

“A Different Kind of Challenge”

Ezekiel 3:1-11

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Delivered in participation in
The 2010 Russell V. DeLong Sermon Series

Strickland Chapel

Nazarene Bible College

Colorado Springs, CO

May 4, 2010

Introduction: Good evening. Before I begin, I would like to thank all those that have made my experience here at Nazarene Bible College possible. None of us comes here entirely on our own. Even if we arrive alone, we do not make it through without help from many others. I would especially like to thank my wife, Dawn, and our children Hailey, Tyler, and Matthew for the sacrifices that they have each made to enable me to stand before you tonight. I would like to thank the DeLong family for making this series possible and all of my professors for making my participation possible.

In the past few weeks and months as I've been finishing my classes here at NBC, I've spent a lot of time thinking about what I've experienced here and about what lies ahead when I leave this place. I thought of all of the classes that I've had the honor of sitting in and I thought about all of the great preachers that I have had the privilege to hear speak in this chapel. I can say now that it is a humbling experience to stand here where so many of the finest men and women of the faith that I have ever known have stood. Though I do not belong in their company, I will do my best to honor their tradition. One of the first messages that I ever heard from this pulpit in that the very first fall term was given by Dr. Harmon Schmelzenbach. If you've been around the Church of the Nazarene for a while, then you know about this family that first took the denomination to the continent of Africa. Dr. Schmelzenbach told great stories about his life and ministry in Africa. As a third generation Nazarene missionary, he had lived there his entire life. His stories were fantastic, colored with lions and hippos and native chiefs with many wives and sharp spears. Dr. Schmelzenbach talked about ministry to another culture that was full of overwhelming challenges and exciting miracles. He made ministry sound adventurous in an almost Indiana Jones sort of way. He encouraged us with story after story of how God had provided for and protected his family and blessed their efforts.

I sat right over there dumbfounded and still a little in awe of actually being here and thought, “Cool. If that’s ministry, sign me up.” Then I remembered that God had not called me to cross-cultural ministry in a foreign land where uncivilized people live in the jungle and fight wild animals. If God has called you there, then go and serve well. The world desperately needs your ministry and we support you all the way. However, if like me, you’ve been called to ministry in 21st century America, then this message is for you. It’s likely that none of us will spend our days and nights learning an unwritten language and listening for war drums being carried on the wind. Most of the people that we’re likely to meet and minister to will look like us, talk like us, and dress like us. I doubt if many of them will have spears or drums, and we’ll probably never see a lion outside of the zoo or the circus. We’ll face a different kind of challenge.

What: Our passage tonight is from the book of Ezekiel, chapter three. Go ahead and turn there if you like. Ezekiel lived among the exiles in Babylonia in what we know today as Syria. Usually we think of Babylon as Iraq, but this particular river valley lies just to the north in Syria. Chapter one tells us that the hand of God was on Ezekiel. One day while he was outside with some of the other exiles near the Kebar River, he saw an amazing vision of God being carried along above four flying creatures with four faces each and riding on wheels within wheels. This is one of the most vivid and amazing descriptions of the glory of God in all of Scripture.

Chapter two tells us that God’s Spirit filled Ezekiel and lifted him up as the voice of the Lord began to speak to Ezekiel about his assignment. He tells Ezekiel not to be afraid even though he is being sent among a people that are like scorpions. We’ll pick the story up in chapter three, starting with verse one:

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

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.

He then said to me: "Son of man, go now to the house of Israel and speak my words to them. You are not being sent to a people of obscure speech and difficult language, but to the house of Israel- 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. 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. But I will make you as unyielding and hardened as they are. 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."

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

Ezekiel was not called to go to foreign people and tell them about a God that they've never heard of. He faced a different kind of challenge. God tells the prophet that if he was to be called to such a task, then the people would certainly listen to him and turn from their ways. Instead, the Lord gave Ezekiel what He believed to be a more difficult task. Ezekiel was sent to speak on the Lord's behalf to his own countrymen, fellow Israelites that knew about God but were living in rebellion to His teachings.

