

Excerpts From A Sermon  
**The Call Of The Prophet  
In Declining Times**  
Ezekiel 1-3



by **D.A. Carson**

“It was the best of times; it was the worst of times.” So reads the opening line of Charles Dickens’ famous novel *A Tale of Two Cities*. Doubtless that simple paradoxical summary could be displayed to describe many periods of history. Nazi Germany, for example, 1932-1939. It was the best of times. The corruption and the ineffectiveness of the Weimar Republic were done away with. Currency was stabilized. The shame of the Treaty of Versailles was being removed. Youth had a sense of direction again. The industries were flourishing. The economy was doing well . . . But freedoms were dying. The churches were being domesticated. The shadow of the Holocaust lay just over the horizon. In fact, just around the corner was World War Two and a mighty bloodbath. It was the worst of times.

It was true in Britain in 1740. It was the worst of times. At the height of the Industrial Revolution before the introduction of trade unions or any counter-balancing force, the rich were getting richer, and the poor were being crushed. Children were being sent into the mines at the age of five or six, putting in fourteen to sixteen-hour days. There were two hundred eighty crimes on the books for which you could be executed by hanging, including stealing a loaf of bread. In some parts of London every building was either a brothel or a pub. In fact, religion had sunk so low in the British Isles that on Easter Sunday, 1740, only six people showed up for communion at St. Paul’s Cathedral in London. It was the worst of times. And yet in 1734 God had raised up a young man by the name of Howell Harris in Wales. In 1738 George Whitefield began to preach to the coal miners in Bristol. In 1740 the Wesley brothers started, and over the next sixty years there came such a mass of social overturn out of the preaching of the gospel that Britain was not the same beast by the end of that cycle as it was at the beginning. It was the best of times. Out of this came the abolition of slavery. Out of this came new laws on child labor. Out of this came the beginning of trade unions that counter-balanced some of the power of capitol unleashed without discipline or accountability. Out of this came the beginning of prison reform. Out of this also came the beginnings of welfare hospital care and the like. It was the best of times.

Some would say the dictum applies to our own times. After all, the cold world is over and we won. We are actually dismantling nuclear bombs for the first time in history . . . In this country, although there are doubtless developments we may not like, there are things for which to be grateful. There is now a very high percentage of young people, eighteen and older, in tertiary education. The Gross Domestic Product has been pressing on a steady course for quite a long time. Despite the current jag in the stock market, the economy is basically sound. On the other hand, world-wide, many countries in the ten-forty window are desperately poor. Tribalism in Africa is fueling butchery veering toward genocide. The UN says there are one hundred million homeless and abandoned children on the world’s streets (that is, children under the age of twelve). The percentage of child prostitutes under thirteen, in the streets of Bogotá, has

quintupled since 1987. UNICEF says there are more than eight hundred thousand prostitutes in Thailand serving plane loads of sex tourists, many from Japan and Germany, and increasingly from the US. This, too, is our world . . . But is this is all that can be said? “Weigh up the good and the bad. It was the best of times; it was the worst of times.”

No. We can say something more, especially on the smaller scale of the nation, if we look for the things God values and where they are leading. When we quietly think through what God values as disclosed in Scripture and test Western nations in that light, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that we are living in declining times. There is an increasing loss of any sense of objective truth. More and more, truth is defined in terms of the individual or the sub community. It’s a social construct, nothing more. It is not an objective reality in the public market. The residual forms of confessional Christianity have pockets of wonderful strength, but a fair bit of evangelicalism has succumbed to a focus on methods and power and ecclesiastical politics, or conversely, a mere traditionalism that really does not know how to engage the contemporary culture. There has been a long term decline of the home, the foundational building block of society. There is a formidable ingrained interest in present well-being, and almost no thought given to eternal well-being. A postmodern epistemology is on the rise, whose many effects include the relativizing not only of all truth, but of all morality, and much more.

