

## CHAPTER 18: Ezekiel

Ezekiel is living in Jerusalem during the early Babylonian attacks on the city. There are several invasions of Jerusalem by Babylon's King Nebuchadnezzar. This leads to the systematic deportations of its citizens to Babylon. Up to this point we have treated the exile as though it was one major event. But you need to understand that the exile was actually a long drawn out process that took place over 23 years. It is during the third of six deportations of Jerusalem's citizens that a 25-year-old Ezekiel is captured and taken to Babylon (597 BC). That occurs 11 years prior to the final invasion of Jerusalem when the temple and the city are destroyed (586 BC). This is important in understanding the context of Ezekiel's ministry in Babylon to his fellow exiles there.

The book of Ezekiel begins five years after Ezekiel's deportation to Babylon. He sits on the bank of the Chebar River near his refugee camp. It's his 30th birthday, the year he would have been installed as a priest if he were still in Jerusalem.

Suddenly, Ezekiel has a vision. He sees a windstorm approaching filled with lightning and bright light. Four unusual creatures, each with four faces and four wings, fly back and forth. Their four faces appear as a man, a lion, an ox and an eagle. There are also four wheels, one by each creature. Over the heads of the creatures is a dazzling platform. On this platform is a spectacular throne. Seated on that throne is a human-like figure glowing and shrouded in fire. Ezekiel suddenly realizes what he is seeing...

**This was the appearance of the surrounding brilliant light; it looked like the glory of the Lord.** (Ezekiel 1:28a). The Lord God Himself rides in His royal throne chariot! Ezekiel's reaction at being in the very presence of God is this: **When I saw it, I threw myself face down, and I heard a voice speaking.** (Ezekiel 1:28b) God speaks to Ezekiel from His throne chariot and He commissions Ezekiel to be His prophet.

God calls Ezekiel "son of man." **He said to me, "Son of man, I am sending you to the house of Israel, to rebellious nations who have rebelled against Me; both they and their fathers have revolted against Me to this very day. The people to whom I am sending you are obstinate and hard-hearted, and you must say to them. 'This is what the sovereign Lord says.' And as for them, whether they listen or not – for they are a rebellious house – they will know that a prophet has been among them."** (Ezekiel 2:3-5)

God informs Ezekiel that the people are likely not going to listen to him. But he is to deliver an all too familiar message – the people have rebelled against God and they must repent and turn back to Him. This is the message Ezekiel is to give to God’s people who are in exile with him in Babylon.

God gives Ezekiel a scroll to eat, which symbolizes the word of God. **He said to me, “Son of man, feed your stomach and fill your belly with this scroll I am giving to you.” So I ate it, and it was sweet like honey in my mouth.** (Ezekiel 3:3)

When the vision is over Ezekiel sits without saying a word among his fellow exiles for seven days. After seven days God tells Ezekiel... **“Son of man, I have appointed you a watchman for the house of Israel. Whenever you hear a word from My mouth, you must give them a warning from Me.”** (Ezekiel 3:17)

God instructs Ezekiel to go out in public and act out various object lessons for the people. Each one deals with an aspect of God’s upcoming judgment on Jerusalem – that final invasion by King Nebuchadnezzar when the city will fall. God tells Ezekiel to build a model of Jerusalem under siege. He is to lie down next to it on his left side for 390 days for the sin of Israel. After that he is to lie down a second time on his right side for 40 days for the sin of Judah. Ezekiel eats just enough food to stay alive. That represents the famine that will be in Jerusalem during this terrible time.

Ezekiel is told to take a sword and use it like a razor to cut off his hair and his beard. He is then to divide his hair into thirds. One third he is to burn inside the model of Jerusalem. One third he is to strike with the sword outside the city. One third is to be scattered by the wind. This represents the fate of the inhabitants of Jerusalem when God’s final judgment comes.

**The word of the Lord came to me: “Son of man, turn toward the mountains of Israel and prophesy against them: Say, ‘Mountains of Israel, Hear the word of the sovereign Lord! This is what the sovereign Lord says... I am bringing a sword against you, and I will destroy your high places.’”** (Ezekiel 6:1-3) “High places” is a reference to idolatry. Ezekiel announces the eradication of idolatry from the Promised Land. God directs Ezekiel to clap his hands and stamp his feet representing God’s joy at the destruction of idols.

Ezekiel sees of a vision of the fall of Judah and gives a detailed description – the entire land will be purged, the people will be surprised and horrified, the judgment will be swift, and death will result. Babylon and other pagan nations will come and possess the land. Jerusalem will become desolate and an object of scorn.

So there you have the first part of Ezekiel – from the time he is taken captive until just before the fall of Jerusalem. It is quite depressing isn’t it?

We know that Ezekiel's vision about the destruction and fall of Jerusalem does in fact take place – the date is 586 BC. It has been mentioned several times in our story so far. But it will be a while before Ezekiel and his fellow exiles learn of Jerusalem's fate – several months (news traveled slowly in those days and they are hundreds of miles away). The next part of Ezekiel takes place during this timeframe.

