

My Mom was a very kind person. She would welcome many into our home for a visit and dinner. But I remember most her kindness to my friends and me. She would prepare snacks for us. She did those little things that made a home feel welcome. She was especially good in times of sickness. She didn't shy away from those tough moments of caring for an unwell person whether it was her mother, my Dad or myself.

Then she became a grandmother. I witnessed again the kindness shown to my nephew and then our kids. She would make time to read with them, sit with them and even play with them. She would include our oldest in watering her flowers in the backyard. At the age of 80, she got down on her knees to play mini stick hockey with our son. She also loved reading to our youngest whenever we visited. You learn about a person's heart when you spend time with them. You see what they do and how they treat others. I sure learned about my mother's heart during those growing up years.

One of our challenges as Christians is understanding God's heart. What is He like? How does He treat people? How does He respond to situations and the people in them? That's where the Bible comes in. It gives us a window into God's heart so we can relate to Him more intimately.

We will see more of God's heart today in the next section of the book of Ezekiel. Last week, we saw the glorious vision of the transcendent God on His chariot throne carried by fiery cherubim. It ended with Ezekiel recognizing the likeness of the glory of the Lord. He fell on his face and heard the voice of one speaking.

Now the Lord speaks to commission Ezekiel to his prophetic ministry. In this commission we will see 3 passions of God's heart. I pray that at least one of the three will draw you closer to Him. I pray that you will see God's heart for you and then we will meet at the Lord's Table to respond. So please find Ezekiel 2. It's on page 589 in the Bibles we have for you. We will read to chapter 3, verse 11.

Ezekiel 2:1-3:11 (ESV)

2 And he said to me, “Son of man, stand on your feet, and I will speak with you.”² And as he spoke to me, the Spirit entered into me and set me on my feet, and I heard him speaking to me.³ 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.⁴ The descendants also are impudent and stubborn: I send you to them, and you shall say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD.’⁵ And whether they hear or refuse to hear (for they are a rebellious house) they will know that a prophet has been among them.⁶ And you, son of man, be not afraid of them, nor be afraid of their words, though briars and thorns are with you and you sit on scorpions. Be not afraid of their words, nor be dismayed at their looks, for they are a rebellious house.⁷ And you shall speak my words to them, whether they hear or refuse to hear, for they are a rebellious house.

⁸ “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.”⁹ And when I looked, behold, a hand was stretched out to me, and behold, a scroll of a book was in it.¹⁰ 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.

3 And he said to me, “Son of man, eat whatever you find here. Eat this scroll, and go, speak to the house of Israel.”² So I opened my mouth, and he gave me this scroll to eat.³ And he said to me, “Son of man, feed your belly with this scroll that I give you and fill your stomach with it.” Then I ate it, and it was in my mouth as sweet as honey.

⁴ And he said to me, “Son of man, go to the house of Israel and speak with my words to them.⁵ For you are not sent to a people of foreign speech and a hard language, but to the house of Israel—⁶ not to many peoples of foreign speech and a hard language, whose words you cannot understand. Surely, if I sent you to such, they would listen to you.⁷ 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.⁸ Behold, I have made your face as hard as their faces, and your forehead as hard as their foreheads.⁹ 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.”¹⁰ 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.¹¹ 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.”

¹² Then the Spirit^l lifted me up, and I heard behind me the voice^[d] of a great earthquake: “Blessed be the glory of the LORD from its place!”¹³ It was the sound of the wings of the living creatures as they touched one another, and the sound of the wheels beside them, and the sound of a great earthquake.¹⁴ 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.¹⁵ And I came to the exiles at Tel-abib, who were dwelling by the Chebar canal, and I sat where they were dwelling. And I sat there overwhelmed among them seven days.

What do we learn about God’s heart as He calls Ezekiel to prophetic ministry? God has a heart for righteousness. God commissions Ezekiel to confront people about their unrighteousness. God Himself is righteous and calls forth righteousness from His people. What is righteousness? Well when it comes to God one definition goes like this: “God’s righteousness means that God always acts in

accordance with what is right and is himself the final standard of what is right.”¹ God then calls His people to live righteously. He gave them His law to show them the way of righteousness.

Yet Israel collectively failed to live out this calling. And it wasn't like they missed one or two items on some obscure little law about what to eat on the Sabbath. They disregarded and violated all of the Ten Commandments. An enormous level of unfaithfulness to God hand spread through His people. They collectively disregarded the original covenant and settled into a lifestyle of rebellion against the Lord.

