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Theology of Preaching, Part 2

Ezekiel 33 at first glance may appear to be the same as any other discourse one might find in the prophets.

Ezekiel 33:23-24a, 25a, "Then the word of the Lord came to me saying, 'Son of man, they who live in these waste places in the land of Israel are saying...' Therefore, say to them, 'Thus says the Lord God...'"

If you've read this once in the prophets, you might think you've read it a thousand times, or have you? However, this passage is *UNIQUE*. Unlike any other prophetic discourse in the Bible, this comes on the heels of an announcement that God was going to open the mouth of

Ezekiel and allow him, for the first time, to preach.

In the Bible, the prophetic office involved two elements: Revelation and proclamation. The former is what typically comes to mind when we think of a prophet. The latter is akin to what we understand today to be preaching. It was this latter element of the prophetic ministry, the preaching of God's word which was initially barred from Ezekiel when he was called to the work of a prophet. Recall, this ban was placed on Ezekiel until he received news of the fall of Jerusalem.

Ezekiel 24:26-27a, "...on that day [that is, the fall of Jerusalem] he who escapes will come to you with information for *your* ears? On that day your mouth will be opened to him who escaped, and you will speak and be dumb no longer."

This withholding of the proclamation of God's word was an act of judgment! A generation that does NOT endure sound doctrine, who like swine tramples underfoot the pearl of God's word, does NOT deserve to have God's word preached to them. Accordingly, God at times will withhold His word from His people as an act of discipline.

Amos 8:11-12: "'Behold, days are coming,' declares the Lord God, 'When I will send a famine on the land, not a famine for bread or a thirst for water, but rather for hearing the words of the Lord. And people will stagger from sea to sea, and from the north even to the east; they will go to and fro to seek the word of the Lord, but they will not find *it*.'"

This is what God did in the first eight years of Ezekiel's ministry! During this time a prophet walked amongst God's people in exile, but he was NOT allowed to preach!

Ezekiel 33 announces the news of the fall of Jerusalem and so the lifting of the restriction that had been placed on Ezekiel.

Ezekiel 33:21-22: "Now it came about in the twelfth year of our exile, on the fifth of the tenth month [five months after the fall of Jerusalem], that the refugees from Jerusalem came to me, saying, 'The city has been taken.' Now the hand of the Lord had been upon me in the evening, before the refugees came. And He opened my mouth at the time *they* came to me in the morning; so my mouth was opened, and I was no longer speechless."

Now, with the opening of Ezekiel's mouth God instructed Ezekiel in vv. 23-33 as to how he was to go about the ministry of preaching. This is significant, as John Murray argued in his book *Christian Baptism*, if you want the definitive word on baptism you don't go to the three of so passages in the New Testament which references baptism. Rather, you go to where it was instituted (in this case, Matthew 28) and derive your theology. (Murray, 1992, pp. 1-2) Likewise, if you want to know about the calling that God placed on Ezekiel's life as a preacher, we must go to where that calling was initiated and instituted, which is Ezekiel 33.

Before us is a *UNIQUE* passage as it reflects NOT ONLY the call of Ezekiel to the pulpit ministry, BUT how he was to go about fulfilling that call. *Ezekiel, now that your mouth is open, this is what you are to say!* Accordingly, D. I. Block made this observation concerning our passage: “This unit contains the three elements of a classic prophetic proof oracle: the motivation (...vv. 24–26), the pronouncement of judgment (...vv. 27–28), and the recognition formula (...v. 29).” (Block, 1998, p. 258) If therefore the content of Ezekiel’s sermon here followed the structure of the rest of the prophets when they preached, we conclude that this instruction was that which was universal to all prophets when they received their call!

Thus Ezekiel 33 gives us a theology of preaching. It is a significant treatment on the part of God as to what constitutes a faithful pulpit, or more specifically, how Ezekiel was to carry out the call of a preacher now that his mouth was open. By way of note, this is NOT the last time God would give such a treatment. In a couple few years, God’s people would be privileged to read of the example of Ezra and how he went about his work as a preacher.,

Ezra 7:10, “For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the Lord, and to practice *it*, and to teach *His* statutes and ordinances in Israel.”

The classic New Testament passage on preaching is Paul’s instructions to Timothy, “Until I come, give attention to the *public reading of Scripture*, to exhortation and teaching” (1 Timothy 4:13). While rich indeed and inspirational, both of these passages fall short of the thorough treatment God gave Ezekiel as to how he must handle the pulpit. Through His example, we derive what we ought to look for when it comes to the Pulpit!¹

This brings us to a second characteristic of a faithful pulpit, and that is its power.

