

What Might We Face As We Follow God's Call?
~ Ezekiel 3:16-27

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“What is God’s will for your life? What does God want you to do with the life He has given you?” These questions show up in our lives at different times. Graduation season is certainly one of them. We celebrate the completion of a degree or diploma. But after the congratulations, everyone asks “what’s next?” Or we ask ourselves, “What does God want me to do now?”

We can ask these questions when it comes to finding a life mate. Does God call me to be single or married? If married, who does He want me to marry? Where is that person? We may wonder about the future of a relationship in our lives. It’s at a crossroads. We seek God’s wisdom to know which direction to take.

Or we can ask this question when we go through a life transition. Maybe it’s moving out of our parent’s house. Maybe it’s considering a move to another city to go to school or take a different job. Maybe we ask “What is God’s call on my life,” now that all the kids are grown up? Or we find it harder to keep up our current life pace. So we wonder about transitioning to a lower stress life or retirement. Then in our later years we face aging issues and living arrangement questions. We wonder, “What is God’s will?”

Well, there’s no simple answer to this question. God doesn’t lay out a step by step plan that gives us roadmap for the next 50 years. The Christian life involves a daily walk with God where we talk and listen to Him. He reveals next steps to take along the way. We need to continually seek His will in the various situations of our lives. This is the journey of faith. So I don’t have 3 easy steps to find out God’s will for your life because it doesn’t work like that.

But I think I have something that can help us as we seek to walk with God and follow His ways. Our passage today can help us see some realities that we all experience when seeking God’s will for us individually and as a church. The Bible contains many accounts of people who sought God’s will and followed God’s way in their lives. From their testimonies, we see realities of life for one seeking to follow God’s will.

We will see this today in the life of the prophet Ezekiel. This book began with him seeing “the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord.” He saw the Lord on His chariot throne carried by fiery creatures called cherubim. Then we saw God call Ezekiel to prophetic ministry. We noticed the many different ways that God would equip, empower and strengthen Ezekiel to carry out this calling. Now we near the end of this call narrative. Here we will see 3 realities that may come into our lives as we seek to follow the Lord. None of them is easy. Maybe you’ll find yourself experiencing one or more of these right now. It helps to know that it’s not abnormal. God’s people have experienced these realities again and again. But then we need reasons to persevere in following God. I will give you a theology of persevering in following God’s way. So we will look at some of those. Then we will respond to the Lord’s word in prayer and song.

Ezekiel 3:12-27 (ESV) (Page 590)

¹² 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!” 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.

¹⁶ And at the end of seven days, the word of the LORD came to me: ¹⁷ “Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel. Whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. ¹⁸ If I say to the wicked, ‘You shall surely die,’ and you give him no warning, nor speak to warn the wicked from his wicked way, in order to save his life, that wicked person shall die for his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand. ¹⁹ But if you warn the wicked, and he does not turn from his wickedness, or from his wicked way, he shall die for his iniquity, but you will have delivered your soul. ²⁰ Again, if a righteous person turns from his righteousness and commits injustice, and I lay a stumbling block before him, he shall die. Because you have not warned him, he shall die for his sin, and his righteous deeds that he has done shall not be remembered, but his blood I will require at your hand. ²¹ But if you warn the righteous person not to sin, and he does not sin, he shall surely live, because he took warning, and you will have delivered your soul.”

²² And the hand of the LORD was upon me there. And he said to me, “Arise, go out into the valley, and there I will speak with you.” ²³ So I arose and went out into the valley, and behold, the glory of the LORD stood there, like the glory that I had seen by the Chebar canal, and I fell on my face. ²⁴ But the Spirit entered into me and set me on my feet, and he spoke with me and said to me, “Go, shut yourself within your house. ²⁵ And you, O son of man, behold, cords will be placed upon you, and you shall be bound with them, so that you cannot go out among the people. ²⁶ And I will make your tongue cling to the roof of your mouth, so that you shall be mute and unable to reprove them, for they are a rebellious house. ²⁷ But when I speak with you, I will open your mouth, and you shall say

to them, 'Thus says the Lord GOD.' He who will hear, let him hear; and he who will refuse to hear, let him refuse, for they are a rebellious house.

What realities might come into our lives as we seek to follow God's will?

Reality 1 - We experience personal struggle as we follow God's way. (3:12-15). In verses 12-15, we see Ezekiel struggle with the call of God on his life. We see the conclusion of the initial vision in verses 12 and 13. God's chariot throne is on the move. It sounds like a massive earthquake. But it's actually the wings of the living creatures and moving wheels that roar. Then the Spirit takes Ezekiel back to the canal where he sat in chapter 1 verse 4. But notice what it says about Ezekiel's spirit in verse 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." Why is Ezekiel bitter in heat of his spirit? This sounds like one miserable guy. He's just seen a glorious vision of the Lord. Wouldn't he be full of praise?

