

SANTA BARBARA COMMUNITY CHURCH



THE GOSPEL OF **EZEKIEL**

FALL 2009

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SOURCES & ABBREVIATIONS

- Barclay** William Barclay, *The Gospel of John* (Westminster, 1956), 2 vols.
- Taylor** William B. Taylor, *Ezekiel: An Introduction and Commentary* (IVP, 1969)
- Block** Daniel Block, *The Book of Ezekiel*, (Eerdmans, 1997), 2 volumes
- Wright** Christopher Wright, *The Message of Ezekiel*, (IVP, 2001)
- Alexander** Ralph Alexander, *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, (Zondervan, 1986)

All Scripture passages are taken from the *English Standard Version* unless otherwise noted.

This study was written by Reed Jolley, proofread by Susi Lamoutte, Bonnie Fearer, Steve Jolley and Mike Willbanks. Design and layout of the study was done by Carolee Peterson and the art was drawn by Kat McLean. May God bless us as a church as we study his word.

INTRODUCTION



Imagine waking up one morning, say, three years from today. You are in the northern territory of Canada. As you stretch and yawn in the morning darkness you recall that you were taken captive in Santa Barbara and marched from your home through the states of Oregon and Washington and on into the frozen tundra of the Yukon. You have no assurance that you will ever return home and you have no confidence that the ruling government will treat you with even a modicum of dignity and respect. Everything you once believed about your own country, and even about your God, has come under attack.

A flimsy analogy perhaps, but multiply the above scenario by ten and you might have some sense of how the people of Israel were feeling during the time of Ezekiel. Everything the Jews held dear had been taken from them. Once every

Jew in Judah was convinced that God would never abandon the people of the nation. Everyone who worshipped Yahweh in the Jerusalem temple believed that God would never abandon the land of Israel and would never abandon his holy city. But by the time of Ezekiel all of these assumptions had been dashed on the rocks. But we are getting ahead of ourselves. . .

Ezekiel. His name means *May God strengthen*, or, *May God toughen*. The book in the Bible that bears his name is largely autobiographical. Ezekiel tells his own story and we, the readers, are invited in. Ezekiel was born and raised to be a priest. Instead God called him to become a prophet. He planned on serving Yahweh in Jerusalem, instead he served God in Babylon. Ezekiel was born six hundred twenty-two years before Christ. And in the midst of the training of this would-be priest, the most traumatic event in Israel's history took place. Jerusalem was overtaken by the Babylonians, the city was razed to the ground and the vast majority of the people were deported. Ezekiel's world came crashing down and his story flows from that trauma.

Ezekiel's Times

The book of Ezekiel is not an easy read. Ezekiel recounts fantastic visions that boggle our imagination, even as he includes painstaking details in a prophecy about a rebuilt temple, details that probably don't interest us (chapters 38–48). But his message is as pertinent today as it was to his original readers. The great biblical themes found elsewhere in Scripture are found here too. God's mercy and faithfulness are proclaimed loudly even as his unwillingness to compromise with sin forms the backdrop of all that we will read and discover.

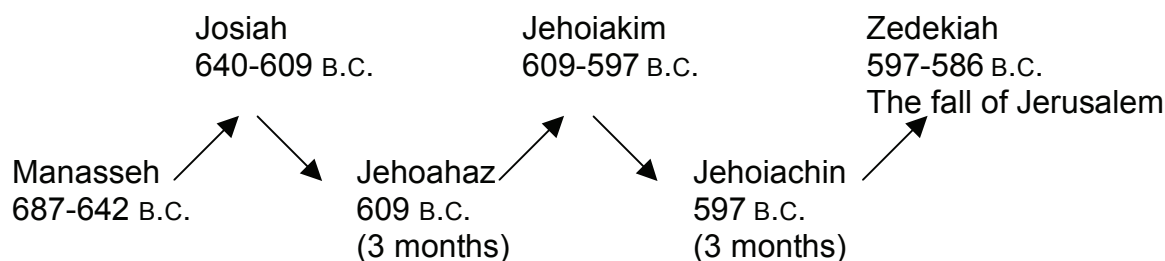
THE GOSPEL OF EZEKIEL

INTRODUCTION

Understanding the times in which this priest who became a prophet lived will help us appreciate and learn from Ezekiel's message. Think back over the checkered history of Israel. After the period of the Judges, the nation had three kings, Saul, David and Solomon. After King Solomon's death, this tiny nation had a civil war and split into two kingdoms called Judah and Israel.

The northern kingdom of Israel lasted through the reigns of 19 kings. Each of these kings did evil in the eyes of the Lord. As a consequence, Israel was completely destroyed by the Assyrians about 75 years before Ezekiel's birth.

The southern kingdom, called Judah,¹ lasted through the reigns of 17 kings. Nine of these kings were wicked and eight walked in the way of the Lord. Judah was on a rollercoaster ride through history. To gain perspective, consider the following chart that shows the last six kings of Judah.



Before Ezekiel's birth, Judah descended to the low point of her spiritual history. Manasseh was king and ruled 55 years. He was evil to the core. It would be difficult to overestimate his impact on the nation.

... Manasseh led [the people] astray to do more evil than the nations had done whom the LORD destroyed before the people of Israel. . . . Moreover, Manasseh shed very much innocent blood, till he had filled Jerusalem from one end to another, besides the sin that he made Judah to sin so that they did what was evil in the sight of the LORD. (2 Kings 21:9, 16)²

After Manasseh, Josiah became king and began to reform the nation. Josiah earnestly sought to purge the nation of foreign gods and return the people to the worship of Yahweh, the true God. During this time the Assyrians were losing their political grip on the area. The decline of Assyria allowed Josiah to extend his influence to the north in the former territory of Israel.³ One of Josiah's projects was the purification of the temple in Jerusalem. The idols representing other gods were purged, as were the temple prostitutes and pagan artifacts. During this cleansing of the temple something called the *Book of the Law* was found.⁴ The reading of this long-forgotten book led the king to renew the nation's covenant with God.

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- 1 To make things a bit more confusing, *Judah* is also called *Israel*, especially after the fall of the northern kingdom. Ezekiel uses the term *Judah* 16 times in his book, but refers to the southern kingdom and the people of that kingdom as *Israel*, many more times.
 - 2 Manasseh even burned his own son as an offering (2 Kings 21:6).
 - 3 Josiah's influence extended as far as Naphtali (Gentile territory). 2 Chronicles 34:7 reads, *he broke down the altars and beat the Asherim and the images into powder and cut down all the incense altars throughout all the land of Israel. Then he returned to Jerusalem.*
 - 4 2 Chronicles 34:15. The *Book of the Law* was probably either the book of Deuteronomy or the entire Book of Moses (also called the Pentateuch = the first five books of our Old Testament).

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Ezekiel was born in the eighteenth year of Josiah's reign. Optimism and spiritual renewal were gaining traction in the hearts and minds of the people of Judah.

As the Assyrians lost power, the Babylonians and Egyptians vied for political ascendancy over the world of the ancient Near East. Babylon emerged victorious under the ruthless leader Nebuchadnezzar, crushing the Egyptians in the battle of Carchemish in 605 B.C. With Egypt subdued, Nebuchadnezzar began subjugating smaller nations to expand his power. Judah was high on his list.

The fall of Judah took place in waves. First, the Babylonians took some of Jerusalem's nobility into captivity during the reign of King Jehoiakim, hoping to gain that king's allegiance.¹ Jehoiakim rebelled and Nebuchadnezzar attacked Jerusalem, killing Judah's king. Jehoiachin ascended to the throne and surrendered Jerusalem to the Babylonians within three months time. The Babylonians did not destroy the city at this point, but they deported king Jehoiachin along with the most prominent of the city.

[Nebuchadnezzar] carried away all Jerusalem and all the officials and all the mighty men of valor, 10,000 captives, and all the craftsmen and the smiths. None remained, except the poorest people of the land. (2 Kings 24:14)

Ezekiel was among this group. He was a twenty-five year old priest-in-training. Ezekiel was preparing for a life of ministry in the temple but now found himself in Babylon, some 1,000 miles from home.

During this time Nebuchadnezzar installed Zedekiah as king, but even this puppet king eventually rebelled against Babylon. The year was 587 B.C. when the unthinkable happened, Jerusalem was destroyed.

By the time of the destruction of Jerusalem, Ezekiel had been in Babylon five years, five exceedingly difficult years as we will see. For the next fifteen years, Ezekiel prophesied to a shattered people living in exile. These prophecies constitute the book we call Ezekiel.

Ezekiel the Man

Generally prophets had very difficult lives. They were mocked, jeered, persecuted and often killed.² Tradition has it that Isaiah was killed by being sawn in two. Jeremiah spent time in a dungeon. As Stephen put it when he was on trial for his life,

Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One. . . (Acts 7:52)

Ezekiel was no exception to this pattern of persecution and hardship.

¹ This first deportation probably included Daniel and his friends. See 2 Kings 24:1.

² See Hebrews 11:37.

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Ezekiel trained all his life for the priesthood. Accordingly he would have been steeped in the law of God. He would have been expected to be a teacher of the law and to know how to apply the law to social situations that arose in Jerusalem. In addition to this, he would have been an expert in the art of temple worship. This would include the work of animal sacrifice and butchery. He would have mastered the laws and stipulations prescribed in Leviticus pertaining to the duties of a priest. But he served God, to his surprise, as a prophet far from his home in Jerusalem.

Ezekiel's world-view was thoroughly God-centered. This prophet saw everything from God's perspective. Ezekiel has a deep sense of the sinfulness of sin and an equal sense of the holiness of God. Sin is sin because it is an offense to God. In the early ministry of Ezekiel we learn that God's wrath is coming because the people's sin has offended God's holiness. Then, in the latter ministry of Ezekiel, we learn that in the future God will save his people and restore them beyond all they can ask or think. This is not because of any merit in the people, but because Yahweh is concerned for his own reputation, his own glory. When the Babylonians captured and oppressed Israel, Yahweh's reputation was at stake. The return of the people from exile will vindicate the glory and power of Yahweh!

Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord GOD: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came. And I will vindicate the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them. And the nations will know that I am the LORD, declares the Lord GOD, when through you I vindicate my holiness before their eyes. (Ezekiel 36:22-23)

Ezekiel's Ministry

Calling Ezekiel a prophet might be too limited. He was that and more. Ezekiel functioned in Babylon as the people's pastor, as their priest, as an evangelist and as a theologian. He was the watchman of the people, the teller of parables and riddles. He took the stance of a court prosecutor and as the judge. Ezekiel also thundered against the surrounding nations promising God's wrath on them in the future. Ezekiel guarded the people from slipping into the worship of the Babylonian gods, he foretold of God's coming judgment on Jerusalem and he offered hope for the future restoration of a people to their home.

Like his contemporary Jeremiah, Ezekiel was something of an actor. Ezekiel preached not only with words but with drama.

- He shut himself in his house and is tied up with ropes. Furthermore he was mute, unable to speak to anyone for seven and a half years symbolizing both how the people had treated God, and how God is now refusing to speak to the people. (3:1-27)
- He made a model of the city of Jerusalem that demonstrates Yahweh's coming judgment. (4:1-3)
- He lay on his side for 390 days and eats repulsive food to prophesy the duration of Israel's judgment. (4:4-17)

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- He cut his hair and beard with a sword, burning a third of it, striking a third of it with his sword, and scattering the rest in the wind to symbolize God's judgment on Jerusalem. (5:1ff.)
- He acted out a one-actor play of going into exile to symbolize the final deportation of the people from Jerusalem. (12:1-6)
- He preached with his face set in different directions to show the comprehensive judgment of God. In one of these sermons Ezekiel waved his sword and claps his hands to symbolize those who would be slain. (20:45—21:17)

Ezekiel's Message

Ezekiel's message, as we will see, was often shockingly rude,¹ and startlingly simple. Ezekiel wants to awaken the people from their spiritual stupor and provoke their repentance before God. At the heart of Ezekiel's sermons, parables, drama and object lessons is his vision of the glory and sovereignty of God. This prophet had an unending reverence for the majesty and purity of God. But Ezekiel is not an abstract theologian.

