

Explore the Bible: Commissioned

November 12, 2021

- *The Explore the Bible lesson for Dec. 5 focuses on Ezekiel 3:8-21.*

The great missionary Hudson Taylor once stated, “The Great Commission is not an option to be considered; it is a command to be obeyed.” As believers we are called, or commissioned, to engage our culture with the message of God’s offer of salvation through Jesus Christ and to train people in what it means to follow Jesus.

But the task can be daunting. We live in a fallen world, with a population largely either ambivalent or opposed to the call. Even among churchgoers, the Great Commission is somewhat of a tertiary idea.

A survey of church goers done by the Barna organization a few years ago showed only 17 percent of those polled could correctly identify the Great Commission and its meaning (Barna Group, 2018). Regaining a perspective of our role and task is of vital importance if we are going to be the people God has called us to be.

The prophet Ezekiel lived in times very similar to us in many respects. He had been taken into Exile with many from Jerusalem as part of Babylon’s exacting of punishment on Judah’s leaders for refusing to pay tribute due to the greater power. The people of Judah were ambivalent or in outright opposition to the things of God.

Ezekiel’s ministry in large part would be about trying to wake up the population to their dire situation. Examining the commission Ezekiel was given in such a dark time should help us understand our own commission and how we might properly respond to it.

Prepared (Ezekiel 3:8-11)

Ezekiel's favorite description for himself through his book is "son of man." The phrase, which simply means human in most contexts, is used throughout his book to highlight his limitedness and frailty. Indeed, given his status as one of the ones who was in Exile, it is easy to understand how Ezekiel might have felt completely inadequate to the task of intercession required of both his prophetic and priestly roles.

Perhaps this is one of the reasons that Ezekiel has the longest call narrative of all of the Old Testament prophets. Ezekiel's call is three chapters long. In a setting where we are uncertain of our place in God's work, God offers the reassurance we need to carry out our commission.

Here in Ezekiel 3:9, as his call narrative is coming to a close, God informs Ezekiel all the necessary work has been done by making him essentially as "hard-headed" as the stubborn people of Israel to whom he will be preaching. Though the NIV renders this verse in the future tense, "I will make," the verb is in the perfect voice, which means it is an already completed action.

For the believer, in the Great Commission Jesus reminds us his command to make disciples is backed by the fact that all authority has been given to him. We too have been prepared!

Overwhelmed (Ezekiel 3:12-15)

Though some interpreters view the lifting of Ezekiel by the Spirit of God in these verses as some sort of transportation, it is probably better to see it as an expression of causing him to stand (cf. Ezekiel 2:2). The idea expresses both a rousing from the vision and an empowerment to carry out the task.

At this raising up, Ezekiel experiences a "heat in his spirit," or as the NIV

renders its, “the anger of my spirit.” This feeling may be the result of his disappointment in leaving his visionary status, but it seems more likely to be a compulsion to deliver his message, similar to what Jeremiah records in Jeremiah 20:9, “his word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones.” Delivering a message of judgment, or even one of hope, is not always the most pleasant task, but the work of the Spirit compels us forward as an application of Christ’s divine command.

Assigned (Ezekiel 3:16-21)

Most interpreters rightly point out the significant responsibility that God gives to Ezekiel here to deliver his message. Certainly there is a dominating element of his responsibility to function as a watchman who issues a warning.

In this passage, Yahweh mentions the wicked who don’t repent who haven’t been told, the wicked who don’t repent who have been told, the righteous who turns away who were not warned and the righteous who stand strong because they weren’t warned. In all these the accountability of Ezekiel before God is explicitly stated. An accountability all God’s people bare if we fail to carry out the task assigned to us.

But there is another aspect that I believe is being expressed here that is found in the absence of a certain group. In God’s description there is no mention of the wicked who repent and turn to righteousness. This seems to be an outgrowth of God’s statements in verse 11 that there will be those who don’t listen.

The point simply is this: in Ezekiel’s and our commission, we are given the call to faithfulness in our task, not to “success.” The work of conversion rest on God’s shoulders in interaction with the recipient of the message. Our responsibility is simply to go in Jesus’ name.

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