

Strong at the Broken Places

2. Facing Reality

July 25, 2021

Around the end of March I decided to play in a softball league this year. It had been a long time since I'd played, and I thought it might be fun. So, I found a men's league online and signed up. They held a workout for the new guys, so I dug out my old glove and off I went. I arrived on time, but it didn't occur to me to get there early enough to warm up. I figured that would be built that into the practice time. But it wasn't. When we took positions on the infield, I just started throwing the ball from shortstop. I really didn't think anything of it until one of the guys said to me, "I remember the days when I was younger and I could just start throwing without warming up." It was true, I hadn't warmed up my arm, but no big deal, right? I finished the practice and went home looking forward to the season.

But when I got up the next morning, I had a hard time putting on my shirt because I could barely lift my arm without feeling like someone was sticking a knife in it. In my *mind* I was able to throw the ball like I used to when I was younger – but the *reality* was I wasn't young anymore. And I hadn't played softball in over 12 years. So, my arm hurt for weeks. I even Googled symptoms of rotator cuff injury. It took me about a month before I was able to throw comfortably again. Now I always take time to warm up. I didn't want to admit that my body had changed, until reality smacked me in the face (or in the arm.)

Sometimes there is a major difference between what we want to be true and what is actually real.

- We might be sure that we'll ace the test, until we get our grade.
- We might tell ourselves that our eating habits are fine, until we look at the number on the scale.
- We're convinced we're going to get the job... until we don't.

Facing reality can be difficult, so sometimes we choose not to. This is true even when the reality is a good one - some won't accept it. I heard a story about a guy who was convinced he was dead. His family tried to convince him that he was alive, but he wouldn't listen to them. Finally they took him to a doctor who sat him down and did everything he could to convince him he wasn't dead. Didn't work. Finally, the doctor said, "Would you agree that dead men don't bleed?" "Of course, they don't bleed." the guy responded. "Great," the doctor said, and then pricked the man's finger. When the guy saw blood trickling out, he said, "Well, I'll be, dead men do bleed!"

That's why they say, "Denial is not just a river in Egypt." We often edit reality if it's not pleasant. The tricky thing is its hard to know when we're deceiving ourselves! If denial runs rampant when it comes to the physical realm that we can see, how much more susceptible are we to deny spiritual realities that we can't see with our eyes?

That's why it was so hard to be a prophet like Ezekiel; he had to tell people truths they didn't want to hear. He had to try to make them face the reality they wanted to deny. Ezekiel lived about 600 years before Christ was born. At that time, the nation of Israel needed a wake-up call. They needed to face the reality that their relationship with God was broken. Israel had been conquered by the Babylonians and most of the leaders had been taken as captives to Babylon. They were in a broken place and they weren't facing the truth that the reason that they were living in exile was that they were unfaithful to God by worshipping idols.

So God sent a prophet named Ezekiel to shake the people out of their denial. Chapter 1 of Ezekiel describes how God appeared unexpectedly to Ezekiel while he sat on the bank of the Kebar River in Babylon. Then God called Ezekiel to be his spokesman: ***Ezekiel 2:3-5*** *He said: "Son of man, I am sending you to the Israelites, to a rebellious nation that has rebelled against me; they and their ancestors have been in revolt against me to this very day. ⁴ The people to whom I am sending you are obstinate and stubborn. Say to them, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says.'⁵ And whether they listen or fail to listen—for they are a rebellious people—they will know that a prophet has been among them*

God calls Ezekiel to speak his message to the Israelites, but he warns the prophet that the people might tune him out. But God says, "Don't let that stop you from speaking." ***Ezekiel 3:11*** *Go now to your people in exile and speak to them. Say to them, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says,' whether they listen or fail to listen."* Ezekiel is not responsible for how the people respond, he is only responsible for communicating God's message the best way he knows how. The people will be responsible for how they respond. Ezekiel is only responsible for delivering the message: ***Ezekiel 3:18-19*** – *When I say to a wicked person, 'You will surely die,' and you do not warn them or speak out to dissuade them from their evil ways in order to save their life, that wicked person will die for their sin, and I will hold you accountable for their blood. ¹⁹ But if you do warn the wicked person and they do not turn from their wickedness or from their evil ways, they will die for their sin; but you will have saved yourself.*