The God Who Acts in History: Yahweh introduces himself, several times with the words, *I am Yahweh, I have spoken and I will act.*² As Daniel Block writes, *Ezekiel offers neither sublime poetry on the attributes of God nor lofty lectures on his personality.* (Block, 1, p. 49) It is God who is really in control of the Babylonian armies. Nebuchadnezzar will only do what Yahweh wills (21:1-32). The exile and the return to the land will take place according to God's will and on his timetable. The prophet's oracles against the surrounding nations show that he firmly believes Yahweh is in control not only of Babylon but of every nation (chapters 25-32).

The God Who Won't Tolerate Idolatry: Much of this prophecy is concentrated with Yahweh's judgment of a rebellious people. Time and again the people of Israel have abandoned their God. They have acted worse than the peoples whom they displaced when they came into the land after the exodus (5:6). The people have played the role of a spiritual harlot and have behaved worse than the people of Sodom and Gomorrah (chapter 16). Finally, Yahweh says, *Enough!* His judgment is coming.

The God Who Keeps Covenant: Much of Ezekiel's message is concerned with the truth that the people of Israel have broken the covenant they made with Yahweh. Not once, but again and again and again. . . . Yahweh's judgment is coming on this rebellious people, destruction and exile is inevitable. But, in the end, Yahweh will enter into a *new covenant* with his chosen people. This time, God will give the people a *new heart and a new spirit* that will enable them to keep their side of the covenant (36:26ff.).

¹ Ezekiel uses strong sexual imagery that will embarrass most of us and disgust each of us. He also employs what one commentator calls *fecal language* to make very strong points (see chapters 6, 16, 23). Some of his language is so strong that our English translations have blushed and modified the force of Ezekiel's graphic words.

² This is Block's rendering of the Hebrew (see Block, 1, p. 49). The ESV reads, *I The Lord have spoken and I will do it.* See 17:24; 22:14; 24:14; 36:36; 37:14.

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The God Who is Concerned for His Own Glory:

Thus says the Lord GOD: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came. (36:22)

In the ancient Near East, each nation had its gods. What happened politically was thought to be a representation of what was happening in the spiritual world among the gods. If a nation gained power, that made the gods of that nation appear to be powerful. If a nation lost power, the gods of that nation appeared to have lost power. In Ezekiel, we have oracles that foretell of the doom of nations other than Israel.

[Yahweh's] primary goal in bringing down foreign powers is not to destroy the enemies of Israel but to manifest his greatness, glory, and holiness. Similarly, his aim in restoring Israel is to demonstrate his holiness (36:16-32). (Block, 1, p. 49)

Ezekiel's Book

Ezekiel is a long book, 48 chapters containing 1273 verses. Unlike other prophetic books in the Bible, Ezekiel is organized in chronological order.¹ It tells a story. The vast majority of the book is autobiographical. If the reader can live with imagery that is not immediately clear, Ezekiel becomes one of the easier prophetic books to understand.

A simple outline of Ezekiel should be helpful.

1. Oracles of judgment prior to the fall of Jerusalem (chapters 1–24).
2. Oracles against the foreign nations (chapters 25–32).
3. Oracles of future hope (chapters 33–48).

Ezekiel's passion is that the people will have an accurate vision of God. He wants them to know that Yahweh is God. There is no other. Over seventy times in the book we will read the words, *Then you will know that I am Yahweh*.

As we work through this difficult, yet spectacular book, let us pray that Ezekiel's goal for his original readers will come to fruition in our lives. Let us pray that we know that God is God, that we are his people and that his glory is our delight.

¹ Ezekiel includes fourteen dates in his book. They fall into four groups. First, those which come during the first five years of his ministry in Babylon before the news arrived of the fall of Jerusalem (1:1; 1:2; 8:1; 20:1; 24:1). Second, those which are connected with his oracles against the surrounding nations (all in chapters 25-32). Third, a reference to date when the news arrived that Jerusalem had been destroyed (33:21). Fourth, the date of Ezekiel's final vision of the restored temple in Jerusalem (40:1).

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THE GOSPEL OF EZEKIEL

INTRODUCTION

STUDY ONE

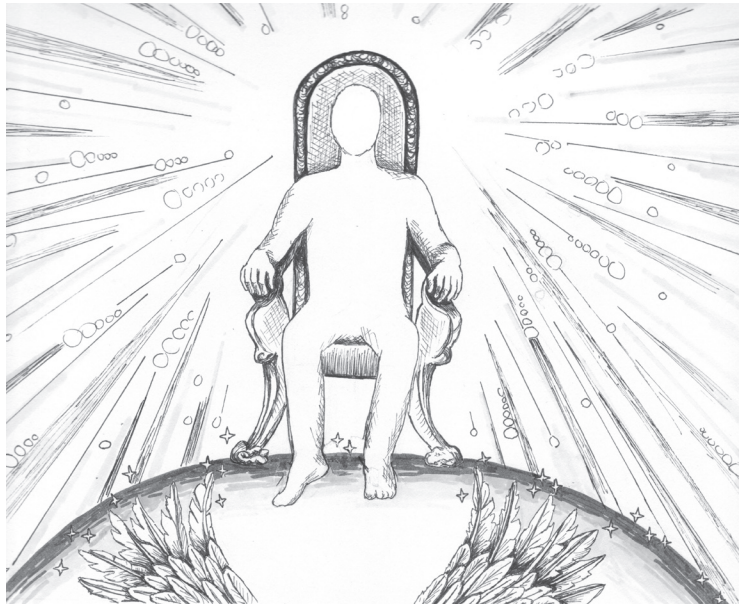
THE GOD WHO IS THERE

EZEKIEL 1

*By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept,
when we remembered Zion.*

*On the willows there we hung up our lyres.
For there our captors required of us songs,
and our tormentors, mirth, saying,
“Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”*

How shall we sing the LORD’s song in a foreign land? (Psalm 137:1-4)



Ezekiel 1:1-3

Read these few verses. As we open the book of Ezekiel we learn in the first sentence that the story begins on Ezekiel's thirtieth birthday¹. It is July 31st, 593 B.C., five years after the first deportation of the exiles from Jerusalem. The day must have been bittersweet for this young married man.

On the one hand, as we have seen in the introduction, Ezekiel had trained to be a priest. In 1:3 he is called *Ezekiel the priest*². His service as a priest would have begun at age thirty. According to Numbers 4, the Levites were to serve as priests in the temple

from age thirty to fifty³. A lifetime of temple service and priestly duties had been denied him by the Babylonians. Instead of being in Jerusalem, in the temple, seeking and serving Yahweh, Ezekiel was 1,000 miles from home and a world away from everything he held dear. All of his training, apparently, had come to nothing. When he was deported and made the long walk from Jerusalem to Babylon his professional career and personal dreams were over.

1 Every date, except that of 1:1, in the book of Ezekiel is referenced from the point of Jehoiachin's exile in 597 B.C. See 1:2-3; 3:16-17; 8:1; 20:1; 24:1; 26:1; 29:17; 30:20; 31:1; 32:17; 33:21; 40:1.

2 The Hebrew is not entirely clear. It could be that his father, Buzi, is being called a priest.

3 If we follow the dates in Ezekiel we learn that he missed his entire career as a priest. At the outset of the book we find that the prophet is thirty years old, and at the beginning of his last vision (40-48), we learn that the year is the twenty-fifth year of the exile. The prophet would have been turning fifty.

THE GOSPEL OF EZEKIEL

STUDY ONE · THE GOD WHO IS THERE

1:1 Tells us that Ezekiel is *by the Chebar canal* which is most likely one of the canals bringing water from the Tigris and Euphrates rivers into the city of Nippur. Instead of singing the equivalent to our *happy birthday* song, Ezekiel probably sang something along the lines of Psalm 137 (see above).

Can you think of a time in your life when things didn't turn out the way you'd hoped or expected? A time when all you thought you had prepared for wasn't going to come to pass? What was your reaction? How did you feel? Share this with your homegroup.

On the other hand, to his great surprise no doubt, Ezekiel was soon to have a vision of the glory of God so dramatic that it would take him a week to recover (3:15). This vision becomes the turning point of Ezekiel's life.

The God Who is There

Notice the language of 1:1-3. Each draws attention to Ezekiel's deep and shocking experience of God.

- *The heavens opened*
- *I saw visions of God*
- *The word of the Lord came to Ezekiel*
- *The hand of the Lord was upon him there*

In other words, Yahweh was speaking to this priest who is becoming a prophet. In spite of all of the above, the most important word is yet to come. The most significant word in this opening paragraph is the pronoun *there*. In the Hebrew text its position is emphatic, the word comes at the end of the sentence. God is THERE. Where? In Babylon, right there by the Chebar canal!

Yahweh, the God of Israel, is appearing, is speaking, is putting forth his mighty hand, *there*, in the land of exile, uncleanness and despair. (Wright, p. 45)

This single word shows the reader that the world-view of Ezekiel is being revolutionized. In the ancient Near East people believed their gods to be local deities. Yes, Ezekiel and the people should have known better. They should have known that Yahweh was not just the God of Israel but the God of the whole universe. The Hebrew Scriptures are full of references to the universal reign of God, to the everywhere-presence of God.¹ But surely Ezekiel must have felt that Yahweh was really back in Jerusalem, back in the land of Judah. Furthermore the people back home held this same view. By being exiled, the people had moved *far from the LORD* (11:15).

But now Ezekiel, and the reader, learns that God is there!

¹ See Deuteronomy 32:21; 2 Samuel 7:22; Isaiah 44:6, etc.

STUDY ONE · THE GOD WHO IS THERE

God is there. There are times when our doctrinal conviction of God's omnipresence needs to become an experienced reality again. Whether through geographical distance, like Ezekiel's, or through more spiritual or emotional alienation, the experience of exile from the presence of God can be dark and terrible. We may not be privileged with an overwhelming vision like Ezekiel's, and most of us will be grateful to be excused the privilege, but we can certainly pray for the reassurance of the touch of his hand reminding us that God is there, even there. (Wright, p. 45)

Review and respond to the above quotation. Think about your own life. Where is God? Are there special times and places where God seems *more present* than others?

What is it that makes you aware of God's presence?

Read Psalm 139:1-12. This Psalm extends to each of us the discovery that Ezekiel made at the Chebar canal.

Make a list from these verses of all the things that God knows about you.

In verses 7-12, the Psalmist speaks about being unable to escape from the presence of God. The language is comprehensive. God is up there, down here, in the *depths* and over there, on the horizon. What are the implications of these verses for your Christian life?

Have you ever tried to get away from God? What did you do? What was the result?

THE GOSPEL OF EZEKIEL

STUDY ONE · THE GOD WHO IS THERE

Compare Hebrews 13:5-6. Often part of this verse is quoted without the surrounding commands. We quote God's promise, *I will never leave you nor forsake you*. . . but notice what surrounds this promise. How should this comfort you?

Sometimes God is there and we don't see him, we don't know he is there. Proverbs 16:9 says, *The heart of man plans his way, but the LORD establishes his steps*. Describe a time in your life when God was *there* and you didn't know it until after the fact. How did this realization shape your faith?

Being aware of God's presence is not solely dependent upon God's movement or self-revelation. How can the state of your heart and the direction of your actions and habits contribute to or inhibit your experience of God being *there* in your life?

The Vision of Glory

What we have studied (and discussed) above is the heart of this week's study. But we would be remiss if we didn't at least take a peek at Ezekiel's vision.

Read 1:4-28. If possible read this aloud, or at least read it slowly. This should take you about three minutes. Prepare yourself, this vision is fantastic, elastic, confusing and dramatic. Ezekiel is trying to give words to a vision God gave him. Be patient.¹

. . . this account is full of hasty, disjointed and ungrammatical language, tumbling along as the words struggle to cope with an overwhelmingly awesome confrontation with the majesty of God. (Wright, p. 46)

¹ John Calvin writes of this vision, *If someone asks whether the vision is clear, I confess it is very obscure and I do not profess to understand it*. . . (cited in Wright, p. 46).

