

EZEKIEL

DEVOTIONAL READING: Ezekiel 17:22-24

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Ezekiel 1-3

EZEKIEL 3:1-11

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.”



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KEY VERSES

He said to me, “Son of man, listen carefully and take to heart all the words I speak to you. 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.”—Ezekiel 3:10, 11

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Describe the context of Ezekiel’s call.
2. Contrast the difficulty of correcting those who don’t know better with the difficulty of correcting those who should and/or do know better.
3. Identify situations in modern churches about which one should be “hardheaded.”

LESSON OUTLINE

Introduction

- A. Gourmet or Garbage?
- B. Lesson Background

I. Tasted Words (Ezekiel 3:1-4)

- A. Command to Eat, Part 1 (vv. 1, 2)
- B. Command to Eat, Part 2 (vv. 3, 4)

II. Tested People (Ezekiel 3:5-7)

- A. Same Language (vv. 5, 6)
- B. Same Result (v. 7)

Wavelength

III. Toughened Prophet (Ezekiel 3:8-11)

- A. Unyielding Messenger (vv. 8, 9)
 - Stubbornness as a Go(o)d Thing*
- B. Unyielding Message (vv. 10, 11)

Conclusion

- A. Balancing Act
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

Introduction

A. Gourmet or Garbage?

Foods considered delicacies in some parts of the world may turn stomachs in others. For example, in Mexico City you may be offered a dish called *escamoles*. At first glance it may look like some sort of cooked grain. Don't ask, or you will be told that escamoles are ant larvae!

Casa marzu is a traditional Sardinian cheese. You may balk when you learn that the Italian name for it is *formaggio marcio*, meaning "rotten cheese." If it seems to you that it is moving, it is. This "delicacy" is a sheep-milk cheese filled with live maggots!

Coffee lovers may be tempted to try *kopi luwak*, the most expensive coffee money can buy. Some specialty coffee shops sell the brew for \$80 per cup. The reason this Indonesian delicacy is rare is that the coffee beans are first eaten by a type of wild cat, then collected after the beans have made their way through the animal's digestive system!

At one time or another, our reluctance to eat a certain food was met by someone saying, "Just try it!" The call of Ezekiel held forth a similar challenge. Ezekiel was commissioned to prophesy to people who found God's Word unappetizing. Therefore God offered Ezekiel a taste test.

B. Lesson Background

The prophet Ezekiel was a contemporary of the prophet Jeremiah (see [lesson 7](#)). Both were living at the time Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians in 586 BC. Jeremiah was likely some years older than Ezekiel since (1) Jeremiah saw himself as "too young" when he received his call from the Lord ([Jeremiah 1:6](#)) in 626 BC and (2) Ezekiel was 30 years old (if that's the correct reference of the text) in "the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiachin" ([Ezekiel 1:1, 2](#)), which was the year 592 BC. Thus Ezekiel would have been born in 622 BC. Perhaps there was some personal contact between Ezekiel and Jeremiah prior to Ezekiel's captivity. But the Scriptures are silent on that.

Ezekiel is introduced as "the priest" ([Ezekiel 1:3](#)). And that is what he would have been had it not been for the tragic turn of events in the southern kingdom of Judah. The first stage in these events came in 605 BC, when Daniel and his friends were taken captive to Babylon ([2 Kings 24:1, 2](#); [Daniel 1:1-6](#)). Ezekiel's relocation to Babylon was a part of the second stage of exile; he was among the 10,000 of the elite citizenry taken in 597 BC ([2 Kings 24:12-14](#)).

Daniel and other Jews were taken to serve "in the king's palace" ([Daniel 1:4](#)), while Ezekiel found himself in a completely different setting: "among the exiles by the Kebar River" ([Ezekiel 1:1](#)). Even so, "the hand of the Lord was on him" ([1:3](#)). It was there that the Lord proceeded to call the priest to a task he undoubtedly did not anticipate.

The call began with an intense display of what Ezekiel describes as "the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord," which caused Ezekiel to fall facedown ([Ezekiel 1:28](#)). Then followed this command: "Son of man, stand up on your feet and I will speak to you" ([2:1](#)). As with other call accounts in this unit, Ezekiel's included both sounds and sights. The sound was the voice of the Lord. The sight was, first, the awe-inspiring glory of the Lord, then an outstretched hand that held "a scroll" ([2:9](#)). As we recall from [lesson 6](#), taste was the one bodily sense of five

that Isaiah did not experience in his call. The situation was different with Ezekiel, however!

