



Life Setting of Ezekiel

Ezekiel is the first of the prophets to speak in exile. There is some overlapping between the book of Jeremiah and the book of Ezekiel. The book of Jeremiah reveals that the people of Judah were exiled to Babylon in stages. Those who resisted the Lord's hand of discipline to go to Babylon and stayed behind in Jerusalem suffered the worst. Those who fled to Egypt didn't fare any better. But, for those who obeyed and went to Babylon the challenge was how to go about life in exile as normally as possible. Ezekiel speaks to people in this life setting.

The dating and place of Ezekiel's prophesy is very specifically spelled out in the opening verses of the book, *"in the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, on the fifth day of the month, as I was among the exiles by the Chebar canal..."* (Ezekiel 1: 1). Jeremiah ended his prophesy in the book of Lamentations with a plea, *"Restore us to yourself, O Lord, that we may be restored! Renew our days as of old – unless you have utterly rejected us, and you remain exceedingly angry with us."* The opening verses of Ezekiel are a reminder that God will continue to speak to his people even in exile. The issue is still the same. Will the people of God hear the message he's speaking through his prophet and will they repent?

Ezekiel's prophesy represents a new trajectory for the people of God and how God will communicate with them. New systems of leadership are emerging as the monarchy is abolished and people live under the rule of Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar. Ezekiel often address the shepherds of Israel who are the Elders among them. This appears to be a new leadership structure made necessary by the new setting of life in exile. While God has led his people to exile as a means of discipline for sin, as the book of Ezekiel makes clear, that does not guarantee repentance. The sins of life in Judah followed the people to Babylon. In many instances hearts were hardened in the process and things worsened. Old sin patterns were met with new opportunities as people acquiesced to the culture around them.

Regardless of the setting, people need to hear from God. Ezekiel reveals a God who has not nor will not change even in the midst of unprecedented changes in his people. God is still speaking and his people still aren't listening. This is the life setting Ezekiel speaks into and his burden is

just as heavy “*by the Chebar canal*” as it was for the prophets before him who spoke in and around Jerusalem.

The latter portion of Ezekiel is focused on the construction of a new temple. This is necessary due to the fact that the old temple in Jerusalem was destroyed. A new one will have to be built, but what exactly that entails and how to interpret Ezekiel chapters 40 to the end of the book in chapter 48 is one of the greatest challenges this book presents to a reader. These chapters come to Ezekiel approximately 14 years after the fall of Jerusalem and the ravishing of the temple by King Nebuchadnezzar’s forces.

Ezekiel is probably the most dramatic of the prophets. He is asked by God to engage in bizarre behaviors that are often hard to explain. It’s best understood by the hardness of heart of the people and the lengths God will go through his spokesmen to get people’s attention. This is grace from a God who is there and is not silent. Ezekiel begs the question: “Are we listening?”

Ezekiel 1

Ezekiel 1 describes the setting in Babylon right down to the specific date of writing of Ezekiel’s prophesy. The word of the Lord comes to Ezekiel in exile, in Babylon of all places, “*by the Chebar canal*” (vs. 2). Moreover, verse 2 tells us that this word came to Ezekiel five years after King Jehoiachin was exiled to Babylon. From this information in the opening verses, the beginning of Ezekiel’s ministry overlaps the latter part of the ministry of Jeremiah. Ezekiel will speak to the people in Babylon while Jeremiah’s message is directed to the people of Judah.

The historical setting for Ezekiel’s ministry corresponds with 2 Kings 24 and 25. It is a time of great political instability in Judah as Egypt and Babylon jockey for power in the region. Egypt was no match for Babylon for control over Judah. As Babylon lays siege to Jerusalem, King Jehoiachin and his mother are exiled to Babylon as prisoners. All of the treasure of the temple in Jerusalem are also carried to Babylon. Second Kings 24:14-16 tells us that King Nebuchadnezzar took captive all the men of valor and brought them to Babylon. Ezekiel appears to be among this group of exiles. Once in the land of Babylon, the word of the Lord comes to Ezekiel in Ezekiel 1:3.

Like his counterpart Jeremiah, Ezekiel also comes from a priestly family (1:3). His ministry is not only prophetic but pastoral in the care and shepherding responsibilities of his people. His care for his people is centered around delivering God’s word to them.

Ezekiel receives his call to ministry with an extraordinary vision of the glory of the Lord. The sin problems of God’s people have not gone away in exile. If anything, they have worsened as the exiles adapt to a new culture. Thus, the need for a prophet like Ezekiel to speak.

Ezekiel begins with a powerful encounter with the holiness of God. God is raising up a prophet who will proclaim God's message of restoration. Ezekiel receives this message from God not in the temple courts of Jerusalem, but in exile, *by the Chebar canal*. God has not forsaken his people and his spoken word through Ezekiel is proof.

The vision Ezekiel receives is more than a personal epiphany from God. It is a sign that our God has not nor will he ever change. As God's people grow in their awareness of their sinfulness that led them to captivity in Babylon, they must also understand the holiness of the God who put them there. Ezekiel is here to help us understand that important point as God reveals himself to Ezekiel.

The vision Ezekiel received is hard to conceptualize. There are four living creatures that are multidimensional that have faces resembling a lion, ox, and eagle. There is no human counterpart to it. It's a heavenly vision that comes directly from God.

Beginning in verse 15, Ezekiel sees a wheel next to the living creatures in the previous verses. Some wild interpretations have been made of the wheel, or more specifically the wheels within wheels. The safest and most probable interpretation is that the wheel is a symbol of God's forward momentum in his progressive revelation of himself through his prophets. While God's people are in Babylon experiencing the discipline of God, God has not abandoned them. Nor will he ever. Things are moving forward according to plan with God's steady hand on the wheel.

Ezekiel 2

Ezekiel 2 provides a detailed account of the specific mission to which Ezekiel is being called. Ezekiel is to prophesy to "rebels" whose "*fathers have transgressed against me [the Lord] to this very day*" (vs. 3). This is a further exposition of Lamentations 5: 7 *Our fathers sinned, and are no more; and we bear their iniquities*. While God's people are being disciplined in Babylon for the sins of their fathers, they still have a lot yet to learn. Enter God's calling of the prophet Ezekiel to deliver the message.

Ezekiel 2 is a short chapter, only 10 verses long, but twice the Lord repeats a phrase in the commissioning of Ezekiel that should cause us to stop and ponder: "*whether they hear or refuse to hear, for they are a rebellious house.*" God first says this to Ezekiel in verse 5 and then repeats it in verse 7.

Ezekiel is a model of faithfulness to God's calling. Remember, Ezekiel is living in exile. It's a time when God's people are bereft of success or victory. This is wilderness time when a sign or word from God is at best rare. Ezekiel has received just that for such a time as this. He faithfully delivers it to his people, regardless of their response.

The Lord concludes his commissioning of Ezekiel by handing him a scroll that contains the *“words of lamentation and mourning and woe”* that will receive a clearer explanation in chapter 3.

Ezekiel 3

Ezekiel 3 records God’s instruction for Ezekiel to eat the scroll containing the words that he is to deliver to the house of Israel. Ezekiel is to feed his belly with this scroll. Ezekiel obeys God’s instruction to him and as he eats the scroll it is *“as sweet as honey.”*

This is, in contrast, God’s command to the house of Israel in chapter 2 that is *“rebellious”* (2: 8). For the House of Israel, the word of God is not sweet as honey, as it is for Ezekiel. For them, it is a message of *“lamentation, mourning and woe”* (2: 10). This symbolizes Israel’s refusal to listen to anything Ezekiel has to say to them. It’s a consistent pattern with God’s prophets of delivering God’s message to a people who refuse to listen and repent. God’s people have *“a hard forehead and stubborn heart”* (3: 7). As a result, God makes the face of Ezekiel *“like emery harder than flint have I made your forehead”* (3: 9).

Ezekiel is lifted by the Spirit where he hears a great earthquake and sees the glory of the Lord again. This is either a reiteration of what Ezekiel sees in chapter one or it is another vision similar to what he saw in chapter one. Either way, Ezekiel is overwhelmed by this vision and the burden of delivering the word of the Lord to the Exiles. He sits among them seven days unable to speak a word (3: 15).

At the end of seven days, the word of the Lord comes to Ezekiel in which God appoints Ezekiel to be a Watchman over the house of Israel. This will be a common theme throughout Ezekiel’s prophesy. Chapter 3 is the first designation of this unique calling to Ezekiel.

Ezekiel 4

This chapter is arguably one of the strangest chapters in the Bible. God’s prophets are often asked to do some bazaar things in order to understand and communicate God’s message and this chapter describes Ezekiel’s experience

Ezekiel is asked to take an iron griddle and stare at it, symbolic of the state of siege the people of Jerusalem currently find themselves in during Babylonian captivity. More likely what Ezekiel is starring at is a clay tablet that is made into a replica of the city of Jerusalem. Ezekiel is to lie on his side in some sort of a contraption and stare at this iron griddle for 390 days on his left side. Once that time is up, he’s to turn on his right side and stare at it for another 40 days, well over a year.

Ezekiel is careful to follow God's directives on how he's to obtain nourishment during this time of lying on his side and staring at a griddle. He is to take wheat, barley, beans and lentils, millet and emmer and make bread from it to sustain himself, at best a starvation diet. All the while Ezekiel is bound up with cords tied to him so that he cannot move from his position of staring at the iron griddle.

As for the baking of his bread, Ezekiel is to bake it on top of human dung. Ezekiel protests this part and God relents and allows him to bake his bread on top of cow dung instead of human.

The reason for all this madness is described in verses 3 and 7 of Ezekiel 4. God is putting Ezekiel through all of these bazaar rituals that he'll endure for well over a year to drive home the purpose of the siege of Jerusalem. The very thought that the city of Jerusalem would ever fall is a hard concept for the people in exiled to grasp. It's also for hard for Ezekiel, thus the graphic unforgettable images the Lord will reveal to him to bring the point home. In verses 3 and 7 Ezekiel is to *set his face* toward these things and contemplate God's message and the consequences of the sin of his people.

Sin is a heavy burden to carry and when you add to that burden the sins of your countrymen, it's even harder. These are not things we're prone to stare at very long which is perhaps why God placed cords on Ezekiel to hold him in place. Sin can be very ugly to come to terms with, but it's something we cannot escape. We must *set our face* in that direction and contemplate answers to our sin problems.