STUDY ONE · THE GOD WHO IS THERE

Notice the progression in the vision. It begins with a storm and moves to the throne of Yahweh. God *rides* the storm and *sits* on his throne. Everything in the vision, while not entirely clear, testifies to the power, glory and supremacy of God!

Look for the following in the vision:

- The Four Living Creatures (1:5-14)

The lion (strength, power, ferocity, courage).

The eagle (swift, stately).

The ox (most valuable of domestic animals, symbol of fertility, and divinity).

The Human (created in the image of God, invested with divine majesty).¹

- The Wheels (1:15-21)
- The Throne (1:22-28)

1:28b What happens to Ezekiel when this vision is completed?

Describe one of your deepest experiences of God? What happened to you during and after this experience?

When we look at this passage we find that Ezekiel's book begins with a note of triumph. God is there. There with Ezekiel, there with the Jews in exile, there in Babylon. Wright offers a fitting conclusion to our look into this chapter.

Even if the idea of Yahweh's omnipresence had been a vague part of Israel's faith, the exile must have shattered any expectation of it being really true any longer. As we have seen, for many Israelites Yahweh was defeated, disabled, disgraced and certainly very distant. There is no reason to imagine that Ezekiel would have been immune to the doubts and questions that would have settled like the dust of the Mesopotamian plains on the huts of the exiles. For five years he had mourned and wondered and questioned. Five years is a long time for a refugee. The conclusion that Yahweh had abandoned them must have been close to irresistible—until today, his thirtieth birthday. Yahweh, in all his kingdom, power and glory, has arrived in Babylon. No border guards can keep him out. No place on earth is barred to the throne-chariot of this God. He was *there*. (Wright, pp. 52-53)

¹ From Block, 1, p. 96.

THE GOSPEL OF EZEKIEL

STUDY ONE · THE GOD WHO IS THERE

Take a moment and thank God that he is *there* in your life. Ask him for a growing awareness of his empowering presence as you move through each day.

SERMON NOTES

STUDY TWO

THE RELUCTANT PROPHET

2:1—3:27

Prophets are a gift from God to his people. Prophets stir the pot. They stoke the fire. They don't fit in. Prophets embarrass, often they are rude. As one writer puts it, *Prophets are angular*. They see all of life from God's perspective and preach accordingly. Theirs is a message sometimes of judgment, sometimes of comfort. Prophets call for repentance and proclaim God's salvation. As Eugene Peterson writes,

These men and women woke people up to the sovereign presence of God in their lives. They yelled, they wept, they rebuked, they soothed, they challenged, they comforted. They used words with power and imagination, whether blunt or subtle.¹

But often prophets were anything but eager to fulfill their call. Jeremiah complained incessantly during his ministry. Jonah got on a boat and left town when God called him to preach in Nineveh. Hosea was called to marry a prostitute. It takes little imagination to ponder his reaction to such news.

Ezekiel fits into this family of the disinclined.

Before going on in this study, read 2:1—3:27. Read these verses slowly and, if possible, read them aloud. In these two chapters we read primarily of Ezekiel's call to be a prophet.

Ezekiel 2:1-10

Why does Yahweh commission Ezekiel?

What are the people of Israel like? How many descriptions of the people's character can you find in these verses?



¹ From *The Message: The Old Testament Prophets*, p. 7.

THE GOSPEL OF EZEKIEL

STUDY TWO · THE RELUCTANT PROPHET

2:10 What is written on the scroll?

3:1-3 What do you think Ezekiel was to learn from this unpleasant culinary experience? Compare Jeremiah 15:16.

3:12-27 This passage begins with Ezekiel being transported back to *Tel Abib* where he and his fellow refugees lived. Notice, he goes home in the same way he left. He is transported by God's Spirit. What thoughts, insights and questions do you have as you read these verses? Make a few notes of the things Ezekiel will be called to do by God as he begins his ministry as a prophet.

3:14-15 As we have noted above, the Spirit transports Ezekiel from the location of his initial vision of the glory of God, back home in *Tel Abib*. The name conveys the sense of a town that was destroyed by a flood. More than likely this was not the most desirable place to live. Refugees are rarely given beach-front property with a view.

These verses give us a rare glimpse into Ezekiel's feelings. Notice what he says about the condition of his heart when he went home.

- *Bitterness*
- *In the heat of my Spirit*
- *Overwhelmed*

STUDY TWO · THE RELUCTANT PROPHET

The Hebrew word for *bitterness* has a history in the Old Testament. The word is *mar* and may be a contraction of *mar nephesh*, *bitterness of soul*. It is the word used to describe Esau's emotions when he was robbed of his father's blessing (Genesis 27:34). When Job despairs of his life-situation he uses the same word.

*Therefore I will not restrain my mouth;
I will speak in the anguish of my spirit;
I will complain in the bitterness of my soul. (Job 7:11)*

Block translates *in the heat of my spirit* with the words, *deeply disturbed*. Literally the text reads, *angry in my spirit* (Block, 1, 137). Elsewhere in Ezekiel the word means *rage*, or, *wrath*, and is used to describe God's wrath against Israel.

Lastly, Ezekiel was *overwhelmed*, or, *stunned*. A synonym for this Hebrew word is *appalled*, or, *desolate*.

Ezekiel sat in his self-centered stupor for seven days!

Think about Ezekiel. He has just turned thirty. He should be serving in the temple in Jerusalem where he would have the respect and gratitude of the people. Instead he is called to the role of a prophet with the requisite animosity he will receive from the people. Understandably he is not too happy about his call.

Think about your own life and calling. It probably has not been as dramatic, but have you ever experienced a reaction similar to Ezekiel's when God has called you to a specific task or ministry? Have you ever wished God would ask someone else to do what you know he wants you to do? Share this with your homegroup.

3:14 The elapsed time between 3:15 and 3:16 is one week. When we are stubborn in our resistance to God's call often he is silent until we are ready to listen. Describe a time when God felt absent to you. How was this absence connected to the state of your heart?

3:16–5:17 When God spoke to Ezekiel after seven days the prophet's shock was just beginning. What did Yahweh have in store for this man from Jerusalem? He was calling him to serve in a variety of roles and in a variety of ways. His ministry would involve words and silence, theater, drama, cooking, and even self-imposed captivity.

STUDY TWO · THE RELUCTANT PROPHET

3:16-21 The Watchman

The metaphor of the prophet as watchman is vivid and challenging. Picture an Israelite village or city in a time of invasion, or the army encampment during a military campaign. Sentries would be posted by day and night on a tower or some elevated place, and charged with the crucial task of watching for any movements of the enemy. If they spotted any such danger, it was their responsibility to blow a trumpet or horn, or call out loudly, to awaken the rest of the inhabitants or army to the situation. Early warning could save lives. (Wright, p. 65)

3:17 is shocking. Ezekiel's role as prophet was to sound a warning that the enemy was coming, but who was the enemy? In the ESV we read, *you shall give them a warning from me*. But commentators point out that the verse could read, *warn them about me*. The following verses (3:18-21) contain the warning itself. Yahweh is coming and will dispense his wrath against an obstinate and deeply sinful people. The people need to be warned.

What do we learn about God in Ezekiel's role as a watchman? Consider the irony of this appointment. What invading army would ever post a watchman to warn the people of its arrival? God is coming in judgment, yet he wants to give his people every opportunity to repent. God's grace trumps his judgment.

Think of a time when you have experienced this dual role of God in your life. A time when God both warned you and disciplined you for your failure to heed his warning. If appropriate, share this with your homegroup. What did this experience teach you about God?

Notice the strength of God's call on Ezekiel. The prophet is to preach repentance to both the wicked and righteous alike. In each case, Ezekiel's *soul*, or life is at stake.

What governs the watchman's fate is simply whether or not he fulfils the duty of his posting. He is not judged by whether or not he is successful in persuading the wicked to repent or in dissuading the righteous from backsliding—that is their own responsibility before God. He is judged solely on whether or not he has been faithful in the attempt. (Wright, pp. 67-68)

Respond to the above quotation. How does this instruct you?

STUDY TWO · THE RELUCTANT PROPHET

What inhibits you from speaking out God's message? How can you grow past this inhibition?

3:22-27 The Mute Hermit

While this section is not crystal clear, it does indicate that Ezekiel had a second vision of the glory of God (3:23) and was then instructed to go home and live like a hermit, even like a prisoner, bound in his own house. Furthermore, Yahweh was going to make him mute, unable to speak casually for the next seven years!¹ Yes, Ezekiel would prophesy, but otherwise he would remain silent.

The scene has been called *cartoonlike* insofar as it seems to be a caricature of a bad day. *Go preach to the people! And, let me lock you up in your house and make you unable to speak.* The point seems to be that God is in absolute control over his messenger. Yahweh will determine when Ezekiel is able to speak and when he is able to leave his own home. Ezekiel doesn't even ask God for an explanation. . . his job is to obey.

Respond to the above. Describe a time when God's call on your life and your life-circumstances seemed to be in competition with one another.

Ezekiel, as we have seen, was a reluctant prophet. In the end, however, he embraced the call of God on his life and served in the place and in the manner where Yahweh had called him. Spend time as a homegroup praying for one another. Pray that each member of your group will embrace God's call on his or her life.

¹ Commentators point out that this is probably some form of discipline, one year of silence for every day Ezekiel maintained his bitterness, his *heat of spirit*, and his overwhelmed state. Ezekiel's silence is obviously not absolute. He will speak when God has something to say through him for the next seven years. Otherwise, he will remain silent.

THE GOSPEL OF EZEKIEL

STUDY TWO · THE RELUCTANT PROPHET

SERMON NOTES

STUDY THREE

VISIONS OF DOOM

EZEKIEL 4—5

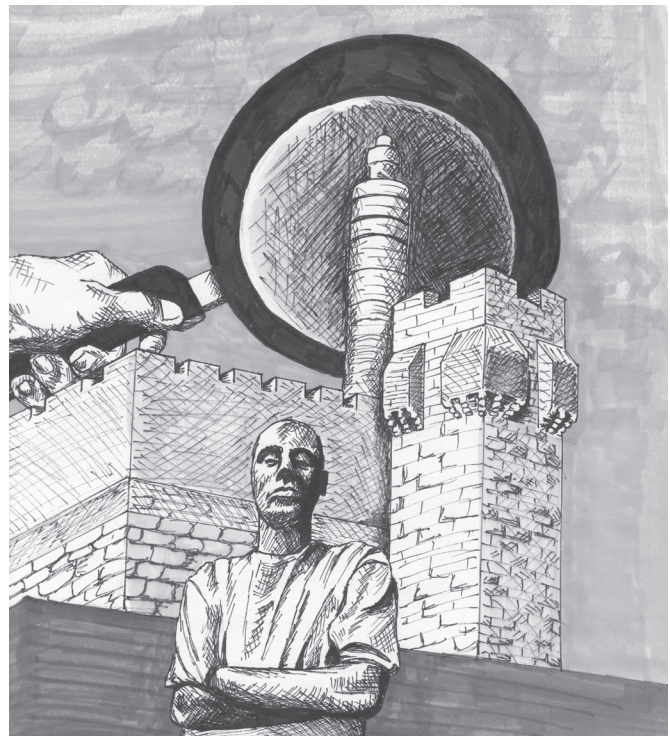
Moreover, I will make you a desolation and an object of reproach among the nations all around you and in the sight of all who pass by. You shall be a reproach and a taunt, a warning and a horror, to the nations all around you, when I execute judgments on you in anger and fury, and with furious rebukes—I am the LORD; I have spoken. . . (Ezekiel 5:14-15)

In his classic book *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis says that pride is *the great sin*. At the root of all other sins is the sin of pride. He writes,

According to Christian teachers, the essential vice, the utmost evil, is Pride. Unchastity, anger, greed, drunkenness, and all that, are mere fleabites in comparison: it was through Pride that the devil became the devil: Pride leads to every other vice: it is the complete anti-God state of mind.