I. Tasted Words

(EZEKIEL 3:1-4)

A. Command to Eat, Part 1 (vv. 1, 2)

1a. And he said to me, “Son of man,

The designation *Son of man* occurs over 90 times in the book of Ezekiel, always when the Lord is addressing the prophet. We recognize this phrase as a self-designation of Jesus in the New Testament, a title of messianic significance as it reflects [Daniel 7:13, 14](#). However, the phrase does not appear to have any messianic significance when applied to Ezekiel. *Son of man* simply draws attention to the humanity and mortality of Ezekiel in contrast with the eternal God who calls him.

1b. “eat what is before you, eat this scroll;

The scroll that Ezekiel is commanded to eat is the one written “on both sides” with words of “lament and mourning and woe” in [Ezekiel 2:10](#). Language such as this points to the visionary nature of Ezekiel’s call. It is similar to John’s dietary experience in [Revelation 10:8-11](#), though the aftereffect in each case is quite different, as later noted.



Visual for Lesson 8. Point to this visual as you ask, “In what ways does resistance to the Word of God manifest itself today? How should we respond?”

1c. “then go and speak to the people of Israel.”

It is important that Ezekiel first receives the message within himself. Only then is he qualified to carry out the command we see here. God’s

Word must become a part of the messenger before the messenger can impart it to others.

² So I opened my mouth, and he gave me the scroll to eat.

Ezekiel complies. Those who preach on the importance of obedience to the Lord must first be obedient to him themselves.

B. Command to Eat, Part 2 (vv. 3, 4)

^{3a} 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,

For Ezekiel to *eat this scroll* signifies that God’s message is to become the prophet’s source of spiritual nourishment. The comparison of God’s Word with food is found elsewhere in the Bible (see [Psalm 119:103](#); [Matthew 4:4](#); [Hebrews 5:12-14](#); [1 Peter 2:2, 3](#)).

The phrasing *fill your stomach with it* points to the thoroughness with which Ezekiel is to receive God’s message that is written on the scroll. The word translated *stomach* is used figuratively in the Old Testament to describe an individual’s inner self—the place of understanding and/or emotion. See the translation “heart” in [Psalm 40:8](#) and [Isaiah 16:11](#).

^{3b} and it tasted as sweet as honey in my mouth.

The sweetness that accompanies Ezekiel’s eating of the scroll may seem odd since its contents consist only of “lament and mourning and woe” ([Ezekiel 2:10](#)). Most likely the sweetness is linked to Ezekiel’s faithfulness to his appointed task. Even though his message will not be pleasant to hear and the audience will be resistant and hostile (a point the Lord will make shortly), Ezekiel’s fulfillment will come from his faithful delivery of the words given by the one who has called him (compare [Jeremiah 15:16](#)).

We must grasp the significance of honey in this era to get the full impact. Today we tend to view honey as one sweetener among many that are readily available (cane sugar, corn syrup, etc.). But the people of Ezekiel’s time and place do not have all these options. Honey is a delicacy (compare [Proverbs 25:16](#)). [Psalm 19:9-11](#) places it alongside gold in a comparison with “the decrees of the Lord” by which “your servant is warned.” God’s decrees can be sweet, because “in keeping them there is great reward.”

However, we note a certain contrast when the apostle John ingests “the scroll” in his heavenly vision in Revelation. It is “sweet as honey” at first, but turns bitter in his stomach ([Revelation 10:8-10](#)). Perhaps that is because the judgments John bears witness to are the harshest in Scripture, eternal in their scope.

What Do You Think?

What can we expect to experience when we taste God’s Word? What is signified if we don’t experience such things?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Regarding our state of mind ([Psalm 34:8](#))

Regarding our commitment ([Hebrews 6:4-6](#))

Regarding our maturity ([1 Peter 2:1-3](#))

Other

⁴ He then said to me: “Son of man, go now to the people of Israel and speak my words to them.”

Here are the three essentials in conveying God’s message in any era. First, we must take the initiative and *go*. Second, we must have an audience. Third, we must have a message from God.

What Do You Think?