Ezekiel 33:30, “But as for you, son of man, your fellow citizens who talk about you by the walls and in the doorways of the houses, speak to one another, each to his brother, saying, ‘Come now, and hear what the message is which comes forth from the Lord.’” The pulpit at this time and place had a *HEAVY* presence amongst God’s exiled people. When Ezekiel entered the holy desk, people flocked to hear him! I can’t help but wonder if any responded the same way as those did centuries later when Christ began preaching.

Matthew 7:28, “The result was that when Jesus had finished these words, the multitudes were amazed at His teaching.”

Church history has witnessed some pretty gifted preachers, men who seem to have a double portion of the gift. Spurgeon was one such a man. He started preaching at the age of 19 and before long, thousands were flocking to hear him. The Metropolitan Tabernacle truly was the first mega-church in history. So powerful was Spurgeon’s preaching, so richly did the Spirit of God rest on him, that when he went to test the acoustics of the newly built Tabernacle, he proclaimed with a loud voice John 1:29b, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” and a janitor sweeping the floor on the second level fell on his knees and professed

Christ as his Lord.

Based on Ezekiel 33 I would imagine that that was Ezekiel! So strong was the gift in him that he was all the talk in the Jewish community in Babylon which now numbered in the tens of thousands. As such, as word circulated about him, the crowd grew exponentially.

Ezekiel 33:30, "...your fellow citizens who talk about you by the walls and in the doorways of the houses, speak to one another, each to his brother, saying, 'Come now, and hear what the message is which comes forth from the Lord.'"

Of this verse D. I. Block wrote this:

The whole community of exiles is talking about Ezekiel. The reference to the walls and the doorways has a merismic function [that is, they are clichés], suggesting that wherever people find shade from the scorching Mesopotamian sun, and whenever they have time for a quick chat, Ezekiel's name surfaces as the subject of discussion. (Block, 1998, pp. 265-266)

What made Ezekiel so powerful? To answer this, consider the origin of preaching.² When God's people were at the base of Mount Sinai we read:

Exodus 20:18-22a, "And all the people perceived the thunder and the lightning flashes and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw *it*, they trembled and stood at a distance. Then they said to Moses, 'Speak to us yourself and we will listen; but let not God speak to us, lest we die.' And Moses said to the people, 'Do not be afraid; for God has come in order to test you, and in order that the fear of Him may remain with you, so that you may not sin.' So the people stood at a distance, while Moses approached the thick cloud where God *was*. Then the Lord said to Moses..."

This is the *terminus a quo* of preaching; this is where it all began! During the Exodus from Egypt, God's people were brought to Mount Sinai to fellowship with God. Yet when God spoke, the mountain literally quaked on account of the weight of the glory of God's presence. There was lightening, thunder, smoke, and what sounded like the blast of trumpets! Accordingly, Israel was terribly frightened! And so quaking in their sandals, God's people made this request of Moses, "Speak to us yourself and we will listen; but let not God speak to us, lest we die."

Now God in His condescending grace was pleased to accept this request such that, and this is key, the lightening, thunder, smoke, trumpet blast, and quaking mountain were replaced by the voice of a solitary man proclaiming the word of God!

Do you understand the significance of this? Behind a faithful pulpit, which we'll define here in a bit, is the glory, splendor, and power of an almighty God! Do you understand this? Behind a

faithful pulpit are these things:

- Isaiah 6 and a transcendent Being before whom sinless angels sit in reverence and awe on account of the holiness of God!
- Ezekiel 1 and a Being who goes beyond a mortal's ability to comprehend "...the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord" (Ezekiel 1:28c).
- Revelation 1:17 and a Being so awesome that mortal man falls down before Him as though dead!

And so, this is where preaching began, in Exodus 20! Yet it most certainly isn't where it ended. Throughout redemptive history this calling, the proclamation of the word of God was placed on prophet and priest alike. Yet historically, the pulpit ministry came into its own following the exile.

Nehemiah was cupbearer to the Persian king, Artaxerxes I (465–424 BC). Upon hearing news of the desolate state of Jerusalem (it was open, vulnerable, and laid bare, 1:3), Nehemiah was noticeably shaken. Artaxerxes saw this and granted him permission to return to Jerusalem conferring upon him the title of governor. Upon Nehemiah's arrival in Jerusalem, God's people set about rebuilding the walls of the city in the midst of heavy opposition. Amazingly, the work was completed in no less than 52 days! At this time, a worship service was called and God's people gathered to renew their Covenant relationship with the Lord. The text before us is the description of this service:

Nehemiah 8:1-8, "And all the people gathered as one man at the square which was in front of the Water Gate, and they asked Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses which the Lord had given to Israel. Then Ezra the priest brought the law before the assembly of men, women, and all who *could* listen with understanding, on the first day of the seventh month. And he read from it [that is, he preached from it... as well see in a moment from v. 8...] before the square which was in front of the Water Gate from early morning until midday [we are talking here about a six hour sermon], in the presence of men and women, those who could understand; and all the people were attentive to the book of the law. And Ezra the scribe stood at a wooden podium which they had made for the purpose [that is, a pulpit]. And beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiyah, and Maaseiah on his right hand; and Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah, *and* Meshullam on his left hand. And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up. Then Ezra blessed the Lord the great God. And all the people answered, 'Amen, Amen!' while lifting up their hands; then they bowed low and worshiped the Lord with *their* faces to the ground. [Yet, this would not be the only sermon preached that day, consider...] Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, and the Levites, explained the law to the people while the people *remained* in their place. And they read from the book, from the law of God, translating to give the sense so that they understood the reading."

