

The God who Warns and Woos

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[0 : 00] May the words of my mouth and the folks of all our hearts be now acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer.

Amen. Amen. As you know, we are in a series of sermons about God.

And that's a great thing. The purpose is that we should come to know God and go to God and relate to him on the basis of what he has told us about himself.

And so get closer to God than ever we've been before. And our text is the book of the prophet Ezekiel.

And our lesson this morning was Ezekiel chapter 33, first 20 verses, which is pages 720 and 721 in our church Bibles.

[1 : 12] You may find it helpful to have the Bible open at those pages. Ezekiel is a prophet.

That's where we start. He was one of those special messengers whom God sent to his people in Old Testament times to deliver calls of one kind or another from himself to them.

And a number of the Old Testament prophets wrote their oracles after they delivered them. And Ezekiel was one of those special things. And Ezekiel was one such.

And his book consists of things that God showed him to share with his people. And we Christians receive all that as part of what we call the Old Testament, part of the written word of God as it comes to us.

And in fact, the Old Testament scriptures correspond to the New Testament scriptures as a frame corresponds to the picture set in it.

[2 : 42] We all know the frame has to be appropriate for the picture. The picture is set off and appreciated much more when the frame is right.

And good. Well, the Old Testament is the frame within which the New Testament gospel is set. And the prophets spoke the word of God just as the apostles spoke the word of God and the prophets ought to be taken just as seriously.

Now, I was given this chapter and a title with it to preach on. The title was God Who Warns and Woos.

Actually, those are wise and wonderful words. And I hope that what I say will be worthy of them. What then are we being taught here?

Well, the first thing we're being taught, clearly, emphatically, is that God speaks. God is not dumb.

[4 : 01] He uses language. The chapter begins with the words, The word of the Lord came to me. And the word of the Lord began, Son of man, speak to your people and say this to them.

If I bring the sword on a land and so on. This is a message from God. We have the Bible and a blessed gift it is.

For it is the word of God to us, first to last. It is a record of what God said, as well as of what God did in the era of Revelation.

And it's a presentation to us of what God says to us. For it's still his living word.

And still, by his Holy Spirit, it's addressed to the hearts of his own people. We today are his people. The Bible, the word of God, is addressed then to our hearts.

[5 : 16] It's just as much a word to us as it was a word to the people in whose lives it first came.

The Bible is the sum total of what God has to say to us. Each story, each message, each oracle from a prophet has a message for us as much as for anyone in the past.

So what we have to learn, each single one of us, and it's a lifelong lesson. It's the lesson of listening to the word of God and learning from it.

And preachers correspond, of course, to the prophets and the apostles. We take their word.

And we seek to echo it and apply it. And so operate as God's messengers, just as they were God's messengers long ago.

[6 : 28] I say this because nowadays so many people think that a sermon is just the preacher's religious reflections, which he offers as being personally an expert in the field.

That's a very misleading notion. The business of a preacher is to echo the scriptures and be it said, we preachers must be the first to live under the authority of the message we deliver.

And so set an example to everybody else. So the first thing I want to say to you is, hear God as he speaks in the word.

Let the Bible preach directly to your heart. Learn from God by listening to God.

For God keeps his word. Ezekiel in this chapter is hammering away at the fact that God means what he says.

[7 : 45] And he gets Ezekiel to say this in very solemn terms because Ezekiel's people are not taking seriously the things that God says.

Well, God grant that you and I will be wiser and take to heart as truth which God will stand by whatever we learn from the scripture.

Promises and warnings, yes, they are agendas for divine action. Take God seriously as he teaches us from his word.

And that brings us to the message that was announced for today. Second thing that we learn from this passage, in fact, is that God warns and woos.

Yes, he does it in his word, by his word, and he does it through his messengers. He warns and woos.

[9 : 09] Two quite different notions, you'll agree. Well, yes, he does. He warns of judgment.

And he woos in love and mercy. And what that reflects, actually, is that God, in both Testaments, is, in fact, self-revealed as holy love.

And both those words are equally weighty and equally part of the truth. You could put it the other way round, if you like, and talk about God as, in his own nature, loving holiness.