What does the prophet’s “go” mandate in [Ezekiel 3:1, 4, 11](#) have to say, if anything, to Christians pondering how best to implement the “go” mandate in [Matthew 28:19, 20](#)?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Regarding the mandates’ similarities

Regarding the mandates’ distinctives

II. Tested People

([EZEKIEL 3:5-7](#))

A. Same Language (vv. 5, 6)

⁵ “You are not being sent to a people of obscure speech and strange language, but to the people of Israel—

The prophet Daniel’s concurrent ministry is with *a people of obscure speech*, a language he and his friends are expected to learn ([Daniel 1:4](#)). Ezekiel, on the other hand, is to speak to people who share his identity and heritage: *the people of Israel*. One would think this would be a plus for communicating the Lord’s message. But such will not be the case, as the Lord proceeds to explain.

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.**

Language barriers can be difficult to overcome. But here the Lord tells Ezekiel that people of other lands and *of obscure speech and strange language* would have welcomed the prophet’s message. Those in Nineveh, for example, heeded Jonah’s preaching and turned to God in a national expression of repentance ([Jonah 3:4, 5](#)). Jesus cites that incident in an indictment of those in his day who refuse to repent in response to his preaching ([Matthew 12:41](#); compare [11:20-24](#)).

B. Same Result (v. 7)

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.”**

By contrast, *the people of Israel* (God’s covenant people) *are not willing to listen to* Ezekiel. Of course, ultimately it is not Ezekiel-the-spokesman who is rejected, but God. The prediction reminds us of what God told Samuel when the elders of Israel demanded a king: “It is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me” ([1 Samuel 8:7](#)). Centuries later, Jesus will speak in similar terms to his disciples: “Whoever rejects you rejects me; but whoever rejects me rejects him who sent me” ([Luke 10:16](#)).

God uses the highly unflattering terms *hardened* and *obstinate* to describe his people. One would think that a people in captivity as a result of God’s judgment on them would be more sensitive to spiritual matters and willing to heed his prophet! Some will be willing to give the prophet a hearing and will encourage others to do so as well ([Ezekiel 33:30](#)). But Ezekiel’s audience ultimately sees him as an entertainer ([33:32](#)) and as one whose message is obscure ([20:49](#)). Any positive response ends up being nothing more than lip service ([33:31, 32](#)).

WAVELENGTH

Living in Ukraine, another American and I were spending several weeks in intense language training. There were many chances for miscommunication. One problem stemmed from Russian words that sounded or looked like English words.

One day our teacher was drilling us with flash cards that featured Russian words for common objects. The drill required that we point to pictures of the objects, and the word *krovat* kept tripping us up. We thought it was a type of necktie, but there was no such picture. We tried to describe it to the instructor, but she could not understand. Finally she pointed to the correct picture: *krovat* meant “bed.”

We found that hilarious. Before long the teacher was laughing with us. Something that started as a communication gap ended as a bonding experience. Although we didn’t speak the same language, we did indeed end up on the same wavelength.

Ezekiel’s problem was the exact opposite. Sent to people who spoke his language, his message ended up being rejected because his fellow Israelites were not on God’s spiritual wavelength. It’s bad enough to face misunderstandings; it’s worse to be understood but rejected anyway. May we have the strength God gave Ezekiel to face such opposition when it comes. —L. M. W.

What Do You Think?

What are some ways for Christians to prepare themselves for negative reactions that may come when sin is confronted within a church?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

For reactions that hide behind [Matthew 7:1](#)

For reactions that hide behind [John 8:7](#)

For reactions that hide behind cultural concepts of “privacy”

Other

III. Toughened Prophet

(EZEKIEL 3:8-11)

A. Unyielding Messenger (vv. 8, 9)

8. **“But I will make you as unyielding and hardened as they are.**

God will not change the prophet’s message to make it less offensive to the hostile crowd, but he will change his prophet. God makes Ezekiel *as unyielding and hardened* as his opposition.

The language pictures intense resistance toward the prophet, but also sufficient resources to counter it. Anyone who tries to “butt heads” with Ezekiel will meet his or her match and then some! The Lord’s promise to Ezekiel is similar to that which he gives to Jeremiah ([Jeremiah 1:17-](#)

19) and to Moses ([Exodus 7:1-5](#)). The name Ezekiel means “God strengthens” or “God hardens” in Hebrew. God is promising his messenger the power to live up to his name.

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.”

The word translated *like the hardest stone* is an adjective that conveys the idea of “firm” or “unyielding.” But it can also describe any substance, such as *flint*, of extreme hardness. Because of such preparation, Ezekiel need not *be afraid of or terrified by* his opposition.