This began what we now know as Ezra and the Men of the Great Synagogue! This is where preaching came into its own. See, the people of God did NOT cease serving the Lord and worshipping Him in exile. Yet as the temple was destroyed, they no longer could assemble in light of a sacrificial system. So what did they do? They gathered together- they συναγωγή (*sunagōgē*)/“synagogaed.” And then for their liturgy they took the order of the worship of the Temple, and everywhere there was a sacrifice they inserted a Scripture reading, a prayer, and, at the end of the service, a sermon! Accordingly, during this era, during the intertestamental period, preaching became a significant part of the worship of God amongst His people.

And yet the beginning of all of this in exile was the text before us. The first preacher God’s people sat beneath in exile was Ezekiel! In this regard, what is the call of a preacher? What is the task of a pulpit?

This brings us to the call of the preacher.

Jeremiah 23:28, “The prophet who has a dream may relate *his* dream, but let him who has My word speak My word in truth. What does straw have *in common* with grain? declares the Lord.”

This passage is very simple, the task of a preacher is to do nothing more and nothing less than to proclaim the Word of God!! It is NOT to do any of the following:

- Preach a message that supposedly has been lain on their heart from God.
- Inspire, encourage, or even build up God’s people (if that happens that’s wonderful; yet this is NOT the objective of a faithful pulpit).
- Entertain goats.

The call of a faithful pulpit is to “speak God’s word in truth”! Accordingly, the bottom line when listening to a sermon is NOT were you inspired or entertained BUT was the text of Scripture faithfully/accurately proclaimed. In this context we can with certainty assess that which makes for a powerful pulpit. It is NOT determined by the people’s response, how it moved us, BUT by the faithfulness of the preacher in explaining/proclaiming God’s word!

There is no debate that Christ in His first advent was the most powerful preacher this world has ever seen. Yet what did He have to show after three years of preaching night and day? Twelve men... all of whom abandoned Him and one of which was a devil! Powerful preaching is NOT determined by the response, BUT the content of the message preached. If it pleases the Lord, the response may be that “... the lame walk and the blind see.” Yet it may be God’s pleasure to close the ears of all present such that the corporate response is a collective yawn! Yet that is up to the Lord. The call of the preacher is to “speak God’s word in truth”!

And thus we say that a powerful pulpit is when the word of God is faithfully proclaimed! And that only makes sense considering what we have in the word of God! God told Jeremiah after

instructing him simply to preach God's word- no more or less (Jeremiah 23:28).

Jeremiah 23:29, "'Is not My word like fire?' declares the Lord, 'and like a hammer which shatters a rock?'"

Do you understand the power of a faithful pulpit?

- God's word "...is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword" (Hebrews 4:12a)!
- It "...pierc[es] as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow" (Hebrews 4:12b)!
- It is "...able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Hebrews 4:12c)!
- A powerful pulpit, a faithful pulpit, is one where the word of God is faithfully proclaimed!

Speaking of the word of God, Paul said this:

1 Corinthians 2:4-5, "And my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom [which constitutes the false pulpit of the last days], but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power [this is a metaphor for God's word- NOT theatrics], that your faith should not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God."

Do you understand that when the word of God is the sole content of a pulpit, the power of God is unleashed? Now again this doesn't mean lives will necessarily be changed. It does mean that God's will for that people that day will be accomplished! Listen to Isaiah.

Isaiah 55:10-11, "For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there without watering the earth, and making it bear and sprout, and furnishing seed to the sower and bread to the eater; so shall My word be which goes forth from My mouth; it shall not return to Me empty, without accomplishing what I desire, and without succeeding *in the matter* for which I sent it."

In contrast, when the pulpit becomes a bully pulpit, a place where a man speaks according to his own perspective and will on the issues of the day, no matter how moved you might be as a result, God has been dishonored! Yet that is what God's people will want in the last days.

2 Timothy 4:3-4, "For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but *wanting* to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires; and will turn away their ears from the truth [God's word], and will turn aside to myths."