For us, perhaps, it's not easy to grasp how both those qualities can equally be reality in one and the same God.

But, well, the New Testament certainly says God is love. But the Old Testament says God is the Holy One of Israel.

[10 : 29] And the New Testament speaks of God as holy, just as the Old Testament speaks of God as loving.

So, we must grasp the fact that God's nature and character embraces both.

And the essence of God's love is that he seeks to make those whom he loves great in whatever way is appropriate.

And the essence of God's holiness is that he deals with people according to their desert.

So that for a right relationship with God, we have to face up to sin. We have to recognize the reality of redemption through Christ's death on the cross.

[11 : 35] We have to turn from our sin. We have to acknowledge Christ as our Savior and give him thanks and give him our hearts.

And we must seek, heads forth, to live the way that he calls on his disciples to live and to avoid the things that both Testaments, in fact, warn us that believers must avoid or at least must seek to avoid.

Yes, the two qualities come together and must be held together in our minds. We are used, well, shall I say, we are wearisomely used to folk who, in the name of Christ, talk of God as if love was the whole story about his character.

But no, holiness is as much the reality of God as love is. And we have to challenge ideas which don't acknowledge that fact.

So now, what is God telling Ezekiel in this chapter that he's to do?

[13 : 17] Well, he is charged to be God's faithful messenger, taking a threefold message to God's people, the exiles in Babylon, to whom Ezekiel is sent as a prophet.

And the three matters on which the faithful message must be delivered are these. First, Ezekiel must be a faithful messenger of judgment.

That is to say, divine retribution as an expression of divine holiness. The first nine verses of the chapter are all about that, because God is laboring the point that if and when he sends a word of

judgment to his people, threatens them with chastening and retribution for their sins, well, he means it.

And only by turning from their sins can they hope to escape the judgment of which he warns. Well, that's a thought that runs all the way through the Bible, and indeed in the New Testament we are told that everyone, every single person in this world, is by God given an inkling of judgment to come for the impenitent.

So you've got the very last verse of Romans, chapter 1, assuring us that everyone knows the judgment of God, that those who do, well, the text says these things, and the phrase refers back to a vice list, horrible vice list, that Paul has just given of ways in which people sin and dishonor God. [15:53] Now he says they know the judgment of God, that those who do these things, those who things, I'm sorry, those who do these things receive judgment, but yet they do them and applaud others who do them.

And that's really a dreadful verse from one standpoint because it's so direct a comment on our culture today. But I can't go further with that.

Suffice it to say that the messenger of God, Ezekiel, and you and I as recipients of the message of God, are called to be serious about the prospect of retributive judgment for unrepented sin.

And that's the matter of warning of which the title to this message speaks. And that, by the way, no, I shouldn't say by the way, that let us remember is where the gospel starts.

For the gospel introduces us to Jesus Christ as a Savior. And it's only those who have appreciated that they need a Savior who will ever come to Christ and find him as a Savior.

[17:28] Now, the second thing, I'm introducing it actually by saying that, the second thing on which Ezekiel is called to be a faithful messenger and on which the word of God teaches us a vital lesson, is the message of mercy.

The message that God, who is holy and threatens judgment, is merciful and restores the repentant. The word repent isn't used in this chapter, but the notion is there time after time. God, speaking to Ezekiel, says that people find his mercy when they turn from their way.

That is, their ungodly way. Turn is the verb, and it occurs half a dozen times. And that's the essence of repentance.

I picture it always in terms of the military command, halt, right about turn, turn 180 degrees, quick march in the opposite direction from the way you were going before.

[18:54] And that is the clearest picture I know for what repentance involves. Find the things that were wrong in your life and put them right.

Follow the teaching of God in the Ten Commandments, follow the teaching of Christ in the Sermon on the Mount, follow the teaching of the Apostles in the rest of the New Testament, put right what was wrong in your life.

Change the bad habits by God's grace. Be serious about holiness. We said God is holy and he calls for holiness from us.

