

Hearing Him Who Speaks From Heaven

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[0 : 00] But we are going to turn now to our Bibles and to the prophet Ezekiel, and we read chapter 1 last week. We're going to read together Ezekiel chapter 2 through to the first half of chapter 3, which is the next section of the prophet.

And after all that extraordinary vision of the Lord that Ezekiel saw in chapter 1, chapter 1 ended there with not just seeing but hearing.

When I saw it, I fell on my face and I heard the voice of one speaking. And he said to me, Son of man, stand on your feet and I will speak with you.

And as he spoke to me, the spirit entered into me and set me on my feet. And I heard him speaking to me. And he said to me, Son of man, I send you to the people of Israel, to nations of rebels who have rebelled against me.

They and their fathers have transgressed against me to this very day. The descendants also are impudent and stubborn. I send you to them and you shall say to them, thus says the Lord God.

[1 : 17] And whether they hear or refuse to hear, for they are a rebellious house, they will know that a prophet has been among them. And you, son of man, be not afraid of them, nor be afraid of their words.

The briars and thorns are with you and you sit upon scorpions. Be not afraid of their words, nor be dismayed at their looks, for they are a rebellious house. You shall speak my words to them, whether they hear or refuse to hear, for they are a rebellious house.

But you, son of man, hear what I say to you. Be not rebellious like that rebellious house. Open your mouth and eat what I give you. And when I looked, behold, a hand was stretched out to me.

And behold, a scroll of a book was in it. And he spread it before me. And it had writing on the front and on the back. And there were written on it words of lamentation and mourning and woe.

And he said to me, son of man, eat whatever you find here. Eat this scroll and go speak to the house of Israel. So I opened my mouth and he gave me this scroll to eat.

[2 : 37] And he said to me, son of man, feed your belly with this scroll that I give you and fill your stomach with it. And then I ate it. And it was in my mouth as sweet as honey.

And he said to me, son of man, go to the house of Israel and speak with my words to them. For you are not sent to a people of foreign speech and hard language, but to the house of Israel.

Not to many peoples of foreign speech and a hard language whose words you can't understand.

Surely if I sent you to such, they would listen to you. But the house of Israel will not be willing to listen to you.

For they are not willing to listen to me. Because all the house of Israel have a hard forehead and a stubborn heart. Behold, I have made your face as hard as their faces and your forehead as hard as their foreheads.

Like emery harder than flint have I made your forehead. Fear them not, nor be dismayed at their looks. For they are a rebellious house.

[3 : 48] Moreover, he said to me, son of man, all my words that I shall speak to you receive in your heart and hear with your ears. And go to the exiles, to your people, and speak to them, and say to them, thus says the Lord God.

Whether they hear or refuse to hear. And then the spirit lifted me up. And I heard behind me the voice of a great earthquake.

Blessed be the glory of the Lord from its place. It was the sound of the wings of the living creatures as they touch one another. And the sound of the wheels beside them.

And the sound of a great earthquake. The spirit lifted me up and took me away. And I went in bitterness. In the heat of my spirit.

The hand of the Lord being strong upon me. And I came to the exiles at Tel Aviv. Who were dwelling by the Chebar Canal. And I sat where they were dwelling.

[4 : 54] And I sat there. And overwhelmed among them. Seven days. Amen. And may God bless to us his word.

God our Father, as we come near to you.

We pray that you will most graciously come near to us. That you will open your word to our hearts and minds. And open our minds and hearts to your word.

In Jesus' name. Amen. I imagine that many people listening will have been to Rome.

And probably when you were there, you visited the Vatican. And if you did, almost certainly, you'd go to that very remarkable building, the Vatican Library.

[6 : 08] Room after room. Room after room. Corridor after corridor. Filled with the most glorious and wonderful artifacts. There's just one problem. None of them are catalogued.

You've no idea what period the artifacts come from or who are responsible for them. And that, of course, is why you need a guide. And we had a very witty and funny and amusing guide.

Whether he was telling us the truth or not is neither here nor there. He was at least a guide. Now, many people, many commentators, talk about books like Ezekiel and Revelation as if they were like the Vatican Library.

In other words, a series of glorious pictures, glorious visions, and no idea how to understand them. But that's simply not true. At the very end of chapter 1, when I saw it, I fell on my face and I heard the voice of one speaking.

Last week, we looked at the vision, seeing him who is invisible. And this week, our title also comes from Hebrews, hearing him who speaks from heaven.

