

The meal God gives - now and then.

Letton Hall 2015 – Ezekiel 3 & Matthew 22

Preamble: Meal theme. Spoilt for choice in the Bible. Great for me to do some in-depth bible teaching – Steve will ground this in the afternoon and give more space for response, but bear with me today – we’re going to cover some ground. Needed to start with Jonah – brief recap. Hard to choose which one of these next, then realised both – and maybe something different for Sunday! This is the now and then – and both have something to teach us and both speak into the trials that we see happening among us. We have realism and hope.

Scrolling forward: Jonah was 8th century Israel prophet. Nahum later prophesied to Nineveh, who returned to wicked ways, and it was overthrown eventually – the revival came but didn’t last. But mercy was extended for a season. Jonah learnt some lessons – perhaps learnt to weep – but Israel didn’t heed the lessons, and continued to run from God’s call. And there were consequences. Israel itself fell to Assyria, and the nation that God spared because of Jonah’s message became the ruin of Jonah’s beloved home country. But Israel had brought it upon themselves by their idolatry. Judah fared better, maintaining the true Davidic line, but it too fell in 586 BC to Babylon, who had succeeded Assyria as the great world power. It was around this time that Ezekiel was born and he ministered through this time of Babylonian conquest and exile.

Ezekiel’s Diet: Scrolls, baked poo, nothing at all – not exactly Michelin star stuff. We’re going to focus in on one of his meals, that is echoed elsewhere by other Bible writers – but first let’s put him in context.

Ezekiel - Wheels within wheels: Ezekiel is not a popular read among Christians today, especially in the west. He’s not very popular in the Bible! One of few prophets not mentioned anywhere outside his book. Poor guy! The stuff he writes about is strange. Some bits we like. We like ch.37 with the dry bones living – that’s a picture we can relate to and brings hope. We like the river in ch. 47 (?) – another gem of a picture – but beyond that, what do we know, and how much has this book influenced your life as a Christian? Shame really, because this is an important book for our times.

Ezekiel – Why we need it: See if I can pique your interest. One of 4 major prophets, though Daniel often lumped with 12 minors – just scroll size! Isaiah – the Messianic prophet extraordinaire. Unto us a child is born, a son is given. Etc. Jeremiah – the man of sorrows, showing the heart of the Father for his children, and promising a new heart and a new identity in the family of God. It is the prophet of the Father heart of God, yearning for his wayward children. What do you think Ezekiel might emphasise? Isaiah refers to the Spirit of God occasionally. Jeremiah not once! Ezekiel more than any other book in the Old Testament. Why is it weird and hard to get our heads around? Because we’re so full of materialism and Western naturalism that we find this spiritual supernatural stuff difficult. This is spiritual and supernatural. And we need this – all the more because of our consumerist materialist world-gone-mad. If you haven’t read it, read it. If you have read it, read it again! I haven’t read it in ages – but I’m feeling inspired to, as I’m beginning to grasp how much we need it.

Ezekiel – the missing link: If the Trinitarian view of these 3 major prophets isn't enough – consider how the 4 major prophets flow, esp. in relation to the life of Jesus. Isaiah tees up the start of Jesus' life and work. Galilee has seen a great light. A son is born. And this is his mission mandate – Jesus quotes Is.61 at the start of his ministry. This is the beginning – Jesus bursting on the scene. There's also pointing forward to Jesus' second coming, but this is still advent theme – Jesus comes. Being a very Messianic prophet, we do get a fuller picture, with Jesus as the suffering servant in Is. 53, but this is the theme focused on most in Jeremiah, the man of sorrows. We see Jeremiah opposed, as happened to Jesus in his latter ministry years. For years Jeremiah is ignored and shunned – thrown down a well, mocked and mistreated. Then when he has been proved right, the people come to him in penitence and ask his advice: should we stay or go? He prays and says stay. They not only go, but force him to go with them. It is unrelenting. Jeremiah culminates his prophecy with the book of Lamentations – a powerful foreshadowing of the passion of Christ. Daniel takes up the story with a grand theme of the kingdoms of the world and their relationship with God's kingdom, and points forward to the unfolding of the ages. So what comes in between Jeremiah and Daniel? Between the Gospels and the NT letters and all the church history that comes after those? Ezekiel is the book of Acts of the Old Testament – it's all about the working of the Spirit not only in Messiah's life but especially in the people of God. It is the indwelling presence of God with His people. See what we're missing if we miss this out?

Ezekiel – Unravelling the mystery: Ezekiel was a priest who happened to be a prophet (unlike Jeremiah who was the reverse). Jeremiah poo-pooed the Temple worship – he stood at the Temple gate and derided those who went there – “This isn't what God wants – forget the Temple – get with the programme! You think the temple is where it's at? Forget it!” I get that! Ezekiel loved the Temple. But he never got a chance to act as priest there. He was later than Jeremiah, and by the time he was 30 and of age, the exile was upon them and he was away. Later the temple was destroyed. But his heart for the temple was there, and he pushes in with God to get at what the Temple was meant to be. It becomes a language for talking about the real thing – the spiritual temple, whose walls are made of breath/spirit – that grows with the people of God. And words get clumsy when you're trying to inhabit a spiritual reality behind a misunderstood outward expression of it. People hadn't grasped what the Temple was meant to convey while they had it. Now, without it, Ezekiel is attempting to get at what it was about. So, we get all kinds of images, and God used what was in his mind, with Babylonian sights and sounds that were alien and bizarre – animals and creatures and symbols and signs – but uniquely, using the building blocks of thought that were in his head from Israel and Babylon, God reveals through the mystery something of the awesomeness of God and His glory in His people. The glory of God departs from the Temple and comes to reside in the people. It's great! God's glory was there – it was the place people would call if they wanted to see if God were in, but now God has become homeless. He's not there – and instead he makes his home in us, wherever we go. This is Acts. The Holy Spirit fills the disciples and they go and take God's presence with them. This is our role. We are a holy people... Ezekiel was very nationalistic, because of his priestly preoccupations – lots about Israel all the way through and nothing about other nations – until the end, when we discover that God's purpose is to have a people he can live in that will bless all nations. We keep proclaiming his excellencies until everyone has heard. The good news of the kingdom will go...

