

# EZEKIEL

## Chapter 3

And he said to me, “Son of man, eat whatever you find here. Eat this scroll, and go, speak to the house of Israel.” 2 So I opened my mouth, and he gave me this scroll to eat. 3 And 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. 4 And he said to me, “Son of man, go to the house of Israel and speak with my words to them. 5 For you are not sent to a people of foreign speech and a hard language, but to the house of Israel— 6 not to many peoples of foreign speech and a hard language, whose words you cannot understand. Surely, if I sent you to such, they would listen to you. 7 But the house of Israel will not be willing to listen to you, for they are not willing to listen to me: because all the house of Israel have a hard forehead and a stubborn heart. 8 Behold, I have made your face as hard as their faces, and your forehead as hard as their foreheads. 9 Like emery harder than flint have I made your forehead. Fear them not, nor be dismayed at their looks, for they are a rebellious house.” 10 Moreover, he said to me, “Son of man, all my words that I shall speak to you receive in your heart, and hear with your ears. 11 And go to the exiles, to your people, and speak to them and say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD,’ whether they hear or refuse to hear.” 12 Then the Spirit lifted me up, and I heard behind me the voice of a great earthquake: “Blessed be the glory of the LORD from its place!” 13 It was the sound of the wings of the living creatures as they touched one another, and the sound of the wheels beside them, and the sound of a great earthquake. 14 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. 15 And I came to the exiles at Tel-abib, who were dwelling by the Chebar canal, and I sat where they were dwelling. And I sat there overwhelmed among them seven days.

**3:1** *feed your belly with this scroll* – The command for Ezekiel to “eat” the scroll in 2:8 is repeated two more times in 3:1, and it will be expanded in 3:3. All that repetition, plus the fact that in this verse the object (“whatever you receive”) is placed first in the chiasmic structure of the double command to “eat,” has been taken to imply that Ezekiel was reluctant to eat something so unappetizing; perhaps he was resisting. The supposition is not implausible. Moses, Isaiah, and Jeremiah voiced reservations when they were called into the ministry (Ex 3:11; 4:10; Is 6:5; Jer 1:6–7). But Ezekiel does not raise any explicit objection to God’s call and command to eat. A comparable double command, with double obedience by Ezekiel, occurs in Ezekiel 37, when the prophet prophesies to the dry bones (37:4, 7, 9–10). (CC)

Blessed Lord, who hast caused all Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning, grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and *inwardly digest* them, that by patience and comfort of Thy holy Word we may embrace, and ever hold fast, the blessed hope of everlasting life, which Thou hast given us in our Savior Jesus Christ, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. (TLH) (CC)

The part of the collect about inwardly digesting the Scriptures is based on this episode in Ezekiel. We might compare Ezekiel’s ingestion and digestion of the Word in scroll form to the way in which in the Lord’s Supper the Word made flesh is received by mouth and ingested to permeate the body of the communicant, who is a member of Christ’s one body (1 Cor 10:16–17). (CC)

The double command to “eat” in 3:1 is followed in virtually the same breath by a reiteration of the command to preach to an apostate people (“then go, speak to the house of Israel”). The extraordinary experience was not an end in itself, but a prerequisite for ministry. (CC)

*house of Israel.* Phrase appears 78 times in Ezk but rarely in the rest of the OT. “House” would accent a family solidarity in the covenant. Although the Israelites are descendants, they have abandoned the heritage of the family of God. (TLSB)

**3:3** *fill your stomach.* The Word must permeate every fiber of Ezekiel’s being so he will be prepared for the unpopular ministry ahead of him. (TLSB)

The causative forms of “eat” in these verses perhaps imply a supernaturally aided act. The picturesque reiteration of the command in 3:3 involving “stomach” and “innards” implies that Ezekiel’s entire body is to be permeated with the ingested divine Word. Faith is never a matter of either “head” (intellect) or “heart” (spiritual disposition) alone, but of both. That principle applies to a called messenger of the Word in a special way, and in Ezekiel that point is made most dramatically: the scroll of God’s Word enters through his mouth (head) and is to be digested in his innards (in the vicinity of his heart). The objective Word, coming to him entirely from outside himself, must be “internalized.” Even his physical life is to be grasped, owned by the Word. One immediately thinks of the many subsequent action prophecies of Ezekiel (especially in chapters 4–5) that involve his body. Since hostility and rejection were also his lot, one might also invoke a certain “theology of the cross” here. (CC)