Ezekiel 5

Ezekiel 5 records "Ezekiel's Haircut." Ezekiel is asked to take a razor and shave his head and beard. This is a sign of humiliation for God's people (2 Samuel 10: 4). In Ezekiel's case, it is a sign of the humiliation of his people to the coming disaster. At the time of writing the temple in Jerusalem and the city have not yet fallen into the hands of Babylon.

To illustrate what is about to happen Ezekiel weighs his hair on a scale and divides it into three piles. The first pile he is to burn symbolizing those who will die in Jerusalem. The second pile he is to scatter all around the city, symbolizing those who will die outside the city. The last pile Ezekiel is to scatter with the wind, symbolizing those who are in exile. No one escapes God's judgment.

What is important to see in this chapter is that the humiliation Ezekiel and his people are about to face at the disciplining hand of God is not arbitrary nor is it unfair. Ezekiel 5 must be read side by side with Leviticus chapter 26. The latter passage outlines the terms of the covenant Ezekiel's people have violated. It lists the blessings to come from obedience or in the case of Ezekiel's people, the curses to come from disobedience.

Ezekiel's people have broken everything contained in Leviticus 26 and now they must face the consequences. It's not as if God has lost his temper or that he's unhinged. It's that God is faithful to his terms of the covenant stipulated in Leviticus 26. Israel had agreed to these terms at Mt. Zion. They broke the contract and now God in his faithfulness is doing exactly what he said he would do.

Ezekiel 6

Ezekiel 6 records Ezekiel's call to *set his face* toward his homeland and to the people around him. This is not the first time God has called Ezekiel to do this and it won't be the last. The phrase *set your face* is significant in the book of Ezekiel and the ministry God has called him to. We first see this phrase twice in Ezekiel chapter 4 where he is to stay in place tied to some sort of contraption in which he stares at a mock replica of Jerusalem. In verse 3 and again in verse 7, of Ezekiel 4, the prophet is to *set his face* in this prescribed direction. Now again, in chapter 6, Ezekiel is going to receive the word of the Lord against the idolatry of his people. He is again asked in verse one to *set your face*, this time not only toward Jerusalem but in a broader perspective *toward the mountains of Israel*.

In other words, God is going to help Ezekiel to see his people in all of their sinfulness the way God sees them. Ezekiel's setting his face toward Jerusalem is exactly the same thing Jesus does in Luke's gospel as he heads toward Jerusalem to die on the Cross for our sins.

We first see this of Jesus in Luke 13: 33, "*I must go on my way today and tomorrow and the day following, for it cannot be that a prophet should perish away from Jerusalem.*" Jesus' ministry is beginning a journey to Jerusalem where he'll die on a cross. We see this movement again in Luke 17: 11, Luke 18: 31, which give a more detailed explanation. He's going there to die for our sins. We see it again in Luke 19: 28. We know why this journey is moving in this direction. Luke 19: 10 is the clearest indicator, "*For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.*" Finally, Jesus gets to Jerusalem when he lays his life down for us.

Ezekiel 7

Ezekiel 7 details Ezekiel's main message. It concerns the coming Babylonian judgment that according to verse 2, includes *"the four corners of the land."* In other words, no corner of the land of Israel will be untouched. God is about to unleash his fury upon the land of Israel for their sin. *"Now I will soon pour out my wrath upon you, and spend my anger against you, and judge you according to your ways, and I will punish you for all your abominations"* (vs. 8).

Some context is needed to understand Ezekiel's message in this chapter. At the time of Ezekiel's writing, there are three groups of people in Judah, those who are determined to stay in Jerusalem and defend the land against Babylonian aggression, those who flee to Egypt for safety, and finally those who accept the disciplining hand of the Lord and submit to the Babylonian exile. It is the third group of people who have submitted to go to Babylon that Ezekiel is called to speak to. But, in the broader scope of things, Ezekiel is also speaking to those in Judah and those who have fled to Egypt in chapter 7. There is an overlapping of Ezekiel's prophesy and that of Jeremiah who is still in Judah at this time saying the same thing to the people in and around Jerusalem that Ezekiel is saying to the exiles in Babylon.

Beginning in Jeremiah 24, the first of the deportees from Jerusalem and surrounding Judah, begin to arrive in Babylon. Jeremiah shows that this happened in stages and both he and Ezekiel warn that exile is not the full extent of God's judgment. There is much more to come and exile is actually the safety net God has put in place to protect his people from the full extent of his wrath. Those who stay behind in Judah or those who flee to Egypt will suffer the worst.

This is what Ezekiel is warning about in chapter 7. The siege of Jerusalem and destruction of the temple has not yet happened, but it is imminent. Ezekiel's primary focus is on the temple in Jerusalem. In 7: 22, Ezekiel refers to the temple as God's *"treasured place."* God has turned his face from his people because the people of Judah have profaned the temple. This is probably a reference to the synchronized worship introduced by Ahaz and others (see 2 Kings 16). But, in Ezekiel 7, as the temple was first profaned by Israel itself, God will deal the final blow. *"Robbers shall enter and profane it"* (7: 22). This is no doubt a reference to the coming Babylonian destruction.

Ezekiel 8

Ezekiel 8 is the beginning of a vision Ezekiel receives that occupies all of chapters 8, 9, 10, and 11. It is an expansion of what Ezekiel first saw in chapter one. The timing of when Ezekiel received this vision is very specific in 8: 1. This is 14 months into his symbolic siege of Jerusalem in chapter 4. No doubt Ezekiel had managed to get people's attention from his bizarre behavior in chapter 4. Now the elders of Judah are sitting in Ezekiel's house and they are about to hear more specifically what God has to say to them through Ezekiel and the vision he receives from the Lord.

The vision begins with a more detailed account of the abominations in the temple in Jerusalem. Since Ezekiel is in Babylon and not in Jerusalem where he can see for himself, this knowledge must come to Ezekiel in the form of a vision. Ezekiel is transported by a bright, fiery image of a man who takes hold of a lock of Ezekiel's hair and helps him to see a vision of the wickedness in the Temple.

Ezekiel's tour of the abominations of the temple goes from bad to worse, marked by the phrase, *"you will see greater abominations"* (vs. 6, 13, and 15). The first thing Ezekiel sees is an "image of jealousy" at the altar gate at the north entrance. Whatever this image is, it has driven God far from his sanctuary (vs. 6). Next, Ezekiel is taken to the entrance of the court where he sees a hole in the wall. Ezekiel is asked to dig in this hole and as he does he finds an entrance. When Ezekiel enters he finds all the images of idolatry of the house of Israel that Israel seems to think have been hidden from God. They are now exposed within the temple itself. Ezekiel's tour continues in verse 14 to the *"entrance of the north gate of the house of the Lord"* where he sees a woman weeping for Tammuz, a Babylonian god. The people of Judah are appealing to the gods of Babylon for protection and not the God of Israel. Finally, Ezekiel is brought to the inner court where he sees 25 men with their backs to the temple of the Lord, worshipping a sun god.

God has no choice but to act, *"my eye will not spare, nor will I have pity. And though they cry in my ears with a loud voice, I will not hear them"* (vs. 18).

Ezekiel 9

Ezekiel 9 is a vision of the slaying of the inhabitants of Jerusalem. It is in response to the idolatry Ezekiel saw in chapter 8. Six men appear to Ezekiel in this vision who are probably angelic beings. One of them has a writing case and appears to be a scribe. They all appear before the bronze altar.

In verse 3, the glory of the Lord appears and instructs that six men are to go throughout Jerusalem and see who is appalled at the idolatry Ezekiel sees in his vision in the previous chapter. Those who are outraged are to have a mark put on their face. Those who are not grieved over it are to be struck dead, without exception for defiling the temple.

This is a sign of the coming judgment of God against these atrocities in his temple.

Ezekiel 10

Ezekiel 10 is a vision of the glory of the Lord departing the temple. The revelation of the glory of the Lord has been a key theme in Ezekiel's prophecy. It is what initiated Ezekiel's prophetic ministry in chapter one and it will continue to guide him throughout.

Of all the visions Ezekiel receives, this one in chapter 10 is perhaps the most terrifying. If people are terrified in the presence of a holy God, how much more terrifying is the removal of God's glory? If God has left the scene then all powers of hell are now unrestrained.

What Ezekiel sees in this chapter is quite similar to what he saw in chapter 1. In fact, Ezekiel himself confirms that in verses 15, 20, and 22. The imagery of the whirling wheels, or wheels within wheels, that Ezekiel sees is an important component of the visions Ezekiel receives throughout the book and subject to a lot of speculative interpretations. In its simplest understanding, we need to look at the function of a wheel itself. A wheel is a critical component of movement from one place to another. In the case of chapter one, God's plan is moving forward from Jerusalem and surrounding Judah to the exiles in Babylon. In chapter 10 the glory of the Lord is leaving the temple in Jerusalem. The wheels represent that movement from one place to another.

While it's important to remember that this is a vision, it nonetheless does correspond to reality. The temple will in fact be destroyed begging the question where will the glory of the Lord dwell?

Ezekiel 11

Ezekiel 11 continues the vision of the glory departing the temple. Ezekiel is transported to the east gate of the temple where he sees 25 men, where he recognizes two of them as princes of the people. They are the subjects of God's wrath for their abominations.

Even though the glory has departed from the temple, Ezekiel's message is not one of abandonment. It is a matter of identification of who the people are who will experience the glory and presence of the Lord and where that will take place. The people who are still living in Jerusalem at the time believe that it's them and that they are the remnant of God and the glory and presence of the Lord will continue to be around the temple. But, Ezekiel's vision sees it differently. Jerusalem *is the cauldron*, and those living there *are the meat* (11: 3). The remnant will come from those living in exile, already in Babylon. Ezekiel's vision is consistent with Jeremiah's prophesy to those in Jerusalem.

The crux of what Ezekiel saw in his visions in chapters 8 through 11 is found in 11: 14- 25. God is not a tribal deity or a localized deity confined to Jerusalem. Ezekiel 11: 16 says that though God

had removed his people *“far off among the nations and though I scattered them among the countries, yet I have been a sanctuary to them for a while.”*

God promises a new land (vs. 17), free of detestable things and abominations. Most importantly God will give his people *“one heart, and a new spirit I will put within them. I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in my statutes and keep my rules and obey them”* (vs. 19, 20).