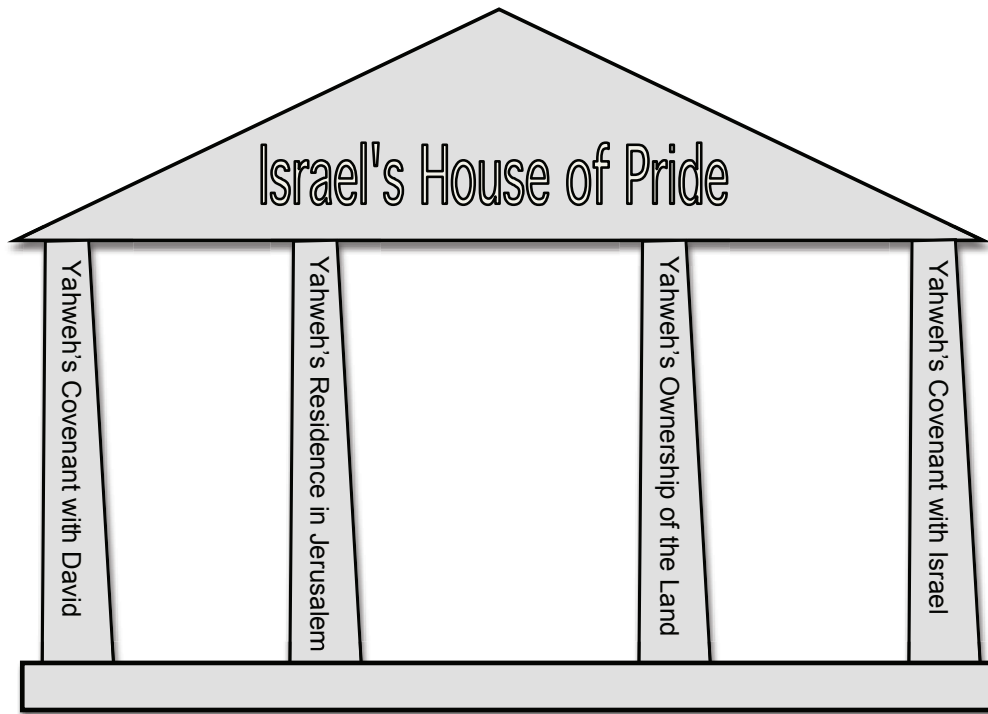
If pride works on every human heart in the way that C. S. Lewis describes, pride can also infect a nation, especially a nation that is convinced God is on her side. Israel, almost from her inception, was convinced that certain truths were inviolable. Certain bedrock assumptions were unshakable. Israel believed she was God's chosen nation. The people had made and re-confirmed a covenant agreement with Yahweh, the people promised loyalty and God promised protection.

The following chart represents what Daniel Block calls Israel's house of pride (Block, 1, p. 8).



THE GOSPEL OF EZEKIEL

STUDY THREE · VISIONS OF DOOM



At the outset, Ezekiel's message becomes a message of doom.

Your doom has come to you, O inhabitant of the land. The time has come; the day is near, a day of tumult, and not of joyful shouting on the mountains. (7:7)

The house Israel thought was unshakable is about to come crumbling down.¹

The whole of Ezekiel 4–24 could be called *Visions of Doom*. Consider the following overview.

- Messages of doom for the city of Jerusalem and the land (chapters 4–7)
- Messages of doom for the temple (chapters 8–11)
- Assorted messages of doom (12:1–24:14)
- A final sign of doom (24:15–27)²

These messages foretell the coming wrath of God and systematically dismantle the assumptions and theology in the minds of the people of Israel. The people felt safe in their covenant with Yahweh. They believed that Yahweh owned the land of Israel and would protect it accordingly. They were convinced that Jerusalem was the city of God and therefore impervious to foreign attack. They understood themselves to be the beneficiaries of God's covenant with David. Surely they were safe! Israel's house of pride was about to fall to the ground.

¹ From Block, 1, p. 8.

² Based on Block, 1, p. 162.

STUDY THREE · VISIONS OF DOOM

The Model and the Bread

This study will concentrate on Ezekiel chapter 5. But before we get there, read the fourth chapter of this prophet's book.

4:1-8 In these verses we will find Ezekiel making a model of Jerusalem and play-acting for the people in Babylon what is about to happen back home. Jerusalem will soon be under siege. The iron griddle in verse 3 is the shock of the passage. Perhaps the people would ask when seeing Ezekiel enact this parable, *Where is Yahweh in this play?*

The prophet himself plays that role. He lifts the heavy *iron pan*. . . from his wife's kitchen and wields it high. Cheers perhaps greet the arrival of Yahweh to beat down his enemies. But no, Ezekiel crouches beside the city and places the iron griddle between his face and his model, with gestures and grimaces that clearly speak of hostility and attack. Slowly the shock sinks in. Yahweh is not inside the city defending it; Yahweh is outside the city attacking it. . . it is Yahweh himself who is the real enemy. (Wright, p. 76)

4:9-17 Ezekiel will bake some terrible bread on an unlikely fuel source to make the point that very difficult times are just around the corner for the inhabitants of Jerusalem.¹

5:1-17 The Destruction of Jerusalem

Prepare yourself for a startling chapter of the Bible. Thus far in our study of Ezekiel we have read nothing like this chapter. Wright calls these verses *repulsive* (Wright, p. 91), and they are. Yahweh has come to the end of the tether of his mercy. His judgment is going to be swift and comprehensive. Prepare yourself.

Chapter 5 of Ezekiel is divided into two parts. Part one (5:1-4) finds the prophet enacting another prophecy for the people. Part two (5:5-17) contains Yahweh's explanation of Ezekiel's bizarre drama.

¹ Several times in this chapter we run across the number 390. Ezekiel is to lie on his side, at least for some period, for 390 days. Why? Verse 4, 6 and 17 give us the clue, but what is the clue? The key word in Hebrew is *awon* and it is translated either as *punishment* (ESV, NRSV), or as *iniquity* (NASB), or *sin* (NIV). If the ESV is the correct translation, Ezekiel's acted prophecy looks forward to the duration of Israel's punishment in the future, 390 years. If the translators of the NIV and the NASB, etc. are correct, then Ezekiel's prophecy looks backward to the duration of Israel's sins before Yahweh. The number of days/years Ezekiel pictures in his drama take us back to 976BC. This would be during the time of King Solomon who both constructed the temple in Jerusalem, but who also led the nation into apostasy and pagan ritual in the very temple he built (see 1 Kings 11:1-8)! The people have been offending Yahweh ever since!

STUDY THREE · VISIONS OF DOOM

Before going on in this study, read Ezekiel chapter 5. Make a few notes about what you see in these verses. Consider the following questions.

5:1-4 The Barber

Describe exactly what Ezekiel is supposed to do.

5:5-17 The Interpretation

What is God's interpretation of Ezekiel's haircut?

Why is God going to judge his people?

What, specifically, do we learn about God from these verses?

5:5-17 Here we see that Yahweh set Jerusalem *in the center of the nations*. Israel, typified by the city of Jerusalem, was to be the mantle piece of God, a testimony to the surrounding peoples of God's greatness and glory. The people of Israel understood themselves, appropriately, to be God's chosen people. They lived on God's land, many in his city (Jerusalem) and they possessed God's laws. The latter set them apart from the surrounding peoples.

For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the LORD our God is to us, whenever we call upon him? And what great nation is there, that has statutes and rules so righteous as all this law that I set before you today? (Deuteronomy 4:7-8)

Accordingly, the inhabitants of Jerusalem saw themselves at *the center of the earth* (Ezekiel 38:12)! The world revolved around them. Therefore, they reasoned, they were safe from the surrounding powers!

They were to be a light to the nations, but instead, the people became worse than the peoples whom they were to instruct. Not only has Jerusalem failed to keep God's law, they haven't even *acted according to the rules* of their pagan neighbors (5:7).

STUDY THREE · VISIONS OF DOOM

The irony of 5:7 is strong. Over and again God's people were instructed *not* to act like the surrounding peoples. Here God says their behavior would have improved had they done so.

You have not even conformed to the standards of the nations around you. (5:7 NIV)

5:11-12 What is Yahweh going to do in light of Israel's repeated, flagrant disobedience? Notice how these verses interpret Ezekiel's haircut.

We might be tempted to think this story is in our Bible merely to highlight how difficult times were in the Old Testament and how far we've come in the New Testament era. Or worse, perhaps these verses have so horrified us by the absolute, intractable, nature of God's wrath that we are tempted to either ignore them or explain them away as some relic from the old covenant.

Yet Ezekiel 5 has a message for us! Consider and respond to the following:

[T]hose who have presumed upon the light of God's grace must reckon with the darkness of his fury. The danger that we should perceive God from only one side is always present and can lead to a romantic view of one's relationship with him. But God will not condone infidelity, rebellion, wickedness, abominations. He watches over his covenant with passion. Those who claim to be his people may not exchange him for another god without cost to themselves. To do so is to transform his *See I am with you*, to *See, I am against you*.¹ (Block, 1, p. 217)

Compare the following verses. Notice how the New Testament makes the same point as Ezekiel: sin among God's people is actually worse in God's sight than sin outside the fold, and it will not be forever tolerated. Respond to the following:

- 1 Corinthians 5:1-2

- 1 Corinthians 6:1-11

How do the above passages instruct you? How should they instruct our church?

¹ Block is citing 5:8. Here Yahweh reverses his usual words of comfort, *I am with you* to, *I am against you*.

THE GOSPEL OF EZEKIEL

STUDY THREE · VISIONS OF DOOM

The passages above are primarily negative. The apostle Paul instructs the church as to what she should not do because the world is watching. Elsewhere we find positive instruction that tells us what we should do because the world is watching. Consider and respond to the following:

- Matthew 5:13-16
- John 13:34-35

What steps can Santa Barbara Community Church take to obey these verses? Be as specific as possible.

Much of the language of 5:5-17 echoes Deuteronomy 28:15-68. In that passage, about 800 years before the time of Ezekiel, Moses warns the people that if they break their side of the covenant they have made with Yahweh, terrible things will happen to them. In both of these passages we learn a truth that is often missed in the evangelical church of our era. God is *not only gracious but also passionate, demanding absolute and exclusive allegiance*. (Block, 1, p. 217)

Respond to Block's statement above. Is this difficult to swallow or good news? Why?

God commands us to have no other gods besides him (Exodus 20:30). God commands us to be holy as he is holy (Leviticus 11:44-45). Pray for one another in your homegroup that these commands would be the delight of your hearts. Pray for SBCC in the same way. Pray that our happiness would flow from our conviction of God's holiness and glory.

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STUDY THREE · VISIONS OF DOOM

STUDY FOUR A TOUR OF THE TEMPLE EZEKIEL 8

What is the Bible about? What is the point of the story? Anyone who actually reads the Scriptures would agree that two themes, at least, stand out. First, God is God. He will share the spotlight with no one. We find this on virtually every page of the Bible. *The LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome. . .* (Deut. 10:17). Second, God demands absolute loyalty of those who desire to be called his children. God's repeated call is the call to faith and fidelity. Thus idolatry (the worship of other gods) is the most reprehensible of sins. The *first* commandment testifies to this.

You shall have no other gods before me. (Exodus 20:3)



The command could be translated *beside me*. Yahweh wants no god or no other power at his side in the minds and hearts of those who worship him.

In the early chapters of Ezekiel we find that Yahweh's patience has run out with regard to the people of Israel. God's wrath was provoked not because of periodic or even incessant disobedience. His judgment is coming because of Israel's descent into idolatry.

Before we dive into Ezekiel 8 we need a brief consideration of chapters 6 and 7. Both chapters state, repeatedly, that the time has come, the end has come, the doom of the people is certain. Why? Because of the people's gross idolatry.

