

SESSION #45

EZEKIEL

1. Setting

As you can see on the timeline chart, Ezekiel was a contemporary with Jeremiah and Daniel. It is virtually certain that Ezekiel, as a young man just prior to the captivity, heard Jeremiah preaching in the streets of Jerusalem. What a powerful influence this must have been on young Ezekiel! And the same could be said about Daniel, another young man in Jerusalem. I've sometimes thought that in the midst of such terrible discouragements for Jeremiah, if he could just have known that there were two young men in those streets who would later become such giants in the faith, listening to him and absorbing what this great prophet had to say from God – how encouraged Jeremiah would have been! We may not always see the results of our efforts, our ministries, in the lives of other people, but that doesn't mean there is no fruit.

Jeremiah had been the prophet to the Jews in Jerusalem. Daniel was the prophet mainly to the court of King Nebuchadnezzar. And Ezekiel was a prophet to Judah, but not in the land of Palestine; rather as exiles in Babylonia.

At age 25, Ezekiel himself had been a captive who was carried away to Babylonia in the second of three such transitions, 11 years before the final fall of Jerusalem. That group consisted of well-educated people with potential so we know Ezekiel must have been an impressive young man.

He settled into his own home in a town near the city of Babylon, as was the case with most of the exiles who were permitted to find homes in various towns throughout Babylonia and start their own businesses or farms. This was quite different from the fate of people from Israel who were captured by Assyria, an empire which had an assimilation policy. This meant that those 10 tribes virtually disappeared into Assyrian society.

At age 30, Ezekiel is called by God to a prophetic ministry that will be unusual and very powerful. From the record of his book, my mental picture of him is a young man who

was physically fit, fearless, and full of energy. If he had lived in our day I think he would have enjoyed extreme sports – rock climbing, snowboarding, sky-diving, surfing, etc. A most impressive personality with immense stamina and a godly character.

His name means “*God has strengthened*” and he certainly lived out the meaning of his name. At the same time, he was a very practical theologian. He knew God well and proclaimed His truth fearlessly.

The early chapters of the book of Ezekiel have much to do with the coming judgment on Jerusalem because it had not yet fallen completely. It will be six more years before the final destruction of Jerusalem takes place in 586 BC.

Many of his fellow exiles persisted in their sinful ways, and some were being influenced by false prophets and false teachers. They were moving from town to town telling the exiles not to settle down or start up businesses because they were soon going to go back to Jerusalem. But that was not God’s message; it was a false message of false hope.

Ezekiel had probably heard Jeremiah preach and had read the scroll Jeremiah had written so he knew that this exile would not be a short-lived event. They would be in Babylonia for a couple of generations, 70 years to be exact. So part of his ministry was counter-acting the messages of these false teachers and prophets.

2. Structure

The book is divided into three parts. The first 24 chapters describe the fate of Judah. It will be a terrible situation because of their sin; they are destined to desolation. And Ezekiel doesn’t just talk about the judgment of God on sin, like Jeremiah did. Under God’s direction, Ezekiel – of a priestly family – has a very specific focus which is especially seen in chapters 8 – 11.

In a rather mysterious way, God transported Ezekiel back to Jerusalem where he could see what was happening but he himself remained invisible to the people. He describes what he saw – utterly terrible sin being practiced in Jerusalem and even in the temple. Worshipping idols; even worshipping the sun!

As a result of that sin, he describes something else that happens: the glory of God which had resided over the temple now lifted off the holy place and moved to the doorway of the temple, then the doorway of the courtyard, then to the gateway of Jerusalem, then onto the Mount of Olives and then finally the glory of God departs altogether from the people of God. And for Ezekiel, that was the most devastating tragedy arising out of the sin of God's people. It isn't just that God will discipline them and bring the Babylonians; the real tragedy was that God who lived with them now departed from them stage by stage. For Ezekiel, nothing could be worse than this departure of the glory of God!

In chapters 25 – 32, he talks about the foes of Judah who are destined for destruction. The judgment of God's people, but also the judgment of God against the nations around Judah as many of the earlier prophets had done. In Ezekiel's understanding, all of these judgments were to prepare the people of God for the return of God's glory. Ezekiel was from the priestly tribe so it is not surprising that he has such great concern for God's glory and the Jerusalem temple. Their tragedy was that God departed from them due to their sins. But what will mean restoration is that they will turn back to God and He will restore them. The sign of that restoration will be that God's glory comes back once again.

The future of God's people is described in chapters 33 – 48 in terms of restoration. After the 70 years of exile, they will be able to return to their land once again, rebuild the city of Jerusalem and re-establish their national life there.

The turning point for Ezekiel's entire message is chapter 33 when news arrives that Jerusalem has finally, fatefully fallen and been totally destroyed by the Babylonian army. God recommissions Ezekiel with this final tragedy in view, to be His prophet, His watchman to His people.

In chapters 40 – 48 the focus is on the future, a kind of commentary on what will be the message of the book of Revelation much later. There isn't much past to talk about any longer but the future is worth looking for because there will be a new temple and God's glory will return to the rebuilt temple. Worship will be established and renewed there. God will place a river which will flow out of the temple, down into the valley to the east where the Mount of Olives will break in half allowing this special river to flow on with

life-giving power to people. The land will be re-divided. The city of Jerusalem will be ruled over by the King of kings. It is a fantastic message of hope!

3. Message

Seventy times in the book of Ezekiel, God says these things are going to happen so that “*people will know I am Jehovah*”. And not just Judah, but all nations will know this great truth. They will know by three things.