Ezekiel 12

Ezekiel is asked to prepare a suitcase for himself for exile in **Ezekiel 12**. He is to carry it around with him in broad daylight and he is to do the same at night. He’s even asked to crawl through a hole in the wall. All of this serves as a sign to illustrate what will happen to the people who try to flee from Jerusalem.

Beginning in verse 17, Ezekiel is to eat his bread with trembling and drink his water with quivering and anxiety. This is a further sign or illustration from Ezekiel of the plight of those who flee Jerusalem.

The latter half of Ezekiel 12 addresses a common expression or proverb that people were saying at the time in response to Ezekiel’s message, perhaps to his signs earlier in the chapter, *“the days grow long, and every vision comes to nothing”* (vs. 22). This “proverb” is not from the Lord. It’s a reaction of Ezekiel’s people to what they perceived to be the slowness of the Lord to act, answer their prayers, or deliver on his word spoken through Ezekiel. More specifically, it’s their reaction to the false prophets of their day and their inability to distinguish truth from error. For them, Ezekiel is no different than the false prophets. They’ve ultimately given up on God.

The reaction of the people to the word of God Ezekiel is speaking is stated in verse 27: *“The vision that he sees is for many days from now, and he prophesies of times far off.”* They are unable to connect it to anything in their present circumstances.

Their experience is our experience. How do we keep from being cynical in our walk with Jesus? *“The days grow long, and every vision comes to nothing”* or so it sometimes seems. Second Peter 3: 8 is helpful in sorting this out: *“But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.”* In fact, while you’re at it, read all of 2 Peter 3.

Ezekiel’s word is faithful and sure: *“Therefore, say to them, thus says the Lord God: None of my words will be delayed any longer, but the word that I speak will be performed, declares the Lord.”* (Ezekiel 12: 28)

Ezekiel 13

Ezekiel 13 is a message against the false prophets and prophetesses who are speaking from their own inspiration and not God's (vs. 1). Ezekiel compares them to *"jackals among ruins"* (vs. 4). In contrast, Ezekiel has not forsaken his responsibility to address their sin head on. When times get rough, the false prophets are nowhere to be found. Ezekiel, on the other hand, has stood and will continue to stand in the breach between the Lord and the sin of his people.

The false prophets deliver what the people want to hear as opposed the difficult truth that they need to hear and do hear from Ezekiel. This chapter is an encouragement to Ezekiel to continue to the mission God has called him to even in the midst of widespread opposition from his people. Ezekiel is to *"set his face against"* their falsehood. God will *"deliver my people out of their hand. And you shall know that I am the Lord"* (vs. 23).

Ezekiel 14

Not only is Israel saturated with false prophets and prophetesses, but the Elders of Israel have also led the people into idolatry. In **Ezekiel 14**, the Elders come and sit with Ezekiel. The message Ezekiel has for them is *"repent and turn away from your idols, and turn away your faces from all your abominations"* (vs. 6). This has been the consistent message of the prophets all along. Repentance is the opportunity for healing and restoration of God's people: *"that the house of Israel may no more go astray from me, nor defile themselves anymore with all their transgressions, but that they may be my people and I may be their God, declares the Lord God"* (vs. 11).

The mention of the Elders in chapter 14 appears to be a new leadership structure that was brought about by the challenges of spiritual care of a people living in exile. With the abolishing of the monarchy and a displaced people separated from temple life in Jerusalem, new leadership structures emerge to address the shepherding needs of the people.

We first see the Elders in Ezekiel's prophecy in chapter 8 where they sit with Ezekiel as he recites his visions for them. This group appears to be highly invested in the future of Israel. Perhaps they are seeking some sort of economic gain to come from a return to Judah and the rebuilding. If so that could be a big part of their idolatry. I believe this leadership structure is the origin of the Pharisees in the New Testament. Elsewhere in the book of Ezekiel, the shepherds of Israel will be addressed. I believe it is safe to conclude that the shepherds in Ezekiel are the same people as the Elders here in Ezekiel 14. Either way, Ezekiel is against them and the issue in chapter 14 is their idolatry.

Whatever hopes they have of returning to Jerusalem are dashed with Ezekiel's word from the Lord beginning in verse 12. Jerusalem will not be spared. The worst is yet to come and exile will not end anytime soon for the Elders or for the people living in exile.

Ezekiel 15

Ezekiel 15 begins a series of metaphors that continue through Ezekiel chapter 19. Ezekiel continues to drive home the message that his people are so slow to grasp. It's a message that closely parallels the teaching of Jesus in John 15: Apart from God, we can do nothing. Just like John chapter 15, Ezekiel uses the metaphor of a vine to drive this point home.

Ezekiel drives it home even more forcefully than Jesus. In verse 5, the point Ezekiel is making is that if the branch of the vine that was cut off during pruning was worthless before it was pruned, how will it be any better after it is burned? In fact, what Ezekiel is saying is that it's worth even less after it's burned than before. The burning, of course, is symbolic of God's pruning or refining. In other words, Ezekiel's people are beyond reform. They've cut themselves off from God and any source of improvement. Once we reject God, things will only get worse. Apart from him we really can do nothing.

Ezekiel 16

Ezekiel 16 perhaps better than any chapter in the Bible addresses the issue of how God views our sin. In fact, the images are so graphic, even lude that some might be surprised this stuff is even in the Bible. But, such is the ugliness of our sin. God does not forgive sin because he likes it or tolerates it. We are forgiven and the price has been paid for our sin because God hates sin and wants to rid us of it.

The problem is not with God's willingness to forgive, but our refusal to repent and receive his grace. Like the children of Israel, we cling too tightly to our idols: *"But you trusted in your beauty and played the whore because of your renown and lavished your whorings on any passerby; your beauty became his"* (vs. 15).

Ezekiel 16 is a long chapter about Israel being a faithless bride. The chapter is specifically directed to the people who are still living in Jerusalem. This context is important. Ezekiel's prophecy is not just to the refugees he's living among in Babylon, it also is directed to those left behind in Jerusalem. The latter group is filled with self-righteousness. They honestly believe they're better off or more holy for staying in Jerusalem. But, the point that Jeremiah tried to tell them and Ezekiel as well is just the opposite. They will face judgment more severe than those in Babylon because they disobeyed God's command to go.

In chapter 16, Ezekiel is commanded to *make known to Jerusalem her abominations*. And it's not a pretty picture. While to some it may appear that those living in Jerusalem have disguised their sin with the outward appearance of godliness, God is not so easily fooled. Her abominations are so bad in God's eyes that to call it "sin" is not harsh enough of a term. Nor is unfaithfulness. Nor is even prostitution. The word God uses in Ezekiel 16 is whore and it's used

multiple times in chapter 16 and in various forms such as “*multiplying your whoring,*” “*play the whore,*”. It’s an ugly word, but our God does not mince words when it comes to our sin.

In verses 30 through 34, God states that their sin of adultery against God is even worse than that of a prostitute. *Men give gifts to prostitutes, but you gave your gifts to all your lovers, bribing them to come to you from every side with your whorings* (vs. 33).

Ezekiel 17

Ezekiel 17 is a parable of two eagles and a vine. Ezekiel writes this both to conceal and to reveal. On the one hand, it’s very straightforward. The parable involves two Eagles, a cedar, and a vine. The first eagle went to Lebanon, broke off a shoot from a Cedar, and transplanted it in Babylon. In the place of the Cedar in Lebanon, the eagle planted a vine and tenderly took care of it so that it would flourish.

From there the parable gets difficult to understand. Even though the vine “*produced branches and put out boughs*” (vs. 6), a second eagle comes to “*pull up its roots and cut off its fruit*” (vs. 9). It appears the second vine is willing to lose everything it has in an effort to gain something more. In the end, the vine ends up worse than it was before. Its action was not just foolish, it was deadly.

Such is the case with the people of Judah who are in exile in Babylon. When it seems that maybe we have unpacked the meaning of this parable Ezekiel launches into a more detailed commentary beginning in verse 19, “*Therefore thus says the Lord God: As I live, surely it is my oath that he despised, and my covenant that he broke. I will return it upon his head.*” This parable of Ezekiel points the people in exile to their specific sin. They’ve broken the covenant and despised the oath they took with God.

Just when we think we’re good in our understanding of God’s word, look again. There’s always more for us to learn which is the purpose of parables. They force us to dig deeper into the word of God.

Ezekiel 18

Ezekiel 18 begins by addressing a popular proverb the people are saying about their present circumstances, “*the fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge.*” This “proverb” Ezekiel’s people have put their faith in is not from the Lord and thus it is not true.

This is not the first time Ezekiel has had to address clever lines and phrases that are misleading his people. Nor is he the first prophet to do so. In chapter 12, Ezekiel had to address another

popular proverb, *the days are long, and every vision comes to nothing?* (vs. 12: 22). When Ezekiel's people say that *"the fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge"*, what they're really saying is that they in their present circumstances are victims of their parents' sin. A similar thought is expressed in Lamentations 5: 7, *"Our fathers sinned, and are no more; and we bear their iniquities."* Or, again in Jeremiah 31: 29, where the exact same proverb of Ezekiel 18: 2 is repeated, *"the fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge."*

This is wrong thinking on the part of God's people and it springs from a glaring ignorance of God's written Word. The sad reality, however, is that if these proverbs or idioms are repeated enough times like they were in Jeremiah and Ezekiel's day, people will soon believe them and be guided by them. When we build our lives around false narratives, we cannot expect a godly outcome.

It's also the problem with so many of us in the church today. We believe the clever lines and phrases of our day, hear them repeated over and over, so much that we repeat them ourselves and eventually they become the false narrative we build our lives on. Our Lord intervenes to rescue us from the lies we hear that we've convinced ourselves are true. God says in Ezekiel 18, *"As I live, declares the Lord God, this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel"* (vs. 3). In other words, it's sin to repeat these things. Ezekiel's people cannot be allowed to blame their own sin problems on their parents. Ezekiel provides the true narrative: *"All souls are mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is mine: the soul who sins shall die"* (vs. 4)..

The truth is Ezekiel's people are in exile due to their own sin. They have no one else to blame but themselves for this misfortune and no clever line or idiom can conceal this hard reality. All of us stand guilty before God for our own sin and *"the soul who sins shall die"* (vs. 4, 20).

On the one hand, it might appear as if Ezekiel is introducing a new concept of individual responsibility in chapter 18, not found in the Old Testament where up to this point so much emphasis has been upon Israel as a corporate entity. On the other hand, a more accurate interpretation is our lack of understanding of how our individual actions affect corporate community. Ezekiel's people are suffering the cumulative effects of individual sins that have, over time, corrupted their entire community.