Take that seriously. One fears, I fear anyway, that there are a lot of people in our churches who don't. And that's tragic. God, grant that none of us will ever be found among them.

No, God, through Christ who died for our sins, God is merciful to those who repent of their sins and turn to God in sorrow for the sins, the mistakes that they've made.

[20:22] And that's said very vividly in verses 11 and 12 of the chapter. Say to them, says God to Ezekiel, as I live, declares the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live.

that, says God, is what I want. Turn back, turn back from your evil ways. Why will you die, O house of Israel?

The mercy of God is always a reality that's there for those who humbly seek it in the way that God prescribes.

And that's God wooing. That's God alluring us to Christ and new life in Christ. And then the third message, or the third theme on which Ezekiel is to speak and be a faithful messenger, is the reality of restoration for those who turn.

And in the second paragraph of the chapter, verses 12 through 16, we can't look at it in detail, I'm afraid, we haven't time, but in that paragraph, God is telling Ezekiel to hammer away at the thought that once there's been repentance, there'll be forgiveness.

[22 : 16] Just as if a person professes to be walking with God, living for God, and then lapses into unrighteousness, well, I quote from verse 12, the righteousness of the righteous shall not deliver him when he transgresses.

But as for the wickedness of the wicked, he shall not fall by it when he turns from his wickedness turn from his and there again, you see, you've got the message of mercy, which is what God from his heart wants to stress because he takes pleasure in the wicked turning from their way to live. think of how we feel, however, about people who, yes, they're Canadian, but they become Muslims and some of them have actually gone to Syria and are fighting with the Muslim extremists at this time, fighting with them, if necessary, against Canada.

Well, we don't hesitate to shake our heads over the treason of the traitors. That's what we call it and that indeed is what it is.

But while God warns that he too will take seriously the treason of traitors to him and it will make no difference if before they became transgressors defying him, they were laboring, shall I say, to practice righteousness.

[24 : 35] They'll be judged for their treason, judged for their sin. so when someone who has kicked over the traces comes back to the Lord in repentance, well, the slate is washed clean.

And as I say, in this paragraph, Ezekiel is instructed to hammer away at that point for God delights in the sinner turning back from his or her evil ways and so finding life.

So, Ezekiel calls to faithfulness but never loses sight of the reality of restoration when his call is received by those who up to now have been unfaithful.

So, what does all this say to us today? Over and above anything that has seemed relevant to us in what I've said already, there are at least these three maxims arising out of the chapter.

Maxims for professed Christians. Avoid despair when you've slipped. No. turn and live.

[26 : 09] Don't give up hope. Avoid presumption. The idea that because you have a track record of attempted holiness, you may indulge yourself in moral slippage and well, simply disgrace your profession quietly and in secret by the way that you behave.

God will note and God will judge. don't presume that because you've had a track record of faithful church attendance or whatever for many years up to this point that now you can get away with well, whatever it's going to be.

Avoid presumption. Turn and live. Turn from the temptation to slip. And third lesson, avoid self-pity all along the line.

Marvel at the mercy of God. Rejoice in the knowledge that the God who hates sin saves sinners at the cost of Calvary.

This is how God woos. There's no pretense about it. He makes us face frankly the sins that we need to have forgiven.

[27 : 50] And he shows mercy first and foremost by forgiving those sins and then adopting us into his family as his children and granting us the grace of his Holy Spirit for godliness in the future and so bringing us to live in the fullest sense of that word.

Live a new life which is life indeed. And the secret of course as we know is to come to Christ and keep close to Christ as the Savior who grants forgiveness when we repent and ask for it.

as the Savior who sends us the Holy Spirit to enable us not to slip again and as the Savior who stands as our hope at the end of the road of this world to welcome us into the glory that he's prepared for us.

That of course is reading Ezekiel in New Testament terms which yes is what we should be doing.

These are tremendous things surely you will agree and a Holy Communion service is the most suitable place surely to talk about them and take them to heart and indeed to fellowship with Christ about them.

and renew our commitment to him as his disciples forgiven sinners heirs of the glory hoppers for the joy.

[29 : 49] God grant it. Amen.