

## **Ezekiel 2:9 – 3:11**

<sup>9</sup> *Then I looked, and I saw a hand stretched out to me. In it was a scroll, <sup>10</sup> which he unrolled before me. On both sides of it were written words of lament and mourning and woe. And he said to me, “Son of man, eat what is before you, eat this scroll; then go and speak to the house of Israel.”* <sup>2</sup> *So I opened my mouth, and he gave me the scroll to eat. <sup>3</sup> 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.*

<sup>4</sup> *He then said to me: “Son of man, go now to the house of Israel and speak my words to them. <sup>5</sup> You are not being sent to a people of obscure speech and difficult language, but to the house of Israel— <sup>6</sup> not to many peoples of obscure speech and difficult language, whose words you cannot understand. Surely if I had sent you to them, they would have listened to you. <sup>7</sup> But the house of Israel is not willing to listen to you because they are not willing to listen to me, for the whole house of Israel is hardened and obstinate.*

<sup>8</sup> *But I will make you as unyielding and hardened as they are. <sup>9</sup> 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.”* <sup>10</sup> *And he said to me, “Son of man, listen carefully and take to heart all the words I speak to you. <sup>11</sup> Go now to your countrymen in exile and speak to them. Say to them, ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says,’ whether they listen or fail to listen.”*

When Jesus sent the disciples into the work of the public ministry, he gave this evaluation. *“The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few.”* Then he urged them to pray that God would send workers into the field. Through the story of God’s call to Ezekiel, God gives us a chance to pull back the curtain and see how God leads people from the pew to the public ministry. As we consider this journey, pay attention to see if you can discover the vital role God expects each person in the pew to play in this process.

When it comes to the public ministry, there is one major rule. All pastors and teachers must be called by God into the ministry! That is how the work begins. Ezekiel experienced the call from God in our text. <sup>4</sup> *He then said to me: “Son of man, go now to the house of Israel and speak my words to them.* That call from God came with a memorable existential experience as God equipped Ezekiel for the task ahead. <sup>9</sup> *Then I looked, and I saw a hand stretched out to me. In it was a scroll, <sup>10</sup> which he unrolled before me. On both sides of it were written words of lament and mourning and woe. And he said to me, “Son of man, eat what is before you, eat this scroll; then go and speak to the house of Israel.”* <sup>12</sup> *So I opened my mouth, and he gave me the scroll to eat. <sup>13</sup> 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.*

There is no more satisfying a road to take than to travel the road as God's messenger to the world. That is the initial "sweetness" Ezekiel tasted when he ate the scroll. For a sinful man like Ezekiel was, no experience could be more fulfilling than to be called by the Holy God and to bring God's message to a world in need.

Just as in the case of Ezekiel, so today any person who journeys from the pew to the public ministry must be called by God. When that call comes, those who receive it will find satisfaction in their work that is hard to describe. The sweetness is amazing. In over 50 years of ministry, I can recall many fulfilling experiences. Once I entered a hospital room to see an elderly woman facing her final moments in this world, and she was filled with fear. When I asked her why she was afraid, she told me that God would not like her because she had been a cruel bitter person to the people in her life. When I told her of Jesus sacrifice for her earning God's favor, tears rolled down her cheeks. I can still see her softly telling me that this wonderful news was the first time she ever heard it. Her fear was replaced by joy.

Or there was a man whom I met canvassing for my little mission 50 years ago. 50 years later he sought me out to tell me that the day I knocked on the door of his home was the best day of his life. Or the man who told me of the phone call I made to him 30 years ago. It happened at the lowest moment in his life when he was sure there was no one in the world who would care about him or even miss him when he was gone. At that moment I happened to call him and when he answered, I greeted him with three words that changed his life. I said, "We missed you" in the congregation and his life changed from that day on. When God calls you to the ministry, the path you travel will be filled with amazing experiences like that.

But God makes it clear that the public ministry will come with many challenges as well. That is the second major truth for the journey from the pew to public ministry. Remember the message on the scroll Ezekiel ate. On both sides were written a message of **"Lament and mourning and woe."** You see, Ezekiel was carried into captivity in Babylon in 605 BC along with the other Jewish exiles. With their eyes fixed to the west on the city of Jerusalem, the exiles wanted to hear God tell them that he would soon release them from captivity and return them to Jerusalem. Instead, Ezekiel told them what they had experienced was due to God's wrath with them for their idolatry. Worse than that, Ezekiel told the exiles that the Jews still in Jerusalem would themselves become exiles and Jerusalem would be destroyed. So God warned Ezekiel of the challenges and rejection that he would encounter in the work. <sup>4</sup> ***He then said to me: "Son of man, go now to the house of Israel and speak my words to them. 5 You are not being sent to a people of obscure speech and difficult language, but to the house of Israel— 6 not to many peoples of obscure speech and difficult language, whose words you cannot understand. Surely if I had sent you to them, they would have listened to you. 7 But the house of Israel is not willing to listen to you because they are not willing to listen to me, for the whole house of Israel is hardened and obstinate.*** For fifteen years Ezekiel brought that

unwanted message to the exiles and he lived each day with their condemnation and disapproval. The public ministry comes with many challenges.