Against such a scale, the fact that the GDP continues to rise is of relatively minor consequence; a blessing, but a minor one. Perhaps even a deceptive one. You weigh the GDP against the mass of biblical illiteracy that is now characteristic in the land and, from God’s point of view, the gain is not great. The people who we might evangelize at universities nowadays have never heard of Moses. They do not know that the Bible has two testaments. We are living in declining times, and I doubt that there are many here who would doubt the point.

But we are not the first to find ourselves in this position. Almost six hundred years before Christ, Ezekiel lived in times that were remarkable for their declension on just about every front . . .

Now Ezekiel’s prophecy, we are told, begins in the thirtieth year. That is to say, probably the thirtieth year of his own life; at the very time when he should have been entering his richest priestly duties; when he should have been coming into the fullness of his priestly responsibilities. But, obviously, he never would, never could. There was no temple for him to serve at. We are also told that it was the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiakim; that is, 593 BC, when the exiles are in Babylon. Jerusalem had not yet rebelled finally. So there is a six year hiatus now between 593 BC, and the overthrow of temple in Jerusalem finally in 587 BC. If we don’t recall those facts, the rest of the book makes no sense at all. When many were clamoring that God would spare Judah for the temple’s sake, Ezekiel begins his ministry . . .

Now what is vital for us, in the opening chapters, is the nature of God’s call on Ezekiel’s life. For God does not call all prophets in exactly the same way. Samuel is called as a young lad; given to the Lord from before his conception, but called experientially by God as a young lad. Elisha is called to serve a kind of apprenticeship under Elijah.

Amos is called when he is a shepherd in the hill country of the south of Judah, and yet he is called to preach in the north in Israel. But in these peculiarly declining times this call is characterized by three striking elements . . . And, in a sense, they serve as a beacon to God’s people wherever they are called to utter a prophetic witness in declining times.

Three elements: First, it was a call to see God and be humbled (1:4—2:2). We begin in 1:4 with a dust storm. This may have been visionary, but alternatively we may be beginning with a proper dust storm which turns into something supernatural. In any case, Ezekiel soon sees something that is supra-normal rather than normal; something like glowing medal. Then in vv. 5-11 we have described for us four living creatures who turn out to support the platform of Yahweh’s throne. These four living creatures, we are told, have hands extending from their side. Now the purpose of these hands we are not told about until chaps. 8-11. They also have wings. These wings have various functions. Partly the wings stretch out so that each pair of wings from each living creature connects with the wingtips from the other living creature to form a sort of square. Each wingtip touching a wingtip of another creature and then, in addition, the two

other wings are used for flying. That is what we are told. So these creatures, then, constitute a kind of hollow square with the creature himself right in the middle of each side . . .

Then inside the square (vv. 12-14) the burning coals in the midst of the hollow square with flashing lightning and torches of fire, these all symbolize God's terrifying presence; just as there was thunder, and lightning, and fire at the giving of the Law, so also here. Nor do the creatures have independent movement (v. 12). The Spirit animates them, and that is the vital energy by which God acts upon them so that they move in concert . . .

In vv. 15-18, beside each creature, there is a strange wheel made of chrysolite, probably topaz . And these wheels we are told intersect. Not wheels within wheels, as if they are concentric circles, but intersecting wheels so that they cannot fall over; they are stable, they cannot wobble because the two wheels in each case intersect and thus interlock . . . These wheels, we are told, are covered with eyeballs, one of the standard symbols in apocalyptic to indicate God's omniscience . . .

Now all of that is prolegomenon to get to God. Then, we are told, there came a voice from above the expanse over their heads as they stood with lowered wings . . . Listen to it, "There was what looked like a throne. It wasn't a throne; it looked like a throne of sapphire. And high above on the throne was a figure like that of a man. I saw that, from what appeared to be his waist up, he looked like glowing metal as if full of fire, and that from there down he looked like fire and brilliant light surrounded him." So, on the one hand, it is brilliant light. And yet, v. 28, like the appearance of a rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day, so was the radiance around him. This is trying to say that although it was brilliant and blinding and glorious, yet it was fuzzy . . . And Ezekiel says, "This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord" as if to remove any possibilities of lingering anthropomorphism . . .