*sweet as honey.* What Jeremiah experienced emotionally (Jer 15:16) was experienced by Ezekiel in a more sensory way: Words from God are sweet to the taste (see Ps 19:10; 119:103)—even when their content is bitter (see Rev 10:9–10). (CSB)

Frequent simile in the Bible. Cf Ps 119:103; Rv 10:8–10, which appear to be only figures of speech. Here it seems Ezekiel actually did eat the papyrus scroll, which would not normally taste sweet. (TLSB)

The Word will give Ezekiel spiritual joy in his ministry despite the divine mandate to preach searing Law (especially in chapters 4–24) as well as comforting Gospel (especially chapters 33–48). (CC)

**3:4** *speak with My words.* Implies a verbatim repetition of God’s own words. (TLSB)

Ezek 3:4–11 is a unit that basically repeats 2:3–7, although heightening virtually every detail. Ingesting the scroll (3:1–3) has prepared Ezekiel interiorly for his task, and the accent in these verses is on his exterior preparation. He will be supplied with God’s very words (3:4). In comparison with 2:3, the stress shifts from Yahweh’s appointment to Ezekiel’s responsibility to be absolutely obedient in delivering the divine Word to Israel. (CC)

**3:5** Ezekiel is called to preach to his own people, who, of course, speak the same language. (TLSB)

*foreign speech.* Hbr idiom. Lit, “deep of lips.” (TLSB)

*hard language.* Lit, “heavy of tongues.” Is 28:11–12 vividly predicts how painfully difficult it will be for other exiles to learn a foreign language. (TLSB)

Ezekiel is not to be a “foreign missionary” to peoples who speak languages unintelligible to the prophet, nor is he even to have a cross-cultural ministry. He is to minister to his own people, who have the same language and culture as he does. They will have no difficulty understanding his tongue. If they refuse to listen, it will be due to their rebellious sinful nature. (CC)

**3:6** *Surely if I had sent you to such.* Jesus spoke similar words to Israel (see Mt 11:21). (CSB)

Hyperbole. Underscores the unexpectedness of Israel's obstinacy. Compare the Ninevites' reaction to Jonah's preaching (Jnh 3:5–9) with the Lord's denunciation of Capernaum and its neighbors (Mt 11:20–24). It is often harder to regain those who once belonged but have fallen away. (TLSB)

The new thought in this verse uses a contrary-to-fact assertion: if Ezekiel had been sent to some other people besides Israel, they would have listened. In 3:5, the foreign "people" mentioned would most likely be the Babylonians, among whom the Israelites had been forced to live. In 3:6 one would probably think of any of the various other ethnic groups who had also been exiled to the vicinity of Nippur. The best OT example of the situation God describes is the people of Nineveh, who had repented at Jonah's preaching (despite that prophet's own initial refusal to preach). This point is probably also implicit in the oracles to the other nations, found in virtually all the prophetic books (including Ezekiel 25–32), although the situation is more complicated there. At the very least, other nations are subject to God's judgment because they have not obeyed "natural law," the law written in their hearts (especially evident in Amos 1–2; cf. Rom 2:12–15). Jesus makes a similar point, asserting that Tyre and Sidon, even Sodom, would have responded better to his mighty works than did the Jewish communities at Bethsaida, Capernaum, and Chorazin (Mt 11:20–24). (CC)

**3:7** *hard forehead and a stubborn heart.* Conversion is a matter of the will, which only God can move. Ezekiel should not take their rejection personally, because they are really rejecting the One who sent him (cf 1Sm 8:7; Lk 10:16). (TLSB)

Their rejection is not of Ezekiel personally, but of the one who sent him, just as Yahweh said to Samuel in 1 Sam 8:7. It is a refrain heard throughout Scripture. So Jesus expressed "*the Christological principle of representation* according to which the emissaries bear in themselves the person of Christ": (CC)

The one who listens to you listens to me, and the one who rejects you rejects me. But the one who rejects me rejects the one who sent me. (Lk 10:16 and parallels)

**3:8** God promises to equip Ezekiel with the same unyielding determination as his foes show (cf Jer 1:18, Jeremiah's call). (TLSB)

*hard.* From Hbr word for "strong," repeated three times in vv 8–9, and also found in Ezekiel's name, which means "God will strengthen." Deliberate wordplay. Ezekiel's "strong" name will characterize him. (TLSB)