In chapter 6, the prophet addresses *the mountains of Israel*. In chapter 7, Ezekiel addresses *the land of Israel*. It may seem a bit strange to us that Ezekiel would personify the people in this way but the original readers would have understood perfectly what he had in mind. It was on the hilltops where pagan rituals took place. It was on the tops of mountains that Baal and Ashtoreth were worshipped in detestable ways. Jeremiah 2:20 records Yahweh saying to the people,

*. . . yes, on every high hill and under every green tree you bowed down like a whore.*¹

¹ The ESV blushes a bit in this translation. The Hebrew word for *bowed down* is *sprawled*. The Contemporary English Version comes closer to the original language, *Now you worship other gods by having sex on hilltops or in this shade of large trees.*

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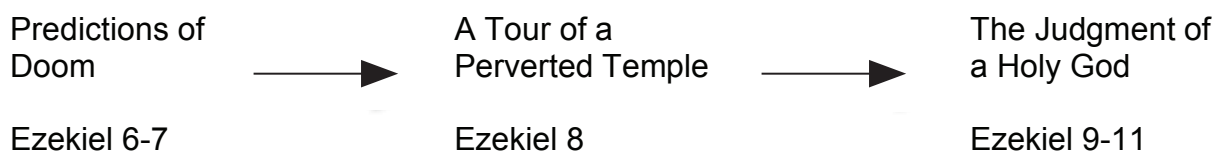
STUDY FOUR · A TOUR OF THE TEMPLE

In Baalism worshippers would have sex on hilltops hoping to attract the attention of the gods. It was all about fertility and the production of crops. Copulation makes babies. Perhaps, the people reasoned, this pagan sacrament will bring a good harvest next year.

Andrew Comisky explains:

Their worship digressed to highly charged eroticism. Somehow an offering was made to these fertility gods through illicit orgasm. But Baal and Ashteroth weren't real gods at all. Both were satanic counterfeits that snatched away the sexuality given by the Creator, reduced it to eroticism, and propped up that eroticism as an object of worship. Submission to these gods meant bowing the knee to the demonic principalities of sexual perversion. In effect, idealized, eroticized images of the creature were being worshiped, and worship degenerated into nothing more than orgies. The collision of body parts between faceless, nameless people marked the depths of Israel's idolatry.¹

In this study we are going to focus on Ezekiel chapter 8. The chapter falls in the middle of a unit which could be diagramed in the following way.



Take a moment to read (or skim) Ezekiel 6–7 saving time for the chapter of this study. What do you learn about God and his judgment from these verses? Why is his judgment intractable? Why will Yahweh show no leniency? What is the purpose and result of his judgment (6:13-14)? Share these findings with your homegroup.

¹ Andrew Comiskey, *Pursuing Sexual Wholeness: How Jesus Heals the Homosexual*, 1989, p. 100.

STUDY FOUR · A TOUR OF THE TEMPLE

Ezekiel 8

This chapter records another of the prophet's famous visions.¹ Here, it seems, God himself takes Ezekiel from Babylon to Jerusalem for a tour of the temple. Yes, Ezekiel had trained to be a priest in the temple, but he may have been ignorant of what was actually taking place in the temple. Three times in this chapter God asks his prophet, *Have you seen. . .?* Yahweh wants the prophet to see for himself the detestable practices that are going on in the house that bears his name. The vision Ezekiel has serves to show him, and the reader, why God's wrath will be dispensed with such ferocity. Whole scale wickedness calls for whole scale destruction.

Before going on in this study, read Ezekiel 8. Remember, Yahweh is taking the prophet on a tour of the temple, showing him the detestable practices that were going on inside the place that was to be his dwelling place. Look for the following stops on the tour. Jot down any thoughts or questions this tour of the temple provokes in your mind.

1. The idol of jealousy (8:5-6)
2. The idol of Egyptian gods (8:7-13)
3. Weeping for Tammuz (8:14-15)
4. Worshipping the Sun (8:16)
5. Yahweh's Response (8:17-18)

8:5-6 The Idol of Jealousy

We know from 2 Kings 21:7 that Manasseh had placed a wooden image of Asherah in the temple. Asherah was the Canaanite mother-goddess and consort of Baal. During the reign of king Josiah this carving was removed and destroyed. But perhaps another was installed during the reign of either Jehoiakim or Zedekiah. Here it is called, an *image of jealousy* or an *idol of jealousy* (NIV). The point is that Yahweh will not tolerate competition. The presence of an idol in his temple provokes his jealousy (see Exodus 20:5, etc.).

¹ This vision begins in chapter 8 and ends at the end of chapter 11 when Ezekiel is transported back to Babylon.

STUDY FOUR · A TOUR OF THE TEMPLE

What will Yahweh do in response to this idol?

Respond to the following quotation:

The sin of the world generates God's grief and anger. It is the sin of God's own people that produces God's jealousy. When we profess loyalty to the Lord Jesus Christ, to whose self-giving love we owe our salvation, but then live lives that are absorbed with the priorities and idolatries of the world around us, there is something detestable, ungrateful and treacherous about that. To go on doing so blatantly and without repentance is evidence of a state of heart and mind that incurs serious warnings as much in the New Testament as in the Old. (Wright, pp. 102-103)

Read 1 Corinthians 10:22 and 2 Corinthians 6:14–7:1.

Notice how Paul uses temple imagery when pleading with the Corinthians to offer complete, undivided loyalty to Christ. How can you apply these two passages to your own life of discipleship?

What idol or idols are in your life which might provoke the Lord's jealousy? What changes can you make in your life to destroy these idols?

8:7-13 The Idol of Egyptian Gods

This section is, literally, the most creepy stop on Ezekiel's tour. He climbs through a wall into what may have been originally a storage room for temple vessels or furniture (1 Kings 6:5). Now it has been converted into a place for pagan worship of Egyptian gods (Block, 1, p. 289)!

That there were 70 elders of Israel worshipping before these images of various reptiles and animals is reminiscent of the 70 elders who helped Moses rule in the desert (Exodus 24:1, 9). So far has Israel descended that the 70 who ruled with the nation's great leader have now morphed into leaders in a dark room worshipping foreign gods.

STUDY FOUR · A TOUR OF THE TEMPLE

8:10 ESV reads, *loathsome beasts*, and *idols*. The Hebrew text is far more shocking. Ezekiel characterizes what he saw as *disgusting things*, and, literally, *pellets of excrement!* (Block, 1, p. 292)

What is going on in this room? It seems that the picture presented is of leaders who have given up on Yahweh's help and are, instead, turning to the Egyptian gods for help against Babylon.

Notice the irony of Ezekiel's tour. The elders think the Lord does not see them (8:12), but they are praying to gods who could see nothing.

Consider how there could be a parallel to this stop on Ezekiel's tour in the American church. We say we place our faith in God alone, but do we? Do we trust in the political power of our nation to deliver us from trouble? Or perhaps we trust in the political agenda of one of our national political parties (whether progressive or conservative). How could the American church of the 21st century commit this form of idolatry?

What can we do to guard ourselves in this area?

8:14–15 Weeping for Tammuz

Tammuz was a Babylonian God of vegetation. In the prevailing mythology Tammuz reigned on earth for 36,000 years and died. After his death he was banished to the underworld where he lost all his power. His wife, the goddess Inanna, wept for him.

The shock of what Ezekiel sees in the temple is that this cult of the dead, which was also associated with pagan fertility rites, had made its way all the way into the temple of Yahweh!

Again, notice the irony. Here, in the temple of the living God we find the cult of the dead.

In the place where the Lord and giver of life was to be celebrated, women were involved in a mourning ritual for a dead hero of pagan mythology. (Wright, p. 106)

Furthermore, the hero being mourned is a Babylonian god, a representative of the very nation which Yahweh will use to punish Jerusalem!

STUDY FOUR · A TOUR OF THE TEMPLE

8:16 Worshipping the Sun

It seems that Ezekiel's tour takes him closer and closer to the Holy of Holies in the Jerusalem temple. Here Ezekiel finds himself in the *inner court of the house of the Lord*. This is as close as someone could get to the place where God's presence dwelt. What do we find? *About twenty-five men* have their backs (literally their *hindquarters*) facing the temple of the Lord. They are busy bowing toward the sun!

In *bowing down to the sun*, these men were literally lifting their backsides to God. Metaphorically, sunnies to the east; moonies to the LORD. The insult is blatant and breathtaking. (Wright, p. 107)

Of course none of us does this literally, but in what ways have you (we) turned our backside to the Lord? How might we do this in our daily living (see 8:17)?

8:17-18 Yahweh's Response

The temple in Jerusalem was a house for the glory of God. In fact, when Ezekiel arrives for his tour of this defiled temple he points out, *And behold, the glory of the God of Israel was there. . . (8:4)!* But God's glory will not tolerate competitors. Because of Israel's debauchery and pagan practices the glory of the Lord will depart from the temple (10:18).

The wrath of God's offended glory in Ezekiel's vision is aroused not by other nations worshipping such gods and indulging in such forms of worship. Rather, it is the spectacle of Yahweh's own people, who were supposed to be committed to exclusive loyalty to their covenant God, engaging in such blatant religious promiscuity that finally breaks God's patience and calls down his judgment. It is those who know better, those who were sinning against the light of revelation and history, those who could not claim ignorance as an excuse, who must now face the consequences of their willful treachery. (Wright, p. 111)

Spend time praying with and for one another in your homegroup. Pray that each person in your group will never depart from the worship of the true God. Pray that his glory will be the satisfaction of each person's deepest longings. Pray that each person stay away from *religious promiscuity* and cling tightly to the God who loves them deeply.

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STUDY FOUR · A TOUR OF THE TEMPLE

STUDY FIVE FAIRNESS AND FATALISM EZEKIEL 18

*Our fathers sinned, and are no more;
and we bear their iniquities. (Lamentations 5:7)*



Fairness and fatalism are the twin brothers who show up and speak in our suffering. On the one hand, those who suffer are tempted to cry, *It's not fair! Why do I suffer so? Why me?* On the other hand, those in pain may gravitate to the opposite extreme. *This is my lot in life. These were the cards I was dealt. What will be, will be.*

Surely both twins whispered into the ears of the exiles who were enduring life 1,000 miles from home. The people longed to go back to Jerusalem. They longed for what was once considered *normal*.

Ezekiel 18 deals with both of these brothers of despair. First, we find the brother named *Fatalism*. The chapter begins with a brief, cryptic, proverb.

The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge. (18:2b)

In context the proverb is spoken by the people and God wants to know why. Yahweh asks, *What do you mean by quoting this proverb?* The implication of the proverb seems to be, *What the fathers reaped, the children sow. We're stuck in Babylon because of the sins of our parents and there is nothing we can do about it. . . How unfair.*

The second brother is named *Fairness*. This sibling cries out against the injustice, or the unfairness of God, saying, *The way of the LORD is not just*, or, as the Message has it,

"Do I hear you saying, 'That's not fair! God's not fair!'" (18:25)

STUDY FIVE · FAIRNESS AND FATALISM

Before going on in this study, read Ezekiel 18. Make a note of the thoughts you have from reading this chapter. What questions do these verses bring to mind? Look for the following divisions in the chapter:

1. The Proverb and the Principle (18:1-4)
2. Three Examples of the Principle (18:5-18)
 - The Righteous father (18:5-9)
 - The Un-righteous Son (18:10-13)
 - The Righteous grandson (18:14-18)
3. The Call to Repentance (18:19-32)

18:1-4 The Proverb and the Principle

As we have seen above, the proverb in 18:2 reflects the fatalistic mindset of the people. Their suffering was, ultimately, not their fault but the consequence of the actions of their fathers and grandfathers. The people had some biblical support for their complaint. In the midst of what we call The 10 Commandments we read,

You shall not bow down to [idols] or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments. (Exodus 20:5-6)

With these and many other verses in their memory bank, the exiles thought of themselves as innocent victims of, rather than active participants in the sins that brought them to Babylon. But the people had missed the point entirely of what God was saying in the 10 Commandments. Block explains:

The [statement in the Ten Commandments] had originally been intended as a . . . warning to adults to guard their conduct because of the implications of their actions for their children. But in the mouths of Ezekiel's contemporaries, it has been transformed into a retrospective accusation of divine injustice.¹ (Block, 1, p. 559)

Think about our own times. Think of some ways you have heard this proverb expressed in our contemporary culture. We speak of our *baggage*, of being an adult child of an alcoholic, a child of divorce, etc. Are these examples of our own version of this proverb? Why? Why not?

