

Commissioned
December 5, 2021
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Ezekiel 3:8-21

Opening: What do we mean when we say someone is “hardheaded?” Is it usually a compliment or a criticism? How can being “hardheaded” be a good/bad thing? Have you ever known someone who was “hardheaded” yet “soft-hearted?” The dictionary has two definitions: “*not easily moved or deceived; practical; shrewd.*” (That’s good) “*obstinate; stubborn; willful.*” (Our usual perception)

In today’s text, God spoke to a 30-year-old priest named Ezekiel to give him a “commission” as a prophet to speak on His behalf to the Jewish exiles in Babylon. They were rebellious and hardheaded, so God told Ezekiel He would make HIM hardheaded so he could deliver God’s stern message of judgment.

When we read about God’s Old Testament prophets, we can understand why they HAD to be a little “hardheaded” given their tough job and hostile audience. Though God no longer uses prophets, He still has proclaimers who preach. One of those great, old preachers, Vance Havner said, “*A preacher should have the mind of a scholar, the heart of a child, and the hide of a rhinoceros. His problem is how to toughen his hide without hardening his heart.*”ⁱ

None of us are preachers so how does this apply to us? We may not be a preacher, but every follower of Christ is “commissioned” to be a proclaimer (Mt. 28:16-20.) With that in mind, here’s the truth that should change us from this passage: Christ-followers must be “hardheaded” about the truth of God’s Word, and “soft-hearted” toward the people who need to hear it and trust Him.

Welcome back to the Old Testament and to the Major Prophets! Old Testament prophecy is HARD. The language can be difficult, the imagery can be weird (unless you’re a science fiction buff), but there is real value in studying the Old Testament prophets. If you are interested, here is a good article with “tips”: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/how-to-read-the-major-prophets-devotionally/> I would distill them down to this: Look at the big picture not small details, look for God’s character, and look for how it all points to Jesus.

Who was Ezekiel? Who was Daniel (our next study?) What was the situation? God’s people in Judah turned away from Him toward idol worship. Eventually, God used King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon to take them into captivity/exile. Ezekiel and Daniel were used by God among those exiles living in Babylon. Daniel rose to prominence in the government of the Babylonians and served as God’s man at the palace. Ezekiel was called to prophesy in a refugee camp. “When the people wouldn’t listen to his words, Ezekiel acted them out (and got a lot of attention – but not the good kind).”ⁱⁱ

Ezekiel also saw some really unusual visions from God: Angels, strange beings, wheels with eyes, the throne of God, and a valley of “dry bones” that come to life at God’s command. Over 60 times in this book we read, “...then you shall know that I am the Lord.” That’s the point.

- Let’s look at our text in Ezekiel chapter three. In verse four God told Ezekiel, “...go to the house of Israel and speak with my words to them...”ⁱⁱⁱ but they won’t listen to you! That’s an encouraging start to Zeke’s ministry!

Ezekiel 3:7–11 (NLT) — 7 But the people of Israel won’t listen to you any more than they listen to me! For the whole lot of them are hard-hearted and stubborn. **8** But look, I have made you as obstinate and hard-hearted as they are. **9** I have made your forehead as hard as the hardest rock! So don’t be afraid of them or fear their angry looks, even though they are rebels.” **10** Then he added, “Son of man, let all my words sink deep into your own heart first. Listen to them carefully for yourself. **11** Then go to your people in exile and say to them, ‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says!’ Do this whether they listen to you or not.”

- God was giving Ezekiel an explanation of his assignment as a prophet:
 - They won’t listen but don’t let that stop you from proclaiming.
 - Don’t be afraid of them. I will give you the “hard head” you need.
 - Verse 10: “*Let all my words sink deep into your own heart first. Listen to them carefully for yourself*” THEN go to the people.
- Why are most Christ-followers afraid to talk to others about their faith? How do the instructions in these verses help us overcome those fears?
- Christ-followers are to live our lives by scripture and proclaim Him to others. To do that we must let scripture “sink deep” into our hearts.
- In verses 12-15, the Spirit of God lifted Ezekiel up to see His glory.
- “*I heard behind me the voice of a great earthquake...^{iv} 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.^v And I came to the exiles [refugee camp] I sat there overwhelmed among them seven days.*”^{vi}
- His calling and the tough task ahead overwhelmed Ezekiel’s emotions.
- I would speculate that Ezekiel’s bitterness wasn’t anger toward God but anger at the situation he faced. “*I studied to be a priest in Judah and now I have to be a “hardheaded” messenger to people who will refuse to listen – what’s the point?*” Wouldn’t that make you a little agitated?
- Like Ezekiel, the calling to live by scripture and share the truth of it with other people can sometimes overwhelm us. God allowed Ezekiel to process his emotions before proclaiming the message. It’s not a bad thing for us to do some sitting and meditating before we share with people.