Such adamancy on the part of the people requires a counter-adamancy. Compare Jeremiah's call: "I make you this day a fortified city and an iron pillar and bronze walls against all the land" (Jer 1:18). In Jeremiah some words of comfort accompany the promise of the requisite fortitude for the task. Ezek 3:8 should not be construed to imply some grim insensitivity on Ezekiel's part, although the personalities of the two prophets are a study in contrasts. Jeremiah is given to expressing his emotions and pathos, while Ezekiel is reserved and resolute, even when his wife dies (Ezekiel 24). God still uses "all sorts and conditions of men" in the ministry. (CC)

**3:9** *emery harder than flint.* Strength and courage were necessary equipment for a prophet, especially when preaching judgment. Jeremiah was similarly equipped (see Jer 1:18). (CSB)

Restating v 8 in picture language. *emery.* Precise meaning of the Hbr is unknown. Used for sharpening hard objects. *flint.* Proverbial for its hardness. (TLSB)

The diamond-hard countenance given Ezekiel (3:7–9) is apparently a deliberate play on Ezekiel’s name. Three times in 3:8–9 the Hebrew adjective קָיָוָה, “strong,” applies to Ezekiel, and his name is compounded of that same root (“God will strengthen”; see the textual note on it in 1:3). Ezekiel’s whole life, as well as his name, is to be an action prophecy, a type (in the theological sense) of the hard words of judgment he has to speak. (CC)

*Fear them not ... rebellious house.* Nearly verbatim restatement of elements of 2:6–7. (TLSB)

**3:10** *Son of man.* Address signals a change of topic or a summary of a section. (TLSB)

*all My words.* Placed first for emphasis. (TLSB)

*listen carefully and take to heart.* The prophet is to stand in marked contrast to the people, who do not listen. (CSB)

Reinforcement of physical eating of the scroll (v 1). (TLSB)

A new direct address to the prophet introduces this final short speech at the end of Ezekiel’s commissioning. Much of it is a reiteration of what has been said earlier. In a straightforward explanation of the implication of the eating of the scroll, Yahweh insists that his prophet listen to his words (unlike Israel, which heard but did not listen) and transmit his words verbatim to Israel, regardless of their reaction. As Zimmerli points out, the Hebrew imperfect (“I will speak”) refers not just to past revelations, but indicates that Ezekiel must continue to be a listener and pass on God’s future messages. Ezekiel conveys only what he has received, and he is answerable to God only for delivering the Word faithfully. As such he is a model for the ministry of all God’s servants. (CC)

**3:11** *Go to the exiles.* Ezekiel’s ministry was to the exilic community, most of whom refused to believe that God would abandon Jerusalem and the temple. After the fall of Jerusalem, therefore, they were strongly inclined to despair. (CSB)

Those exiled with him, not those left behind. *your people.* This phrase is used again in ch 33, with the same “watchman” theme as follows in 3:17–21. (TLSB)

The new element in 3:11 is that the “sons of Israel” (2:3) to whom the prophet shall preach are specified for the first time as “the exiles”—not those still left in Canaan who had escaped this deportation. Ezekiel is to have no part in “decrying absentees from church to the congregation at hand.” God is not only more specific, but also more intimate. The prophet must preach to “the sons of your people,” bound to the same Father by the covenant and its promises, as in the full sense of the NT κοινωνία, “the communion of saints,” initiation into which comes in the Sacrament of Baptism. (CC)

**3:12-15** A new paragraph (3:12–15) begins here, which is a resumption of the narrative begun in 1:1. There are many echoes of earlier parts of the story at the same time that the prophet’s initiatory encounter with Yahweh is concluded. (CC)

**3:12** *Spirit.* We shall meet the Spirit in a similar capacity five more times in Ezk. (TLSB)

The Spirit who had earlier empowered him to stand (2:1–2; and later, 3:24) now transports him. The last part of 3:12 is a spontaneous doxological salute to the departing Glory (כְּבוֹד), presumably uttered by heavenly, angelic creatures, and conceivably joined by the prophet himself (although it would be Ezekiel’s only utterance in chapters 1–3). The closest parallels to Ezek 3:12 are Rev 5:8–14 and Rev 7:9–