Fear seems to be a common initial reaction of those called by God, so God reassures those he calls with various promises of his sustaining power. Ezekiel must not give in to his fears, though the opposition he is to face is likened to “briers and thorns” and “scorpions” ([Ezekiel 2:6](#)).

STUBBORNNESS AS A GO(O)D THING

My children love computers. So for the first week of summer break, we let them have unlimited time on the home computer.

After a week of bloodshot eyes and disengaged children, we initiated a strict time limit. The first few days we saw rebellion. They stubbornly insisted that they couldn’t do any of their summer projects without online video instructions. They extolled the merits of learning correct keyboarding and keeping up with their generation by participating in online games.

We stood firm, however, and took them on bike rides to the park. We had family game time or group reading time. We invited neighborhood children over to play. We baked cookies and made dinner together. Within a few days, the powerful habit of continuous computer usage was broken.

HOW TO SAY IT

Babylon *Bab-uh-lun.*

Babylonians *Bab-ih-low-nee-unz.*

casa marzu *caw-zoo marh-zoo.*

escamoles *ess-kuh-mow-less.*

Ezekiel *Ee-zeek-ee-ul or Ee-zeek-yul.*

formaggio marcio *fohr-mod-djoh mar-choh.*

Kebar *Kee-bar.*

kopi luwak *co-pea lu-wah.*

krovat *craw-vawht.*

messianic *mess-ee-an-ick.*

Moab *Mo-ab.*

Nebuchadnezzar *Neb-yuh-kud-nez-er.*

Nineveh *Nin-uh-vuh.*

Solomon *Sol-o-mun.*

Children can be stubbornly persistent in using childish logic to persuade parents to give them their hearts’ desires! But when those desires threaten their development, parents must be more stubborn than their children. They must make rules and stick with them until the children themselves see the value of those rules.

Ezekiel faced what amounted to a nation of spiritual children. In that regard, they stubbornly insisted on following the ungodly way of their ancestors, “a stubborn and rebellious generation” ([Psalm 78:8](#)). Ezekiel had to match their stubborn hardheadedness with his own, since he was right and they were wrong.

We must cling to the truth. This does not give us license to hurt those who disagree, since our hardheadedness is based in the softheartedness of [John 3:16](#). But the exercise of softhearted compassion must not result in our spiritual compass pointing anywhere but to God alone. —L. M. W.

What Do You Think?

What forms should stubbornness on our part take and not take in spreading the gospel? Why?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

To those of our own language and culture

To those of our own language but different culture

To those who differ in both language and culture

B. Unyielding Message (vv. 10, 11)

10. And he said to me, “Son of man, listen carefully and take to heart all the words I speak to you.

The Lord desires that Ezekiel *take to heart* what he is now hearing. The prophet has already had to “stomach” these words ([Ezekiel 3:3](#), above), and the inclusion of *heart* stresses how complete Ezekiel’s reception of the Lord’s message must be.

The words of [Psalm 119:11](#) are applicable: “I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you.” Ezekiel may be in captivity on foreign soil, but God’s Word is in no way held captive (see [2 Timothy 2:9](#)).

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 Lord has spoken of Ezekiel’s audience as “hardened,” “obstinate,” and “rebellious” in today’s text. These add to their depiction as “briers and thorns” and “scorpions” in [Ezekiel 2:6](#). Now, however, as the Lord’s commission to Ezekiel comes to its conclusion, he describes them in somewhat softer terms as *your people in exile*.

This phrasing indicates that Ezekiel is in the same situation as his fellow Israelites. It is a situation of servitude to a foreign power in a foreign land. They suffer with Ezekiel the same result of God’s judgment. Because of their stubborn disobedience and refusal to heed prophetic warnings, the people deserve to be where they are. But they are still Ezekiel’s kin; he shares with them a common identity as part of the covenant people.

Ezekiel undoubtedly views his fellow Israelites with the same compassion that moves the apostle Paul to say centuries later, “I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my people, those of my own race” ([Romans 9:3](#)).

At the same time, Ezekiel’s compassion must not be allowed to alter the Lord’s message. Ezekiel still must declare *what the Sovereign Lord says*. Resistance to the message must not influence the prophet’s delivery of it. *Whether they listen or fail to listen* makes no difference in that regard. Ezekiel’s primary duty is to remain faithful to the Lord’s message. His listeners must decide for themselves whether they will do the same.