There are two possibilities for Ezekiel's bitterness. One is that he has clearly seen his people from the Lord's perspective. The Lord declared again and again that Israel was a rebellious house. Ezekiel would need a hard forehead to deal with their rejection, taunts and looks of dismay. So this could be a righteous bitterness that aligns with God's holiness. Ezekiel is angry that his fellow exiles have rebelled against the Lord.

But I think the second possibility is more likely. Ezekiel does not like this difficult call the Lord placed upon him. This is a huge imposition on his life. He will have to deliver a message of judgment to people he has suffered with. They have together gone through the trauma of exile. They have struggled together to adjust to their new reality in a foreign land. And it's been 5 years. Suddenly, Ezekiel is commissioned to speak a hard word of judgement to them? One commentator wonders if Ezekiel has a rebellious spirit himself. Look back at chapter 2, verse 8. "But you son of man, hear what I say to you. Be not rebellious like that rebellious house." Maybe Ezekiel struggles with this tough assignment from the Lord.

Then he is brought back to the exiles in the village of Tel-abib. He sits there overwhelmed for seven days. Now he could feel overwhelmed because he, a mere mortal, has had a personal encounter with the holy God of the universe. He could be overwhelmed because of the difficult call. Or it could be a combination of those two. But already Ezekiel struggled upon discovering God's call on his life.

We will likely struggle when we discover God's call on our lives includes hard realities. Think about the trouble and trials we may go through in our youth; our marriages; raising kids or losing a loved one. Maybe God's call involves moving out of our comfort zone or letting our kids go to another country in 24 hours. Think about how we struggle when some unexpected life changing reality becomes part of our lives. Most people don't just adjust and keep going. A couple weeks ago, I was down in Wisconsin for the annual preaching seminar I try to attend. I was talking with a young pastor who is also a young married with an infant. He shared how an illness has come into their family that has brought significant life change for them. He shared the reality of the struggle in adjusting to this. I love Ezekiel's honesty here. We can think that the people in the Bible are the super saints of humans. We think they never struggled and just happily accepted God's hard call on their lives. But it seems everyone struggled to adjust and accept certain realities. You and I have to do the same when this happens in our lives. The only way I know how to do this is come to the Lord and ask for His help. I ask others to help me or pray for me. That's why we need one another in this community. We need to help and hold up each other as we adjust to difficult realities that come with following God's call.

Then we see another reality that Ezekiel had to face. This one also comes into the life of anyone seeking God's will. **Reality #2 – We face heavy responsibility as we follow God's call. 3:16-21.** Verses 16-21 contain some terrifying verses first to anyone in a shepherding or teaching role among God's people. God charged Ezekiel to faithfully deliver His word of warning to the people around him. –to play the role of watchman. Yes, they have already suffered because of God's judgment on the nation. They have been displaced and now live in Tel-Abib by Babylon. But God's judgment and call to repentance is not yet complete. Jerusalem still stands

along with Solomon's temple. And within 7 years from this moment, the Babylonians will again lay siege and this time destroy everything. So the exiles may think the worst is over. "We can continue living with little or no regard for God's ways."

So Ezekiel is charged to faithfully deliver this word of warning to both the wicked and the righteous. If he didn't, God would somehow hold him responsible. If Ezekiel fails to warn the people, the Lord will "require his blood at your hand" in verse 18 and verse 20. Let me tell you friends, this is one of the most difficult callings of pastoral ministry to deliver the hard parts of God's Word. It is tempting and way more comfortable to withhold the hard parts of God's Word. Yet we are charged to bring God's word faithfully and completely. So this is a heavy responsibility for Ezekiel and those called to shepherd God's people.

Notice as well, that we all have a responsibility to respond when God's warnings come into our lives. Notice that the Lord ends the lives of some who continue to sin against him. Verse 18 – "That wicked person shall die for his iniquity." There's a famous verse that some of you know from the New Testament that we quote but may not think fully about Romans 3:23. "For the wages of sin is death." Sometimes it seems God decides to end people's lives because of their continuance in sin. Listen to 1st John 5:16-18. "If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death, he shall ask, and God will give him life – to those who commit sins that do not lead to death. There is a sin that leads to death; I do not say that one should pray for that. All wrongdoing is sin, but there is sin that does not lead to death." Now in 1st John, I believe this is talking about physical death not eternal death. It seems that sometimes God decides to end a person's life because of their sin maybe so they don't keep doing damage to others. But whatever the specific nuance, the warning in both Ezekiel, Romans and 1st John is beware of continuing in a sinful life. God might end your life. If you don't know Him, you will have much greater problems upon death.