12, where the four living creatures (who seem to be the same ones as in Ezekiel's vision) around God's throne in heaven, along with other angels and the elders (saints in glory), sing doxological praises to God and the Lamb. Based on those NT parallels, the four living creatures (and/or other unnamed angelic beings) most likely are the ones who utter the doxology in Ezek 3:12. (CC)

*a great earthquake.* Hbr word may refer to a roar or rumbling of any sort. (TLSB)

*Blessed be the glory of the LORD from its place!* Could imply that the glory had stood still on the ground since 1:24 until now. More likely, this is a spontaneous salute to the departing glory, spoken by heavenly, angelic creatures. Cf 9:3; 10:4, 18–19; 11:22. (TLSB)

God's glory was revealed on earth through the incarnate Word (Jn 1:14), and his incarnation is cause for celebration both on earth and in the highest heavens. The celestial and terrestrial choirs join in unison to laud the "King of glory" at his advent (Ps 24:7–10). (CC)

*place!* Frequently means "holy place, sanctuary." Ordinarily, God's earthly place would be between the cherubim in the Jerusalem temple, but now He is specially present for the exiles a thousand miles away, as demonstrated by the voice/earthquake. (TLSB)

**3:14** LIFTED ME UP – The precise connection between the movement of the Glory and the transportation of Ezekiel by God's Spirit is not specified, but it recalls the way other prophets, such as Elijah, were whisked away by the Spirit to do God's bidding (cf. 1 Ki 18:12; 2 Ki 2:16), and even Philip in the NT had a similar experience (Acts 8:39–40). (CC)

*in bitterness and in the anger of my spirit.* The prophet, knowing the righteousness of God's anger, personally identified with the divine emotions. (CSB)

His psychological disposition. Such a notice is unexpected in a prophet who so rarely shares his emotions (in contrast to his contemporary, Jeremiah). Some other prophets were reluctant to answer God's call (cf Ex 4:1–17; Jnh 1:3; 4:1), but Ezekiel evidences no such mood. The words imply Ezekiel's identification with God's own emotions, a result of swallowing the scroll. *bitterness.* Hbr sounds similar to the frequent description of the exiles as a "rebellious" house. (TLSB)

Some of Ezekiel's bitter anger may have been kindled already by his own forced exile, the devastation of Judah by the invading Babylonians, and his anguish at the impending doom of his recalcitrant people. The apostle Paul could express divine wrath (Rom 1:18) but also deep anguish for the unbelieving Jews of his day (Rom 9:1–5; 10:1). (CC)

*strong hand of the LORD upon me.* See note on 1:3. (CSB)

Both God's Spirit and His hand influence Ezekiel here, and, as often, the two are not easy to distinguish. *heat.* Can be translated "fury," "rage"; frequently used in Ezk of God's wrath at His people's disobedience. *being strong upon me.* Apparently refers to the Lord compelling Ezekiel to do exactly as He commands. *strong.* May be another play on Ezekiel's name. (TLSB)

All in all, Ezekiel's sense is not one of "liberation," but of overmastering compulsion to carry out God's call. Once he has received the divine Word, he is compelled to preach it, as was his older contemporary Jeremiah (Jer 20:9) and the apostles (Acts 4:20; 10:42), including Paul (1 Cor 9:16). (CC)

**3:15** *I came to the exiles.* Ezekiel was somewhere outside the settlement itself at the time of the call and now returns to exercise his ministry. (TLSB)

*Tel Abib.* The only mention of the specific place where the exiles lived. In Babylonian the name meant “mound of the flood [i.e., destruction],” apparently referring to the ruined condition of the site. When used of the modern Israeli city, Tel Aviv, this name (Abib and Aviv are the same word in Hebrew) is understood to mean “hill of grain.” (CSB)

The mound where Ezekiel and the other exiles settled. A “tell” is an artificial mound built up by layers of occupation (cf Jsh 11:13); modern villages are still often located on such mounds. (TLSB)

*overwhelmed among them seven days.* Ezekiel was in the same state of spiritual shock that others in the Bible experienced after an encounter with God (see Ezr 9:4; Job 2:13; 40:4–5; Ac 9:9). Considering Ezekiel’s priestly background (see note on 1:3), the seven-day period may have been a parallel to the time required for a priest’s ordination (see Lev 8:1–33). (CSB)

Literal, and likely also symbolic use to indicate completion. (TLSB)