Ezekiel has a vision concerning the temple in Jerusalem. God takes Ezekiel on a virtual tour of the temple and shows him what is currently going on there. It is NOT good! There's a pagan idol in the entrance to the north gate near the altar. There are images of unclean animals and idols painted over the temple walls. Seventy elders of Israel are burning incense to these idols inside the temple. Women practice the ritualistic ceremony of mourning the pagan god Tammuz, who dies every winter. In the inner court 25 priests bow down and worship a sun god with their backs to the temple. It's a heartbreaking scene!

Ezekiel sees a vision of executioners appear. God sends a scribe to put a mark on the foreheads of those in Jerusalem who have remained FAITHFUL to Him. God then commands the executioners to go around and strike dead all those in the city who do NOT bear the mark on their forehead. **He said to them, "Defile the temple and fill the courtyards with corpses. Go!" So they went out and struck people down throughout the city.** (Ezekiel 9:7)

The vision ends with God's throne chariot moving away from the temple. Judah's idolatry and their covenant violations have angered God and driven Him away. Ezekiel watches as the glory of the Lord departs the temple in Jerusalem and then heads east over the mountains.

Even though God has departed the temple, He has NOT abandoned His people. What God does instead is He goes into exile with them. God promises that He will return a remnant of the people back to their homeland. He tells Ezekiel... **"I will give them one heart and I will put a new spirit within them; I will remove the hearts of stone from their bodies and I will give them tender hearts, so that they may follow My statutes and observe My regulations and carry them out. Then they will be My people, and I will be their God."** (Ezekiel 11:19-20)

God instructs Ezekiel to act out an exile scene. He is to pack up all his belongings and walk out of the city as though he was heading into exile. Ezekiel announces to the people... **"I am an object lesson for you. Just as I have done, it will be done to them; they will go into exile and captivity."** (Ezekiel 12:11)

Ezekiel next prophesies the fate of King Zedekiah. He is the king during this time of the fall of Jerusalem. He is basically a puppet king appointed by Nebuchadnezzar. If you recall earlier in the story (2 Kings 25), Zedekiah attempted to sneak out of Jerusalem

during the siege. He was caught by Nebuchadnezzar's army and his eyes were put out. But Ezekiel is unaware of all this when the word of the Lord comes to him. **"The prince [King Zedekiah] who is among them will raise his belongings onto his shoulder in darkness and will go out. He will dig a hole in the wall to leave through. He will cover his face so he cannot see the land with his eyes. But I will throw My net over him, and he will be caught in My snare. I will bring him to Babylon, the land of the Chaldeans (but he will not see it), and there he will die."** (Ezekiel 12:12-13)

Ezekiel confronts and denounces some false prophets. They continue to proclaim a message of peace when the reality is that judgment is coming. God says their words are like whitewashing a wall. **"I will vent My rage against the wall, and against those who coated it with whitewash. Then I will say to you, 'The wall is no more and those who whitewashed it are no more.'"** (Ezekiel 13:15)

Ezekiel continues to focus his message on God's coming judgment. Israel's elders, its prophets and its people will be punished for their sins. It's a done deal. Even if Noah, Daniel and Job themselves were to intercede for them, God would not listen. Sword, famine, wild animals and plague are going to come and strike the land!

Ezekiel characterizes Israel as a fruitless vine that must be burned up. Using another analogy he views her as an unfaithful wife deserving of death. But God is merciful. After dealing with her severely, God promises to restore her. He says... **"I will establish My covenant with you, and then you will know that I am the Lord."** (Ezekiel 16:62)

Ezekiel uses various analogies and recalls Israel's history of rebellion. He restates the theme of impending judgment. Once again that is followed by a future restoration. The current Babylonian conquest is God's judgment on the rebellious nation of Judah. In fact it is the same message that we heard Jeremiah proclaim to his audience in Jerusalem. Judah will suffer the same fate the northern kingdom of Israel suffered just over a century before. They will be conquered by a foreign power. However, this judgment, heartbreaking as it is, will not be God's final word.

Ezekiel addresses the younger generation of Israelites in exile who believe they are being punished for the sins of their parents. God rejects their claim of innocence. He assures them that everyone is punished for their own sins. So, they too are guilty. God says... **"Throw away all your sins you have committed and fashion yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! ...Repent and live!"** (Ezekiel 18:31-32)

There is a long section where Ezekiel pronounces a series of judgment oracles against Judah's neighbors – Ammon, Moab, Edom, Philistia, Sidon, Tyre and Egypt. These are the same nations that Isaiah had pronounced similar judgments against. God

repeats over and over His providential purpose for divine judgment – **“Then they will know that I am the Lord.”** (Ezekiel 25:11, 25:17, 26:6, 28:22, 28:23)

God informs Ezekiel that his wife is about to die. Her death will symbolize the death of Jerusalem, which is figuratively God’s wife. But God tells Ezekiel not to weep for her. He is to grieve silently. At this point Ezekiel is struck literally speechless. He will remain silent until the word finally comes from Judah that Ezekiel’s predictions pertaining to the fall of Jerusalem have come true. God tells Ezekiel that he will hear the news from a fugitive from the city. Only then will his mouth be opened. But for now Ezekiel sits quietly and waits.