The Lord will expand on this point in [Ezekiel 3:16-27](#), where the prophet’s work is compared with that of a watchman. The watchman can only sound the alarm when an enemy approaches; it is up to the residents of a city or town to take appropriate action. If Ezekiel is faithful to his duties as a watchman yet his listeners scorn his warnings, then they will have no one to blame but themselves when disaster strikes.

What Do You Think?

How do we know whether or not to move on when the gospel is stubbornly resisted?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Considering examples of staying put ([Acts 5:17-21](#); [8:1b](#)—regarding the apostles; etc.)

Considering examples of moving on ([Luke 9:5](#); [Acts 9:23-25](#); [17:32, 33](#); etc.)

Considering examples where both occur in different senses ([Acts 18:1-11](#); [19:1-10](#); etc.)

Conclusion

A. Balancing Act

God called Ezekiel to walk a prophetic tightrope. On one hand, he was given a message that was filled with mourning and woe. On the other hand, he noted that the message was nourishing and sweet. God’s harshest rebukes are given for the eternal good of the hearer.

Christians today are faced with a similar balancing act. Some complain that Christianity is a religion of *no* and that we are defined only by what we are against. On the other hand, some look at positive, affirming messages and then grumble that the church does not take sin seriously anymore! How do we preach the sweetness of the gospel without compromising what the Bible says about the seriousness of sin?

The prophecies of Ezekiel contain some of the bleakest words in Scripture regarding the fate of those who resist the truth of God’s Word. But the same prophecies contain great words of hope and conclude with the promise, “The Lord is there” ([Ezekiel 48:35](#)). May we seek to offer that same balanced message today.

B. Prayer

Father, harden us against whatever opposition we may encounter; but keep our hearts soft with your compassion for a lost world. We pray this in Jesus’ name. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

A message of judgment without grace is no gospel at all.

INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

Into the Lesson

Begin the class by playing a game of “Would You Rather?” Read from the list of food pairs below, asking class members to stand if they would rather eat the first item of the pair and remain seated if they would prefer the second food item. Encourage students to decide quickly.

Ask, “Would you rather eat ...”

... spinach or brussels sprouts?

... tofu or cottage cheese?

... mushrooms or turnips?

... black licorice or cotton candy?

... anchovies or oysters?

... mayonnaise or sour cream?

... liver or Spam®?

... pea soup or lima beans?

Alternative. Distribute copies of the “Gourmet or Garbage” activity from the reproducible page, which you can download. You may do this as a class or as a small-group activity.

After either activity, lead into the Bible study by saying, “Some foods seem extremely unappetizing to us. At some time or another, our reluctance to eat a certain food was met by someone saying, ‘Just try it!’ The call of Ezekiel held a similar challenge. Ezekiel was commissioned to prophesy to people who found God’s Word unappetizing. For that reason, God offered Ezekiel a taste test.”

Into the Word

Divide your class into three groups, and give each group paper and pens. Each group should be assigned a section of the lesson text with a key image from that section. Each group is to summarize the lesson text as instructions to someone who wants to share the gospel today. They are to use straightforward language, not using the main image they are given.

Scripture assignments and sample instructions follow:

Group 1—The Scroll ([Ezekiel 3:1-4](#))

Before you share God’s Word, you must experience it for yourself. It should become a part of you, and you must be convinced of its goodness.

Group 2—House of Israel ([Ezekiel 3:5-7](#))

The most difficult people to reach are not those who know nothing about God. It is those who should know better! Stubborn people are resistant people.

Group 3—Hard Head ([Ezekiel 3:8-11](#))

Those who bring the gospel must be tough. You will be tempted to back down or compromise for acceptance. Don’t do it! Be firm and stand strong!

Allow time for groups to share their instructions and summarize their Scripture assignments.

Into Life

Write this on the board: *Ezekiel was challenged to present the sweetness of God’s message without sugarcoating it.* Ask the class to explain this statement.

Write each of the challenges below on separate index cards. Divide the class into three groups, and give each group one of the cards. Have groups discuss how they would present the sweetness of the gospel without backing away from truth for the challenges they are given.

Group 1—Unloving Christians

Christians today only say what they are against. They are such haters!

Group 2—Silent God

I believed when I was a child. I prayed and prayed that my parents would not divorce, but God ignored my prayers. I ignore him now!

Group 3—Living Life

I may consider following God later in life. I have too much living to do now!

Alternative. Distribute copies of the “Rock Solid” activity from the reproducible page. Use it in class or as a take-home exercise.