Why *seven* days? There is no reason to dismiss the number as purely symbolic, but one should not miss the important biblical symbolism often attached to the number. One naturally thinks first of the seven days of creation, from Sabbath to Sabbath. Job’s “friends” sat with him for seven days and nights as if in mourning before they began to speak to him (Job 2:13). Much more pertinent is the role the number seven played in the consecration of priests (Ex 29:29–37; Lev 8:33–35; cf. 2 Chr 7:9). It is quite plausible that God meant for Ezekiel to understand these seven days as a sort of ordination to his prophetic priesthood. Comparable periods of less than seven days might be Ezra’s shocked silence at the extent of the returnees’ apostasy until the evening sacrifice (Ezra 9:4, which uses  $\text{דָּבַשׁ}$ , the same verb used here in Ezek 3:15) and Saul’s three-day fast after the Damascus-road Christophany (Acts 9:9). (CC)

*overwhelmed* – Psychologically, it is understandable that the excitement of the previous day would end in nervous exhaustion, but that is surely the least of it. It was a period of adjustment, to be sure, but far more than merely emotionally. He must live among his own people, but begin to “dance to the beat of a different drummer.” (CC)

Adjusting to the entirely different lifestyle or vocation that was now to begin. (e.g., Jb 2:13; Ezr 6:22). Seven is also prominent in the consecration of a priest (Ex 29:29–37; Lv 8:33–35). Though Ezekiel will never exercise a normal priesthood in Jerusalem, God “ordained” him into a prophetic priesthood. (TLSB)

**2:1–3:15** God calls Ezekiel to witness to all sorts of conditions of men, even though prospects are bleak and the audience is hostile. As the Lord strengthened Ezekiel, He will also strengthen us to proclaim the Gospel. Our life may be one of lamentation, mourning, and woe, but that may be the only way to break through pride and lead us to see how hopeless our natural condition is. If, however, God’s accusing message is ingested, His word of forgiveness in Christ’s atonement will be “as sweet as honey.” • Lord, drown our stubbornness daily in Baptism and raise us with Christ that we may gladly perform the service He gives us. Amen. (TLSB)

*A Watchman for Israel*

**16 And at the end of seven days, the word of the LORD came to me: 17 “Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel. Whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. 18 If I say to the wicked, ‘You shall surely die,’ and you give him no warning, nor speak to warn the wicked from his wicked way, in order to save his life, that wicked person shall die for his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand. 19 But if you warn the**

wicked, and he does not turn from his wickedness, or from his wicked way, he shall die for his iniquity, but you will have delivered your soul. 20 Again, if a righteous person turns from his righteousness and commits injustice, and I lay a stumbling block before him, he shall die. Because you have not warned him, he shall die for his sin, and his righteous deeds that he has done shall not be remembered, but his blood I will require at your hand. 21 But if you warn the righteous person not to sin, and he does not sin, he shall surely live, because he took warning, and you will have delivered your soul.” 22 And the hand of the LORD was upon me there. And he said to me, “Arise, go out into the valley, and there I will speak with you.” 23 So I arose and went out into the valley, and behold, the glory of the LORD stood there, like the glory that I had seen by the Chebar canal, and I fell on my face. 24 But the Spirit entered into me and set me on my feet, and he spoke with me and said to me, “Go, shut yourself within your house. 25 And you, O son of man, behold, cords will be placed upon you, and you shall be bound with them, so that you cannot go out among the people. 26 And I will make your tongue cling to the roof of your mouth, so that you shall be mute and unable to reprove them, for they are a rebellious house. 27 But when I speak with you, I will open your mouth, and you shall say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD.’ He who will hear, let him hear; and he who will refuse to hear, let him refuse, for they are a rebellious house.

**3:17** *I have made you a watchman.*† In ancient Israel, watchmen were stationed on the highest parts of the city wall to inform its inhabitants of the progress of a battle (1Sa 14:16) or of approaching messengers (2Sa 18:24–27; 2Ki 9:17–20). The prophets were spiritual watchmen, relaying God’s word to the people (see Jer 6:17; Hos 9:8; Hab 2:1). Ezekiel’s function as a watchman was to warn the exiles of the impending doom of Jerusalem and to teach that God holds each one responsible for his own behavior. This commission, repeated in 33:7–9, is spelled out in ch. 18. (CSB)