"When I saw it I fell face down and I heard the voice of one speaking. He said to me, 'Son of man, stand up on your feet and I will speak to you.' As He spoke the Spirit came into me and raised me to my feet, and I heard Him speaking to me."

So, you see, the first element in Ezekiel's call is a call to see God and be humbled. Now that is always important. God help us. We don't need preachers who have no vision of God before their eyes, for whom the whole business is merely an education exercise; skills nicely decked out from homiletics classes. In a declining culture this is non-negotiable. You see, in times of great revival everybody is talking about God. But in times when the whole culture is moving in other directions it is essential that those who proclaim the Word of God have their eyes so fastened on what God is like in all His transcendent glory that they are devoured by Him. And thus speak out of the fear of this living God.

Second, it is a call to speak God's words and be fearless (2:3-8). "Son of Man," God says, "I am sending you to the Israelites, to a rebellious nation that has rebelled against me." . . . He warns the prophet that they are obstinate and stubborn, and then He says several times in these three chapters, "Say to them, 'This is what the sovereign Lord says.'" Not, "This is what the sovereign Lord does." "This is what the sovereign Lord is like." "This is what the sovereign Lord thinks." "This is what the sovereign Lord feels." "This is how the sovereign Lord loves." Nope! Again and again and again, "This is what the sovereign Lord says," . . . for all that we know of what God thinks, all that we know of God's acts come down to us through what the sovereign Lord says. The danger, of course, is that some don't want to listen. But God says, you are to say this whether they listen or fail to listen (v. 5). "And I frankly acknowledge," God says, "that they are a rebellious house, but whether they listen or not they will at least know that a prophet has been among them. And for your part, Son of Man, don't be afraid of them. Do not be afraid of them or their words. Do not be afraid though briars and thorns are all around you, and you live among scorpions. Do not be afraid of what they say, or be terrified by them. Though they are a rebellious house, you must speak my words to them whether they listen or fail to listen." "You, Son of Man, listen to what I say, 'Do not rebel like that rebellious house.'"

How then will Ezekiel fail in his commission? Will he fail in his commission if he does not see a great turning to God? No, because God Himself acknowledges that this is a rebellious house and he does not promise a particular revival. Ezekiel will fail in his commission if he does not speak God's words. For then

he succumbs to the same rebellion that he is supposed to be prophesizing against. Note the emphasis on getting God's words right and not fudging: "Say to them this is what the sovereign Lord says" (v. 4). Again v. 6, "Do not be afraid of them or their words. Do not be afraid. Do not be afraid of what they say, or be terrified by them." For God knows that preachers themselves can be terrified by the audience. We don't like to get a lot of bad reviews . . . Are we not all tempted just to clip the corners a wee bit, and say things that can't possibly cause a necessary umbrage so that we can show that we are part of the good group?

Of course once again, it is always crucial in a fallen world to declare all of the counsel of God. But it is especially important in declining times for three reasons: First, it is important because in declining times it takes special courage.

In revival times it is a wonderful thing to go out and preach. When the culture is against you, however, it takes a certain amount of courage; hence, the warnings not to fear.

Secondly, it is especially important in declining times because it is also the means by which God does His work; whether it is the work of judgment or a work of revival and renewal. It is by the word of God. Al Mohler, the president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville Kentucky, is wont to say, "For the Christian, optimism is naïve but pessimism is atheistic." That is exactly right. Optimism is naïve because we believe in the fall. We do live in declining times. Let's not be innocent or silly about the evil around us. On the other hand, God's hand is not short in that He cannot save. Pessimism is, frankly, atheistic. It simply assumes that God can't or won't act. But God condemns by His Word. He judges by His Word. And He saves and transforms by that same Word . . .