[7 : 18] God does not allow Ezekiel to have to work out what the vision means. He's going to expound it to him. Now, in a sense, of course, that's the rest of the book.

But we, of course, are only going to confine ourselves to these early verses. Not only is God sovereign, in other words, he speaks. And that is one of the main differences between the God of the Bible and the idols.

Idols do not speak. Remember that wonderful incident in 1 Kings 18, where Elijah confronts the prophets of Baal. They have an all-day prayer meeting, increasing fervency and fanaticism as it goes on.

But they have nothing to say. All they say for hour after hour is, O Baal, hear us. They had nothing to say to their God because he had nothing to say to them.

And that's why if we're going to say anything about or to God, he has first to speak to us. Indeed, if God didn't speak to us, we would have nothing whatever to say to him.

[8 : 24] So God is speaking. And the songs, the hymns that have been sung all emphasize that. And there's going to be another one shortly.

So God is speaking. And he's speaking in such a way that his message will be understood, not just by the prophet, but by all who hear him.

The other word of introduction I want to make is in chapter 2, verse 1. He said to me, Son of man, stand on your feet. Now, it's very unusual. Usually when God speaks to people, he calls them by name.

But throughout this book, the phrase Son of man is used. Now, that can simply mean human being. And in one sense, that's obvious because Ezekiel, as a mere human being, cannot speak for God. And of course, it's rather like the Narnia stories, sons of Adam and daughters of Eve. But also, of course, in Daniel chapter 7, the Son of man, the Lord Jesus Christ, comes in the clouds of heaven.

[9 : 30] And he uses that term for himself regularly. The Son of man will be delivered up, be ill-treated and crucified. And the third day, he will rise again. And I think we've got to put these two ideas together.

Ezekiel is a mortal man. But he is pointing to the true Son of man. The one who is the true Word of God. When what Jesus is uniquely and eternally, all his followers must be partially.

And we'll come back to that. So, three things then. First of all, chapter 2, 1 to 7. Word and Spirit are inseparable. He said to me, Son of man, stand on your feet and I will speak with you.

As he spoke to me, the Spirit entered into me and set me on my feet. And I heard him speaking to me. A human being can only speak for God if the Holy Spirit enables.

And you notice a wonderful blend there. Stand on your feet and the Spirit entered into me and set me on my feet. See, it's not that Ezekiel does something and then the Spirit does something. [10:43] It's that the whole action of God allowing Ezekiel to stand is a mark of the Spirit. And he is going to be sent. Son of man, I send you.

Verse 3. That's what Paul says in Romans, isn't it? How shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach unless they be sent?

And he had, of course, to be convinced that God was speaking because he was speaking to nations of rebels. Son of man, I send you to the people of Israel, to nations of rebels who have rebelled against me.

They and their fathers have transgressed against me. Their descendants are also impudent and stubborn. This was a long-lasting rebellion. Moses had predicted this long before in Deuteronomy, that he would hardly be gone when disobedience would become a mark of the people.

And so today we need to be confident in the Word of God because it's not easy to speak the Word of God. People don't always listen. I heard him speaking, verse 2.

[11:52] Now, it's perfectly possible to read the Word of God. It's perfectly possible to hear the Word of God. It's even perfectly possible to speak about the Word of God.

But unless the Spirit is there, that's all it is. Many people who taught me theology knew their Bibles, knew their ancient languages in the ancient world very well indeed.

But they were not speaking the words of God because they didn't believe this was the Word of God. They believed this was simply insights from people throughout the centuries.

And do not be afraid, he says. Do not be afraid of their words, verse 6. Notice, you have to speak words. They'll speak words as well, but don't be afraid of their words.

Yesterday, there are many voices in the world. And in the book of Proverbs, wisdom and folly both call for a hearing in the same place, at the heights and in the streets and in the gate.

[12:55] And indeed, they often sound alike. They invite us to their parties. They set out a way of life. And we need the Spirit to discern who is telling the truth.

And that needs courage, verse 6. He needs courage.

Very like what the Lord said to Jeremiah. Don't be afraid of them. Because so often, God does not remove the fight. He stands with the fighter. And that's what he's doing here.

The Spirit of God and the Word of God are inseparable. We cannot honor the Spirit of God if we treat lightly the Word of God.

In the second point, chapter 2, verse 8, to chapter 3, verse 3. And I suggested this earlier on. The Word must become flesh.

[13:57] I think that's why Ezekiel is described as son of man here. You, once again, son of man, hear what I say to you. But as for you, listen to the voice and trust in the Spirit.