Ezekiel addresses several "what if" scenarios in chapter 18. What about a righteous man who lives in the midst of a wicked community (vs. 5 – 9)? What about the son of a righteous man who acts in unrighteous ways (vs. 10 -13)? Or what about the son of an unrighteous man who sees the error of his father's ways and acts righteously (vs. 14- 18)? These questions or scenarios are best answered in understanding that there are no limits on God's mercy, as Ezekiel 18 makes so very clear.

The message of Ezekiel 18 is that we're all guilty and *"the soul who sins shall die."* But the good news of the gospel in Ezekiel 18 is that none of us are beyond the reach of forgiveness, *"Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, declares the Lord God, and not rather that he should*

turn from his way and live” (vs. 23)? Repentance is a gift from God received by faith in a God who redeems.

Ezekiel 19

Ezekiel 19 concludes the section of symbolic metaphors of Judah’s captivity that began in chapter 15. In this chapter the literary style changes from the previous chapters concluding with the last verse of the chapter, verse 14, calling it a lamentation, *“This is a lamentation and has become a lamentation.”*

If Ezekiel chapter 18 is a call to repentance, then the poetry of chapter 19 can serve as a model for how to repent. All of this harkens us back to the previous book of the Bible, Lamentations. Most believe the book of Lamentations was written by Jeremiah, thus the book is positioned in the Bible immediately following Jeremiah’s prophecy and preceding Ezekiel’s.

Ezekiel was both a contemporary of Jeremiah and he also takes Jeremiah’s prophecy into the future. Ezekiel is living what Jeremiah lamented and there are important lessons for us to learn from this process of lamenting.

Ezekiel uses two different metaphors in chapter 19 to describe Judah’s denigration of sin. The first is that of a lioness who reared her cubs to *“catch prey”* and devour others in her way. The first of her cubs were hunted by other nations, captured, and eventually carried off to Egypt. This most likely refers to King Jehoahaz who reigned in Judah for only three months before being taken captive to Egypt. The next “cub” of the “lion of Judah” is carried off to Babylon. This refers to one or even three of the Kings of Judah who were exiled to Babylon by King Nebuchadnezzar.

The second metaphor Ezekiel uses in chapter 19 is a *vine in a vineyard* that begins in verse 10. God planted this vine in perfect conditions, but in sin, the vine rebelled, and through the pride of Judah and rejection of God, the vine is uprooted, withers, and dies. Certainly, symbolic of the people of Judah who are in captivity in Babylon.

Lamentation can either be a source of disdain toward God or it can also be used as a means of repentance of our sin. Lamenting can either lead us away from God making us bitter over what he’s done to us or it can lead us toward God as we recognize our own sin. Ezekiel 19 should be understood in the latter category.

Ezekiel 20

Ezekiel 20 begins a new phase in Ezekiel's prophecy. The dating of it is very clear in verse one. Whereas the previous five chapters have been mostly parabolic or general observations of the overall spiritual condition of the people, chapter 20 marks a renewed interaction between Ezekiel and the exiles in Babylon.

The prophecy of this chapter is initiated by the elders of Israel who have sought out Ezekiel to *inquire of the Lord*. They know something is wrong and they're looking to Ezekiel for an explanation or some kind of hope for a turnaround. Perhaps this is part of an overall political strategy with religious undertones. The problem is if the elders have come to Ezekiel to inquire of the Lord, they've come to the wrong guy. God instead tells Ezekiel in verse 4 to judge them. God will not allow the elders to inquire of him. Instead, God will inquire of them.

The first 32 verses of Ezekiel 20 are a blow-by-blow history of Israel's sin of forsaking the Lord and what specifically God has against them. Ezekiel begins his judgment of the elders of Israel by describing the original vision God had for them as he led them out of slavery in Egypt, a vision that Israel utterly failed to maintain. *"I gave them my statutes and made known to them my rules, by which, if a person does them, he shall live. Moreover, I gave them my Sabbaths, as a sign between me and them, that they might know that I am the Lord who sanctifies them"* (vs. 11, 12). From here Ezekiel gets very specific.

Ezekiel says, *because they rejected my rules and did not walk in my statutes, and profaned my Sabbaths; for their heart went after their idols* (vs. 16). The phrase, *they profaned my Sabbaths* is used again in verse 21. Readers of this chapter should pause and ask from these verses, how specifically did they profane God's Sabbaths? Ezekiel is about to tell us.

In verse 26, Ezekiel speaks of the sin of Israel presenting *gifts in their offering up all their firstborn*. The issue of child sacrifice is addressed again in verse 31, *When you present your gifts and offer up your children in fire, you defile yourselves with all your idols to this day*. Verse 29 speaks of a high place called Bamah. Jeremiah spoke of a similar place in Jeremiah 19 called Topheth. Both Bamah and Topheth represent high places of idolatrous worship for Israel where child sacrifice was practiced. Both places and the single act of child sacrifice represent the last straw with God against Israel. It's a specific answer to Ezekiel's general indictment that the elders of Israel have profaned God's Sabbaths.

Chapter 20 ends with a promise of a restored Israel beginning in verse 33. The promises contained in this section are a forerunner to other exciting and sometimes confusing visions that Ezekiel describes in his prophecy. Things like a new heart resurrected bones given new life, and a restored temple, all outlined in the chapters to come to that point to a second Exodus for Israel - A time when they will be released from the suffering for their sin and experience a breakthrough of the Holy Spirit.

Ezekiel 21

Ezekiel again sets his face toward Jerusalem in **Ezekiel 21** and speaks against their polluted sanctuaries where child sacrifice, among other things, occurred (vs. 2). The Lord is ready to execute his judgment:

“Son of man, prophesy and say, Thus says the Lord, say: “A sword, a sword is sharpened and also polished, sharpened for slaughter, polished to flash like lightning! (Or shall we rejoice? You have despised the rod, my son, with everything of wood)” (vs. 8-10).

This judgment is a last resort as Ezekiel’s people have rejected all other forms of corrective discipline: *You have despised the rod, my son, with everything of wood” (vs. 21).*

The rod or staff is a very common metaphor of the Old Testament. It most prominently appears in Psalm 23, *“your rod and your staff, they comfort me.”* In Psalm 23 the rod is a source of comfort, but it’s also a source of discipline. God as the good shepherd, is leading us his sheep away from evil and in the path of righteousness. We should welcome this in our lives as it is for our good.

In a similar fashion, Proverbs 13: 24 says, *Whoever spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is diligent to discipline him.* This is not a divine approval for child abuse, but a call for parents to treat their children the same way the Lord seeks to treat us in Psalm 23. It is for our good.

In like fashion, the Lord had attempted to discipline Israel. They refused to repent of their sin and experience his forgiveness.

Ezekiel 22

Ezekiel 22 is a reiteration of Israel’s sins. The list includes idolatry (vs. 3), the shedding of blood (vs. 2- 4, 6, 9, 12), immorality (vs. 10 -11), disrespect for parents (vs. 7, and extortion (vs. 12).

Beginning in verse 18, Ezekiel states that the judgment will occur by fire, *“Son of man, the house of Israel has become dross to me; all of them are bronze and tin and iron and lead in the furnace; they are dross of silver.”*

The final section of this chapter, beginning in verse 23 outlines the failures of Israel’s leaders to bring about reform. In spite of the warnings, the people refused to turn and repent. Their land is still polluted.

Ezekiel 23

Ezekiel 23 is a parable of two sisters, Oholah and Oholibah. The significance in the names of these two sisters appears to be their similarity. Oholah represents the northern kingdom of Israel whose capital was in Samaria. Her sister Oholibah represents the southern kingdom of Israel known as Judah whose capital was Jerusalem.

Ezekiel begins by addressing the conduct of Oholah (Israel) who *played the whore* by lusting after the power of the Assyrians. Instead of fleeing the evil of the surrounding Assyrians, Oholah lusted and fell into an idolatrous relationship with the Assyrians that eventually took them captive.

Oholibah, or the Southern kingdom of Judah, also lusted after the Assyrians. But, rather than falling captive to them, Oholibah or Judah was rescued by God through the intercession of King Hezekiah. Those events and the miraculous defeat of Sennacherib's Assyrian army are recorded for us in Isaiah 36. Judah escaped the Assyrians, but North-kingdom Israel did not.

You would think that this turn of history would have gotten Judah's attention; that they would have learned from their sister's mistakes of idolatry and lust to be like the Assyrians. But, sadly they did not and that's the whole point of Ezekiel chapter 23. Oholibah's (or Judah's) sin is far worse than her sister's Oholah. Oholibah failed to *take heed lest she fall* into the same sin. It's why they're in exile in Babylon.

God puts certain people and certain situations in our lives to teach us how not to be. That was certainly the case with Oholah, but unfortunately, Oholibah did not learn. Instead of turning away from her sin, she fell even further into it than her older sister. It's the reason some of us prefer the term "radical corruption" over "total depravity. Just when you think we've fallen as far as we can degenerate in sin, it can and it does get worse.

Instead of a self-help, bad example motivator of what not to be, we need a perfect example of what to be. And that is why God sent us Jesus. He knows that we can't do this ourselves. We need someone to do it for us. Something more than a righteousness to be imitated, but a righteousness to be received by faith and imputed in us through the perfect, finished work of Christ.

Ezekiel 24

Ezekiel 24 records three important events. The first is the siege of Jerusalem by the Babylonians. The second event is the death of Ezekiel's wife and finally, the third major event is the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem by the Babylonians after they laid siege of the city.

The dating of the fall of Jerusalem is very specific in verses 1 and 2: *"In the ninth year, in the tenth month, on the tenth day of the month, the word of the Lord came to me: 2^m"Son of man, write down the name of this day, this very day. The king of Babylon has laid siege to Jerusalem this very day."*

As best as we can conclude, the date of the siege of Jerusalem is January 15, 587 B.C. Ezekiel can't say that he didn't warn his people of this day. But, instead of writing a "told you so" chapter of God's word, Ezekiel is instructed to *utter "a parable to the rebellious house"* with respect to what God has done in Jerusalem through the hands of the Babylonians.