Jerusalem had been besieged by King Nebuchadnezzar's men. The leaders of the day had either been executed or carried off to foreign lands like Ezekiel had. Eventually, the Temple

would be destroyed and all of its sacred objects plundered and taken to Babylon. Ezekiel was in a foreign land, but only about 500 miles from his home and among his own people. In fact, he was in the area that his ancestors Abram and Terah had set out from when God called them to leave their homeland generations before. Many of us are farther from our homes here in Colorado Springs than Ezekiel was in Babylon.

The first thing that Ezekiel is to do is to put God's words in his own mouth so that He can speak to the people for God. He is told to eat the scroll and let it fill his stomach. Notice that Ezekiel is not told to read the scroll but to eat it. I can't think of a more vivid way for God to tell the prophet to take in His Word. He is to digest the message that God has for His people so that he knows it thoroughly and it becomes a part of him.

Then he is told to go to his own people, the church of his day. God tells Ezekiel that the people are rebellious and that they will not listen to Ezekiel because they are rejecting God's word, not His messenger. To equip His servant for the task ahead, God promises to give him determination to become even more stubborn and thick-skinned than those that He is being sent to serve. God says that he will make Ezekiel's head harder than a rock. Now we all know pastor or two like that don't we? Some of us are one.

He is told not to be afraid or terrified. I find it interesting that Jonah was sent to prophesy against the most powerful city of his day, Nineveh, but the Bible doesn't mention anything about his being afraid. He's sent to speak out against a violent city-state that is known all over the world for the violence and atrocities that they commit against their enemies, but God doesn't feel the need to tell Jonah not to fear these people. The Ninevites would take their enemies captive and take them up to the top of the wall surrounding their city. They would take trees 30 or 40 feet tall and strip off all of the branches and sharpen the top to a point and stand them up in front

of the wall. And then they would hurl their enemies down onto these poles and leave their bodies there as a warning to anyone else that might come against the city. But God doesn't reassure Jonah. Yet when he sends Ezekiel to his own people, he tells him not to fear. In a similar way, Isaiah is told not to fear what his people fear but to fear God alone.

The final instruction that God gives to Ezekiel is that he is to proclaim what the Lord says to the people. God tells the prophet to take the words in, consider them carefully, and speak the truth. It will not be up to Ezekiel whether the people respond or not; it will only be up to him to declare the words of the Lord.

So what: I think that we can take a lot away from this passage. Like Ezekiel, God has called us to speak to our own people in our native language. To this point, God has not called many of us to go to a foreign place and learn new cultures and teach about God to people that have never heard of Him. He has called us to a different kind of challenge. The Barna Group tells us that "85% of all non-churched adults have had a prolonged period of time during which they have consistently attended a church or religious center." He goes on to describe how we will be entering a ministry environment that is nothing like that of Calvin, Luther, or Wesley. It doesn't even resemble the environment that Billy Graham entered just over fifty years ago. The problem in our culture is not that people have never heard of God, it's that they know about Him but they still don't know Him. We, too, are being sent among a rebellious people that have known about God but are not following His ways. Like Ezekiel, we may be called upon to find new methods because the old ways are no longer relevant. Three points and a conclusion hold little magic for a single mother with three kids and a past-due mortgage.

Ezekiel was forced to function in an environment that was very different from what he had been taught by the priests that came before him. One can just imagine that when Ezekiel

went to Bible College he took classes on preparing the altar, burning incense, cleaning the bronze fixtures, and making animal sacrifices. He probably spent a year in a cohort learning how to slaughter animals and offer them as sacrifices on the altar. His professors more than likely showed him the tricks of the trade that they had learned to be effective. With great passion and conviction, they told Ezekiel and his classmates how to hold the various types of animals, where to place the knife, and how to draw it across their necks so that the blood flowed on the ground and not on the priest. I'm sure he received instruction on which pieces to offer in the fire and a few favorite recipes for how to prepare the priest's portion.