The prophet needs to hear the very heart of Israel's faith, the words of Moses. Hear, O Israel. The word, yet the Lord is one Lord.

And then again, at the end of the Bible, the book of Revelation, He who has a near, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

Listening is not easy. Listening often, we can often say we listen when we're simply present when the words were spoken. But hear and listening in Scripture is an active thing.

And we must learn to listen. At this point, we're going to break for a moment or two. And the music group are going to play God in His wisdom for our learning, gave His inspired and holy word.

[15:02] music Thank you.

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[17:52] Thank you.

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[28 : 26] Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. going to use the gifts he already gave you and develop them for his glory. So the word will receive this response. And notice verse 10, all my words, moreover he said to me, son of man, all my words as I speak to receive in your heart and hear with your ears. Notice once again the whole personality, receive in your heart. Now the heart in the Bible is a bigger thing than our English word. Of course it does mean feelings, it does mean emotions, it does mean all these elements of our personality. But really the heart in biblical terms is your whole self, if you like.

Praise the Lord with all your heart, emotion, spirit, intellect, and will. Once again the word becoming flesh. And hear with your ears intelligent and attentive listening.

I often used to say at Cornhill that 90% of good preaching is good understanding of the Bible. So that we can then bring, bring out the manifold riches and treasures of God's word.

God's word. They're rejecting me, says the Lord. Try not to take it personally. It's very difficult not to take it personally. All the words. But then there is reassurance. First of all, verse 11, speak to them and say, thus says the Lord God, whether they hear or refuse to hear. In other words, your responsibility is for delivering the message, not for how it's received. And that surely is the whole emphasis of the parable that we call the parable of the sower. There is nothing wrong with the seed, but what determines the response is the ground on which it falls. But just at that moment comes this glorious reassurance of verses 12 to 15. Once again, the vision that he had seen in chapter one, I heard behind me the voice of a great earthquake, blessed be the glory of the Lord from its place. It's interesting, actually, how frequently the biblical writers burst out on a whole doxology. Blessed be the glory of God from this place. Rather like that passage in 2 Corinthians, where Paul says, I knew a man in Christ who was caught up to the third heaven. Almost certainly speaking of himself, but wanting to emphasize what he had seen and what he had heard rather than himself.

And of course, if you know that letter, you'll know that that vision is accompanied by all kinds of hardships where Paul, in an autobiographical passage, talks about the hardships he had suffered.

[31 : 33] And so it is here. Ezekiel has this glorious vision, but there's a harsh reality. Verse 50, I came to the exiles at Tel Aviv. That, of course, is the same words as the word for Israel's capital, and who were dwelling by the Chebor Canal, and I sat where they were dwelling. And I sat there, overwhelmed among them, seven days. Now, in our experience of the Christian life, there are heights and there are depths. It's not just true of ministry. It's true of the whole of Christian life. And we need to hold these realities together. We need to see him who is invisible occasionally. The glory will almost break out into our lives, just as it does here. But that doesn't mean, then, that everything is wonderful. I think one of the problems when we are particularly young is we think one overwhelming experience of the Lord will solve all our problems. Now, of course, it's great to have these experiences, and I'm the last person to deny that they come when the Spirit makes himself real, when heaven seems a reality, and when nothing seems too harsh. But we know as well that we have to come down from the mountain and sit it overwhelmed. Seven days, once again, maybe not literally seven days, but for a complete period. The vision and the voice together.

And we need both. We need the vision. That's almost the definition of a prophet who stands in the heavenly court and sees the Lord. Isaiah sees the Lord in the court of heaven. And Elijah, at the beginning of his ministry, says, Yahweh, the God of Israel, before whom I stand. And the standing there is standing in the court. We also need to hear the voice, because both for Isaiah, for Elijah, for Ezekiel, and for others. The glowing vision was replaced by a very harsh reality.

So, for us, seeing him who is invisible, and hearing him who speaks from heaven, God has graciously given us these both for the days ahead. And it's a little surprising that Ezekiel says, blessed be the glory of the Lord from its place. Because Bible study theology must always lead to praise, must always lead to doxology. Amen. Let's pray.

Father, in this difficult and trying and perplexing world, we thank you that you throw aside the veil from time to time and show us glimpses of the world to come.
Amen. As we sometimes sing when the road is rough, so our fear long, seals on our ear, the distant triumph song. And we pray, Lord, that in the tough days that follow, that we will be true to you, and that one day, in all doubts and fears and sorrows past, we will see the vision clearly and hear the voice in all its fullness through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.