**In the twelfth year of our exile... a refugee came to me from Jerusalem saying, “The city has been defeated!” ...the Lord opened my mouth by the time the refugee arrived in the morning; He opened my mouth and I was no longer unable to speak.** (Ezekiel 33:21-22)

So here in the last part of the book, the exiles receive word that both Jerusalem and the temple have been destroyed. This is exactly what Ezekiel had predicted would happen! But with this bad news God offers good news – a glorious vision of hope. God is not finished with Israel. She will enjoy a bright future following her exile.

God promises that He will shepherd His flock Israel. This is in contrast to the false shepherds, which are referred to as “the shepherds of Israel.” They have been so busy feeding themselves that they have not fed the flock. God, the good Shepherd declares... **“I will save My sheep; they will no longer be prey...”** (Ezekiel 34:22)

God says He will raise up a David-like king to shepherd His people. So, who is this new shepherd, this messianic king? Is it God Himself or will it be someone else? Ezekiel prophesies about a new covenant just as Jeremiah had done. But Ezekiel calls it a **“covenant of peace”** (Ezekiel 34:25). **Then they will know that I, the Lord their God, am with them, and that they are My people, the house of Israel, declares the sovereign Lord. And you, My sheep, the sheep of My pasture, are My people, and I am your God, declares the sovereign Lord.**” (Ezekiel 34:30-31) God once again promises to put a new heart and a new spirit within His people.

Ezekiel is given another vision. God brings him to a valley of dry bones. It is an old battlefield where the bodies of the soldiers killed had been left unburied. All that remains of them now are bleached white bones scattered across the valley. The picture here is of Israel who is spiritually dead.

God tells Ezekiel... **“Prophecy over these bones, and tell them: ‘Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. ... Look, I am about to infuse breath into you and you will live. I will put tendons on you and muscles over you and will cover you with**

**skin; I will put breath in you and you will live. Then you will know that I am the Lord.”** (Ezekiel 37:4-6)

So, Ezekiel prophesies as he was told to do. Suddenly he hears a rattling sound as the bones come together. He observes as sinew and flesh grow back. But there is no breath in them. Ezekiel is told to prophesy to the breath so that it would come. **So I prophesied as I was commanded and the breath came into them; they lived and stood on their feet, an extremely great army.** (Ezekiel 37:10)

Here’s the point of all this: If God can bring life back to those dead, dried, scattered bones, then He can bring life back to anyone, even spiritually dead and scattered Israel.

Ezekiel describes a future battle that will take place after Israel returns to their land. A coalition of nations invades peaceful, unsuspecting Israel. Unlike the past when Assyria and Babylon conquered Israel and Judah, this time God will intervene and defeat the invaders. Ezekiel describes the flurry of God’s judgment unleashed on the enemy – the fire of God’s fury, a great earthquake, mountains falling, plague and bloodshed, raining down hail and brimstone. The defeat is so sound that it takes years to dispose of all the abandoned weapons of war and to cleanse the land of the dead soldiers.

**“I will display My majesty among the nations. All the nations will witness the judgment I have executed, and the power I have exhibited among them. Then the house of Israel will know that I am the Lord their God, from that day forward.**

**When I have brought them back from the peoples and gathered them from the countries of their enemies, I will magnify Myself among them in the sight of many nations. ...I will not leave any of them in exile any longer.”** (Ezekiel 39:21-22, 27-28)

Thirteen years later Ezekiel is given a final vision of a new city and a new temple. Remember that God’s presence had departed the temple in Jerusalem which was then destroyed. In his vision Ezekiel is shown around the new temple grounds. It is even larger and more majestic than Solomon’s temple! Everything about it is new – new altar, new gates, new priests, and new worship.

Ezekiel now sees God return to the temple. **I saw the glory of the God of Israel coming from the east; the sound was like that of rushing water; and the earth radiated His glory.** (Ezekiel 43:2) Ezekiel’s reaction to seeing God in all of His glory is the same as it was earlier in book – he throws himself face down on the ground. **Then a wind lifted me up and brought me to the inner court; I watched the glory of the Lord filling the temple.** (Ezekiel 43:5)

Ezekiel observes as a river flowing out of the new temple. As it flows the water gets deeper and deeper. He sees this river flow east to the Dead Sea. But it also flows west to the Mediterranean. Along its banks trees spring up and an abundance of fish fills the river.

The book ends with God's promise to restore His exiled and scattered people back to the Promised Land. A detailed description of God's new capital city is given. But the name of this new city is NOT Jerusalem. **The circumference of the city will be six miles. The name of the city from that day forward will be: "The Lord Is There."** (Ezekiel 48:35)

And so it is that the prophet Ezekiel, while living in exile in Babylon, gets a vision of the future restoration and blessing of the covenant nation of Israel. At its very center will be presence of God dwelling among His people once again. It is with eager anticipation that the people in exile can look forward to returning to their homeland and living in a glorious new city.

Well that's great. So, when will all of this happen? Keep reading to find out.