¹ We often read the verses in Exodus and elsewhere as a promise to future, yet unborn, generations. But in the ancient Near East, families would generally have three or four generations living together in a small clan. The Bible may be saying, *As the father decides to sin, in this case by worshipping false gods, the whole living family will be affected and punished.* . . .

STUDY FIVE · FAIRNESS AND FATALISM

Have you ever attributed the cause of your difficulties to your parents or grandparents? If so, how does that affect your self-perception and your understanding of God's desire for your well-being?

18:4a What is the principle that Yahweh offers as the antidote to the proverb? Compare translations on this verse.

What does this verse teach us about God? Compare Psalm 24:1.

Explain how this verse gives (or should give) hope to your life?

18:4b is somewhat of a famous verse from Ezekiel: *The soul who sins shall die.*¹

Ezekiel is stating what Paul states in Romans 6:23 and what God said to Adam in Genesis 2:17: *The wages of sin is death.*

Just as Adam and Eve played the blame game, the exiles in Babylon did the same. This verse in Ezekiel, if nothing else, teaches us that each of us is responsible for our sin before God and the consequence is death.

How does this verse lead us to Christ? Explain to your group the gospel from this verse. (Older believers in the room, help those who are newer to the Christian faith.) Did God suspend this principle (*The soul who sins shall die*) when we were saved? Explain.

18:5-18 Three Examples of the Principle

Review the stories of the father, the son and the grandson. Notice the repetition in each case. Each is held, roughly, to the same standards, each is responsible for his own behavior and each will enjoy or suffer the consequences of that behavior.

¹ Block translates, *Every living person belongs to me.*

THE GOSPEL OF EZEKIEL

STUDY FIVE · FAIRNESS AND FATALISM

18:5 contains the basic idea that will be developed in this section. The question is, does a man do what is *just and right*? God's people were to reflect the character of the God who loves *righteousness and justice* (Psalm 33:5).

These case-studies might sound like a form of works-righteousness as if God were saying, *Be good enough and you'll be saved, be bad enough and you'll be lost*. Nothing could be further from what Ezekiel has in mind. It is not that this prophet sees the people as earning their salvation. They are a part of the covenant community.

It does not mean moral perfection, but certainly implies moral commitment. It is the characteristic of the person who takes seriously the command to love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and strength, and who does so in grateful response to the prior redeeming love of God. (Wright, pp. 192-193)

In other words, Ezekiel 18 is not at all different from the New Testament injunctions that call us to holiness. Consider and discuss the following:

- 1 Corinthians 6:9-11
- 1 Corinthians 10:1-12
- 1 Thessalonians 4:1-8
- 1 John 3:2-10

18:19-32 The Call to Repentance

Read over these verses again. What do they teach you about God? What do they teach you about yourself?

18:21-24 Notice the two people described (*wicked person, righteous person*). There is a shift in Ezekiel's prophecy here. What is it? What is the surprising emphasis we find in these verses?

STUDY FIVE · FAIRNESS AND FATALISM

Are you the wicked person or the righteous person? Are you both? Neither? Explain. Consider Romans 3:23 and 6:23 as you think about your answer.

18:25a Here we meet the second brother mentioned at the outset of this study, the brother named *Fairness*. This brother complains that the Lord's ways are unfair, even unjust.

18:25b-29 What is God's response to this complaint?

18:30-32 are the most important verses in this chapter. In the end, there are only two kinds of people who will stand before God: the righteous and the unrighteous. Ezekiel pleads with his readers, and he pleads with us to see to it that we are found among those who will hear the Master's *Well done, good and faithful servant*. . . (Matthew 25:23).

Notice the heart of God in these verses. In the end of the chapter we learn, again, that God is tender, loving and takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked. Yahweh's plea should melt our hearts.

Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Lord GOD; so turn, and live. (18:32)

The warnings in this chapter are severe while the loving kindness of God is relentless. Let us pray for one another that we will be found among the company of the faithful.

THE GOSPEL OF EZEKIEL

STUDY FIVE · FAIRNESS AND FATALISM

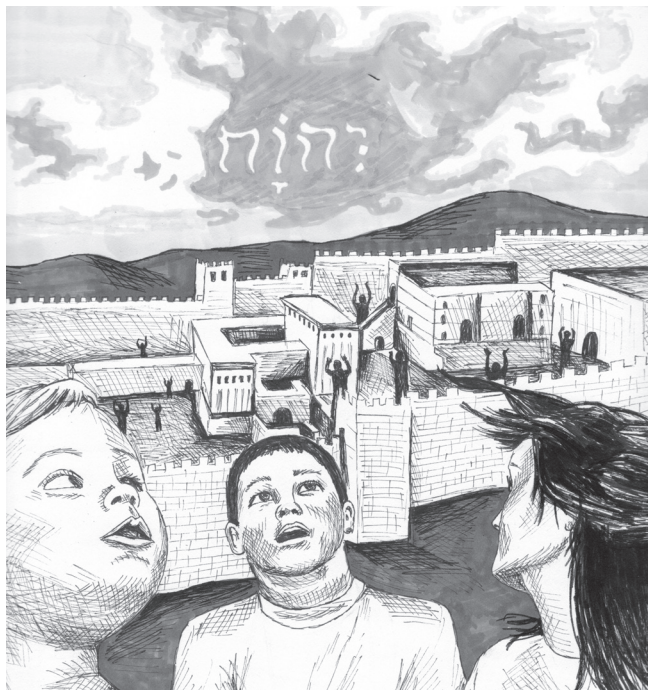
SERMON NOTES

STUDY SIX

THE HOLINESS OF GOD'S NAME

EZEKIEL 36:16-23

What is at stake in a person's name? A baby boy may be treasured, in part, because he will *continue* the family name. An ambitious college graduate may begin his career hoping to *make a name for himself*. A rebellious daughter may bring *shame* to the family name. Sometimes the *name* of a convicted criminal, perhaps long dead, is cleared when new evidence comes to light.



One way to see the story of the Bible is to see it as a story of God's concern for the glory and reputation of his name. He creates the nation of Israel for the sake of his name (1 Samuel 12:22). God delivers his people from their Egyptian captivity so that his name may be *declared throughout all the earth* (Romans 9:17). In Ezekiel we have seen Yahweh send his wrath on his people to protect his name. And now, in the latter chapters of the book, we will see that God is going to restore his people for the same purpose, to protect the honor and glory of his name.

A decisive and marvelous shift takes place in Ezekiel 34. After 33 chapters of *denunciatory oracles* against the nations, and prophecies of doom regarding Israel, Ezekiel *gives way to glorious messages of renewal and hope*. (Block, 2, p. 268) Jerusalem lies in ruins. The exiles languish in Babylon. God's wrath, as

predicted, has fallen on his own people. The storm of God's fury has produced a flood of despair and hopelessness. But now, in the later chapters of the book, the sunrise after the darkness. Ezekiel 34:1–48:35¹ looks forward to a new day of blessing that is coming for Israel, and indeed, for the whole world! We should probably call this *The Great Reversal*. The shift is blatant and welcomed!

¹ Block gives a helpful outline of these chapters:

1. Restoring Yahweh's role as divine shepherd/king of Israel (34:1-31)
2. Restoring Yahweh's land (35:1–36:15)
3. Restoring Yahweh's honor (36:16-38)
4. Restoring Yahweh's people (37:1-14)
5. Restoring Yahweh's covenant (37:15-28)
6. Restoring Yahweh's supremacy (38:1–39:29)
7. Restoring Yahweh's presence among his people (40:1–46:24)
8. Restoring Yahweh's presence in the land (47:1–48:35)

THE GOSPEL OF EZEKIEL

STUDY SIX · THE HOLINESS OF GOD'S NAME

5:8-9

. . . therefore thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I, even I, am against you. And I will execute judgments in your midst in the sight of the nations. And because of all your abominations I will do with you what I have never yet done, and the like of which I will never do again.

36:9-10

For behold, I am for you, and I will turn to you, and you shall be tilled and sown. And I will multiply people on you, the whole house of Israel, all of it. The cities shall be inhabited and the waste places rebuilt.



Notice two other parallels between the early and late prophecies of Ezekiel.

This study is going to focus on 36:16-23. There we will ponder Yahweh's concern for his reputation, for the holiness of his *name*. But before we get to that, we need to consider, briefly, what comes before. The setting of 36:16-23 is 36:1-15.

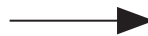
Read 36:1-15 and notice the extravagant promises God makes to his people. How would you summarize these verses?

5:13

Thus shall my anger spend itself and I will vent my fury upon them and satisfy myself. And they shall know that I am the LORD—that I have spoken in my jealousy—when I spend my fury upon them.

36:11

And I will multiply on you man and beast, and they shall multiply and be fruitful. And I will cause you to be inhabited as in your former times, and will do more good to you than ever before. Then you will know that I am the LORD.



6:1-2

The word of the LORD came to me: “Son of man, set your face toward the mountains of Israel, and prophesy against them, and say. . .

36:1

And you, son of man, prophesy to the mountains of Israel, and say. . .



STUDY SIX · THE HOLINESS OF GOD'S NAME

Ezekial 36:16-23

Read this section before going on in this study. Wright points out that these verses are something of a repeat of 35:1-36:15 only this time, the fall and restoration of Israel is described from Yahweh's perspective.

The gospel according to Ezekiel is not just good news for Israel. It is also good news for God. In fact, as we shall see, only for God's own sake is it good news at all. (Wright, p. 287)

What stands out as you read? What questions do you have of this paragraph?

36:18-19 Wright calls these two verses the most *succinct summary of the prophet's preaching imaginable*. Why? How do these two verses, crude as they are, summarize all that we have seen in this book?¹

If Israel defiled the name of Yahweh with impurity and the worship of idols, how might you defile the name of God in your daily living?

¹ *Menstrual impurity, or, uncleanness* (NIV) needs some clarification. A woman's monthly period rendered her ritually *unclean* for seven days (see Leviticus 15:1-18). This was not a moral uncleanness but rather a ceremonial uncleanness. A look at the Leviticus passage will show that both men and women were liable to be rendered unfit for ceremonial worship due to their various bodily discharges. *The activity used as a metaphor for Israel's sin is not a criminal or moral failure so much as a willful disregard of the holiness of God. However, the judgment itself (36:18-19) resulted in God's holiness being yet further profaned* (v. 20). *So God looked now to his own interests* (v. 21). (From the *ESV Study Bible*, p. 1557)
The *idols* in verse 18 are, again, literally *pellets of dung*.

THE GOSPEL OF EZEKIEL

STUDY SIX · THE HOLINESS OF GOD'S NAME

On the other hand, what do you do that makes God's name great?

Look over our passage again (36:16-23). Make note of every reference to the *name* of God. Summarize Yahweh's concern for his own name.

The word God uses to express the misuse of his name is *profane*. This Hebrew word has nothing to do with what we call *profanity*. The Hebrew word translated refers to what is *common* rather than *holy*. For the Jews in Old Testament times, most of life was common (not sinful) while some things were to be set aside as *holy* (such as the Sabbath, the priests, even the utensils used in the tabernacle).

Read 36:20-21 carefully. In verse 21 we read that Yahweh *had concern* for his name. The translation is soft. The Hebrew word means *pity*. God took pity on the denigration of his name. Read the following passages that show Moses appealing to God to act in a certain way to protect the honor of his name.

- Exodus 32:12 (in context)
- Numbers 14:15-16 (in context)

In each of these cases God relents, withholds his wrath and thus protects his reputation among the nations. Now, in Ezekiel, after the venting of his wrath, Yahweh again acts to protect his name / reputation.