But now Ezekiel was facing a different kind of challenge. He was called by God to function in an entirely different environment. Within a few short years, the traditional church of Ezekiel's day was no more. Rather than slaughter animals, Ezekiel was forced to live among exiles whose very families had been slaughtered. He was asked to act out the suffering of his people and call them back to the Lord who never changes, even when everything else does. Ezekiel had to find ways to connect with people that knew about God, but had given up on following Him. He had to live among people who more than ever believed that God had given up on them. People who felt abandoned and saw little hope in their present situations. People just like the ones that you and I encounter every day.

After spending countless hours preparing to serve in a Temple where all good Jews came to worship, Ezekiel now had to find ways to proclaim God's message among the people. He began his ministry in his own house and then moved out into the streets and fields where the people worked and lived their lives. Ezekiel soon found that most of his priestly training had little relevance to the environment in which he served. Although his instructors had offered the

best advice from their own ministries with the purest of intentions, the world had simply changed from the one in which they ministered. He now faced a different kind of challenge.

Now what: If we're to be effective in our own ministries, then we can draw inspiration from Ezekiel. We too face a different kind of challenge. We too must learn to rely on listening to God to find new and creative ways of reaching people that no longer come to the Temple. In his book *Church Next: Quantum Changes in How We Do Ministry*, Eddie Gibbs writes:

“Churches cannot stand apart from society and invite people to come to them on their terms. Rather, churches must go to people where they are and communicate in terms that will make sense to them, addressing the issues that shape their lives and speaking their language...The church in the postmodern era must be prepared to witness with vulnerability and humility from the margins of society, much as it did in the first two centuries of its existence.”

Looking at the research, Gibbs tells us that if the current trends continue 60% of all American congregations will no longer exist by the year 2050. More and more congregations will find that they are not economically viable and they will be forced to close and consolidate. We will be forced to radically restructure our ministry models. In case you haven't done the math yet, that's not the far-away future, that's the next forty years. That's the time that you and I have been called to minister in.

But all is not doom and gloom. The God that had a plan for Ezekiel when things looked hopeless is still in control today. His message of hope and freedom and redemption is still the only real Truth out there. God called you and me and he knows all of the different kinds of challenges ahead. Last time I talked to Him, he was still planning on using us to call his children back to Him. It's not a matter of whether we will do ministry, it's simply a matter of re-thinking how and where we will do ministry. It's a matter of rising to a different kind of challenge.

For some of us, that will mean that we will not work full time in a church. We may have to have jobs that provide benefits and support beyond what a struggling church can offer. I challenge you not to see that as a bad thing, but as an opportunity to live among the people that you're trying to reach. There are certain benefits to not being dependant on the church that we serve for all of our support. Paul chose this ministry model so that he could be free to preach as the Spirit directed him without having anyone second-guess his motives.

For others of us it may mean that although we serve as full-time ministers, we work for other institutions as chaplains or counselors instead of serving in traditional parish ministry. This type of ministry is another way that we can go where the people are and be part of a sent church rather than a sending church. The days of unlocking the doors on Sunday morning and waiting for the people to show up appear to be drawing quickly to a close. I have no doubt that the institution of the church will survive until Christ returns to take His Bride. Make no mistake, the Church will go on. I challenge you tonight to embrace the mission of the church instead of the form that it takes. Our mission and our message are unchanging even as our methods and our environment are in constant flux. God is sending us to our own people.

If we take anything from the lessons of Ezekiel, we should understand that He is not sending us alone and we do not need to be afraid. We are to learn God's Word, take it in, digest it, and make it a part of us. People need to see our lives as different from the rest of the world around them. When we have the chance to talk with them about God, we should take it. The Word of God does not return empty. But I believe that God is challenging each of us tonight to live in such a way that people will see His Word at work in our lives whether they ever hear us talk about it or not.