Ezekiel 3:16–17 (NLT) — 16 After seven days the Lord gave me a message. He said, **17** “Son of man, I have appointed you as a watchman for Israel. Whenever you receive a message from me, warn people immediately.

- In the days of “walled cities” there were “watchmen” high up on the walls to constantly scan for danger so they could warn the people.

- God appointed Ezekiel to be His watchman for Israel, but notice he didn't say, *"When you see something you think is a problem tell them what YOU think."* God said when you *"receive a message from me, warn people immediately."*
- Preachers, teachers, and laypeople are not called to share our opinion; we're called to share God's message from God's word.
- If we are "hardheaded" about the truth of God's word, how we live (our witness) and what we share will be based on the Bible and not opinions or ideas that are not in scripture.
- Remember definition #2 of "hardheaded?" *"Not easily moved or deceived; practical; shrewd."* Being "biblically hardheaded" means not being "easily moved or deceived" by things that are not in scripture.
- Paul wrote in **Ephesians 4:14–15 (NLT) — 14** Then we will no longer be immature like children. We won't be tossed and blown about by every wind of new teaching. We will not be influenced when people try to trick us with lies so clever they sound like the truth. **15** Instead, we will speak the truth in love, growing in every way more and more like Christ, who is the head of his body, the church.
- That's how to be "hardheaded" about scripture, let's talk about being "soft-hearted" for those who need to hear it.
- Verses 18-21 could be "misapplied" if we are not careful.
- Basically, God told Ezekiel, *"If people refuse to repent when they hear my message they will suffer the consequences themselves; but if YOU don't warn them I will hold you responsible for his blood."* Yikes!
- Scholars don't believe Ezekiel's own salvation was at stake.
- Bible Knowledge Commentary: *"Rather, by giving warning, Ezekiel would have delivered himself from any responsibility for the coming calamity. People who refused to heed his warning had only themselves to blame."^{vii}*
- The good news: We're not responsible for whether people accept the gospel or not, that's on them. We ARE responsible for sharing it.
- How might someone misapply and overreact to this concept of "if you don't warn him or her God will hold you responsible for his blood?"
- Some overzealous witnesses might read that and become "hardheaded" soul winners instead of "winsome" witnesses for Christ.
- We have the Holy Spirit living in us to guide us in how and when to share the gospel. We shouldn't be "arm wrestling" every person we meet down the Romans Road. We need to be a "winsome" witness.
- The Apostle Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 9:19, *"I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them."^{viii}* Then he said in 9:22, *"I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. ²³ I do it all for the sake of the gospel."^{ix}*
- Paul never compromised on the message (hardheaded on truth) but he adapted his approach to win "some." That is being a "winsome" witness. Play on words intended!

- A “winsome” witness displays the love of Christ to everyone and listens for the Spirit’s direction on when and how to share verbally.
- **Colossians 4:6 (ESV) — 6** Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.
- A “winsome” witness never compromises the truth of scripture but like, Paul, we should adapt our approach in order to win some. Like Ezekiel, we won’t win them all to Christ, but we can win some.
- Any thoughts on being biblically hardheaded yet soft-hearted to people?

So, What’s the Takeaway?

- Last November, Ed Stetzer delivered a message at Saddleback Church entitled: *“Winsome Witness in a Warring World.”*^x
- Doesn’t that describe where we are in this crazy time in society?
- Christ-followers must be “hardheaded” about the truth of God’s Word, and “soft-hearted” about the people who need to hear it and trust Him.
- We need a “hardheaded” determination to live biblically.
- We need to do what God told Ezekiel to do: “[L]et all my words sink deep into your own heart.” That means daily studying, applying, and obeying God’s word. We are called to live biblically.
- If we are “hardheaded” on scripture we will never compromise on what His word says, and will be wise and not deceived by other messages.
- This week let’s be “hardheaded” on truth, yet “soft-hearted” and winsome toward those who need it. Let’s the love of Christ to everyone and ask the Holy Spirit to direct us on when and how to share the message of the gospel.

ⁱ <https://www.azquotes.com/quote/1184791>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.ttb.org/resources/study-guides/ezekiel-study-guide>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.ttb.org/resources/study-guides/ezekiel-study-guide>

ⁱⁱⁱ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. (2016). (Eze 3:4). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

^{iv} *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. (2016). (Eze 3:12). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

^v *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. (2016). (Eze 3:14). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

^{vi} *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. (2016). (Eze 3:15). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

^{vii} Dyer, C. H. (1985). *Ezekiel*. In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Vol. 1, p. 1233). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

viii [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#). (2016). (1 Co 9:19). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

ix [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#). (2016). (1 Co 9:22–23). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

x <https://saddleback.com/watch/winsome-witness-in-a-warring-world/winsome-witness-in-a-warring-world>