This remains true today for all who travel the road from the pew to the public ministry. We carry from God a message that is desperately needed. Yet it is a message that the world rejects. Jesus used a picture to help us prepare for this reaction. Calling himself the corner stone, Jesus said in ***Matthew 21:44 “He who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces, but he on whom it falls will be crushed.”*** People in this world have one of two reactions to the message of God’s grace. The first is a reaction of pride. The Christ tells us that we can’t earn God’s favor. It says that all have fallen short of the glory of God and there is no one that is righteous. This message offends the pride in people’s hearts. they feel that they are clearly better than others and God should be pleased with them. So they reject the message as offensive, and they walk away in unbelief.

The second reaction Jesus describes as being “crushed” by the stone. Through his message God leads sinners to see that their sins are not mere accidents. God reveals that we sin because we have sinful hearts. ***“Out of the heart proceeds evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, etc”*** says the Lord. That too is not an easy truth for a sinner to embrace. Only by God’s miracle grace can this be done. So the point is that sharing this hard message with a sinful world is not an easy task. There will be many failures, many disappointments, many experiences that seem like a loss.

To face such moments, God prepares his public ministry servants in a special way. He showed Ezekiel that way here. <sup>8</sup> But I will ***make you as unyielding and hardened as they are.*** <sup>9</sup> ***I will make your forehead like the hardest stone, harder than flint. ...*** <sup>10</sup> ***And he said to me, “Son of man, ...”*** <sup>11</sup> ***Go now to your countrymen in exile and speak to them. Say to them, ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says,’ whether they listen or fail to listen.”*** Facing such challenges in the public ministry will always be a difficult task which requires firm resolve.

Here is an example of how this works. While I was starting a mission in Rhode Island I came across a young couple canvassing and they agreed to study the Bible with me. Over the next 18 weeks I went to their home each week and shared with them what the Bible said. When the course finished the man told me he wanted to join the church, but he could not bring himself to it. He said it feels like *“there is a wall between me and that choice that prevents me from deciding to join.”* He did not know what the wall was. Neither did I, but he was resolute. It was 1978 and Providence, RI encountered the biggest snowstorm I had ever seen, 55 inches of snow over two days. A few days later when things were getting back to normal, I went out to shovel the snow from my driveway. While I was shoveling Ken came by and offered to help. We shoveled for an hour or so and stopped to take a break. He casually mentioned that he called his lieutenant the night before to talk about a shared experience in Viet Nam. It seems that these two were in battle separated from their unit and they captured an enemy soldier. Rather than turn him

in as a prisoner, he threw the man into a pit and tossed a grenade in. In that story I discovered the wall Ken was facing. He did not think that even the grace of God could forgive the terrible thing he had done. Ken never joined my church. After over a half year of sharing God's word, Ken walked away. To me it felt like a loss. But in such moments God is actually teaching a different lesson through the outcome.

Hardship in the ministry has a purpose. It teaches the public servants two important lessons. The first is that soul work is done on a continuum. Each called worker is only one contact with the soul, one among others who has planned. Sometimes you don't get to harvest. Sometimes you only get to plant or plow or weed. But I always hoped that there would be a minister who one day was able to harvest Ken and show him that the *"blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin"* even though *"your sins are as scarlet, they shall be white as snow"* under the cross of Christ. The second thing hardship teaches the pastor, or teacher is that the results of the work are in God's hands. The public servant is only a messenger. One plants, another waters, but God alone makes it grow. So, while it might feel like a loss or a failure, it was actually a necessary step in God's harvesting plan for that soul.

So you might ask, why would anyone take a job like this with so many possible hardships and so little control of the results. The answer is, God calls them to the task. And this was an issue with which I struggled for many years in the ministry. I knew no one entered the ministry without God calling them. The problem was, I had no memory of when God spoke to me. People would ask me if *"I felt called by God"* and I would have to say no. In my childhood no one ever suggested that I should become a pastor. After years of thought I remembered a moment when I was in sixth grade. One evening my family was eating supper. My Father was talking about a church council meeting he had to attend. He was the chairman of the congregation, and he was so amazed by the pastor. The pastor would come to the meeting with a long check list of things that needed attention. And he would walk right down the list in a very organized way. I remember listening and noticing how much my dad respected and appreciated the pastor. And I remember thinking that perhaps if my father valued the pastor and his work so highly, that might be a worthwhile thing to do with my life. Though neither my Father or I recognized it, that was the voice of God for the first time directing me to begin the journey from the pew to the pulpit.

And this is where you come in today. Our church has four pastors. These men are very different from one another. They have very different skills, different personalities, different preaching styles. Yet God has brought our pastors here so he can bless us through whatever skills they bring to the work. Our role in that is to honor and treasure each man for the gifts God gives us through them. And if we honor our pastors in this way as I my father did there may be young ears in our congregation that hear our respect. And perhaps God may use our words of honor and

respect for the public ministry to whispers in their ear that the best path for them may well be the journey from the pew to the pulpit. The fields are still white with the harvest and the workers still are few.