Do you remember the desire of God's people when it came to the pulpit just prior to the exile? Jeremiah lamented:

Jeremiah 5:31a, “The prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests rule on their *own* authority; and My people love it so!...”

Christian! The voices of the sirens can be heard everywhere today saying that faithful preaching, a powerful pulpit, is the preaching of a charismatic speaker that moves the individual deeply. Resist this temptation and so demand nothing less from this and every pulpit than the clear teaching of the word of God! That brings us to the text before us and the power that accompanied Ezekiel’s pulpit, and the preaching ministry of Ezekiel.

Ezekiel 33:23a, 25a, 27a, “23 Then the word of the Lord came to me saying... 25 Therefore, say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord God...’ 27 Thus you shall say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord God...’”

Ezekiel 33:30, “But as for you, son of man, your fellow citizens who talk about you by the walls and in the doorways of the houses, speak to one another, each to his brother, saying, ‘Come now, and hear what the message is which comes forth from the Lord.’”

We know from vv. 31-32 that God’s people flocked to hear Ezekiel just as people in our day might flock to a circus in order to attend a freak show. Ezekiel was the latest fad of entertainment at this time amongst God’s people. Yet all this notwithstanding, Ezekiel’s contemporaries recognized that this man was not preaching “persuasive words of wisdom” BUT the word of Almighty God. Look at the end of v. 30 again:

Ezekiel 33:30, “Come now, and hear what the message is which comes forth from the Lord.”

This is the power of any faithful pulpit. Again, it is NOT:

- The delivery.
- The theatrics.
- Whether or not those listening were moved... brought to tears.

Such preaching can be found in so many places today, amongst saved and unsaved preachers alike. It is that which bewitched an entire nation to follow a mad-man named Hitler in the twentieth century. It is that which will continue to grow in frequency and popularity as we near the coming of the Lord (cf. 2 Timothy 4:3-4). Yet among the remnant and those gatherings where God is truly worshipped will be a leadership and a church that demands nothing more or less from the man called to preach... than that he “speak God’s word in truth”!³

Accordingly, may we guard our hearts at this point. May we purpose to set this as our expectation when it comes to any church we attend. Recall those great words of Pastor Floyd Doud Shafer:

Tell him you can read the morning paper and digest the television commentaries and think through the day's superficial problems and manage the community's weary drives and bless the sorted baked potatoes and green beans ad infinitum better than he can. Command him not to come back [to the pulpit] until he's read and reread, written and rewritten, until he can stand up, warn and forlorn, and say, 'Thus says the Lord.'

May we raise up the next generation such that this would be their appetite: the clear proclamation of the word of God! May this be that for which we prayer for this and every pulpit in America! It is this that God gave His people when Ezekiel's mouth was opened. And it is that which God will remove from His people if they acquire another taste.

Works Cited

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Note(s)

¹ Now as we saw last time, the placement of this treatment in the immediate context is significant. Sandwiched between the call for God's people to be a watchman (Ezekiel 33:1-20) and so their responsibility to shepherd one another faithfully (Ezekiel 34) is this treatment on how Ezekiel was to go about the work of the pulpit. The implication must not be lost on us: the primary way God's people are cared for as they live in the wilderness is a faithful pulpit- which is what we saw last time!

² This is NOT to imply that prior to Moses there were no prophets. Clearly Abraham (cf. Gen. 20:7) and Miriam (Exodus 15:20) served in the capacity of prophet(ess). It is to say that during Moses' day, the prophetic office came into its own.

³ Such has always been the minimal standard when it comes to a faithful pulpit. T. David Gordon wrote the following as it relates to the priority of preaching the word of God from the pulpit, "For those who remain unconvinced, I call attention to Robert Lewis Dabney's *Lectures on Sacred Rhetoric*. This became a standard text on homiletics in the late nineteenth century, and it was well reviewed not only by Presbyterian journals, but by Episcopal, Methodist, and Baptist sources as well. There was nothing idiosyncratic in it (though there were several idiosyncrasies in Dabney's other writings), and while his thorough study of ancient rhetoric is off-putting to contemporary readers, no one would take exception to the two chapters in which he enumerates "The Seven Cardinal Requisites of Preaching." These seven requisites (not excellences, but requisites) are seven minimal requirements that Dabney believed (and his reviewers agreed) were essential to every sermon. None of these seven categories is subjective; each is perfectly susceptible of objective evaluation... 1. Textual Fidelity... For Dabney, a minister is an ambassador, who represents another, declaring the will of that Other. Therefore, he is not entitled to preach his own insights, his own opinions, or even his own settled convictions; he is entitled only to declare the mind of God revealed in Holy Scripture. Since the mind of God is disclosed in Scripture, the sermon must be entirely faithful to the text-a genuine exposition of the particular thought of the particular text." (*Why Johnny Can't Preach*, pp. 23, 24)