

Proper 9B: God's Word is medicine that brings life

1. For these couple of weeks we're going to be focusing on our OT lessons and what we can learn from Israel's history
  - a. Because like it or not, no matter how far we've advanced scientifically we are still the same people underneath.
    - i. The same desires, the same inclinations that drive us drove them
    - ii. Last week we heard from Jeremiah in the book of Lamentations as the southern kingdom, and more specifically Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians
    - iii. The city was destroyed, its people killed or taken in exile, and the temple levelled its treasures taken.
  - b. Yet in the midst of that devastation Jeremiah held out hope not because he was thought things would just naturally turn around but because he relied on the nature of God as he wrote, "**The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.**" (Lam 3:22-23)
    - i. God had revealed Himself as faithful to this faithless people time and again throughout their history as He promised
    - ii. Jeremiah was relying on God's unchanging nature that though the exile was bitter medicine, it was medicine none the less and God would use it for Israel's benefit
2. The Babylonian exile lasted 70 years and was a pretty grim period in Israel's history
  - a. The Babylonians captured Israelites in several different campaigns, it didn't happen all at once. It culminated in 586 with the fall of Jerusalem
    - i. Ezekiel, a member of one of the priestly families, had been taken in an early exile
    - ii. In today's reading he's sitting at the banks of the Chebar river in Babylon and he is commissioned by God to be a prophet
    - iii. Ezekiel's ministry spanned several decades and the book, especially the first half, is a message of judgment - Israel's predicament was its own fault, it had forsaken God who had redeemed them from Egypt.
    - iv. But the second half of the book Ezekiel comforts the broken-hearted with the message of God's steadfast love and mercy – the same steadfast love and mercy that Jeremiah wrote about last week.
  - b. Would the people like that message? No, does anyone like bad news especially when the message is, "You brought this on yourself."
    - i. But like so often happens in our own lives they had ignored the warning signs that God had repeatedly sent their way for hundreds of years
    - ii. The prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah and others had proclaimed a message of repentance to the children of Israel but they were hated for it
    - iii. As the Lord says to Ezekiel today, "**the children are impudent and stubborn (that is stiff necked and hard of heart), and so I am sending you to them, and you must say to them, 'Thus says the Lord Yahweh!'**"

- c. But unlike worldly success that looks at outcomes as the litmus test for success, Ezekiel's success would be measured by his faithfulness to the message
    - i. The Lord says, **"I send you to them, and you shall say to them, 'Thus says the Lord GOD.' And whether they hear or refuse to hear (for they are a rebellious house) they will know that a prophet has been among them."**
    - ii. That is, "Don't change the message Ezekiel, preach what I give you whether they love you or hate you preach the Word with integrity."
    - iii. The message would be hard, the message of repentance always is, but the bitter medicine of the truth was necessary to bring life.
  - d. It's hard to be the bearer of bad news in bad times especially if those suffering have to be made to see that their actions contributed to their predicament
    - i. "My job is failing, I'm about to be fired..." Maybe it was all those phony sick days, missed deadlines, and overall irresponsibility
    - ii. "My marriage is failing I'm about to be divorced..." Maybe it was all the time you spent around friends, the affairs and constant fighting
    - iii. "Our country's in debt and economically depressed..." Maybe it's all the untenable promises we made without a thought of how to pay for them
    - iv. In short, maybe your actions are directly responsible for the mess you're in but you don't see that and if someone doesn't tell you you'll keep doing it
3. But while we often claim that we can handle the unvarnished truth in worldly matters (doctors, police officers, judges often bear bad news) religion gets a pass
- a. In that respect we're not all that different from Israel who didn't want to hear Ezekiel's message
    - i. We're naturally, sinfully more inclined to believe that "Religion is supposed to make you feel good isn't it – about yourself, your life, etc?"
    - ii. We think it's supposed to be an affirming word not tough
    - iii. But just because the message may hurt, it may be bitter medicine, doesn't mean we should avoid it – sometimes we have to accept responsibility in order to change.
  - b. Ezekiel's message wasn't only about God's judgment against a stiff-necked people, it was also a message of hope.
    - i. Israel's predicament was their fault but God would be faithful to His people and restore them.
    - ii. God says later to Ezekiel, **"For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Lord GOD; so turn, and live...As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them..."**
    - iii. Israel's deliverance from Babylon that Ezekiel spoke about was only a preview of God's ultimate deliverance of the whole world from sin in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ.

- iv. He is the One who has taken our sin, the world's sin, upon Himself and nailed it to the cross some 2000 years ago, so that we would be forgiven and adopted as God's children through faith.
- c. And that is the same message of hope that we bring today
  - i. God remains faithful to His promise despite our sin that this is ultimately Good News
  - ii. As Paul tells us in his letter to Timothy, "**When if we are faithless, he remains faithful— for he cannot deny himself.**" (2Ti 2:13)
  - iii. We, like Israel, have often wandered far from our heavenly Father, sought our ways rather than His ways.
  - iv. But just as the Lord revealed His steadfast love in sending messengers like Ezekiel, Jeremiah, and the other prophets whose words were often bitter medicine that bitter medicine brought with it the promise of life.
- d. When that unvarnished truth of God's Word reveals areas in our lives that we have kept for ourselves and not given over to God it can be bitter medicine for us to swallow too.
  - i. But that bitter medicine brings life, it is the sign of God's steadfast love and mercy calling us to repentance and back to Him.
  - ii. Are there things that you have kept for yourself, areas of pet sin or frequent temptation that you know are incompatible with what God has revealed as His will for our lives?
  - iii. If so, know that Christ has taken that to the cross for you, it may be a bitter word to hear but it is forgiven in Christ as our Lord promises, "**For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us.**" (Psa 103:11-12)
  - iv. As Ezekiel was commissioned to call God's people back because of His un failing love that's what you hear today, return to the Lord your God for His Word is the medicine that brings life.