Ezekiel compares Jerusalem to a *"pot whose corrosion is in it, and whose corrosion has not gone out of it"*(vs. 6). Instead of the pot stewing a pleasing meal, it is a big hot mess of Judah's sin and corruption. Even as the pot simmers, the corrosion of Judah's sin will not be boiled out of the pot, *"its abundant corrosion does not go out of it"* (vs. 12).

God's desire was that the people of Jerusalem would repent of their sin: *"I would have cleansed you and you were not cleansed from your uncleanness"* (vs. 13). Indeed, much of Ezekiel's prophecy is a call to repentance. Yet, Ezekiel's people refused time and again, and now the dreaded day of their siege has finally come.

The second significant event of Ezekiel 24 records a much more personal day for Ezekiel than the fall of Jerusalem. It is the day Ezekiel's wife died that corresponds with the fall of Jerusalem: *"Son of man, behold I am about to take the delight of your eyes away from you at a stroke"* (vs. 16).

The Lord tells Ezekiel that he *"shall not mourn or weep, nor even have tears run down."* It's unclear from this passage if Ezekiel's lack of grief is a special grace from God, or a matter of Ezekiel rejoicing that his wife will not experience what is about to befall his people from the siege of Jerusalem. Perhaps it is a combination of both. Or, maybe Ezekiel understandably feels the grief of this loss, he's just not allowed to express it. What is clear is that Ezekiel did exactly as he was commanded. *"He spoke to the people in the morning, and at evening his wife died"* (vs. 18).

Throughout his prophetic life, Ezekiel's calling has been intensely personal. God has taken him through all kinds of experiences that most people would consider quite strange, if not questionable of Ezekiel's sanity. But, every experience Ezekiel is taken through is an exercise in feeling what God feels for his people who have betrayed him and an attempt to bring the

people back to God. The pain that Ezekiel feels with the loss of his wife does not compare with the pain God feels in the loss of his people.

The final event of Ezekiel 24 is the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. It is described in verse 25 as a stronghold, joy, glory, *“the delight of their eyes and their soul’s desire, and also their sons and daughters.”* Ezekiel learns this news from a fugitive.

So much of life in Judah and particularly in Jerusalem centered around the temple and the worship that occurred there. It’s a big reason so many resisted exile or thought it would never happen. Through exile, God has proven that he is not a localized tribal deity, but an omnipresent God.

It is unclear what is meant by Ezekiel no longer being mute in verse 26. In chapter three Ezekiel was only permitted to speak what God told him to speak. Unlike his contemporary Jeremiah, Ezekiel does not offer intercession on behalf of his people. That is because the time is up and God’s judgment is at hand.

Our God does not utter idle threats. He delivers on his word. That should be the clear unmistakable message of Ezekiel 24. But, even more importantly, we must ask ourselves if we take God any more seriously than Ezekiel’s people did?

Ezekiel 25

Ezekiel 25 begins a new series of prophecies in the book of Ezekiel. With the siege of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple by the Babylonians that took place in chapter 24, Ezekiel now turns his attention to the judgment of other neighboring nations. Ammon, Moab combined with Seir, Edom, and Philistia are all addressed in chapter 25.

The prophecies are arranged in a series of six oracles, with four of them in chapter 25 alone. The charges against these nations mostly pertain to them rejoicing over the downfall of Judah, celebrating the siege of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple. What has happened in Jerusalem with the temple is the very thing God warned about in 1 Kings 9:6-9. The nations mentioned in Ezekiel 25 are the nations that pass by who will be *“astonished and will hiss, and they will say, ‘Why has the Lord done thus to this land and to this house?’ ”* (1 Kings 9:8).

The charge against Ammon is clearly spelled out in Ezekiel 25: 3, *“Because you said, ‘Aha!’ over my sanctuary when it was profaned, and over the land of Israel when it was made desolate, and over the house of Judah when they went into exile.”* Moab and Seir committed a similar sin by mocking and celebrating that Judah was *“like all the other nations.”* In other words, they were mocking God’s power to protect Judah from the fate that has befallen them. Edom similarly acted *“revengefully against the house of Judah”* (vs. 12). Philistia is the last nation to be

addressed in chapter 25. Their sin is for acting *“revengefully and taking vengeance with malice of soul to destroy in never-ending enmity”* (vs. 15).

This chapter outlines the serious consequences of finding pleasure in other people’s pain. For God, the gloating over the fall of God’s holy city Jerusalem and the destruction of his temple is a very personal assault against his glory.

Ezekiel 26

Ezekiel 26 continues the series of judgments against other nations by turning attention to Tyre. A lot of Biblical prophecies are directed against the ancient Phoenician cities of Tyre and Sidon. Ezekiel address all of this in chapters 26 and 27 with a lament for Tyre and carries it through to chapter 28, with a prophecy against Tyre, Sidon, and the Prince and King of Tyre.

Throughout the Old Testament, Tyre is presented as a prosperous city, a mega trading empire. The judgments against this city pertain mostly to the pride of their wealth and the false sense of security they had in it. They also are a major source of pagan cult worship, particularly Baal worship that infiltrated into the land of Judah through trade and labor. The sin Ezekiel addresses with Tyre is the same as the sin of Judah’s surrounding neighbors addressed in Ezekiel 25. They all rejoiced at the siege of Jerusalem by the Babylonians.

Apparently, Tyre saw an opening to expand their trading empire with the siege of Jerusalem with this competitor out of the picture, *“the gate of the peoples is broken; it has swung open to me”* (vs.2). They saw themselves being *“replenished, now that she [Jerusalem] is laid waste.”* They are viewing the destruction of Jerusalem and surrounding Judah as an opportunity for economic gain. I believe this is also the focus of the elders of Israel who seek counsel from Ezekiel. Their sin is the ulterior motives in seeking a word from the Lord to offer them an economic advantage.

The same God who judged Judah and its city Jerusalem is also against Tyre. *“I am against you, O Tyre, and will bring up many nations against you, as the sea brings up its waves. Worse, Tyre will be obliterated, never to be rebuilt,” I will bring you to a dreadful end, and you shall be no more. Though you be sought for, you will never be found again, declares the Lord”* (26: 21).

These are indeed stunning indictments directed toward Tyre and this prophecy did indeed come true. The Babylonians besieged Tyre just as they did Jerusalem and later Alexander the Great destroyed the city. God’s judgment pronounced against Tyre came to pass, just as God’s word said that it would. The rebuilding of Tyre, however, is a subject of considerable confusion in Ezekiel’s prophecy. Tyre exists today as a city so how do we understand this in light of Ezekiel 26: 21, that it would never be rebuilt? It appears Ezekiel is speaking with respect to Tyre’s center of power and influence. His reference of Tyre never being rebuilt is about more than its name, but more likely a reference to its power, influence, and pagan worship.

Ezekiel 27

Ezekiel 27 continues the prophecy against Tyre with a lamentation over what is about to happen to them. Even though they rejoiced at the fall of Jerusalem, Ezekiel has made clear the same thing awaits them.

Once again the focus is on Tyre's pride and vast economic empire. Tyre is described as "*the entrance to the sea, merchant of the peoples of many coastlands*" (vs. 2). The lamentation of chapter 27 is offered because the Lord is about to judge their sin and they are about to face the same fate as Jerusalem.

Verses 12 through 25 detail the many business partners Tyre had. They were clearly an economic force to contend with in their day. As such the judgments against them serve for us as a reminder of the sin of pride and the warning against the love of money which the Bible describes as "*the root of all evil*" (1 Timothy 6: 10).

Notice that the Scriptures do not teach that money is evil. It is the love of money that's evil. God had strategically placed Tyre at "*the entrance of the sea*" in which they could not help but prosper. But, instead of seeing themselves as blessed by God in order to be a blessing to others, they chose instead to turn the blessings of God into an opportunity for their flesh.

Don't just gloss over these prophecies against Tyre. They serve as a reminder to us of what Jesus said in Mark 8: 36: "*For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?*"

Jesus visited the regions of Tyre and Sidon during his earthly ministry in Mark chapter 7. In Luke chapter 10, Jesus sends out his seventy-two witnesses to proclaim the good news of the gospel. When they are rejected by the unrepentant cities of Chorazin and Bethsaida, Jesus proclaims their fate will be worse than that of Tyre and Sidon: "*For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes*" (Luke 10: 13).

Ezekiel 28

Ezekiel 28 continues the judgments against Tyre by focusing on the Prince of Tyre, who personifies the pride of the city he represents, "*by your great wisdom in your trade you have increased your wealth, and your heart has become proud in your wealth*" (vs. 5).

Establishing the identity of the King of Tyre in Ezekiel chapter 28 is no small task in Biblical prophetic interpretation. Early church fathers saw in this chapter a conflict between God and the forces of evil depicting the fall of Lucifer from his heavenly realm. They saw in Ezekiel 28, most notably in verses 14 and 15, the King of Tyre being "*an anointed guardian cherub*" as the cherub in the garden of Eden in Genesis 3. At one time he was a blameless being "*until*

unrighteousness was found” in him. This passage, according to this interpretation, is about his fall from grace and equating Satan with the King of Tyre.

Reasonable people can disagree with this interpretation. But, in disagreeing, let’s not miss the important analogies and correlations of how the forces of Satan work in our lives. Ezekiel chapter 28 is most definitely instructive.

We must first begin by understanding the specific grievance God has against the city of Tyre in Ezekiel 28. It is clearly the pride of their wealth of being a major trade center to the nations surrounding them. Isaiah addresses the same sin of Tyre in Isaiah 23. Tyre is the ultimate in self-sufficiency and pride. They are drunk on their own power and success. The King of Tyre is a self-made man who flaunts his wealth and power in direct defiance to God. Who needs God when you can obtain such power on your own?

God had established Israel to be dependent upon him for the “blessing” God so richly provides to those who trust him. In contrast, Tyre had obtained this on their own and in so doing became their own god. Clearly, Ezekiel is speaking metaphorically of Tyre and their fall from grace. They have been seduced by Satan and in this sense, it’s accurate to equate the king of Tyre to Satan. This, however, does not necessarily make him the same person as the serpent in Genesis 3.

Unfortunately, we in Christ can also be all too easily swayed into the same pattern as Tyre and its rulers. 1 Timothy 3: 6 is helpful, *“He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil.”* While this passage speaks of qualifications for elders or pastors in the church, it, more importantly, describes a process of falling into the lure of Satan. Power, success, and self-sufficiency are seductive and Satan uses all this and more in our lives to condemn us. In the case of 1 Timothy 3: 6, If we are not grounded in Christ, like a “recent convert” we too will be seduced.

