

“And he said to me, ‘Son of man, stand on your feet, and I will speak with you.’ And as he spoke to me, the Spirit entered into me and set me on my feet, and I heard him speaking to me. 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. The descendants also are impudent and stubborn: I send you to them, and you shall say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD.’ And whether they hear or refuse to hear (for they are a rebellious house) they will know that a prophet has been among them.”

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

There aren't too many people, at least among those I know, who would be able to say what Paul said in our epistle lesson today: ***“For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”*** (2 Corinthians 12:10, ESV) When it comes to suffering, hardship and difficulty, we always hope and pray that it stays far, far away from us. We want to approach life with a *joie de vivre*, with a carefree and confident attitude that every day will be sunny and wonderful.

But that isn't the real world, is it? What can be happy and carefree one minute can be disastrous the next. Life is tough. Fortunately, we have hope in the midst of all the struggles of this life, the hope that comes from knowing that the Lord of Life, who came to die and rise for us still has the hairs of our heads all numbered and still cares about the things that are happening to us each day. We can believe God's promise: ***“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”*** (2 Corinthians 12:9, ESV) Or we can say with Paul: ***“For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.”*** (Romans 8:18, ESV)

Studies have shown that people of faith are better equipped to deal with the problems and stresses of life. We find real and sustaining comfort in God's promises. Our faith assures us of the hope that we have through Christ. We also can assure one another with His Word, as we ***“comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.”*** (2 Corinthians 1:4, ESV)

So what does this have to do with our text today? Peter reminds us: ***“but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you.”*** (1 Peter 3:15, ESV) Since we know the love and comfort of God, we want to show love and bring comfort to others. God wants His Word to go out into all the world, even though His Word is met with hostility, with indifference and with unbelief. Even though people may not think they need God, He is the only hope for all people. God sends His church like He sent Ezekiel, ***to nations of rebels, who have rebelled against me. They and their fathers have transgressed against me to this very day.*** God sends us because people need the truth that only God can give. They need a prophet among them. Thankfully the Word does work, and where people hear and believe that Word, it brings the soothing comfort that God wants people to experience by His grace.

We don't have to look too hard to see the power and influence of this sinful world at work in the lives of the people around us. We also see, far too clearly, the hurt that sin brings into our world. Marriages and relationships end in divorce or disagreement. People become ill. People die. Fire can destroy our home. Those things that we refer to as 'acts of God', such as hurricane, tornado, or flood, can devastate lives in a moment. We have families among us who have had to deal with the murder of a loved one. The world we live in is no different than the world to which Ezekiel was sent. It is a world of sin and evil. It is a world of unbelief where people live only for themselves, and forsake any of God's truth.

Sadly, there far more people in this world trying to face the troubles and trials of each day without God than there are those who are turning to Him and finding strength in His loving care. We may conclude that it doesn't do any good to point unbelievers to a loving God, when their rebellious hearts keep them from seeing God as a God of love, especially in the midst of their pains and problems. We can be far too content to see an unbelieving world get what it deserves, but what about those who are closest to us? What about those we know and love? We want to make them feel better. We want to take away their pain. We want to give them hope. We want to comfort them.

God wants people to find comfort and hope in this world. But there is no comfort apart from God's comfort. We want to help, but without God, life in this world is ultimately helpless and empty. The only thing that can truly bring hope is the Word of God, which speaks to us of the grace and mercy of a Saviour, who comes to suffer in our place and who dies and rises to bring us into eternal peace and joy.

When people are hurting, they need to hear about the love of God in Christ Jesus. When things are going well, people need to hear about God's love in Christ Jesus. Even those who don't believe still need to hear that message. We have to share the hope that is in us, and let the Holy Spirit work in that Word to bring comfort as He works faith through that Word.

That is the lesson we can learn from our text today. When God sent Ezekiel to the people of Israel, He was sent to bring a message of judgement to an unbelieving people. Since the people had turned from God, the Lord would let them experience the pains of their sinfulness. But God also had a message of comfort and grace for His people as He called them to turn with repentant hearts to Him.

Ezekiel had one thing to share with the people, the only thing which can awaken sinful hearts, and that is the full truth of God's Word. But God tells His messenger right up front that the message isn't always going to be received with joy and gladness. He says: ***"Son of man, I send you to the people of Israel, to nations of rebels, who have rebelled against me. They are obstinate and stubborn people, yet that wasn't to deter Ezekiel in his ministry to the people. Go and preach, God says. "And whether they hear or refuse to hear (for they are a rebellious house) they will know that a prophet has been among them."***

We need to have that same attitude in dealing with the people around us. As we speak to them, we want to share the only real hope that exists—and that is the hope that is ours through faith in Jesus Christ. Please do not misunderstand; I am not suggesting that if we simply share the gospel with hurting people everything will be okay. There isn't some sort of magical formula that we chant and things get better. But whether or not people believe in the God we worship and adore, they should know by our words and our actions, especially in times of trouble, that a child of God has been among them.

So what can we say? What can we do? First and foremost, pray. Pray that God would help you minister to others in their needs. Pray that the Holy Spirit would open the hearts of unbelievers to understand His grace and love in Jesus Christ. Pray that He will help and deliver your friends from their troubles and that these people, in their needs, would see God's hand at work for their good.

Once you have prayed, share the hope that is in you with your friends. This isn't time for a big judgement sermon, where we hit them with our bible and ask if they are saved or whether they believe. We don't want to ram our religion down someone's throat. But it is a time to speak of the power of God at work in you. Share with them how your faith makes a difference in these times. Let them know that you believe that God is with you and that no matter what, even when things don't work the way we want, He will bless you and help you.

Tell them that you love them, that you care about them. Be sincere and honest. Assure them that you will pray for them, even if they don't think it will do any good. Lend a hand where you can, since our actions also testify to the faith and hope that is in us. More importantly, tell them that Jesus loves them and how He gave Himself on the cross to bring us forgiveness, and how He lives so that we can have life forever with Him in glory.

Will it always make a difference? Ezekiel learned that preaching God's revealed truth doesn't always change the hearts and lives of people. The disciples had the same experience. Jesus sent them to preach His truth, but also told them: ***"And if any place will not receive you and they will not listen to you, when you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them."*** (Mark 6:11, ESV) Yet Jesus sent the apostles. The Lord sent Ezekiel to those rebellious people. God wants His Word to go out to the world to lead people to faith in the Saviour. There were—and there are—those who hear His message, who believe, and who find hope in God's goodness. We can do the same thing. We should remember our limitations. We cannot fix everything or wipe it away. We cannot always bring people the comfort they need. But we can speak God's comfort. And, as Ezekiel could well testify, the Word does work! It does bring hope and healing to even the most troubled hearts, as the God of grace and love comforts us with His goodness and mercy towards us in Jesus Christ. Amen.