

EZEKIEL

Hard to Heart

"The Fantastic Fore-head"

3:4-11

English is not an easy language. Something that's close to what you might want to say could mean something completely different.

Here are a few advertising slogans as they were first translated. See if you can guess the original English version.

- "Eat your fingers off." ("Finger lickin' good," as originally translated into Chinese).
- "Are you lactating?" ("Got milk?" as originally translated into Spanish for advertising in Mexico).
- "Suffer from diarrhea." ("Turn it loose," as originally translated into Spanish for advertising of Coors beer).

When we think about missions and missionaries we are concerned about language barriers. One advantage to supporting native missionaries is that they already speak the language.

It's a little odd, therefore, to read what God told Ezekiel in verses five, six and seven:

Ezekiel 3:5 For you are not sent to a people of unfamiliar speech and of hard language, but to the house of Israel,

Ezekiel 3:6 not to many people of unfamiliar speech and of hard language, whose words you cannot understand. Surely, had I sent you to them, they would have listened to you.

Ezekiel 3:7 But the house of Israel will not listen to you...

God told Ezekiel that people of “unfamiliar speech and... hard language” would have listened whereas the Israelites who he would speak to in their own language would not listen.

Ezekiel faced a language barrier of a different kind. It was a spiritual language barrier. It was the result of hardened hearts.

The Israelites, God’s elect people, were more hardened against God than were the surrounding pagan nations.

We should stop before going any further and at least acknowledge that it is possible for us, God’s elect, to be more hardened against Him than the nonbelievers surrounding us!

I’m not suggesting we are. Only that we remain a people who “hears what the Spirit says to the churches.” God is working to mold and shape us into the image of His Son.

Are we moldable? Pliable? What changes can we see in our lives can we and others identify that reveal the Potters hands upon us?

Let’s delve into the text to further understand the language barrier Ezekiel faced.

Ezekiel 3:4 Then He said to me: "Son of man, go to the house of Israel and speak with My words to them.

Ezekiel had just eaten the scroll containing God’s message to His people in exile and captivity. He had a message to bring them, “My words,” and Ezekiel was His messenger.

You and I are God’s messengers. We are sent to certain people. It’s usually based on where we live and work. Those people are our audience.

We bring those folks the Word. We do it from our general study and understanding of the Bible. But we should also depend upon the Lord for His anointing to know exactly what to say about His Word to the particular audience we are addressing.

Ezekiel 3:5 For you are not sent to a people of unfamiliar speech and of hard language, but to the house of Israel,

Note the emphasis on Ezekiel being “sent.” It’s a great word, filled with power and purpose. It indicates a plan, the plan of God, to send you to a specific post of service.

Jacob Kelso reminded me of some homespun pastoral wisdom the other day. When discussing different people who say they are serving the Lord, “there are some who were sent, and there are some who just went!”

In other words, some have God’s leading and His empowering. Others muscle their way into a position. They tout their giftedness and their supposed abilities.

You don’t want to be one who “just went.” One way, a biblical way, to know if someone is sent or went would be the decision of the leadership of the church. When Paul and Barnabas were set apart for mission work by the Holy Spirit God worked in and through the leaders of the church in Antioch.

There are a lot of Lone Rangers out there, doing their own thing. They may attend a church, but they have no real accountability to its leadership. They just went and keep on went-ing!

On the surface this assignment for Ezekiel might seem easy. No language barriers to overcome. No cultural rules to learn. No weird food to eat! (Or so he might have thought).

It would prove to be a very difficult assignment. There is no way to know the response you will receive.

Ezekiel 3:6 not to many people of unfamiliar speech and of hard language, whose words you cannot understand. Surely, had I sent you to them, they would have listened to you.

The first part of verse six reminds me that God wanted to save Gentiles. He wanted Israel, as a nation, to be His witness to the Gentiles.

God is mighty to save. He is not willing that any should perish but that all would come to eternal life. His call is to whosoever will believe. Jesus is the Savior of the whole world, especially those who believe.

I have no patience with those who would seek to limit the Gospel call in any way. Let's not get sidetracked with their intellectual arguments that exclude most of the members of the human race from the elect. Let's not give credence to their conclusion that God has predestinated billions of people to Hell.

Ezekiel must be thinking, "Let me go to the foreigners, then!" No; it wasn't his calling. God would see to them. He had other means by which to reach them.

It's pretty easy to get sidetracked while you're serving the Lord. There are so many good things you can get involved with - so many ministries and missions. Get with God about what He wants you to do, not what others are pressuring you to do.

Ezekiel 3:7 But the house of Israel will not listen to you, because they will not listen to Me; for all the house of Israel are impudent and hard-hearted.

Since Ezekiel would be speaking God's Word to them, then in rejecting him they were rejecting God.

The Word of God stands true, inspired, and authoritative whether someone believes it is or not. When someone rejects what you are saying to them from the Word, they are rejecting God.

Why do people reject the Word that is so full of grace, mercy, and forgiveness? Why will they not be reconciled with God?