Ezekiel is called to a high-stakes mission: God's message is a life-or-death matter. Verse 18 says God calls Ezekiel to try to convince the Israelites to repent so that they can save their lives. If the people ignore God's message, they will have to deal with the consequences. But if Ezekiel ignores God's call to preach God's message, he will deal with the consequences. As Christians, we are not called to be OT prophets. However, there are some similarities between Ezekiel's call and ours. Ezekiel was called to communicate God's message to people, and so are we. We are to be the messengers of Jesus in our day like Ezekiel was to his. Why would we go to the trouble to do that? Why take the risk to speak to people about Jesus if they might not listen anyway? There are several motivations.

Motivation # 1. We have been called by God to deliver his message to people.

We start here, because if God calls us to do something, that's all the motive we should need. He says it, I will obey it. God called Ezekiel to communicate his message, so he did it. And Jesus has called us to share his gospel:

Matthew 28:19-20 *Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.*

Acts 1:8 *But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."*

That call is given to every Christ follower, not just preachers, not just those with "the gift." It's true that some people have a gift of evangelism, but each of us are called to share the hope we have in Christ.

Motivation #2: the gospel is a life-or-death matter.

In Ezekiel 3:18-19, God told Ezekiel that he is accountable for the life or death consequences of communicating God's message. The Gospel is both really bad news and incredibly good news. Here it is in one verse: **Romans 6:23** *For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* First the bad news. **Romans 6:23a** says, "The wages of sin is death...." The wages – or expected result of sin is death. Not just physical death, but spiritual death. In other words, hell. Now that's a harsh reality. We might want to write it off as an outdated scare tactic. And truthfully, I'd rather not talk about hell. In fact, I usually don't. But if I am going to be a faithful pastor to you, there are times I have to speak about it because Jesus did. Jesus talked about hell... a lot, and I need to say what he said.

- **Matthew 25** Jesus talks about people being divided into 2 groups, one going to eternal life and the other to eternal fire.
- **Luke 16:23** He said hell is a place of eternal torment.
- **Mark 9:43** He says it's a place of unquenchable fire.
- **Matthew 13:42** he says it's where people gnash their teeth in anguish and regret.
- **Luke 16:19-31** he says there is no way to return from hell.

I could go on, but I won't. At the core, Hell is the absence of God's presence. It is eternity without his light and love. And it is the result of sin. God doesn't send people to hell, they choose to go there. When we push God away from us in this life, then he lets us have our wish in spades in the next life. Most of us don't want to think about that, especially when it comes to friends and family. I know I don't. We can't bear the idea of someone we love being eternally separated from God, so we tell ourselves that God wouldn't do that. We love our friend, and God is love, so surely God won't let them be in hell for eternity.

We need to let harsh realities impact us – and to motivate us. Over the years I had many conversations with my father about the gospel, but he always resisted. A couple of years ago he was in the hospital, and I had another conversation about the Gospel with him. At that point he responded with a shoulder shrug. I considered that progress because it wasn't a "No." Then he a week later he had a cardiac arrest and was close to

death. I realized that the time could be very near that he would enter eternity—without Christ. I remember lying in bed that night with my stomach churning. I didn't sleep much. I remember thinking, "This is it. There is no one else who is going to share the gospel with him if I don't. It's up to me." So, the next morning I canceled my appointments, got in my car and drove to the hospital. He was on a ventilator and couldn't speak, but he could hear me and squeeze my hand. I got right to the point and said, "Dad, your body might not last much longer. But you can live forever with God if you want to. If you want Jesus to forgive you and to live with him, just squeeze my hand. A couple seconds ticked by, and then he squeezed my hand. After 50 years of talking with him, I was overwhelmed. He lived another year and a half, then passed away from the same event that happened in the hospital. But I was so glad that I allowed myself to be agitated enough to go back one more time.