Ezekiel – Sweet and bitter: Here's the rub. Ezekiel heard from God. He communed with God. Sometimes bit strange. Don't think it's a model for us all to follow – not a general rule of how to

encounter God. But he was obedient. He received the word of God and it was sweet. He understood the spiritual mysterious reality of God's purpose of how God wanted to be present on the earth, through His Spirit, through His people – bringing life to the dead, hope to the hopeless, flooding the land with rivers of grace, reaching the nations. Sweet revelation. Sweet experience of God. Do you want this too? Jeremiah reflected on this in the same way – a sweet taste in the mouth – what joy to hear from God! But it set them apart. Jeremiah suffered. And when Ezekiel took his message, the scroll for which was so sweet in his mouth, to the people. When he went to proclaim the excellencies of God, it was tough. John uses the same imagery in Revelation 10: sweet to the mouth, but bitter in the stomach. And it is confusing, bewildering, it makes us question the experience or the message. This isn't how it's meant to be! We have a great spiritual high, but when we come to pass on the blessing, people look blank – they are so far off. We recommend reading Ezekiel so they will get it. They say: "What?! Wheels within wheels! Weirdo!"

Eating the Word: Beloved, eat the word. It is life-giving. It is sweet. It is true. It is good. But it does not guarantee a trouble-free life. In fact, it will give you tummy ache. Jesus promised that he would always be with us in this world – why? Because he knew we'd always need him in this world. He also promised that in this world we will have...trouble! What an encouragement! This is the realism. We need the word of God and the Spirit of God, and the 2 go hand in hand. The spirit leads us into truth and helps us discern God. Spiritual things are spiritually discerned. And the truth helps us encounter the spirit and guard against the counterfeit – not everything that glitters is gold! Not everything supernatural is God. And the more naïve we are in spiritual things in this ridiculous materialist age, the more vulnerable we are and the more we need God's word and Spirit working in tandem in our lives. Ezekiel has so much for us. But even when we get it, we have trouble. We are living through a season of trial. There is bad news, illness, and trouble among us just now. We've had sweet moments with God and received sweet truths – but there are moments when it doesn't make a difference. It doesn't work! Nobody listens. Those who do are even more confuse than before and don't change. And it's not working for us now. There's pain in our own bodies. That word that was so sweet has become something else. We're wishing we never even tasted it. It gave us hope and now the hope is dashed. We just have tummy ache. It is bitter. We're wishing we hadn't eaten it and then we wouldn't have the pain of hopes dashed as well as the pain of this world's troubles. Why give us sweet when this is what's going to happen? Because the sweet sustains us. The sweet taste is the reality. The truth and goodness of God are uncomfortable in this fallen world – that's why it can be uncomfortable when they are in us in this world. But with God, the price tag is visible! With Satan, you don't see the full cost until after. Jesus said, count the cost. If you follow me, there will be a cross. When Jesus arrested Paul on the road to Damascus, the call came: you will suffer much for me. Not very cheery, but there it is – it's real. It means we shouldn't be surprised when it comes. It means that when trouble hits, it's not God letting us down. It doesn't mean God is not there. It doesn't mean God is not good. It just means this world has gone wrong. The word is sweet because the word is good. Pursue the word. Pursue the Spirit. But know that it will set you apart, and brace yourself. This is the food God gives.

The food God will give: To finish on a brighter note, let's look ahead, to Matthew 22. There is a feast coming. The Father wants the best for His Son. The guests he invited made excuses. So, all were invited. It was an amazing event. The best food ever. And guess what? No tummy ache! Just sweet and the sweetness stays. This world may pull us back from time to time into the grim realities of a world in bondage under Satan – but we get the tastes of heaven come to us in the midst of it,

sweet in the mouth here and now, breaking through and reminding us of the feast to come. Paul, who suffered much more than any of us, shipwrecked, stoned, beaten, imprisoned, he said this: Momentary light affliction is storing up for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond comparison (1 Thess. 4:16?). Paul said it: "To die is gain, but to live is Christ". Personally, Paul couldn't wait to escape this vale of tears, but he knew it was better for the churches he'd planted to live longer. Death does not have the last word. The sting is gone! Death is defeated. Fear is gone. We know there will only be the feast.

The right clothes: Matthew, unlike Luke, adds this bit on. Here is someone in the party, at the feast, but not wearing the right clothes. Matthew is a disciples' manual. Hell is not something we scare people into heaven with! I'm not getting into the debate on the nature of hell, or whether or not we are "once saved, always saved". I just want to say that Jesus is making a point in the parable, which Matthew chooses to record because he wants disciples to know that we must take this seriously. Pursue the word. Pursue the Spirit. Find your calling. Live in it. Change your ways. Put on righteousness. Don't mess about with sin. "Walk in a manner worthy of your calling." – Ephesians 4:1

There is a meal that God gives. It is sweet in the mouth. Now, it can produce tummy-ache. But only for a short short short season. Then it will be sweet forever in the feast of the king in honour of his Son. To enter in we need to reconnect with the Spirit and eat the words He gives, come what may.