

The Complete Word of God is at the Same Time Bitter and Sweet

Sermon for Sexagesimae

Ezekiel 2:1-5, 8-10, 3:1-3



¹And he said to me, "Son of man, stand on your feet, and I will speak with you." ²And as he spoke to me, the Spirit entered into me and set me on my feet, and I heard him speaking to me. ³And 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. ⁴The descendants also are impudent and stubborn: I send you to them, and you shall say to them, 'Thus says the Lord God.' ⁵And whether they hear or refuse to hear (for they are a rebellious house) they will know that a prophet has been among them.... ⁸"But you, son of man, hear what I say to you. Be not rebellious like that rebellious house; open your mouth and eat what I give you." ⁹And when I looked, behold, a hand was stretched out to me, and behold, a scroll of a book was in it. ¹⁰And he spread it before me. And it had writing on the front and on the back, and there were written on it words of lamentation and mourning and woe.... ¹And he said to me, "Son of man, eat

whatever you find here. Eat this scroll, and go, speak to the house of Israel." ²So I opened my mouth, and he gave me this scroll to eat. ³And he said to me, "Son of man, feed your belly with this scroll that I give you and fill your stomach with it." Then I ate it, and it was in my mouth as sweet as honey.

Bonhoeffer wrote from prison about stupidity in his essay titled "After Ten Years." In it, he explains that stupidity should be understood not as an intellectual problem, but as a moral one. According to Bonhoeffer, stupidity is not a lack of intellect, but rather the will to oppose all otherwise applicable rules and refusing to listen to rational or moral arguments. Bonhoeffer speaks of this stupidity from his own experience and writes that he looked into the faces of people he thought he knew, suddenly seeing something strange and closed off as if their hearts had hardened.

We find something similar among the people of Israel when the prophet Ezekiel was called by God to speak to them. It was not a matter of individual violations of God's commandments, but of a fundamental attitude. It was a matter of a will that actively opposed God and penetrated the very essence of human beings, so that their hearts, faces, and behavior were directed against God. Thus, the whole of humanity was turned upside down and inside out, turned against God and fellow humans. The shocking thing about this prognosis for the Israelites is that they were God's people. They were the ones who, above all others, were supposed to be a testimony to God's great deeds. That is exactly what was turned upside down. Ezekiel's words are first addressed to the people of God, so one must assume that there was a time when all that Ezekiel describes did not yet exist. There was a time when hearts were not hardened. There was a time when people followed God's commandments. There was a time when hearts, minds, and deeds were in harmony with one another, not in opposition to God but in harmony.

The process of distancing oneself from God in this manner usually occurs gradually. Initially, one becomes accustomed to the idea that life can be managed quite well without God. One develops a belief in God that is extremely superficial, namely, the belief that God approves of everything one does. This belief is no longer about what God has to say, but about what I think God has to say. It is thus a godless society that is God's people in name only.

The prophet Ezekiel is sent into precisely this situation of hardened hearts. His task is not an easy one. God Himself describes his task as being like a path among thorns and scorpions. His preaching will not be met with applause. On the contrary, the rebelliousness will only increase. With great sobriety, God explains to Ezekiel that he should not depend on the success of his preaching. His office is that of a watchman. One can imagine this quite vividly: the

watchman sits in the tower. Because he has a wide view of what is happening around the castle, his job is to warn when danger threatens. The people in the city do not have this view. This means that they can live in peace, pretending everything is fine and life can continue the same forever. Only the one sitting in the tower can see the imminent danger. His job is to shout aloud and point out the danger. He should do this even if the people below don't believe him. If he doesn't say anything, the watchman himself is responsible for the death of the city.

This description of the human heart and the call to repentance were taken up by Jesus and Paul. That is why the prophetic office continues to exist for us today. The people we know and live with are no different from us. Essentially, we are all lost to God. Yet, through the Word of God we have the view from the tower and thus a responsibility as watchmen. We have the broad perspective to recognize why we are lost. But even more than that, we also recognize that God Himself is setting out to save us from our wandering.

The description of God's encounter with Ezekiel is exciting. We see nothing in Ezekiel's person that distinguishes him in any particular way. God Himself takes action, puts him on his feet, and gives him spiritual bread to eat. The bread that Ezekiel is given to eat is tough. The scroll is written on both sides, and contains nothing but lamentation, woe, and sorrow. When Ezekiel heard this, he fell down and could do nothing. The words were too hard to bear. Ezekiel cannot do it on his own. God therefore makes him do something extremely unusual. He has to eat the thick scroll that God has written, and which contains nothing but lamentation, woe, and sorrow. As an explanation, God says this so that he will not contradict him. God's words should be within him. Ezekiel should not only have them in his head or his thoughts, but he should actually eat them physically. I can imagine that such a scroll is quite disgusting and probably unhealthy as well. And yet, God wants it that way. I imagine how Ezekiel took the scroll with fear and trembling at that time. He had no idea how he would manage it, but God had commanded it. So, he slowly and hesitantly began to break off the parchment and put it in his mouth. How great was his surprise when this piece of parchment tasted like sweet honey. At that time, honey was the most precious food of all.

What Ezekiel experienced is a good description of how God's Word still works today. Many of God's words are difficult to understand. Most of the time, we don't want what God wants. We don't want to love our neighbor. We would much rather love ourselves. Likewise, we don't want to live for God and put Him first in our lives. All of this contradicts us, and I know many people who throw the Bible aside in disappointment because of this. Some say, "Why should I read these old words, which were simply thought up by ancients?" However, those who take the time to read them can have the same experience as Ezekiel. What you consider bitter and unhygienic suddenly tastes like sweet honey. It is the same when you confess your sin. Admitting that you were wrong is bitter and painful. When we confess our sins, we expose ourselves, not being the great heroes we would like to be. But when I confess my sin, I realize that I am becoming free. What has been weighing me down, bothering me, and what I've been worrying about can melt away like butter in the sun. This is always the case with the Word of God. God's Word is alive and it promises us life and bliss.

Even when God's Word reveals our sin and is against us, it saves us and brings us bliss. We can take in such treasures of God's Word again and again, to be strengthened and comforted by them. God's command to Ezekiel to eat the scroll seems strange to us, but God said it and therefore Ezekiel did it. At least as strange are the words of Jesus, spoken much later: "Take and eat, this is my body...take and drink...this is my blood." Every Sunday we speak these very words at Holy Communion and firmly believe that Jesus Himself dwells in us and gives us forgiveness and faith. The words we hear with our ears are not enough. God Himself must dwell within us. God Himself alone can remove the contradiction in our hearts so that we can believe.

Even before Bonhoeffer was captured, he preached to youth on the Danish northern island of Fanø. He said, "We want to speak to this world, not half a word, but a whole word, a courageous word, a Christian word. We want to pray that this word will be given to us..." Bonhoeffer said that we owe the world a whole word. It would be a half-word if we only spoke of grace, love, and peace without judgment and if the world no longer challenged us. But a word that only challenges us and leaves us without a physical connection to Christ through baptism and communion would also be a half-word. The Word of God should not only be whole, it should also be Christian. That means grounded in Jesus. The message becomes Christian when the message of doom is transformed into salvation. Ezekiel ate the message of doom, and then it became sweet as honey. Amen.