That was one reason why the exiles now lived in Babylon. God warned His people for centuries to return to Him and walk in righteousness. But they ignored His pleas and continued in their own ways. So He finally allowed the Babylonians to conquer the land and lay siege to Jerusalem. Yet even this had not led to a collective repentance. So God would send Ezekiel to bring His message to those living in exile.

Yet we might object to this requirement of living in righteousness according to God's standards. We might think: “Why can't God just leave us alone? As long as we don't hurt anybody, we're good people. Why must we live according to God's standards of righteousness?”

To this, we need to recognize first that God wants what's best for us. He knows way better than we do what we actually need. Though we may think we can more than adequately rule ourselves, the evidence points in other directions. We think it best for us to be completely free of any restriction or authority over us. Yet humanity has shown an inability to effectively rule itself. We think we can solve all the world's problems with some advance in technology. Yet we fail to address the restlessness and despair in our souls. If we are so great at solving the world's ills, why is there a mental health crisis?

So God's call for righteous living is not to be strict and controlling – but for our good.

The ancients conceived of happiness in a different way than we do. Happiness was not seen as doing anything you wanted but as conforming your life to the nature of reality just as a trout is only happy

¹ Wayne Grudem, Systematic Theology, 203.

when it is in the water rather than the air and the robin is only happy when it is in the air and not under water. Ultimately, when we live according to God's righteousness we are aligning with reality and increase the likelihood of our own happiness.

Second – Turning away from God means we will inevitably make something or someone else our idol. And idols eventually always master those who worship them. Thinking we are free, we actually become more enslaved. Without God, we may turn to some addiction to cope with life. We think we're free but instead we're enslaved. Without God, we turn to something or someone else as our source of strength, hope and purpose – including ourselves. Eventually we run out of ourselves and our own resources. Yet when we turn to God we find an eternal well of resources and ability to supply all our needs.

Third – We all have a sense of justice. We hope that God will judge the really bad people – like Hitler, Stalin and serial killers. We all know that our justice system has multiple flaws. Yet, because of His own righteousness, God will ultimately call all injustice to account – from the great genocides to the mean bully on the playground. God will not let wrongdoing and injustice go. Ultimately, the injustices committed against us will be called to account.

Yet God not only insist on righteousness. He also reaches out in love. If God were only a God of holy perfection, we'd be too crushed under a sense of inadequacy to change. If God were only a general spirit of love, we'd be complacent in our sin. But He is a God of holy love calling us to respond with repentance.

We may think that God's heart for righteousness is an imposition on our lives. But ultimately it is for our good. God is the ultimate good. We will see God's heart for righteousness more as we go through this book.

What else do we learn about God's heart through His call on Ezekiel's life? **God has a heart for His rebellious people.** Throughout this call, God describes Ezekiel's target audience. The Israelites exiles. These are the people of God. He does not flatter His people. He simply states truth about them.

In 2:3 Ezekiel is told he will speak to nations of rebels who have rebelled against God. He will bring the message to those who along with their forefathers have transgressed against God

Ezekiel He must speak to the impudent and stubborn in verse 4. The impudent man will not lower his gaze in humility. Instead he will keep staring at anyone who dares look at him with disapproval while he sins. The stubborn describes interior hardness. They are hard of heart or mind.

In verses 6 and 7, the Lord refers to them as a rebellious house. So Ezekiel's audience has collectively rebelled against the Lord. In fact, the Lord sends Ezekiel to a people so stubborn that he would have more success preaching to a foreign people who could not understand him. In 3:5-6, the Lord says, "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 cannot 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 because they are not willing to listen to me."

So these Israelites were not only rebellious. They would be unresponsive to the message.

You might think, "Tom, I thought you said that God has a heart for rebellious people. This doesn't sound like he has much of a heart for them." Yes, God's words do not flatter or comfort. But we must notice God's care for them in sending a messenger?

If the Lord didn't care about rebellious people, He would just ignore them. He wouldn't bother to go all this trouble to send them a warning. This speaks to me about a God who cares enough to keep talking to me when I rebel against Him. He cared enough to stay with me, even when I lived in rebellion against Him for maybe weeks. He cared enough to continue with me when I ignore my sin. He reached out to me to save me. He persevered with me. God's heart for a rebel such as me brings us hope in two ways.