Yet the overall emphasis of verses 16-21 is the Lord's call on Ezekiel's life to be Israel's watchmen. He needed to stand guard by remaining true to the messages of the Lord. That is a heavy responsibility.

When you and I follow God's call, we will face heavy responsibilities. Taking responsibility for our lives can be hard when we want to take the easier way out and pass off responsibility to someone else. It's a heavy responsibility to raise kids. We might have significant responsibility at work or in our church or in some position of influence. We may want to shy away and give up. Yet remember the Lord equips and empowers His people to carry out His call on our lives.

So following God's call on our lives will involve personal struggle. Following God's call will involve responsibility – sometimes heavy. **Reality 3 – Following God's call will include suffering.** Verses 22-27 are hard to interpret. They contain another vision where the Lord now stands before him. Verse 23 – “The glory of the Lord stood there.” The Lord informs Ezekiel that His call goes far beyond Ezekiel preaching a few messages. It will involve Ezekiel's entire life. It will affect his comfort, his body, his convenience, his reputation and his family. The Lord will use Ezekiel himself as a sign to the people. He's going to do this first by shutting Ezekiel up physically and verbally. He commands Ezekiel to shut himself up in his house. Then he talks about cords placed upon him and binding him. So these could be literal ropes where people come and tie him up. Or they could be symbolic indicating Ezekiel's house arrest. Then the Lord says he will make Ezekiel mute in verse 26. So Ezekiel will be unable to speak to the Israelites though the Lord has just told him he must warn them. All this adds up to personal suffering for Ezekiel. His activities will be restricted. He cannot go and come as he pleases. Nor can he speak freely.

It seems the Lord will do this to set up the people and Ezekiel for the moment when he will deliver his messages. In the meantime, Ezekiel himself will serve as a sign. If you look at the picture of this passage in the middle of your bulletin, you see the sign acts portrayed. These are described in chapters four and five. So Ezekiel will build a model of Jerusalem under siege. He will lie on one side for 390 days and his other side for 40 days. He will eat food cooked over poop to symbolize the terrible conditions of Jerusalem's coming siege. He will cut his hair and scatter it to the winds symbolizing the scattering of the people. No wonder people thought Ezekiel was crazy. Yet it's likely he did all this while mute. So that when the Lord finally opened his mouth,

people would pay some attention. Yet this all required personal suffering on Ezekiel's part. God's prophet would suffer for the people.

Isn't this often the way of God? He raises up people to do his work and even bring a hard message. Yet He shows His love by having his servants suffer for the call or with the people. Think about Joseph suffering 13 years in slavery. Think about Jeremiah about the bottom of a well sunk down into the mud as God's prophet. Think about Jesus who left the glories of heaven to live among us, suffer and die for us so we might have life.

This is part of our journey. We suffer as we follow Christ – whether it be persecution or mocking or exclusion or pain or oppression by the enemy or discouragement – we suffer. Yet the Lord suffers with us and heals us to move forward.

So we started today by asking the question “What is God's will for our lives?” We learned that God doesn't give us a road map. He reveals things along the way as we walk with Him. So then we asked, “What realities might we face as we seek God's will?” We've learned we will face struggles, responsibility and suffering. When I came to the end of that, another question popped into my mind. Why would anyone sign up for that? “Hey I've got an opportunity for you over here. It will involve personal struggle, heavy responsibility and suffering.” How many of us would run over to sign up? So why follow God's call?

So why do it? Struggle, heavy responsibility, suffering.

1. **God deeply loves us as His beloved children.** There is a great reward coming
 - a. 1 John 3:1 – How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!
2. **God has our best in mind.**
 - a. Romans 8:28 – And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.
3. **God will provide us with a glorious inheritance.**
 - a. Ephesians 1:18 - I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people.
4. **Turning away from God means turning away from hope and life.**
 - a. John 6:66-69 – After this many disciples turned back and no longer walked with him. So Jesus said to the 12, “Do you want to go away as well?” Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom would we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed and have come to know that you are the Holy One of God.”
5. **God's calling includes growing us in holiness and Christ likeness.**
 - a. 1 Thessalonians 4:7 – For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life.

- b. 2 Timothy 1:9 - He has saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time.
- 6. This journey sometimes involves struggle, responsibility and hardship.**
- a. Hebrews 12:1 – Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and sin which clings so closely and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.
- 7. God helps us carry out His calling on our lives.**
- a. 2 Peter 1:3 – His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness.

So bring to him your struggles, heaviness of responsibility, suffering. God is for you and is at work for your good. God empowers and equips us to carry out His calling on our lives. Ask for His help, strength and power to keep going.