Military metaphor; often applied to prophets (Is 21:6–12; Hos 9:8; Hab 2:1). In the NT, it is applied to all Christians, esp in final judgment contexts. The “warning” ultimately comes from the Lord, but the prophet is responsible for relaying it to those in danger. (TLSB)

**3:17b–21** Nearly duplicated in 33:1–9, though the contexts are entirely different. Here the passage is a private message and digression for the prophet alone, concerned with the message of judgment to which the prophet has been called. In 33:1–9, after the fall of Jerusalem, the message is virtually a second commissioning to proclaim Gospel promises. (TLSB)

**3:18–21** Four examples are given in “if ... then” form. Each case involves individual accountability before God, both for the speaker (the prophet) and the listener. Each example classifies the listener as either wicked or righteous. (The word “wicked” was used rarely in the ancient Near East outside of Israel.) Great care must be taken that the distinction between “righteous” and “wicked” is heard in full biblical context. Ethics will be involved, but that is secondary. The starting point is one’s standing before the heavenly throne, whether one has been declared guilty or not guilty, depending on believing or rejecting the promise (the Gospel fulfilled in the Messiah as Savior). If, in the OT, the final judgment were based on works, not grace, the religion of the OT would have been diametrically opposed to the NT, and the OT would not belong in the Bible. (TLSB)

**3:18** In this first example, the prophet is derelict in his duty, and both he and the wicked will die. The prophet is accountable as an individual. Death here involves the fates of individuals in the coming sack of Jerusalem, but unless the thought really is fatalistic, death or life in these contexts also involves ultimate destinies, i.e., eternal life or damnation. Bern: “Why do you [ministers] lay your heavy yoke upon those whose burden it is rather your duty to bear? Why does the young son who has been bitten by a serpent avoid displaying his wound to the priest, to whom he ought rather to resort as to the bosom of a mother? If you are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering yourself, lest you also be tempted (Gal. 6:1)” (WDC, p 154). Bern: “These and similar warnings, You, O Christ, did invisibly

thunder to each, I appeal to their conscience as witness. You did knock at the doors of the mind of each with kindly terrors” (SLSB, p 185). (TLSB)

The first example is where the watchman fails to warn the “wicked man” that God has declared “You shall surely die.” The man dies because of his iniquity, but the prophet is held responsible for his death because of his dereliction. The principle applies directly to modern ministry. The burden of the office of the ministry is not to be taken lightly, nor is the responsibility of each Christian to admonish his erring brother. In the world’s eyes—and sadly, in the estimation of much of visible Christendom—it is not a “capital crime” for a pastor to be remiss in warning about God’s verdict of death, that is, in preaching the Law, but the pastor is sure to be held accountable by a higher Judge. The pastor is no mere “spiritual advisor,” “counselor,” or “enabler,” but the public holder of the office of the keys—Christ’s keys, “the keys of death and Hades” (Rev 1:18; cf. Mt 16:19; Rev 3:7). (CC)

**3:19** In a second “if ... then” example, the prophet is faithful, but the one warned refuses to “turn.” The unrepentant person will die, but it is not the prophet’s fault. (TLSB)

*not turn.* Unrepentant. (TLSB)

*delivered your soul.* Potentially misleading. Hbr has no word exactly corresponding to “soul.” In the OT, people do not “have” souls; they “are” souls (cf Gn 2:7). In OT usage, “soul” is the life principle, i.e., what distinguishes a living person from a corpse; “soul” is synonymous with “life.” (TLSB)

This verse presents case 2, which is identical to case 1 (3:18), except that here the watchman has done his duty, and when the warning is rejected and the wicked man dies as a result of his iniquity, the watchman has saved his own life. Just how the fact that the prophet saves his life was conceptualized and what all that concept entails must parallel what has already been discussed in the previous verse. It underscores that faith is always personal (even though not isolated from the community, OT Israel and the NT church); no one can believe for someone else. It also emphasizes that faith manifests itself in love for one’s neighbor (Gal 5:6). (CC)

Love for the lost mandates warning that eternal death awaits the wicked man, even as eternal life is God’s gift to the righteous man, such as the prophet who “saves his life.” To take the easy route and to fail to warn the sinner—or worse yet, to preach a “gospel” that does not require repentance from sin and trust in Christ as the only Savior—is to hate one’s neighbor and to face God’s judgment for failure to be a watchman. (CC)

**3:20** The third “if ... then” example is more complex. In this case, a once-faithful person falls away and dies as a result. (TLSB)