Ezekiel 29

Ezekiel 29 continues the judgments upon the cities and nations surrounding Judah, by focusing on Egypt. This will continue through chapter 32. The previous oracles against foreign nations were against lesser states. Egypt, however, was one of the greatest empires of the ancient world.

The dating of Ezekiel’s oracle is very specific in 29: 1. It corresponds with Nebuchadnezzar’s siege of Jerusalem. While Babylon will plunder Jerusalem and the temple of God, the interesting part of Ezekiel 29 is that God is not against Babylon in this chapter. This chapter is devoted to God’s judgment of Egypt and it focuses on two sins of Egypt.

The first is similar to the other nations surrounding Judah. They’re guilty of worshiping creation over the creator. Egypt had said, *“my Nile is my own, I made it for myself”* (vs. 3). This of course

is a lie, but one the Egyptians all too easily believed and clung to. God addresses this sin in verses 9 and 10, *“Because you said, ‘The Nile is mine and I made it, therefore, behold I am against you and against your streams.’”* God is going to make *“the land of Egypt an utter waste and desolation.”*

The second offense God has against Egypt is the alliance they tried to form with Judah in warding off the Babylonians. Isaiah spoke at great length against this alliance in his prophecy. So did Jeremiah. Ezekiel follows by declaring Egypt *“a staff of reed to the house of Israel”*. Judah had looked to them for strength or to be a staff to them. But, the staff they sought to lean on in Egypt was a *“reed.”* It all too quickly broke under the pressure placed upon them. Even the power of the Egyptians could not resist the Babylonians. The greater sin was why Judah sought their help in the first place.

What is most remarkable, if not ironic, of this chapter is that while God is focused on the sin of Egypt, he seems to excuse, if not accommodate the Babylonians who were guilty of the same sin of pride and power as the Egyptians. Beginning in verse 17, Ezekiel utters another prophecy 17 years later than the one against Egypt at the beginning of this chapter.

The Babylonians were responsible for bringing down the city of Tyre in the previous chapters. It was a hard fight and Nebuchadnezzar’s army did not get *“anything from Tyre to pay for the labor that he performed against her”* (vs. 18). The Lord is therefore giving the land of Egypt as the wages for the Babylonian army (vs. 19). They are an instrument in the hand of the Lord to carry out his judgment against sin.

Ezekiel 30

Ezekiel 30 is a more specific description of what the judgments against Egypt will be. Verse three indicates that the *“day is near.”* This will be *“a time of doom for other nations.”* *“Her wealth is going to be carried away; her foundations torn down”* (vs. 4). Those who looked to Egypt for support, as a group of people from Jerusalem did, will not find the security in Egypt that they hoped for. *“Those who support Egypt shall fall, and her proud might shall come down”* (vs. 6). Verses 13 – 19 outline the various towns in Egypt where God will destroy their idols.

Beginning in verse 20, Ezekiel states that Egypt will fall to the Babylonians. The dating of this prophesy is very specific, *“in the eleventh year, in the first, month, on the seventh day of the month”* (vs. 20). This is three months before the fall of Jerusalem recorded in Ezekiel 24. What Ezekiel is stating in verse 20 is when the vision of the fall of Egypt came to him, not when it actually happened. God knows the beginning from the end.

God is going to *“scatter the Egyptians among the nations and disperse them throughout the countries. Then they will know that I am the Lord”* (vs. 26).

Ezekiel 31

Ezekiel 31 is specifically directed to Pharaoh King of Egypt. Beginning in verse 3, the mention of Assyria is used as a warning to Pharaoh. Assyria's rulers like the Pharaohs of Egypt thought of themselves as being invincible. This chapter makes clear that not only will Egypt fall to Nebuchadnezzar's army, but the Pharaoh will also fall as well.

The glory of Egypt and her Pharaohs does not compare with the glory of the Lord. "*Whom are you thus like in glory and in greatness among the trees of Eden*" (vs. 18). Pharaoh and all his multitude "*shall lie among the uncircumcised, with those who are slain by the sword*" (vs. 18).

Ezekiel 32

Ezekiel 32 concludes the judgment against Egypt with a final lament for what awaits them from the hand of God executed by Nebuchadnezzar's army.

Ezekiel is asked by God to deliver a word to Egypt. The place that Ezekiel is to take them in his prophecy is "*to the world below*" (vs. 18) to those who have died before them. "*It is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment*" (Hebrews 9: 27). Egypt through the word of the Lord delivered by Ezekiel is getting a foretaste of this afterlife.

Specifically, Egypt is going down to "*be laid to rest with the uncircumcised.*" Circumcision is the mark of the covenant God made with his people Israel. It symbolized their union with God as his covenant people and God's provision and protection of them. Likewise, uncircumcised describes a people separated from God. Ezekiel is about to give them a vision, not of the battle that awaits them but the aftermath of this life.

Ezekiel is literally taking his readers to the pit of hell to see the uncircumcised who are there. They have fallen "*amid those who are slain by the sword*" (vs. 20). This, according to Ezekiel is where Egypt is ultimately headed. It is the fate of the uncircumcised, those who live apart from the living God and his promises of eternal provision. The place where Ezekiel is taking his readers is not only reserved for Egypt, "*they shall fall amid those who are slain by the sword*" (vs. 20) and it's quite a list. "*Assyria is there, and all her company*" (vs. 22). "*Elan is there, and all her multitude around her grace*" (vs. 24). "*Meshech-Tubal is there, and all her multitude, her graves all around it*" (vs. 26). "*Edom is there*" (vs. 29) and so are "*The princes of the north*" (vs. 29, 30). Such is the fate of those who live apart from God.

Jesus speaks of hell as a place where there's weeping and gnashing of teeth (Luke 13: 28). Ezekiel presents a contemplative vision of hell where people are "*placed among slain, who are slain by the sword.*" While they fought each other while among the living, those who reject God all share a common destiny. In Ezekiel 32 they contemplate this for eternity.

All this places the judgment of God among the living in clearer perspective. As we'll see in the next chapter of Ezekiel, God takes *"no pleasure in the death of the wicked."* God's desire is that man *"turn from his way and live"* (Ezekiel 33: 11). God's judgment then is a means of grace, an opportunity for us to repent from our evil ways and find life in Christ.

Ezekiel 33

Ezekiel 33 is God's recommissioning of Ezekiel to be a watchman to the house of Israel. Ezekiel faces a defeated people. Unfortunately, they're not asking how they should live in relation to the living God. Instead, they're asking how *can* they live in light of their transgressions and sins that are upon them. They see themselves rotting away because of them. They believe that God is against them and the sad reality is that he is. But, what Ezekiel is trying to get across to his people is that God is against their sin, not them personally.

God takes *"no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live"* (vs. 11). Repentance is a gift from God. It marks a death to our sin and results in us receiving life in Christ. When we receive these gifts by faith, the price is paid for our sin and the justice of God is fully satisfied in the death of Christ. Just as Christ has been raised to life again, so we too are raised to life in him when we repent of our sin and believe the good news of the gospel.

Beginning in verse 21, Ezekiel gets the official word that the city of Jerusalem has fallen to the Babylonians. God had promised Ezekiel in Ezekiel 24: 26 that he would send a fugitive from Jerusalem to report the news to him when it happened. Ezekiel 33: 21 is a fulfillment of that promise. But, it's also a sign to Ezekiel. Up until this time Ezekiel has been mute. When the fugitive from Jerusalem comes, it's time for Ezekiel to speak to his people and be a *"sign to them, that they will know that I am the Lord"* (24: 27).

Ezekiel is to speak the word of God to his people. The time of being mute has ended. Now it's time for Ezekiel to speak. The remainder of the book of Ezekiel will be focused on the future, the reconstruction of a temple for God's people. It's a message of good news and God's future restoration plan for his people.

People are talking about Ezekiel (vs. 30) and now they're actually listening to him. But, talking about a preacher or a sermon or listening to a sermon is not enough. God is looking at the heart. God says to Ezekiel; *"their heart is set on their gain"* (vs. 31). They are not obeying God's word. Ezekiel is to his people *"like one who sings lustful songs with a beautiful voice and plays well on an instrument."* Ezekiel's people *"hear what he has to say, but they will not do it"* (vs. 31).

All of this embodies the heart of what ministry really is. It is best capsulized in this concept of being a watchman. *“So you, son of man, I have made a watchman for the house of Israel. Whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me”* (vs. 7).

Ezekiel 34

Ezekiel 34 addresses the elders of Israel as shepherds. Exile brought about a radical shift in the leadership structure of Israel. Prior to exile, the leadership of God’s people primarily flowed from the monarchy and the priesthood at the temple in Jerusalem. In Ezekiel 34, Ezekiel again refers to a leadership structure that is common in the book. It is the elders of Israel and Ezekiel refers to them in this chapter as shepherds.

The concept of shepherds shepherding God’s people does not originate with Ezekiel. There is a mountain of material in the Old Testament about shepherding the people of God. The focus of Ezekiel 34 is the shepherd’s dereliction of duty.

Instead of feeding the people spiritually, the shepherds have been putting their own needs and wants ahead of the needs of their people. They’ve been feeding themselves while starving the sheep. *“You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep”* (vs. 3).

Ezekiel’s indictments get even worse in verse 4: *“The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them. The end result of this negligence is God’s sheep are scattered over all the face of the earth, with none to search or seek for them”* (vs. 6).

Ezekiel does not seek to reform these shepherds or call them to repentance. They’re beyond reform. Instead, Ezekiel issues a promise that God *“will rescue my sheep from their mouths, that they may not be food for them”* (vs. 10). This rescuer is none other than God himself, *“I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep and I myself will make them lie down, declares, the Lord God. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them in justice”* (vs. 15, 16).

In Matthew 9: 35, we see our Lord Jesus proclaiming the good news of the gospel everywhere he goes. Jesus is moved to compassion for the sheep he encounters *“because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd”* (Matthew 9: 36). Jesus has come to rescue us, his sheep, and be our shepherd.

While Jesus is the good shepherd who rescues his sheep, he also charges us with shepherding responsibilities. *“Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few;*

therefore, pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.”
Matthew 9: 37).

Ezekiel 35

Ezekiel 35 is a prophecy against Edom and its central mountain, Mount Seir. At first, it may seem a bit out of place in relation to chapter 36, but these two chapters must be understood together. Any future hope of restoration of Judah will first have to focus on the judgment of Edom.

