



# Pastor Ken Nelson's Sermon

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**SERMON – 5<sup>TH</sup> LENT  
EZEKIEL 37:1-14 & JOHN 11:1-45  
MARCH 26, 2023**

## **“THE WORD OF GOD”**

I have spent the last 30 years of my life reading, studying, teaching, and preaching the Word of God. I believe I experienced a true awakening of faith while I read the Bible, really for the first time in my life, while serving as a missionary to Tanzania in the early 1990's. I recall almost coming to tears a few times as I read the history of Israel in the OT books of Judges, I and II Kings – not normally books one would say engender emotion, wondering how people who saw the things Israel did could have forgotten or chosen to ignore what God had done in the Exodus, rescuing them through Moses and the promises they soon thereafter made to God in the Covenant of Sinai – “*all that the Lord has spoken we will do*” they said with one voice.

For those of you who may never have heard me say this, I credit my call to the ministry to those experiences in Tanzania. And yet, in 23 years as a pastor, I have rarely preached a sermon “about” *the word of God* – what it is and does – though sure as I stand here today, I've tried to preach and teach according to that Word. So, my remarks today will center on what the Word of God is and does.

This past week I facilitated our Wednesday study of “*The Epitome of the Formula of Concord*” – a document from 1577 that summarized (hence the title “epitome”) what the second generation of Lutheran reformers – descendants in the faith of Martin Luther, believed. The Epitome is a defense of those beliefs. The fifth defense, or “article” of it is devoted to the Word of God – it's titled “Law and Gospel.” To Lutherans, that's what the word of God is – it is in fact how God intends us to hear it. It answers the questions “*what does God intend to say in the Bible...what should we listen for when we read it*”

In II Timothy 2:15, Paul says to Timothy “*do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.*” The word translated as “handle” is sometimes translated “divide” – it comes from a Greek word that means “*to cut along a straight line.*” It was used to describe the work of a farmer ploughing a furrow in his field or a mason erecting a wall who has to cut stones “straight.”

Ok, so what does this mean for us? In the Lutheran church we believe the word of God is “divided” into law and gospel – which can also be stated “*command and promise.*” The law teaches us what is good and pleasing to God, and what is not, and the gospel conveys God's mercy to those who do or do not do those things. Pretty simple – right from wrong. You might say with the law God pushes us around and with the gospel he picks us up. The gospel “consoles” us who recognize, through the law, our sin, and repent of it. It assures us we have Christ's unwavering promise of forgiveness.

In II Timothy 3:16 it says “*all scripture is God breathed, and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.*” I love how Paul tells us God's word is “useful” – like a Swiss army knife or one of those household gadgets my cousin Billy sends me every Christmas that he bought on QVC. The word ‘useful’ is sometimes rendered ‘profitable’. II Timothy 2:15, echoed by the Epitome of the Formula of Concord, tells us God's word has two sides – command and promise. II Timothy 3:16 tells us God's word is for our benefit – it “profits us.”

“Law” is God in his mercy telling us what’s good for us, and what is not, peeling back the onion of our hearts, and then in the gospel, God in His mercy telling us his love is unwavering when we fail to embrace the good or resist the bad – and that He will never leave or forsake us because of it. That’s all well and good as I say as an explanation. But something happened to me 30 plus years ago when I read the Bible - a guy who rarely has a tear in his eyes unless it’s his allergies - had a few tears in his eyes as he read.

That is what the word of God does...it gets inside of us, it gets to us, because we were created to have it get to us. It ought to move us, not just inform us. When Paul said in II Timothy 3:16 that scripture is “god-breathed” he combines two Greek words – *“theos”* and *“pneuma”* – God, and lungs, God, and breath. The Jewish religious teachers said the spirit of God rested on Moses and the prophets and spoke through them so that their words did not come from themselves but from God. The Christian church from its infancy was entirely in agreement with this.

But the word does something to us as well as says things to us. For what it does we look “profitably” to our lessons from Ezekiel and John. In Ezekiel, God says *“prophesy, son of man, and say to the breath...breathe on these slain, that they many live.”* The word of God brings about the things it says. Ignoring God’s word – Israel died – became brittle as bones. But the same word – in OT Ezekiel no less, teaches that God’s word brings that which is lifeless, to life.

Tell that to Lazarus, four days good and dead. Jesus spoke (breathed) and he lived. No laying on of hands, no mud in the eyes, just a word – *“Lazarus, come out”*. Precisely what Jesus is going to say to you at your grave – at least the “come out” part! Paul, in our lesson from Romans, says all humans breathe in some pretty bad air – he calls it “the flesh”, symbolized vividly by the meticulous attention our lesson from John pays to Lazarus’ dead body –the flesh, that which dies Paul says, has a “bad odor.” Sin stinks to high heaven. And we all have an “odor” problem – the law tells us that. Maybe that’s what I felt back when I read the bible – reading Israel, I read my own story.

But the breath that raised Lazarus – and raised Lazarus’resurrector Jesus, will the gospel says - resurrect you. I’m not saying that should make you cry, but it ought to at least moisten your eyes now and then! What is God’s word? Paul in I Corinthians says, *“it is the power of God for salvation to all who believe it.”* From its first page to it’s last, OT and NT, it is law and gospel – God showing how to live well, and promising that anyone who confesses they don’t – because they can’t and are dead because of their sin have life in Jesus – who it appears knows what to do around a grave. AMEN