In the case of Israel they were "impudent and hard-hearted." One commentator said of them, "they were strong of front and hard of heart."

- They were "impudent" outwardly. They refused to budge or to blush. They sinned openly.

- They were “hard-hearted” inwardly. They had no tenderness or sensitivity to the things of God.

Unwatered ground grows hard. If you quit watering your heart with the Word it will grow hard. Eventually your behavior will become impudent.

Just a cursory reading of the Word, or attending a service, isn't what we mean by 'watering your heart.' The idea is to produce fruit, the fruit of the Holy Spirit.

The Israelites were set on religious cruise-control. Everything was outward and habitual. Their inner man was dying of thirst.

At the beginning of verse seven God made it clear that “they **will** not listen.” It was a matter of their “will,” of their free choice. They decided to not “listen” in a way that would bring repentance leading to obedience.

Ezekiel 3:8 Behold, I have made your face strong against their faces, and your forehead strong against their foreheads.

If they got into a staring match, Ezekiel would win. He was not going to look away, no matter their response.

If they butted foreheads, Ezekiel would be like a ram against them.

Ezekiel wasn't a harsh, unfeeling guy. It was going to seem that way to them because of his face and forehead.

It got me thinking. If someone, a spiritual leader perhaps, seems to be giving you a hard time then maybe, just maybe, it's because **you are giving God a hard time!**

We can be resistant to change or insistent that our changes be implemented. We may not even realize we're doing it. But God does. He wants to soften us because He has something new for us, something different. If we won't soften then He will put in front of us someone with a stronger forehead!

Our response to being spiritually head-butted says a lot about how spiritual I really am!

Ezekiel 3:9 Like adamant stone, harder than flint, I have made your forehead; do not be afraid of them, nor be dismayed at their looks, though they are a rebellious house."

Ezekiel may have been the first Marvel Comics super hero. His "forehead" was "like adamant stone." In the comic universe there is a fictional substance, adamantium, that is virtually indestructible. Captain America's shield contains adamantium. Wolverine's bones have been fused with it.

We need a name for Ezekiel. The Fantastic Forehead is my suggestion.

Back to reality and the sixth century before Christ. Ezekiel was told "don't be afraid"; don't be "dismayed." He had nothing to fear but God Himself. Fear of man would save him mental and physical anguish but only in the short run.

The word for "dismayed" can be translated *broken* or *shattered*. He was God's vessel and could not allow himself to be broken by mere men.

The devil is out to scare you. He wants to break you. Fear only God. Trust that you have His treasure in earthen vessels that cannot be broken.

How? How do you build that trust against what seems to be so overwhelming?

Ezekiel 3:10 Moreover He said to me: "Son of man, receive into your heart all My words that I speak to you, and hear with your ears.

The answer lies in your relationship with Jesus. It lies in listening to the Lord in private, as you walk with Him.

Notice the order here. Ezekiel was told to "receive into [his] heart" then "hear with [his] ears." Seems the opposite of the normal order of things.

We talked about predispositions in our last study. Ezekiel was to be predisposed to receiving the Word of God. Thus whenever he heard the Word it was immediately assimilated into his heart.

In other words, I have already determined that whatever God's Word really says, that is what I believe and how I will behave. No matter how hard or weird it seems. God's commands **are** His enablings.

Ezekiel 3:11 And go, get to the captives, to the children of your people, and speak to them and tell them, 'Thus says the Lord God,' whether they hear, or whether they refuse."

Focus on the word "captives." The Hebrews were in a bad way. In one sense you might not blame them for being hard-hearted. After all, God had allowed them to be taken captive and exiled.

Of course you'd be wrong to blame God! Their very captivity was a show of love from God. It was a chastening from Him as their Father.

For a child to despise the chastening of his father is foolishness. To become hard-hearted, bitter, and rebellious does not help, it hinders.

Their suffering was designed by God to soften them, not harden them. So in our lives. We can be made better or we can grow bitter.

A sub-theme we might develop in Ezekiel, as we follow his ministry, is that results are not up to us. They are up to God. You need to know you are where God has sent you, saying what He's spoken to you. Then you leave the results up to Him.

Even in their stubborn rebellion God was reaching out to them. His hard-headed prophet was just the person they needed for what they had brought upon themselves. It wouldn't do to have some mealy-mouthed, thin-skinned ear-tickler. They needed hard truths delivered in a bold manner if they were to survive and thrive.

There seems to be a movement within biblical Christianity to change the way we address nonbelievers. The argument is that a fundamentalist

understanding of the Bible as the unique, inspired, authoritative Word of God is no longer relevant. We need, they say, to be more inclusive.

For example: The de facto 'leader' of the emergent church, Brian McLaren, is going to be celebrating Ramadan, the holy month of fasting and prayers among Muslims. Relevant? Or ridiculous?

I say that is dangerous and reckless. The Gospel hasn't changed. It's a universal message for the universal need of mankind. It can break all language barriers to bring salvation.

We can be contemporary but we don't need to be apologetic. The Word of God is the power of God to salvation.