Spend time praying as a homegroup for God's name to be glorified in and through each person in your group. Pray for the same in our church community. Pray for the other churches in our town asking that we, together, would live lives that would compel the larger Santa Barbara community to see the style of our lives and then *glorify God in heaven* (Matthew 5:16). Ask God to protect his reputation by working in and through the church.

STUDY SIX · THE HOLINESS OF GOD'S NAME

36:20-21 How was the name of Yahweh profaned in these verses? Here, unlike 36:17-18, the issue doesn't seem to be so much moral impurity, but rather, the exile itself. God's name was profaned as a consequence of the destruction of Jerusalem. Because the Jews were defeated by the Babylonians, Yahweh himself looks bad. Wright explains:

The defeat of a nation meant the defeat of its god. Yahweh was self-evidently defeated. Yahweh was therefore no better than any of the rest of the petty gods who had succumbed to the might of Babylon and her gods. Yahweh's name would be mocked as just another common loser among the gods. (Wright, p. 290)

In a similar way, in the New Testament era the reputation of God is at stake in the behavior of the church (1 Corinthians 5:1, John 13:35, etc.). How could Santa Barbara Community Church tarnish (profane) the name of God in her actions and behavior? What could we do that would make Jesus look as though he were *just another messiah, one among many*?

36:22 brings us to the heart of the matter. God is going to redeem his people for the sake of his *holy name*. Notice the parallel, *it is not for your sake. . . it is for my sake*.

Consider how this theme of the holiness and reputation of God's name is played out in the New Testament. Look up these verses and ponder the breadth of biblical witnesses to the importance of the glory of God's name.

- In John's gospel Jesus comes in his Father's name (5:43), does his miracles in his Father's name (10:25) and dies on the cross to glorify his Father's name (12:27-28).
- Jesus tells his followers they will be hated *for his name's sake* (Matthew 10:22).
- Jesus tells his followers that the things they forsake (family and wealth) for his name's sake, will be rewarded a hundred fold in the life to come (Matthew 19:29).
- The early church, exclusively Jewish, learns that God will include the Gentiles in his blessings for the sake of his name (Acts 15:14).
- When Saul / Paul first worships Jesus as Messiah he will learn how much he will suffer *for the sake of my name* (Acts 9:16).
- Late in his ministry Paul goes to Jerusalem despite many warnings that he will be arrested saying, . . . *I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus* (Acts 21:13).
- John tells us that God forgives our sins *for the sake of his name* (1 John 2:12).

THE GOSPEL OF EZEKIEL

STUDY SIX · THE HOLINESS OF GOD'S NAME

John Piper ponders the importance of God's name in a chapter entitled, *The Pleasure of God in His Fame*. Read, ponder and discuss the following paragraphs. Then allow the glory of God's name to provoke you to worship him.

The great ground of hope, the great motive to pray, the great well-spring of mercy is God's awesome commitment to his name. The pleasure that he has in his fame is the pledge and passion of his readiness to forgive and save those who lift his banner and cast themselves on his promise and mercy. . .

[W]hether we are reading in the Old Testament or the New, the great ground of our forgiveness is God's allegiance to his holy name and the unswerving pleasure that he takes in making the worth and righteousness of that name known, especially in the gospel message that Christ died both to justify the ungodly and vindicate the Father's justice. If God were ever to lose his delight in the fame of his glorious name, the foundation of our pardon would be imperiled. (*The Pleasures of God: Meditations on God's Delight in Being God*, 1991, pp. 110, 112)

SERMON NOTES

STUDY SEVEN GOD'S HOLY HEART EZEKIEL 36:24—38

At the end of Ezekiel 18 we came across a curious verse. There God says,

Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed, and make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! Why will you die, O house of Israel? (18:31)

The obvious question, of course, is *How can I make a new heart for myself?*

An ancient proverb reads,

The heart of the human problem is the problem of the human heart.

The proverb is true. There is something in each of us that we don't understand, which is at war with our will. That something is a heart that is tainted by sin.

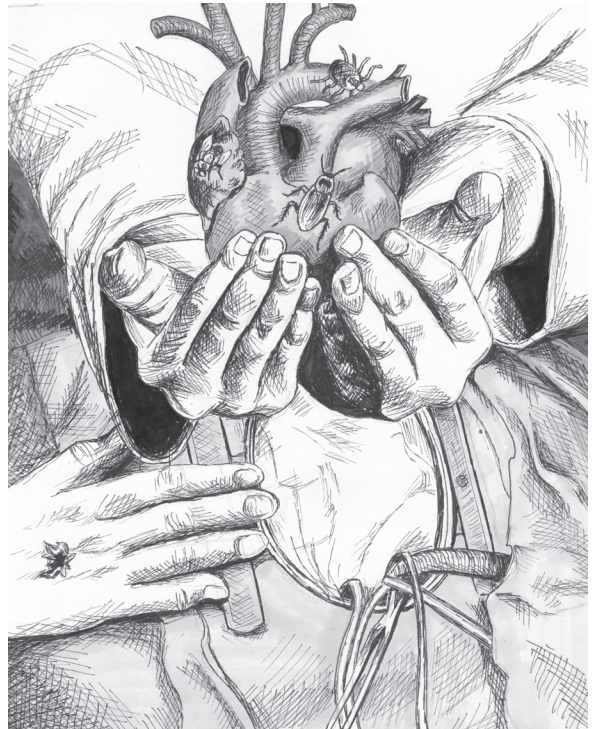
Jeremiah testifies to this *dark side* in every human being when he writes,

The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it? (Jeremiah 17:9)

The apostle Paul puts the same truth in more personal terms. In his letter to the Roman church he confesses,

For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. (Romans 7:5)

Ezekiel 36:24-38 is the gospel of a new heart. Not a heart we create on our own through religion or discipline, but a new heart which is a gift from God himself.



STUDY SEVEN · GOD'S HOLY HEART

Read this passage before going on in this study making note of anything that stands out or of any questions you may have.

Now look through this passage again. If you don't mind marking your Bible, underline every time God says, *I will*. What does the repetition of this phrase teach us about Israel's hope? About our hope? Make a specific list of all the promises God makes.

Describe the hope you have that God will act in your life.

Our passage needs to be read in context, and that context is what we looked at last week in study 6. The issue was, and is, the holiness and reputation of God's name. Before, God's name was profaned because of Israel's wickedness, thus the destruction of Jerusalem and the Babylonian captivity of God's people. But one day's solution is another day's problem. With Jerusalem in ruins and Yahweh's people in exile, God appears to be weak to the surrounding nations. That is the bridge from exile to a return to the land. God's reputation, again, is the issue.

What is at stake is not an impressive position for Israel, but the justification of God's claim to reveal himself to the world as its God.¹

Wright adds,

Thus Ezekiel, along with other prophets, argues that God's plan of restoration must do two things: it must provide for a radical change of heart and behaviour among God's people; and it must restore God's own name in the earth. Ultimately, of course, only the final act of God's justice and grace through the cross and resurrection of Christ and the sending of his Spirit would accomplish both. (Wright, p. 292)

¹ Walter Eichrodt, *Ezekiel: A Commentary*, 1970, p. 496.

STUDY SEVEN · GOD'S HOLY HEART

Having looked at the whole, let us now turn and examine the parts of this passage which as been called *The Gospel of Ezekiel*.

1. Gathering (36:24)
2. Cleansing (36:25)
3. Transforming (36:26-27)
4. Restoring (36:28-30)
5. Shaming (36:31-32)
6. Rebuilding (36:33-38)¹

36:24 Gathering

At least ten times in Ezekiel we read of the return to the land as a second Exodus. The vocabulary the prophet chooses seems to be deliberately borrowed from the book of Deuteronomy.² Yahweh is fulfilling the prophecy given by Moses.

If your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there the LORD your God will gather you, and from there he will take you. And the LORD your God will bring you into the land that your fathers possessed. . .
Deuteronomy 30:4-5



I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries and bring you into your own land.
Ezekiel 36:24

This passage is about the return of the people from Babylon to Jerusalem under the leadership of Zerubbabel. In the latter chapters of Ezekiel (study 8) we will find the prophet using this second exodus as a picture of God's final ingathering of people from every tribe, tongue and nation into his eternal kingdom.

36:25 Cleansing

Sometimes, God commands his people to wash themselves; that is to deal with and change the behaviours which make them dirty in his presence. And sometimes it is recognized that people may make superficial efforts to do this, but leave the basic stain of guilt untouched. Much more often, it is recognized that the job of cleaning up the accumulated dirt of our lives has to be done by God himself. (Wright, p. 294)

¹ This outline is base on Wright's commentary.

² The book of Deuteronomy records several sermons of Moses to the people. In the last of these teachings he predicts Israel's decline, fall and restoration.

The language of this passage borrows from the priestly rituals of both personal washing and then sprinkling blood in the temple. Here we learn that God's people, corporately, will be washed by Yahweh himself. Notice the three-fold repetition of cleansing (*sprinkle clean water, clean, cleanse*). In Hebrew when we find something repeated three times the author is giving the reader an exclamation point, saying, Listen up! Pay attention!

Compare the following verses:

- Psalm 51:2, 7
- 1 Corinthians 6:9-11
- Hebrews 10:22

What does this mean to you in your life?

What would you say to a believer who claims to *feel* dirty because of past sins?

36:26-27 Transforming

These verses are among the most important verse in Ezekiel and in the whole Old Testament. Here we learn, in graphic terms, that God will transform his people from the inside out.

As chapters 16, 20 and 23 have shown, Israel was not just an occasionally disobedient child, or a sporadically flirtatious wife. They had shown a persistent, willful and incorrigible determination to disregard the covenant requirements of Yahweh and an unstoppable downward drift towards, and sinking below, the levels of wickedness to be found among the non-covenant nations. The problem lay not just in their behaviour, but in the source of their behaviour—the attitudes and mentality that characterized them. In short, the problem was in their 'heart; and 'spirit'. (Wright, p. 296)

STUDY SEVEN · GOD'S HOLY HEART

These verses promise a *new heart* and the infusion of a *new Spirit* within the people. Translating the Hebrew word *leb* with English word *heart* may be misleading. In Hebrew the *heart* is the center of a person. The heart encompasses all that a person is, mind, emotions, will. The word for *spirit* in Hebrew refers more to a person's inner feelings, dreams, ambition, life-direction.

With this in mind, what is the difference between a *heart of stone* and a *heart of flesh*?

What is God's transforming promise in 36:26?

How have you experienced this verse in your own life? What are you still waiting for with regard to the fulfillment of this verse?

Notice the strength of 36:27. The NIV reads *I will . . . move you to follow* isn't as strong as the Hebrew verb. God says, literally, *I will work it out, that in my decrees you will walk and my commands you will keep and do them* (see Wright, p. 297), or, as the ESV reads, *[I will] cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules*.

God will do in us what we cannot do for, or in, ourselves!

George Croly (1780-1860) wrote a hymn called *Spirit of God, Descend Upon My Heart*. Consider the last verse of the following stanza.

Spirit of God, descend upon my heart;
Wean it from earth; through all its pulses move;
Stoop to my weakness, mighty as Thou art,
And make me love Thee as I ought to love.

Croly is praying an Ezekiel 36 prayer for the transformation of his heart. Pray for one another in your homegroup. Pray that even as we wait for the fullness of this promise to come to fruition, we will walk in obedience to God's will. Not because we must to gain his favor, but because we can after having received his grace.

36:28-30 Restoring

Notice how Yahweh promises to remove the *disgrace* of his people.

Think about your own life? How has God removed your *disgrace*? What has his grace felt like in your life?

36:31-32 Shaming

Commentators point out that these verses seem somewhat contradictory to 36:28-30. God will remove the people's disgrace, *then you will remember your evil ways. . . and you will loathe yourself.*

What do you think this means? How might the grace and forgiveness of God lead to self-loathing?