The bad news is bad --- the wages of sin is death. Yet the good news is more amazing: Romans 3:23b *but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* God offers us an abundant life that starts now and never ends. People made alive in Jesus find purpose, the path to heal broken relationships, "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness..." It's the power of God that can right injustice and the ills of the world. And we receive it as a gift, we don't have to earn it. That's motivation!

Motivation #3 - the glory of God

Ezekiel was sitting by the river. What got him up and moving? A vision of God. He experienced the glory of God that overwhelmed him. How could he stay quiet about that? If we have not told anyone about Jesus in a long time, a cure for that is to experience the reality of God's love and glory. We talk about what excites us. I haven't told anyone about my breakfast cereal, but I have told people about Jesus. That's why spiritually on fire people share their faith a lot more often than spiritually complacent people. It's no accident that Jesus told the disciples in Acts 1:8 that they would be his witnesses AFTER the Spirit came upon them. The presence of God in our lives will motivate us to share it with others. And the reverse is also true: If you want to experience the power of God, then reach out. That's when the power comes. Why would God fill us with power if we are not going to do anything with it? God is not going to send us power to do nothing. *"Why would the Comforter comfort people who are already comfortable? He comforts those who have ventured out of their comfort zones."*

Once we are motivated to share the Gospel, then what? How do we do that? God called Ezekiel to speak to his own community. *3:5 You are being sent to your own...* That is true for most of us: we are called to our own people – where we live, work, play, and learn. Some of you might know that B.L.E.S.S. is an acronym that stands for a process or rhythm of the gospel. We cover this in MD1, so I won't go into great detail here, but here are the basics.

1. B = Begin with prayer

Before we talk to people about God, we talk to God about people. We ask God to work in the hearts of the people we care about. And that makes a difference. A few years ago I was cleaning out my files when I came across a card that was more than 25 years old.

There were 4 names written on that card: people I knew who were not yet followers of Jesus. One of the guys became a pastor and church planter. Another guy came to faith in Christ. Two of the others did not come to Christ as far as I knew, but maybe they have since. Praying makes a difference! We don't need to seek out a lot of people to share with – they are already in our lives. Who do you live, work, and play with? Start praying for those who don't know Christ.

2. L = Listen

3. E = Eat

These steps are about building a relational connection with someone.

We are called to love others as ourselves, and we start out by learning about the person. The best way to do that is to listen to them. And eating together is fun! Meals are significant in the scriptures. Jesus often ate with people. One of my mottos is, "Something good happens when people eat together."

4. Serve

When we listen and spend time with someone, at some point we will notice a need. It might be as simple as needing something to drink with lunch – so we buy them a coke. Or it might be something more significant, like help with a home project or a lift to the airport. When we serve we demonstrate God's love in action.

5. Share the Story

At some point we will have the chance to share what the Lord has done in our lives --- our own experience.

Author Lee Grady wrote about a conversation he had with a friend named Josh who leads an evangelistic organization. Before the pandemic Josh spent most of his time preaching overseas because he felt people were more open to receive the gospel in foreign countries. But today he is witnessing a new spiritual openness in the United States. "I believe that the on-fire, remnant church is realizing that the only hope for America is a spiritual awakening," Josh told me yesterday after leading an outreach in downtown Chicago. "America has been very hardened to the gospel, but now because of all the shakings in our society—the coronavirus, political turmoil and economic issues—I am seeing such openness."¹

So let's start right now with the "B" of BLESS - -let's pray for people to come to him. Let's bow. Ask the Lord to bring to your mind someone you live among – maybe it's a family member, or a neighbor, someone on your street. [Pause] Got that name? You might ask the Lord to bring someone to mind you work with. Scan your colleagues: who needs Christ? What do you do for recreation? Anyone there you can pray for? Someone you go to school with? Let's take a moment to pray for those people to come to Christ.

¹ *The Lord Says Let Down Your Nets for a Catch* – J. Lee Grady https://www.charismamag.com/blogs/fire-in-my-bones/49475-the-lord-says-let-down-your-nets-for-a-catch?utm_source=Fire%20in%20my%20Bones&utm_medium=email&utm_content=subscriber_id:758408&utm_campaign=FIMB%20-%202021-06-30