Edom’s sin is similar to the other nations surrounding Judah that Ezekiel addressed in chapters 25 – 32. They rejoiced at the calamity of Judah with the fall of Jerusalem. Except, with Edom the hostility is long-standing. They *“cherished perpetual enmity and gave over the people of Israel to the power of the sword at the time of their calamity”* (vs. 5). Specifically, they helped Nebuchadnezzar in his assault on Jerusalem by cutting off fugitives and handing them back to Babylonian forces. This sin is addressed again in Obadiah verses 10 – 14 and Malachi 1: 2-5.

The hostility between Israel and Edom traces back even further to their progenitors, Jacob and Esau from Genesis 27 – 28. Jacob’s descendants became Israel and Esau’s descendants become Edom. The sin problems started when the younger brother Jacob stole his brother Esau’s birthright by deceiving his father Isaac. It’s a story of family drama with long-standing effects. But, in truth, Jacob and Esau’s sin problems started before they were even born. It really is in fulfillment of the promise of Genesis 3:15. It’s a scenario that is played out between Cain and his brother Abel as well as Jacob and Esau. Ultimately, as in the case of Jacob and Esau, it leads to humanity being divided into two communities; the redeemed who love God, and the reprobate who reject God out of love for self.

These prophecies find their fulfillment in Christ by him abolishing enmity and establishing peace by the creation of one new man (Ephesians 2: 15).

Ezekiel 36

Ezekiel 36 is a prophecy to the mountains of Israel. Specifically, it is a reference to Mount Zion where the temple in Jerusalem once stood. This chapter stands in stark contrast to the previous chapter. In chapter 35, the emphasis is on Mount Seir. What Mount Zion is to Israel, Mount Seir was to Edom. The judgment of Edom in chapter 35, is preparing the way for a future restoration of Israel, which will be the focus of the remainder of the book of Ezekiel.

Verse 8 contains the promise that though Jerusalem and surrounding Judah lies in ruins, it *“shall shoot forth your branches and yield your fruit to my people Israel, for they will soon come*

home.” What exactly Ezekiel means by the people coming home is the subject of deep theological debate. The promises of chapter 36 could easily be a reference to the returning to Jerusalem after 70 years of Babylonian captivity. If it is, however, the promises of this chapter as well as other prophecies in the Old Testament fell far short of being fulfilled in the return. I think it’s safe to say that the events recorded in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah are only a partial fulfillment of a future restoration that we await.

All of this is predicated on the Lord’s passion in this chapter to preserve his holy name. While the nation Israel lived in their own land, *“they defiled it by their ways and their deeds”* (vs. 16). Therefore the Lord had no choice but to pour out his wrath upon them and their idols in which they defiled it (vs. 18). God has done this and his reasoning was out of *“concern for my holy name, which the house of Israel had profaned among the nations to they came”* (vs. 21).

Beginning in verse 22 through the end of the chapter, God gives Ezekiel a vision of what his restoration will look like. God is doing something new with his people. He will give them *“a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules”* (vs. 26 – 27).

This is a reference to the regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit giving eternal life to those who put their faith in Christ (Titus 3: 5).

Ezekiel 37

Ezekiel 37 is an illustration that any future hope of restoration must first be preceded by a movement of the Holy Spirit. In New Testament theology, we say that regeneration precedes faith. It is in keeping with God’s revelation throughout the Scriptures that Salvation belongs to the Lord. Ezekiel 37 is a powerful illustration of these truths and the fact that God has not forgotten his people.

The Lord takes Ezekiel to a valley of dry bones in Ezekiel 37. Like so many things in the book of Ezekiel, the image that Ezekiel is shown is very graphic. Ezekiel sees not only an image of death, it’s an image of bodily decay, right down to the remaining skeletal structure of deceased humans. They are not just dead, they’re beyond dead. The bones Ezekiel sees are *“dry”*, meaning they’re missing any form of life such as flesh, tendon, or ligament. They are void of any sign of life whatsoever.

A dead person is incapable of bringing himself back to life. In Ezekiel 37, it is the Lord who breathes life into these dry bones and resurrects them to new life. It is the Lord who puts sinews upon these bones, causing flesh to come upon them and covers them with skin. All of Ezekiel 37 is a miraculous work of the Lord with absolutely no prompting or initiative of the dry bones.

Ezekiel is not just shown a vision of spiritual death in Ezekiel 37, it is better understood as an illustration of the doctrine of regeneration confirmed by the deadness of the bones Ezekiel is shown in the valley.

Regeneration is understood as being born again or new life in Christ. Like the dry bones Ezekiel is shown, we need the prompting of the Holy Spirit to receive the breath of God. This miracle is described for us in Titus 3: 5,6: *“He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Christ Jesus our Savior.”*

When this happens we are brought from death to life. James 1: 18 says, *“Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.”* In the chapters that follow chapter 37, Ezekiel is about to be shown a vision of a new creation. The resurrection of the dry bones is the firstfruits of this new creation.

Ezekiel points us to a salvation that was ordained for us *“before the foundations of the world”* (Ephesians 1: 4). It is according to plan and a reminder that our spiritually dead bodies did not choose Christ. He chose us in order that we should bear fruit and that the fruit we bear should abide (John 15: 16).

After giving Ezekiel a vision of regenerate individuals in the valley of dry bones, the prophet is now shown in the latter half of chapter 37 a vision of a restored or regenerate Israel. It is a picture of a united Israel where the hostilities of the divided kingdom of Israel in the north and Judah in the south are reconciled. This is illustrated to Ezekiel by two sticks, one for Judah and one for Israel that are joined together to become one in Ezekiel’s hand (vs. 15 – 17).

For those of us in Christ, we know this vision of two sticks equaling one Cross.

Ezekiel 38

Ezekiel 38 is one of the more difficult chapters to understand in the book of Ezekiel. There is a mountain of material in this chapter and the chapters that follow make them one of the more complicated sections of the Old Testament to understand.

First, is the identity of Gog and the territory ruled by Gog known as Magog. Who is Gog and where is Magog located? The answers are the source of widespread speculation. I have personally concluded that the identity of Gog and the territory he rules transcend normal historical identifiable categories. I have come to view both as a general characterization of the forces of evil who operate in direct opposition to God. In this sense, I think it is appropriate to view Gog and Magog as references to Satan and his demonic powers. Ephesians 6: 12 is helpful. We do not wrestle against specific, identifiable people, but *“cosmic powers or spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.”*

The context of Ezekiel 38 and 39 certainly fits this interpretation. After describing a vision of a reunited Israel in Ezekiel 37 and before describing a new temple beginning in chapter 40, Ezekiel must first deal with Israel's foes and the direct assault they have upon God's people and his future plan of restoration. The spiritual forces of evil are real and are an ever-present danger to the people of God. But, Ezekiel 38 and 39 present a picture of a restored people who dwell securely in their land. This is what the remaining chapters of the book of Ezekiel focus on and it's an important point that God's people often forget.

Students of Biblical prophecy are often either stuck in the past attempting to identify such things as Gog and Magog, or they are myopically focused on untangling future end-time details. Both approaches miss important considerations for life in the present. Walking with Jesus is an ever-present reality with an ultimate destination. I don't necessarily need to focus on unraveling the end time code as I need to focus on the one who knows the exact combination of the code. Those points should be clear to the reader of Ezekiel 38 and 39.

In the end, God wins. Ezekiel 38: 23 bears repeating, *"So I will show my greatness and my holiness and make myself known in the eyes of many nations. Then they will know that I am the Lord."*

Satan's power is supernaturally great and he should be taken seriously. As Martin Luther taught us to sing, *"his craft and power are great and armed with cruel hate. But, one [little] word shall fell him."*

Ezekiel 39

Ezekiel 39 is a prophecy against Gog and the territories he rules who are in opposition to God's people. Many commentators believe this is ultimately a description of the battle of Armageddon. That seems to be a fitting interpretation. The forces of evil have met their end.

God promises to give Gog *to birds of prey of every sort and to the beasts of the field to be devoured* (vs. 4). The people of Israel will take the weapons of Gog and repurpose them as firewood to warm themselves. The supply will be so great (seven years' worth) that *they will not need to take wood out of the field or cut down any out of the forests* (vs. 10).

This is not only a picture of the restoration of God's people, it is a picture of repurposing things back to the way God intended them to be. The prophets Isaiah and Micah both speak of end-time prophecies in which the enemies of God beat their swords into plowshares (Isaiah 2: 4, Micah 4:3). This is similar to the weapons of Gog being repurposed into firewood. What man means for evil, God intends for good. Swords are repurposed as plowshares to till the ground. Weapons of the enemy are used to warm God's people by being turned into firewood.

God is doing all this to preserve his holy name. In Ezekiel 36: 21, God declares to Ezekiel that the reason for his judgment against Judah was to preserve his holy name. He could not allow his people to continue in their sin that defiled the name of the God of Israel. While Israel professed a halfhearted faith in God, their sin testified against them. God had no choice but to execute his judgment and he used the enemy Babylon to get it done.

But, in Ezekiel 39, particularly verse 7, the scene is not one of the judgments of God's people. It's one of the judgments of the enemies of God's people. It's a scene of salvation for the people of God. Salvation, as Ezekiel 39 confirms, is not just the deliverance and reconciliation of a people, but the full restoration of all things. Such a restoration is necessary for a redeemed people to experience the ultimate blessings of their salvation. And, all of it is from the hand of God, for the glory of God's holy name.

In the past God *dealt with them according to their uncleanness and their transgressions, and hid my face from them*" (vs. 24) But, now God promises to *restore the fortunes of Jacob and have mercy on the whole house of Israel, and I will be jealous for my holy name* (vs. 25).

Ezekiel 40

Ezekiel 40 begins the last section of Ezekiel's prophesy and it's some of the more difficult reading of the book. These concluding chapters center around the building of a new temple and the greatest challenge for a reader is how to interpret them. Are they a blueprint for future construction? If so when will the temple be built? What exactly did Ezekiel see in his vision?

Before attempting to form a framework for the chapters ahead in the book of Ezekiel, it's helpful at this point to look back at the previous chapters. It is clear from earlier chapters that Ezekiel is envisioning an entirely new framework for the people of God initiated in large part by life in exile. The monarchy, temple life, and Jerusalem as a central hub of worship have become obsolete through exile. This presents the people of God with unprecedented challenges but at the same time new opportunities.