Case 3 contemplates the sad case, all too familiar in Israel and the church, a “righteous man” (קִיָּאֵל), by all human measures a faithful member of the community, who apostatizes—who abandons or even renounces the faith and life he once professed. To compound the tragedy, the “watchman” also, for whatever reason, fails to give timely warnings and so is held accountable by God for the apostate’s death. This is a reminder that, to use Lutheran language, the *iustus* (“saint” or “justified person”) needs to hear God’s Law just as much as the *peccator* (“sinner”) precisely because we are always (throughout this life) simultaneously both (*simul iustus et peccator*). The pastor needs to contemplate case 3 even more than every Christian does. His holy office does not shield him from God’s wrath if he fails to exercise it. On the contrary, “to whomsoever is given much, much shall be required from him” (Lk 12:48). (CC)

*lay a stumbling block.* A favorite expression of Ezekiel. It cannot be that God has caused the apostasy, but the “block” is something placed in a person’s path that forces him to make a decision. What

is in his heart must come to open expression. Cf Rm 9:32–33; Gal 5:11. The prophet’s warning might have stopped the man’s defection. (TLSB)

*his righteous deeds ... not be remembered.* The Bible frequently describes God in human terms as “remembering” or “forgetting” sins (cf Jer 31:34; Heb 8:12). The formerly righteous person has no merit to which he can appeal to balance the scales of justice on the Day of Judgment. Cf Ezk 18; Heb 9:27. (TLSB)

Ezek 3:20 finally warns that the righteous man who apostatizes “shall die because of his sin, and his righteous deeds which he had done will not be remembered.” No one, no matter how righteous, can earn (or acquire from some other, “more righteous” saint) a “treasury of merit,” some accumulation of previous good deeds that might now outweigh his evil. God will not finally judge using some “scales of justice,” in which the good must be heavier than the bad—a common figure in ancient Egyptian depictions of a man’s final judgment, and still prominent in modern, populist religion or spirituality. This line of thought will be especially prominent in chapter 18: God judges according to people’s status *coram Deo* at the time of death, neither crediting them for past faith from which they have lapsed, nor holding repented and forgiven sin against them. Instead of balancing scales, it is all or nothing: with righteousness through faith (ultimately in Christ), all sin is forgotten (Jer 31:34), whereas without such justifying faith, any prior good is forgotten (Heb 6:4–8). (CC)

**3:21** The fourth example is the exact reverse of v 20. The prophet is faithful, the one tempted heeds the warning, and both live. (TLSB)

Here, in case 4, in a way, is the positive motivation for the prophet to undertake his calling despite its bleak prospects. Not all of Israel is incorrigibly wicked and doomed to die. To return to the language of 3:20, there is an interval between a person’s first stirrings of apostatizing (perhaps even subconsciously) and his actual implementation of a return to his natural, fallen state. During this interval, it is always possible, by God’s grace, that the prophet’s warning may take effect. And, if the man (and the prophet) is “faithful unto death,” God’s promise is sure: “I will give you the crown of life” (Rev 2:10). No person merits or chooses life of his own free will, but he is free to spurn or forfeit it. (CC)

**3:22–27** Returns to the main matter: Ezekiel’s call (v 25). This is the most complex call narrative in all Scripture. There remains yet an additional instruction and also a directive such as no other prophet was required to observe. These verses may also be considered the beginning of the action prophecies (see note, chs 4–5). If the commands given Ezekiel here are read in that light, we have powerful action prophecies of the siege and fall of Jerusalem. Its inhabitants will be banned, at least in the sense of inability to move about the whole land freely. When Jerusalem does fall, its people will be stunned into speechlessness—at the very time when Ezekiel’s muteness will be lifted (33:22). (TLSB)

**3:22** *the valley.* Far enough removed from the Tel-abib settlement that God could instruct Ezekiel in privacy. (TLSB)

**3:23** *I fell on my face.* Ezekiel’s response is the same as when he first saw the glory (1:28). Too casual a familiarity with God, as our “spirituality” is prone to become, suggests that we are no longer worshipping the true God. (TLSB)

**3:24** *shut yourself within your house.* As the following instructions will amplify, Ezekiel is to do nothing without God’s explicit command, esp in public. All other passages that specify Ezekiel’s preaching speak of his house; often the elders or people came to him there (8:1; 14:1; 20:1; 33:30–31). (TLSB)

