatic on that; you can take your choice between the two possibilities. That's one thing about the Word of God, we have to make our own choices at many points. We must get all the light we can upon our choice, we must get all the evidence we can to make a decision one way or another as to the meaning of a verse, as to the implications, as to its relations to other verses. But then, point after point, we have to make a choice in order to get an understanding of God's word and what he really wants. Then we have to keep testing those choices. We know that what the Word says is true; it is absolutely free from error. But everything written in human language has to be interpreted. And it would take several encyclopedias to give us a full interpretation of the Bible. God did not give us such an interpretation. But he has, as we compare Scripture with Scripture, given answers to all that we need to know in order to serve him effectively.

So I think that one of the most important things in Bible study is to read it with an active mind. To read not simply to remember beautiful words; not simply to remember words that you can quote for the most superficial, easily derived impression of what they mean. That is very important. But that we should think what exactly does this mean? What are the possibilities? Because any sentence in any human language has various possible interpretations. And we must compare passages of Scripture to see what the answer is to problems, but we'll never see the answer if we don't know what the problem is! If we don't have our eyes opened.

Time and time again I deal with one part of the Scripture and I get questions in my mind, I get uncertainties, and I make hypotheses. Then very unexpectedly, when I'm reading an entirely different part of the Bible, I come upon the answer, which I wouldn't have even noticed; I would have gone right over it if I didn't have the questions in my mind beforehand.

So you have this question: "Why was Ezekiel in the bitterness of his spirit? Why was he feeling this way at this time?" Now there is an interesting suggestion that he was feeling anger towards the people. Now, if that was his feelings, I would think that when he got to them he would immediately say right away, "You rebellious people, here is God's message, here is what you must get." And he would go right after them. If we find that's what he does, then that will give us assurance that that is a correct answer. If we find that he acts in a different way, it will lead us to wonder whether another reason is in play.

So we are, I think, surprised but greatly interested to find what we find in the next verse. I really shouldn't make a break at this point, but for the purposes of an outline, I think it is good to do it here. I put here a Roman numeral III: "Ezekiel's Activity in the 5th Year of Jehoiachin's Captivity": 3:15-7:27. Now a much longer section than either of these two previous ones. The term "Ezekiel's Activity in the 5th Year of Jehoiachin's Captivity": how do we know that is when this occurred? We know it from the very first verse of the book where he says, "In the 30th year", which probably means the 30th year of his life, though it is one of the questions we do not know the answer to for sure. I don't

know any other guess that has been made that seems reasonable. But this is, after all, only a guess. All he says is the "30th year" and it's a problem. If he had said "my 30th year," he would have saved many people from wondering about it. But he says "in the 30th year" and I think it's a good guess to mean his life. He says, "In the fourth month, on the fifth day," and then the next verse says, "On the fifth of the month was the 5th year of the exile of Jehoiachin's captivity." So our Roman numeral III is "Ezekiel's Activity in the 5th Year of Jehoiachin's Captivity," and when you get to chapter 8, you will see the 6th year mentioned. So we know that everything in the first 7 chapters is in the 5th year. But up to this point we have not been speaking of Ezekiel's activity, we've been speaking simply of God's giving Ezekiel a vision, giving him a message and he doesn't really do anything himself in the book until verse 15 of chapter 3.

So from here to the end of the seventh chapter, we call it his "activity," even though before that God is occasionally intervening, in fact, a great many of times and giving various messages and ideas to Ezekiel. Well now here the first thing that we read is where he is. Verse 15: "I came to the exile to live to Tel Aviv in the Kebar river and I began to give them the message that God had given me. I presented it to them day after day though they threatened to throw me in prison, though they threatened to mistreat me, though they took all kinds of antagonist attitudes, I proclaimed that message fearlessly". Doesn't sound that way to me.

I would call under III capital A, "The Watchmen," and then number 1 "The Silent Week." It is just this one verse, verse 15. "Where they were living, I sat among them for seven days overwhelmed." Now, did God say, "When you go back to the people, you sit down, and you sit there seven days?" If he did, why was he overwhelmed? God said, "You go and give them this message," he even gave him a whole scroll to take into his being; an understanding of God's plan and God's purposes and he sat there overwhelmed for seven days.

"And at the end of the seven days the Word of the Lord came to me," he said. The Lord said, "Ezekiel, why are you sitting here? Why aren't you giving the message?" We'll call that number 2, "The Specific Charge". "Here's a specific message," he says.

"I've given you a general message now here is the specific message: When I say to a wicked man 'You will surely die,' and you don't warn him or speak out to deflate him." He doesn't say, "When I say to you," but "When I say to a wicked man you shall surely die." He says that to all the wicked men. All the wicked are going to be punished, they should know that if they have read the Scriptures. God has told the wicked they will die eternally. "If you do not warn him or speak out to him to sway him from his evil ways in order to save his life, that wicked man will die for his sins and I will hold you accountable for his blood." And then again we read of a slightly different situation, verse 21: "But if you do warn the righteous man not to sin, and he does not sin, he will surely live because he took warning. You will have saved yourself. So you will be accountable for the wicked and for the righteous." Now, what does Ezekiel do then? Does he get up and begin to carry on what God tells him and go to these people and warn the wicked to not carry on in their wickedness and warn the righteous not to fall into sin? Does he do that? It does not say whether he does or not. So we can make a guess. Did Ezekiel, after seven days of sitting and doing nothing, when God gives him a new charge, does he immediately get up and carry out the charge, or does he become so overwhelmed that he just sits there? In the next verse, "The hand of the Lord was upon me there, and he said, 'Get up and go out into the plain and I will speak to you.'" What does Ezekiel do?