It gives us hope that the Lord will continue to speak to us when we sin. He waits like the Father in the prodigal son parable, and runs to us when we turn back to Him. So whether we've been far from him for a long time or just since yesterday, we can respond to his reaching out by returning to Him today.

It gives us hope that the Lord will continue to speak to loved ones who live in rebellion against Him. God sends messengers. He speaks to the heart. He has not lost His heart for them. So if you have loved ones who have walked away from the Lord, don't give up. Continue to pray that the Lord will keep working on their hearts.

God has a heart for righteousness. God has a heart for rebellious people even it comes in the form of tough love. **God has a heart for His servants.** Did you notice the multiple ways God provides for Ezekiel for this assignment? He starts right at the beginning by helping Ezekiel stand up in chapter 2, verse 2. The Spirit enters Ezekiel and enables him to stand in the Lord's presence. Then the Lord encourages Ezekiel to not fear. Verse 6 – And you son of man, be not afraid of them or their words or later “nor be dismayed by their looks.” The Lord prepares Ezekiel for the harsh words and scornful looks he will receive when he delivers the Lord's message.

Notice that strange section in the middle of chapter 2, verse 6? “And you, son of man, be not afraid of them, nor be afraid of their words, though briars and thorns are with you and you sit on scorpions.” Now this could mean like Ezekiel will have to deal with a resistance audience in a hostile environment. Briars and thorns surround him and he will sit on scorpions. Even I know it's not a good idea to sit on scorpions. They will pinch and sting you. This could describe a hostile environment for Ezekiel.

Or it may point to another layer of God's protection. Notice the briars and thorns are “with Ezekiel.” They are not pricking him or tormenting him. It's almost like they surround him like a layer of protection. Then there is an alternative translation for scorpions – scorpion plants. So maybe these plants symbolize God's protection over Ezekiel. If so He not only encourages Ezekiel. He will protect him.

But the Lord not only speaks encouraging words to Ezekiel. The Lord provides actual strengthening to Ezekiel. Notice chapter 3, verses 7 and 8. “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. Verse 8. “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.” The Lord provides a major strengthening and empowering of Ezekiel to bear with the difficulties of his calling.

And he does one more thing to prepare His prophet. He puts him through a test of obedience. In chapter 2:8, the Lord commands Ezekiel to not become rebellious like the Israelites. Then he commands Ezekiel to eat whatever God gives him. Then Ezekiel sees a hand holding a scroll of a book. He sees writings on the front and back. This could symbolize the completeness of the message. No words were to be added to it. The message had words of lamentation, mourning and woe. So this would be a hard message of warning.

Then 3, the Lord commands Ezekiel to eat the scroll. Here’s the obedience test. Will Ezekiel obey? Ezekiel eats. He is to fill his belly with the scroll. This could all symbolize Ezekiel’s willingness to take in the fullness of God’s word in order to communicate it to the Israelites. Surprisingly, though the scroll contains a message of woe, it tastes like honey in his mouth.

So the Lord gives all these resources, motivation and empowering to His servant. He also gives Ezekiel a clear measuring stick for his mission. Chapter 2, verse 5 – And whether they hear or refuse to hear (for they are a rebellious house) they will know that a prophet has been among them.” So Ezekiel’s mission does not depend on the response of the people. It depends on his faithfulness to the Lord’s message.

All this reveals God’s deep heart concern for His servants. He also has a heart for righteousness and for rebellious people.

How can we respond to God’s heart?

We can respond to His heart for righteousness by pursuing it in our lives. We can respond to His heart for rebels by repent of our rebellion. Sometimes we walk closely with God. But other times we are intent on disobeying what we know He commands. If there is some rebellion in our hearts, we need to confess that before Him today.

We can respond to His heart for His servants. We must depend on His empowering to obey His call on our lives. Just as the Lord prepared and empowered Ezekiel for his ministry, the Lord

continues to do the same in our lives today. That includes Parenting; Grandparenting; Working; School; Marriage; Relationship; Thoughts; Lifestyle; Following Jesus. These are all high callings that can get overwhelming if we try to do them in our own strength. But the Lord is willing to empower and help us. So with whatever you face that is beyond you today, I invite you to come to the Lord and ask for His help to carry out His calling on your life.

Let us do that now as we prepare for the Lord's Table.