The command to Ezekiel to seclude himself in his house is the first of the injunctions in 3:24–27, all of which on their face appear to inhibit the normal exercise of his calling. But a closer reading makes clear that they all prepare him for the successful performance of his task. He is to say and do nothing in public except when he is clearly “moved by the Holy Spirit” (2 Pet 1:21). The main point of the confinement in his house is Ezekiel’s seclusion from the public, a point to be reinforced by the following commands. It seems that all the locations of his preaching that are indicated in the book are at his house (8:1), since the elders or people come to him (14:1; 20:1; 33:30–31). (CC)

**3:25** *cords ... be bound.* The question here is whether the cords are literal or metaphorical. One could conceive of a mob being so incensed at the prophet that they would literally tie him up. But there is no evidence in Ezk to indicate hostility toward the prophet’s person, as was true of other prophets (e.g., Jeremiah). He may speak symbolically of the people’s apathy or contempt. In 4:8, in a different context, God will declare Himself to be the one who ultimately does the binding. (TLSB)

**3:26** *tongue cling ... unable to reprove them.* Ezekiel’s muteness is not an unalterable, permanent condition, but is lifted whenever God speaks to him. It is made plain in 24:27 and 33:22 that his ordinary speechlessness was permanently lifted when his basic prophecy came true, i.e., when Jerusalem fell. (TLSB)

*you shall be mute.* Verses 26–27 indicate that the prophet would be unable to speak except when he had a direct word from the Lord. His enforced silence underscored Israel’s stubborn refusal to take God’s word seriously. This condition was relieved only after the fall of Jerusalem (24:27; 33:22). From that time on, Ezekiel was given messages of hope, which he continually shared with his fellow exiles. (CSB)

**3:27** *He who will hear, let him hear.* Our Lord Jesus uses almost exactly the same formula (e.g., Lk 8:8; Rv 22:15–20). God calls all to repent and believe, but, unfortunately, not all will respond positively. We do not by nature have the freedom to come to faith, but we are “free” to spurn it. (TLSB)

Chapter 3 and the whole inaugural vision and prophetic call (chapters 1–3) end with a prophecy that Ezekiel’s preaching will continue in absolute faithfulness to Yahweh, whenever Yahweh wills: “Whenever I speak to you, I will open your mouth, and you shall say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord Yahweh.’” Ezekiel will not be able to serve as “a man who reproves” or “a prosecuting attorney” of the people in the ordinary sense (3:26), but perhaps with greater impact than if he had enjoyed the relative liberty of other prophets. Although the last words of the chapter reiterate that Israel is a “rebellious house,” the preceding words again leave open the possibility of repentance for individuals. No inexorable Greek μοῖρα, “fate,” or other determinism characterizes God’s judgment. The two alternatives (and there are only two!) are summarized in an almost formulaic restatement of the simple, but stark, alternatives: “Whoever listens, let him listen, and whoever refuses [to listen], let him refuse” (3:27). The negative alternative reminds one of the end of Isaiah’s call (Is 6:9), appropriated by our Lord himself to explain his ministry of preaching in parables (Mt 13:14–15 and parallels). And the positive, “Whoever listens, let him listen” (Ezek 3:27), is the prototype of one of Jesus’ favorite formulae: “The one who has ears to hear, let him hear!” (e.g., Lk 8:8). (CC)

And on a similar note the entire Scriptures end: “Outside are the dogs [homosexuals] and sorcerers and fornicators and murderers and idolaters and everyone who loves and makes a lie. ... The Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come.’ And let him who hears say, ‘Come.’ And let him who is thirsty come; let him who desires take the water of life without price. ... He who testifies to these things says, ‘Surely, I am coming soon.’ Amen. Come, Lord Jesus” (Rev 22:15, 17, 20). (CC)

**3:16–27** All Christians are called to watch not only themselves but also others who profess to believe. It is a matter of life and death, and the one who fails to warn the backslider is just as culpable as the one who falls away. The true God is a God of justice (His justice as revealed on the cross) and He offers it to all. Disobedience or faithlessness will bring full judgment, perhaps in this life and certainly in eternity. But full forgiveness is available freely to all who heed the watchman’s warning. • O Lord, through Your Holy Spirit, open our ears that we may heed the warnings of Scripture and open our mouths that with Ezekiel we may say to all, “Thus says the Lord GOD.” Amen. (TLSB)