But there is a third reason why it is especially important in a declining culture. In a culture where most of the people have inherited a Judeo-Christian worldview, a Judeo-Christian framework, then what we meant by preaching the gospel tended to be a sub-set of the biblical big picture. Up until twenty or thirty years ago, the vast majority of evangelism that was done in North America was along these lines: We simply assume that ninety to ninety eight percent of our hearers knew something about a Judeo-Christian framework. Even if we were talking to an out-and-out atheist, the atheist was not a generic atheist. The atheist was an atheist that disbelieved in the Judeo-Christian God. He wasn't a Buddhist atheist, he was a Christian atheist. And thus his categories were the categories of the inherited Judeo-Christian culture. That meant that even people who were out-and-out atheistic, not less those who were agnostics, still used the categories that we use. And in context, therefore, they knew that the God of the Judeo-Christian inheritance was a personal, transcendent being: differentiated from this whole created order; that He made this whole shebang in the first place, that history is going in a straight line toward an ultimate end, that there is a difference between right and wrong and truth and error, that God keeps the books and He is the final judge, that sin is finally sin against God, that there is a heaven to be gained and a hell to be shunned, and that God's justice is perfect and He makes no mistakes . . .

But now, suddenly, we are dealing with people for whom none of the original givens are any longer givens. And what do we do? Those who are still involved in evangelism know that there is only one thing to do. That is, to start farther back. There is more of the words of God to get across. It is as if you are now evangelizing a tribe in Papua New Guinea who have never heard the gospel before, because these people never have. They live in another worldview. It is as if you are proclaiming the gospel in northern India to Hindus who are wonderfully syncretistic, as many in our society are wonderfully syncretistic. You cannot hope to see any major transformation unless you paint the big picture. Paul understood this. That is why in Athens (Acts 17) he paints the big picture before he gets to Christ Jesus; quite different from his approach, for example, in a synagogue in Pisidian Antioch. What it means, then, to teach and to proclaim, to bear witness to all of the counsel of God, to teach all the words of God faithfully in declining culture becomes a much more embracing thing than in a time when many, many, many of your compatriots share your worldview and your vocabulary . . .

Finally, it is a call to empathize with God's perspective and be unyielding (2:9—3:15). In the end of 2:8 God commands Ezekiel to open his mouth and God will give him something to eat. It is a scroll, we are told, and it is written on both sides . . . It is a way of saying this is the fullness, the totality, of God's purposes in judgment and lament and mourning and woe. And the remarkable thing is that when Ezekiel

eats it (3:3), it tastes sweet as honey in his mouth. That is stunning! For you see, we can be so programmed by our culture that when we come to the passages in Scripture about judgment and doom and hell itself, then we often start openly by saying, "Oh these are very difficult things. I wish they weren't in the word of God. They're there, so I guess I have to proclaim them." Do you hear the weakness? That almost makes it sound as if you are somehow a little more compassionate than God. Somewhere along the line we must have preachers who so empathize with God's point of view that even words of lament and woe taste sweet.

Don't misunderstand, there is no hint of glee here, no cheap triumphalism, no harsh looking down your self-righteous nose; nothing like that. What is at stake here, and throughout the rest of this chapter, is this powerful insistence that Ezekiel must be a man with unswerving loyalty to God's perspective . . . In fact, God says in v. 8, "I will make you as unyielding and hardened as they are. I will make your forehead like the hardest stone, harder than flint." Do you hear what God is saying? He is envisioning a kind of head-butting contest. "And Ezekiel," He says, "you are not going to lose. I am going to make your forehead harder than anybody's." Now I realize, again, this can be played out to make preachers harsh and unsympathetic and unyielding bound up with their own ego and their own rightness in every issue. That is not quite the point. The point here is that you do not have reformers that are wimps. Eventually you need reformers who are so impassioned by the word of God that when they do engage in head-butting contests they win because of God's strength in them, such that their foreheads are harder than flint. They butt-up against the culture and they don't bend. They don't crack. They are strong. Or, to put it differently, this is a call to empathize with God's perspective and be unyielding . . .

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