Now the question that I gave you for today is: "Is there a contradiction between this charge God gave him?" When there is a wicked man, you are to warn him. When there is a righteous man, you are to warn him, too. You are God's spokesman to individuals. Did Ezekiel immediately get busy and carry out this task and get the people very irritated at him to the point where they wouldn't listen anymore? Or did he say, "Well now I need to wait until God says something more before I begin to do this; or, I'm just too terrified to begin to undertake it?" Which happened? The question was, is there a contradiction between this and the statement which we have a little later on where he says, "I will make your tongue stick to the roof of your mouth; you will be silent and unable to rebuke them though they are a rebellious house." Is there a contradiction? Well now, many of your papers took a very pious attitude. They said there is no contradiction.

The Bible is entirely true. I am happy that you take that attitude towards the Bible. Of course, I thoroughly believe that there is no real contradiction in the Bible. God's truth is there presented. But we have many facets of the truth. We have many different angles and different aspects of the truth. So there are bound to be what appear to be contradictions. Many matters don't concern us a great deal. We could say, "Well we read this, then we read that, it looks like a contradiction. I know that this is God's Word, he doesn't contradict himself, they are both true and I am very busy so I will go on to other matters." But if we are really going to study the Scripture and learn to know the Scripture as God wants us to, we have to learn to say when there is a contradiction. Why is there an apparent contradiction? Is there a difference between the two statements? Is there a difference of situation? Just what is it?

Now one day I stepped out in the morning and I saw the sunrise in the east, and I saw the sun go up and up and up to the south, and it went up say two-thirds of the way to the top, and it went down in the west. And then, a few days later, I went out one morning and I saw the sun come up in the east and instead of going this way, it went that way. The sun went up there, and on up about two-thirds of the way towards the zenith, and went to the west. But instead of going up towards the south it went up towards the north. I never until that time really sensed what it means that the earth was round. There was a contradiction; there was a tremendous difference. At first I couldn't understand it. It just seemed so- all my life I had seen the sun go this way and then it went that way, it just didn't seem natural. For a little I thought "How could it be?" Now it's true for a little while I was in Pennsylvania and then the next time I was in Brazil, but how can it be that I stand here and I see the sun over there and then a few days later I see it over here at that time of day? I got the concept finally that one time you might say I was at this angle, and the next day I was at that angle toward the sun in the middle. There was a factor which caused a sharp contradiction. Not to be an actual contradiction, but you had to get the factor into it.

Jesus said to the disciples as he sent them out to represent him, he said, "Do not go into any city of the Gentiles or the Samaritans; just go into the house of the Israel." Then

later, Jesus spoke to the disciples and said, "Go into all the world and present the gospel to every creature." There is a contradiction; an entirely different attitude towards the Gentiles. But there is no real contradiction because in-between he has performed the atonement and now the message is to go to all the world. There is a time factor that enters in. Now in this case with Ezekiel, we are not told what the factor is. We cannot be dogmatic about what the factor is.

There is one approach to it, which I do not personally think is right, but which I cannot say is absolutely wrong. I can't say it's impossible. That is, up to verse 21 the Lord gave Ezekiel his definite command, and Ezekiel was so terrified of the people that he sat there for seven days; then he sat there for seven more days. Or maybe seven minutes more; we don't know how long, but at least it was obvious that he wasn't going to carry the commands out and so we read in verse 22, "The hand of the Lord was upon me there and he said, 'Get up and go out to the plain and there I will speak to you.' So I got up and went out to the plain and the glory of the Lord was standing there like the glory I had seen by the Kebar river, and I fell facedown." Ezekiel didn't have the courage to go forward although he had been given these various exhortations, he didn't have the courage to do this, he was helpless, so God said, "We will have to encourage you a little more; we will have to give you another vision of the glory of the Lord. We'll have to put you in a position where you will have a new message and the perseverance to go and do it". Now, that is a possible way of reconciling the contradiction, but I don't think it is the correct one.

Personally, I have a hypothesis. I believe it is a justifiable hypothesis, but it is not a provable one. But this I think fits best with what follows here in the chapter. This hypothesis of mine is that between verses 21 and 22, we have Ezekiel getting up and going about the task God gave him. We have Ezekiel for a period of time now giving the people the message God has given him and the people becoming very indignant. The people refused to listen to him, and it reached a point where just nobody would pay attention to anything that Ezekiel said. It's contrary to what they want; it's contrary to what they think God would do; they just won't listen anymore. He's made himself a

nuisance to everybody, and so God says, "Get up and go out to the plain, I'm going to speak to you again." He gives him another vision of God's glory to encourage him and to strengthen him, and then he says, "Now I'm going to put bonds on you, I'm going to tie you up so you won't continue reproving the people; you won't continue irritating them by the message because they aren't listening anyway. I'm going to use another message to get the first message across to them".

The question is, was Ezekiel so fearful that he couldn't carry out what God had just given him and so God gives him a vision, a message to strengthen him further in his willingness to obey God? Or did he try to do it and have an effective ministry for a time, but the people reached the point where nobody would listen to him? Then at that point God gave him new information about a new approach--a new way to present the message, and to strengthen him further. He then gives Ezekiel a new picture of the glory of God.

There are these two hypotheses. I do not know of any other hypothesis. That God gave him this charge and then he simply says, "Now you are going to be silent." I don't believe there's anything in the charge that says, "You are not to do this until I tell you to speak." The charge says if there is this need in a man's life, you are to speak. He doesn't say you are to wait until I tell you further to speak, he's been telling him you are to go, you are to speak.

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