A new temple is necessary because the old one has been destroyed, but more importantly, it's clear from the life setting of the book of Ezekiel that changes to how the temple functions will also become necessary in order to serve a newly transformed people. How does a new temple serve the new nation described in chapter 35? Or, how does temple worship function for people under a new covenant described in chapter 36? What about temple life after exile? Will it be the same in the return to Jerusalem as it was prior to exile?

We know from the Biblical sources themselves, such as Ezra, Nehemiah, and even the prophet Haggai, that if the descriptions from Ezekiel 40 – 48 are in fact a blueprint for future construction, then it certainly was not followed in Jerusalem after exile in the rebuilding efforts.

Ezekiel must be speaking toward the future construction of a different structure from the one that Ezra and Haggai experienced. Haggai himself seems to confirm this in Haggai 2: 9.

While it's safe to conclude that the temple of Ezekiel's vision is a future structure even beyond the post-exilic structure, that conclusion presents at least as many questions as answers. While one can certainly not rule out a temple structure in a new millennium, one certainly has to ask what the purpose of it would be in relation to the finished work of Christ. Why would a temple even be necessary?

While we can't speak for absolute certainty of what specifically Ezekiel saw, it is clear from the chapters ahead that the overarching theme of Ezekiel's vision is the accessibility the new structure affords its worshippers. Old barriers that were erected by walls, windows, entrances, and porticos in previous structures are removed in Ezekiel's vision. This is a significant factor that must guide us in the material ahead in light of the finished work of the final sacrifice of Christ's body. Christ is the fulfillment of Ezekiel's temple.

Ezekiel is giving his vision in 40: 1 fourteen years after the fall of Jerusalem. In verses 5 through 27, Ezekiel is given a vision of the outer court of the temple and its three gates. Beginning in verse 28 through the end of the chapter Ezekiel sees the inner court and its three gates. The issue Ezekiel seems to be addressing in this chapter is accessibility. This is a much more open concept than previous structures due to the finished work of Christ.

Ezekiel 41 and 42

Ezekiel 41 brings Ezekiel into the inner temple itself. The measurements of the nave and door jambs are very specific. In verse 3, Ezekiel is taken to the most holy place of the temple. Even in a new structure, the angel that is giving Ezekiel the tour can enter the most holy of places, but Ezekiel cannot.

Beginning in verse 5 walls, sidewalls, vestibules, doorposts are given specific measurements.

Ezekiel is taken to the temple chambers in the inner court in **Ezekiel 42**. Verses 1 through 14 include very specific measurements of the inner court. Verses 15 through the end of the chapter include measurements for the outer walls of the temple.

It is difficult in both of these chapters to find a correlation to present or future reality. I do not see this as a construction plan of something the people of God erect on earth, but rather a heavenly reality that Ezekiel is transported to in his vision of something that already exists in heaven. These chapters along with the remaining chapter of the book of Ezekiel test the limits of literal hermeneutics and raise serious questions as to how far to take it.

Ezekiel 43

Ezekiel 43 is a vision of the glory of the Lord filling the temple. Ezekiel's prophesy started with a vision of God's glory in the opening chapters so it is fitting that the closing chapters will also include this important theme. Ezekiel's vision of the temple is a message of restoration.

In chapter 8, Ezekiel was given a vision of the abominations in the temple in Jerusalem, and in chapters 10 and 11, Ezekiel is given a vision of the glory of the Lord leaving the temple.

In Ezekiel 11: 23, Ezekiel is given a new vision in which *"the glory of the Lord went up from the midst of the city and stood on the mountain that is on the east side of the city."* This is the exact spot in which the glory of the Lord departed from the temple in chapters 10 and 11. In verse 5, Ezekiel sees a restoration of what was lost in chapters 10 and 11: *"the glory of the Lord filled the temple."* The Lord is not leaving this temple as he did the old one, *"and I will dwell in their midst forever"* (vs. 9).

Ezekiel clarifies for us the purpose of the vision he is given of the temple in 43: 10: *"As for you, son of man, describe to the house of Israel the temple, that they may be ashamed of their iniquities and they shall measure the plan."* The plans for the temple and the laws that will govern it are given to the house of Israel conditioned on them being *"ashamed of all they have done."* This section of chapter 43 is critically important in our understanding and interpretation of Ezekiel's temple in chapters 40 – 48. It is clear from this chapter that it is a comparison/contrast between the old and the new. The abominations in the temple from earlier chapters should lead people to repent of how far short they have fallen from God's glory. Those who do repent will be shown a new temple in which the Lord will never depart from their midst. The parallels to our union with Christ in these verses are beautiful, powerful, and pregnant with meaning.

Beginning in verse 13, Ezekiel is shown a new vision for the altar of the temple. The altar will have to be consecrated. This will include the Levitical priests *"throwing blood against it"* (vs.18). This is a sin offering (vs. 19). The closing section of this chapter outlines procedures that are quite similar to the laws of the Levitical priesthood that governed the first temple that has now been destroyed.

Ezekiel 44

Ezekiel 44 is a vision of the east gate of the temple. *“This gate shall remain shut; it shall not be opened, and no one shall enter by it, for the Lord, the God of Israel, has entered by it. Therefore it shall remain shut”* (vs. 2). The only one who may enter is the *“prince”* who *“may sit in it to eat bread before the Lord”* (vs. 3). These verses are the subject of disputed interpretations of the book of Ezekiel and rightfully so. Why is this person in verse 3 a *“prince”* and not a king?

Clearly, Ezekiel is being given a vision of something new that is difficult for Ezekiel to fit into the old categories that are more familiar to him. In chapter 37, Ezekiel is given a vision of new life in the valley of dry bones. God will make Israel a united nation, with one king in a restored land to rule over a regenerated people. In 37: 24, the Lord reveals to Ezekiel that *“My servant David shall be king over them.”* God is establishing *“an everlasting covenant with them”* with one shepherd. I believe the *“king”* in Ezekiel 37: 24 is Christ, the son of David, son of God. I also believe this is the same person as the *“prince”* in Ezekiel 44 and again in chapter 46. Why the change in title from king to prince and how is a reader to understand this in Ezekiel’s prophecy?

I believe Ezekiel’s use of the word *“prince”* is intentional to emphasize in his own mind and in the mind of his readers that God is doing something new and showing Ezekiel something new. With the abolishment of the monarchy that was the end result of exile, the term king had a lot of baggage for Ezekiel personally and Israel in general. Moreover, the term prince implies one waiting to be king. While Jesus currently is the prophet, priest and king, in Ezekiel’s mind this ruler he sees in his vision is still a prince who will one day be king.

I offer this interpretation hopefully humbly yet sincerely to guide us through difficult chapters of God’s word. My prayer is that it is shared with an open hand and not a closed fist.

Ezekiel 45

Ezekiel 45 describes a holy district in the allocation of the land set aside for the temple. Very specific measurements are given for this area in the opening verses of the chapter. The area will include the sanctuary, the Most Holy Place (vs. 3), and an area for the *“priests, who minister in the sanctuary”* as well as the Levites for their possession (vs. 4, 5). Yet, alongside this portion in the holy district is an area for the *“whole house of Israel”* (vs. 6).

Beginning in verse 7 through the end of the chapter Ezekiel describes the portion set aside for the prince who was introduced in chapter 44. Ezekiel is directing his readers back to the way the original allocation of the Land should have been in which the presence of the Lord would dwell in their midst.

It is important to remember as we read through these difficult chapters that everything they contain is given to Ezekiel in the form of a vision. The main thrust of Ezekiel’s vision is

repentance, future hope, and direct access to God. The vision Ezekiel is given accomplishes all of these things and more. The vision does not necessarily need to be enacted in all of its specific details to accomplish its purpose for the people of God.

Ezekiel 46

Ezekiel 46 gives a more detailed description of the prince introduced in chapter 44. The focus of this chapter is the feasts the prince is in charge of in the temple and surrounding district.

Throughout this chapter, there is a reorienting of the festival calendar for the feasts. The specifications of dates differ from earlier requirements given in the Law of Moses. Verse 13 indicates that the prescribed offerings are to be given “daily” not just during certain times of the year as was the case in the old system.

God is clearly outlining something new in these passages. These changes have been initiated by the logistics of exile, the abolishment of old systems of worship, and the need for new. God is at the center of the rebuilding process and more than anything else these chapters in Ezekiel detail a God who resurrects, restores, and renews.

Ezekiel 47

With the tour of the temple in Ezekiel’s vision now complete, **Ezekiel 47** speaks of a river that flows from the temple as a source of life to the land. This part of Ezekiel’s prophesy is quite similar to the river in Revelation chapter 22. Both rivers flow from the throne of God, or in Ezekiel’s case, the temple, and they are a source of life to anyone or anything in its flow.

Only in Ezekiel’s river, it begins with a trickle (vs. 2) that gets larger, moving from “waist-deep” in verse 4 to one “*measured a thousand*,” unable to be passed through because it is so deep. The further the river flows the larger it gets. This river ultimately flows to the Dead Sea, formerly a lifeless depository of salt, now a source of life.

The Biblical parallels to water, rivers, and streams are limitless. One cannot help but see Jesus as the source of this river.

Beginning in verse 13, Ezekiel is given a vision of the reallocation of the Land. This is not only a vision of a reunited Israel but a picture of God’s complete restoration of all things.

Ezekiel 48

Ezekiel 48 is the final chapter of Ezekiel's prophesy. It is a continuation of the reallocation of the land first mention in chapter 47. The distribution of specific territories to the tribes of Israel does not correspond with previous distributions in the Bible. Clearly, God is doing something new.

The book concludes with newly installed gates to the city that contain the names of the twelve tribes of Israel (vs. 30 – 35). The most significant part of Ezekiel's vision and thus his entire prophecy is the very last verse of the book, *"And the name of the city from that time on shall be, 'The Lord Is There'"* (vs. 35).

And so the book of Ezekiel ends. Ezekiel was called to speak God's word at a time of unprecedented change among God's people. He's the first prophet to speak in exile. He did not see with his own eyes what Jeremiah saw in Judah and Jerusalem. Instead, Ezekiel had to be transported by visions because he was not there. As such, Ezekiel saw things from God's perspective. While he experiences the ravages of sin among God's people, Ezekiel is transported to a vision of a new world, the place where God is, and even better, the place where God will never depart.

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Charis Community Church, March 2023*