Is there a proper role for shame and guilt in the life of a believer? If so, what is that role?

What kind of relation do you have with your past *evil ways*, *iniquities* and *abominations*?

God says to the people: *Be ashamed and confounded for your ways, O house of Israel.* Is there an appropriate equivalent to this in church worship? How can we call one another to a godly-shame for our sins without becoming self-absorbed in our past?

STUDY SEVEN · GOD'S HOLY HEART

36:33-38 Rebuilding

Notice the amazement of the surrounding nations because of what Yahweh will do. They will look at the rebuilt cities, the farming, the purity and wonder if they are looking at the garden of Eden. The result is that the nations who observe this great transformation will *know that I am the LORD* (36:36).

Ponder what God has done in your life and in the lives of those you know in our church family. Share these things with one another. Spend time thanking God for his transforming power. Pray that the surrounding community of Santa Barbara will see what God has done and say, *The Lord is God!*

SERMON NOTES

THE GOSPEL OF EZEKIEL

STUDY SEVEN · GOD'S HOLY HEART

STUDY EIGHT

WATER FROM THE TEMPLE

EZEKIEL 40-48

I will make a covenant of peace with them. It shall be an everlasting covenant with them. And I will set them in their land and multiply them, and will set my sanctuary in their midst forevermore. My dwelling place shall be with them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Then the nations will know that I am the LORD who sanctifies Israel, when my sanctuary is in their midst forevermore. (37:26-28)

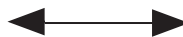


Ezekiel is moving to its labored, yet stunning climax. The conclusion of this book of prophecy is labored because Ezekiel exposes the reader to nine chapters describing a future temple in Jerusalem. It is stunning insofar as he paints a picture of a temple that exceeded any expectation imaginable.

In the latter chapters of the book (34-37) we have been finding what we have called *The Gospel According to Ezekiel*. This gospel proclaims the good news that Yahweh's judgment is not his last word. His grace and mercy will prevail. The people will return to the land in a second exodus. Furthermore, Israel's history of decline and rebellion will not be repeated. Yahweh will infuse in the people a new heart and a new spirit! In fact, God will put his Holy Spirit within the people of his covenant!

The last 10 chapters of this book look in two directions.

God's people will have success with regard to their enemies (38-39)



God's presence will again be with his people (40-48)

Indeed, the last words of Ezekiel read, *The LORD is there!*

Ezekiel 40–48

Here we come to the final vision in this long book. The date (40:1) is *in the twenty-fifth year of our exile* is 573 BC. It has been two decades since the man who trained to be a priest was called to be a prophet.

A Look at the Whole

In chapters 40–48 Ezekiel portrays the future of God's people with all the rhetorical power of his priestly worldview, sketching the contours of a restored temple, land and people. Again, the key moment in the whole portrayal is the return of the glory of Yahweh for permanent residence among his people (43:1-7). (Wright, p. 316)

Obviously a study such as this will not be able to do justice to the details of Ezekiel's final vision. Nevertheless a thorough reading of these chapters will help us understand the whole. For those willing to take the plunge, look for the following themes: the temple, the sacrificial system and the division of the land.

Wright helps make sense of what will seem to many as an endless array of details and minutia.

Ezekiel is concerned, first, that Yahweh should dwell again among his people in a cleansed sanctuary. So he is granted a visionary tour of a temple of perfectly symmetrical dimensions. Secondly, he is concerned that the people's relationship with Yahweh should from now on be sustained by a full and proper implementation of the sacrificial rituals and priestly duties, through which forgiveness, fellowship and covenant inclusion could continue without threat. So he is given instructions relating to the restoration of the priestly and sacrificial system. And thirdly, he longs to see the unruly and incorrigible wickedness of Israel, which had made the exile so inevitable and so deserved, replaced by a nation living in well-ordered peace and harmony on the land. So his vision pictures the tribes of Israel arranged in perfect balance around the central sanctuary and city, with the land divided equally, and above all, with God himself in the very centre of it all, and the river of life flowing out from his presence to bless, heal, fertilize, feed and give life to the world. (Wright, pp. 328-329)

As you read, or peruse, these chapters, look for the following divisions:

- The Return of God's Presence (40:1–43:12)
- The Return of God's Worship (43:13–46:24)
- The Return of God's People (47:1–48:35)

STUDY EIGHT · WATER FROM THE TEMPLE

As you read these chapters jot down thoughts and impressions you glean from the text itself. If time will not allow you to read these chapters, at least look over them carefully and get a feel for their content. What is the overall feel to these chapters?

How are we to interpret these chapters? They are, unsurprisingly, a hotbed of interpretive debate. In some sense, these chapters were fulfilled when the people came back to the land of Judah. But in another sense, each of Ezekiel's prophecies begs for a larger fulfillment in the future. Consider:

Did God come to dwell, uniquely and permanently, with his people after the exile? In a sense, yes, the people returned and worshipped Yahweh in Jerusalem. But, in a sense, no, the worship of God after the exile was haphazard and imperfect.

Was the temple prophesied by Ezekiel built? In a sense, yes, the refugees who returned to their homeland did build a temple (see the book of Ezra). But no effort was made to build it after the dimensions we find in Ezekiel 40–43. Nor does Ezekiel ever give the instruction to build a new temple after the pattern described.¹

Did the rebuilt temple of Ezra-Nehemiah's time fulfill Ezekiel's prophecy? In a sense, yes. God said there would be a temple and there was a temple. But in another sense, everything that happened to the returning exiles fell far short of Ezekiel's vision. The second temple was desecrated by the Greeks, remodeled by King Herod and then razed to the ground by the Romans in 70 AD. This sordid history seems a far cry from what the prophet envisioned.

Did the people return to undefiled worship of God? In 47:3 we read,

The house of Israel will never again defile my holy name—neither they nor their kings—by their prostitution and the lifeless idols of their kings at their high places.

Was this *never again* fulfilled by the returning exiles? Hardly. We are not even past the era of Ezra and Nehemiah and we learn that some of the returnees had married foreign women (Ezra 10), and profaned the Sabbath (Nehemiah 13). They are committing two sins that brought on the exile in the first place! Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi are prophets who minister after the exile. Their message, tragically, was remarkable similar to Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel.

Were the tribes restored to the land as described in 47–48? In a sense, yes. The people do return to the land of Israel. But never in the way Ezekiel predicted. Ezekiel sees a reconstituted Israel with borders that extend beyond anything the nation had ever known. Furthermore, Ezekiel assigns each of the 12 tribes a portion of land, extending from the

¹ Unlike the instructions to build the tabernacle in Exodus where, again and again, the people are told to *make* that structure after a very specific blue print.

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Mediterranean Sea inland (unlike the historical allotment of land to the tribes). Each tribe gets an equal portion of land. But, by the time of Ezekiel, the northern tribes of Israel have been scattered and compromised by mingling with their captors. When the exiles did return from Babylon, the territory they occupied was a very small territory in and around Jerusalem. It was nothing like the territory Ezekiel described. The vast real estate described by the prophet was dominated and controlled by the Persians when the exile was over. Persian control gave way to the Greeks and then to the Romans. By the time the Roman Empire had run its course the Jews were dispersed from their land almost entirely.

Clearly these latter chapters of Ezekiel long for fulfillment still. But how?

- Some interpreters see these chapters fulfilled literally after the return of Christ. He will come again and, literally, establish his rule and reign in Jerusalem. The duration of this reign will be 1,000 years, the temple will be rebuilt exactly according to the dimensions described by the prophet and sacrifices will be offered commemorating the work of Jesus on the cross.
- Others see these descriptions of a new temple, etc., as an extended metaphor describing the blessings of God's people during the present age of blessing in Christ.
- Still others see these chapters as a prediction of God's presence among his people in the future, after Jesus' second coming. Then we will enjoy *a new heaven and a new earth* (see Isaiah 66:17; 2 Peter 3:13; Revelation 21:1). For these interpreters it is not that the details will be literally fulfilled. The new temple, replete with water gushing out in perfect symmetry to cleanse and provide for the nations, is a symbol of the age of the Holy Spirit. God's presence in the temple testifies to the great hope believers have that one day their worship of God will be unhindered and uninterrupted.¹

Which interpretation of these chapters makes most sense to you? Why?

No matter how we interpret this passage several points are clear. God will dwell with his people. His presence will be their joy and delight. God will be honored by his people, indeed, by all peoples, and holiness will guard their steps.

47:1-12 A Look at One Part

Some of the more exciting verses in Ezekiel, indeed, in all of the Old Testament are found here. Read and describe this part of the prophet's vision.

¹ The above is paraphrased from the *ESV Study Bible*, p 1564.

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What happens?

What do the waters do when they flow in four directions?

What meaning is ascribed to this vision?

How are we to interpret this prophecy? Is Ezekiel speaking of literal water flowing from a rebuilt temple in a future Messianic Age? Clearly not. As one commentator puts it,

No amount of exegetical finesse or insistence on “what the Bible plainly says” can transform the poetry of this passage into a topographically and ecologically realistic account of an event in time.¹

So, what is the prophet communicating to his readers?

In our study last week we read that the future land of Israel will be comparable to the garden of Eden (36:35)! The description of the river flowing from the temple connects us to that idea. As Eden had four rivers flowing from its center (Genesis 2:10-14), so also, the temple will have waters flowing from the center, from God himself.

As the breath of God had come from the ‘four winds’ to breathe life back into a dead army (37:9-10), so now the river of Food flows *from the sanctuary (12) to water life back into a dead land and sea. For where the river flows everything will live (9). And with life come also food and healing (12)* – among the most celebrated of all God’s blessings. It is almost as though God were anticipating the words of his Son, ‘I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.’ (Wright, p. 357)

Wright is right. We cannot read this passage without being drawn to Jesus and, in the end, to the apostle John’s vision of eternity.

Jesus

John 7 records Jesus in the temple during the Feast of Tabernacles. This feast had a daily water ceremony that involved pouring out water every day in the temple to symbolize first, Yahweh’s provision of water in the desert, and second, the coming age of the Holy Spirit. It was on the last day of this feast when Jesus, in the temple area, says,

¹ J. Blenkinsopp, *Ezekiel*, 1990, p. 231.

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If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.' (John 7:37-38)

Jesus, who early in John's gospel claims to be the true temple (John 2:18-22), now claims to be the fulfillment of Ezekiel 47:1-12. He is the living water! Will we drink?

John

Notice the similarities between Ezekiel 47:1-12 and Revelation 22:1-4. What similarities and what differences do you find between these two prophecies?

What does it all mean? Christopher Wright lends insight.

As is so often the case with biblical prophetic symbolism. . . Ezekiel's river of living water has several layers of significance. For the exiles, this river spoke of the reversal of the curse, death and barrenness of exile through their return to the land as a people restored to God's blessing and favor. Beyond that, it spoke of the true source of all life and healing – the presence of the living God in his sanctuary. For those who believe in the Messiah, Jesus, the river of living water speaks of the continuing welling up of the Spirit of God which brings life and blessing to the believer here and now and flows out to others.

Then Wright concludes,

We need to remember that all renewal in the church or in the world flows by God's grace from God's presence and is not something we generate or control. And ultimately the river of life, in Ezekiel and Revelation, anticipates the new creation in which God will have lifted the curse from the earth forever and will dwell in life-giving abundance with his redeemed people gathered from all nations (Wright, p. 359)

The Bible begins in a garden and concludes in a city. In the garden God's presence was the delight of his people. Sin, of course, set all history on a different course, but the love of God, in the end brings about the restoration of all things. In the City of God we don't find a solitary couple, we find the nations worshipping and enjoying the God who is glory itself. Ezekiel points us to the time when

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... the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. (Revelation 21:3)

Are you drinking this living water? How does this water cleanse and refresh you? Share words of testimony with your homegroup while praising the God who calls you to himself.

As we conclude this study, spend time praying for one another in your homegroup and for our church as a whole. Pray that we will be found among the faithful when the history reaches its fulfillment. May God bless us and keep us until then!

SERMON NOTES

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