Perhaps one day, if we follow Ezekiel and stay faithful to God in doing ministry in new and unfamiliar ways, God may choose to show us His plans for the new design of the Church in our time just as He showed Ezekiel the plans of the new Temple that would be built by the people that he served. If we stay focused on our call and faithful to our God, then maybe one day we will be used to bring new life to the dry bones of churches all over our land. If we are obedient to what God asks us to do and if we say what He tells us to say, then maybe we too will be privileged to see the glory of God in indescribable ways.

As we prepare to enter ministry, we indeed face a different kind of challenge. When we leave school, we will be entering the fields of previously churching people who have chosen exile over the traditional model of “doing church,” and we must ask ourselves what hinders us from reaching them? We speak the language. We know the culture. But can we see the needs? Can we answer their questions? Can we tolerate their stubbornness? Do we need them to do things our way so that we can feel successful? Or can we rise to a different kind of challenge?

Conclusion: The passage that I’m about to read is said to have been found carved in the door of a martyred African pastor. This pastor was not a cross-cultural missionary. He was a national pastor sent to speak God’s word to his own people. A people that were rebellious to God and didn’t want to hear His message. People like many of the ones that we will be called to witness to in our ministries. I believe that he had an attitude like Ezekiel. Thi is what he wrote:

I am a part of the fellowship of the unashamed.

The dye has been cast.

The decision has been made.

I have stepped over the line.

I won’t look back, let up, slow down, back away, or be still.

My past is redeemed, my present makes sense, and my future is secure.

I am finished and done with low living, sight walking, small planning, smooth knees, colorless dreams, tame visions, mundane talking, cheap giving, and dwarfed goals.

I no longer need preeminence, prosperity, position, promotion, plaudits, or popularity.

I don't have to be right, first, tops, recognized, praised, regarded, or rewarded.

I now live by faith, lean on His presence, love with patience, live by prayer, and labor with power.

My face is set, my gait is fast, my goal is Heaven, my road is narrow, my way is rough, my companions are few, my guide is reliable, and my mission is clear.

I cannot be bought, compromised, detoured, lured away, turned back, diluted, or delayed.

I will not flinch in the face of sacrifice, hesitate in the presence of adversity, negotiate at the table of the enemy, ponder at the pool of popularity, or meander in the maze of mediocrity.

I won't give up, shut up, or let up until I have stayed up, stored up, prayed up, paid up, and spoken up for the cause of Jesus Christ.

I am a disciple of His.

I must go until He comes, give until I drop, preach until all know, work until He stops me; and when He comes for His own He will have no problem recognizing me.

For my banner is clear.

So I ask you tonight, is your banner clear?

In a moment, we're going to pray. But before we do, I'd ask every person in this room, whether this is your first trimester here or whether you've been in ministry for forty years to take a moment and ask God if the path of ministry that you're travelling is the road to reaching His people? Will you continue to do ministry in comfortable and familiar ways regardless of their

lack of effectiveness? Have you let go of traditions and expectations that will hinder your ability to minister in a changing world? Is your commitment to serving God flexible enough to change with the world around you? Will you continue to preach the Gospel even when you have no pulpit from which to preach? Will you, like Ezekiel, rise to meet a different kind of challenge?

Let us pray. *Father, we thank you for your call on our lives. We are humbled by the fact that You choose us to help do Your work. We ask for Your continued guidance in finding ways to reach those that You have put in our lives. Give us the strength to be obedient to Your leading even when we don't know where You're taking us. Help us to remember that the ministry is Yours, the message is Yours, the people are Yours, the results are Yours, and above all, the glory is Yours and Yours alone. Go with us as we leave this place and help us to love one another as You have loved us. We ask this prayer in the Name of the One who called us by name, Jesus Christ, our LORD. Amen.*

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