First, the city of Jerusalem will be punished just as God said. And His people would go into captivity just as His prophets had predicted.

Secondly, there will be judgments against the Gentile nations, again just as was prophesied. The prophesy against Tyre is especially striking because it includes a lot of specific details which take hundreds of years to completely fulfill.

Then thirdly, the preservation and the ultimate restoration of God’s covenant people... that too will take place just as predicted.

And as a result of all three major events under God’s control, everyone will know that He indeed is the Living God of the universe, Jehovah.

4. Visions

Ezekiel has rightly been called “*the prophet of visions*” as well as “*the prophet of hope*”. And it begins in chapter one with a tremendous vision, one of the most astonishing and unusual visions in all of Scripture. The only other vision which could compare is the one John saw and described in the book of Revelation. And there are some similarities between them.

In chapter 1, Ezekiel sees and describes a fiery whirlwind, a storm cloud which seems to come down on Jerusalem out of the north. This is surely a picture of God’s judgment originating in Babylon, destined for Judah. But that is only part of this vision.

Along with this storm cloud, he sees four living creatures, the cherubim who guard the heavenly throne of God. He says these creatures are a likeness of cherubim but each have four faces: one like a lion, one like an ox, one like a man and one face like an eagle.

These creatures who come from around the throne of God now come with the storm cloud. Their appearance is similar to the description John gives of them in Revelation.

But Ezekiel sees an additional feature associated with these cherubim, an element which has made Ezekiel particularly famous: the wheels. There are four of them, each one somehow connected to one of the living creatures. These wheels have tremendous speed and power. They flash with lightning. They are covered with eyes and have wheels moving within wheels. A very complex vision.

The purpose of this vision is to show that behind the events which will soon take place on earth – mainly, the invasion of the Babylonian army which will destroy Jerusalem and carry its people off into exile, a unprecedented storm against God’s people indeed – will also come the cherubim from God’s throne, showing that behind the events which take place on earth are the operations of supernatural powers in heaven. Each of the gigantic wheels belonging to the cherubim touches the earth but also reaches up to heaven, illustrating that there is a heavenly connection to earthly events. God is behind it all.

Ezekiel lifts his eyes beyond these four living creatures with their wheels, and sees a great expanse of something like ice or crystal. And above that, he sees the throne of God – the super-climax of this amazing vision in chapter one. On that throne he sees a likeness of the glory of Jehovah God, a fiery figure sitting on the throne of the entire universe. And he knows that God is the One sending this judgment upon His people, and that God is in absolute control of it. Not only does he see God sitting on the throne and controlling all of these events, he sees a rainbow around that throne.

So there will be wrath, judgment, a storm taking care of sin to the ultimate degree; but there will also be love to the full, symbolized by the rainbow, God’s sign of mercy to mankind ever since Noah and the flood. We saw this two-part emphasis also, you may remember, when we looked at Jeremiah.

Surely Ezekiel, as a young man new to the ministry, needed that double assurance just as so often you and I do. That the catastrophes, the disasters, the difficult things that come to us in life, and which we cannot understand we need a reminder that behind

whatever happens to us is God. It's connected. Nothing touches us that hasn't come through His loving hands first, that He allows for His own good purposes. Don't lose sight of that truth! It's something Ezekiel had to know right off the bat in chapter one, otherwise he couldn't have survived in his ministry. And maybe you need to know that too.

There's a rainbow around God's throne. He's not just powerful, He's not just going to judge sin. He is going to bring an express love to the ultimate degree. We need a reminder of the throne and the rainbow just as much as Ezekiel did.

Ezekiel had many other visions which we don't have time to deal with in this brief survey, but I encourage you to read his book and watch for them.

5. Sign-Sermons

There is another feature of Ezekiel's ministry which is absolutely unique. In chapters 4 – 24 there are ten sign sermons. Ezekiel was not just a preacher in the conventional sense, he was a mime artist. He delivered ten sermons, all without words, just mime actions.

For example, the first one is in chapter four. He made a little clay model of Jerusalem and lay down beside it, pretending to be the besieging Babylonian army. He had to lie on one side for 390 days with an iron pan standing between him and the clay model, one day for every year of judgment against Israel.

Then he had to lie on his other side for an additional 40 days, one day for every year of judgment against Judah. Can you imagine how difficult this must have been?! But then imagine the impact this must have had on the exiles who gathered around him day after day.

The reason he had to do this is clearly stated in Scripture. God tells us that by this time His people had refused to hear – they put their hands over their ears, again as we saw in Jeremiah. They didn't want to hear God's message. So God says, because they don't want to hear, I'm not going to speak. But because He's still a God of love and faithfulness, He'll still give His message to them, without speaking.

He instructs Ezekiel what to do but shuts his mouth so that he cannot speak until the day Jerusalem falls, by which time the purposes for all these ten mime sermons will have been completed. To a people whose ears were largely closed, God was largely dumb.

Sign sermon number 10 must have been the most difficult one of all. God told Ezekiel that his wife was going to die within hours. He loved his wife dearly. But God told him that when she dies, he was not to mourn his loss; he was not to shed even a tear. Why does God ask him to do such a hard thing, as the last of the series of sign sermons? He is asking Ezekiel to save up his tears for the even greater national tragedy just about to happen: the destruction of Jerusalem. And like Hosea, Ezekiel was a prophet who demonstrated God's great sorrow in the judgment of His people. Wow! What a calling. What a ministry! I commend the book of Ezekiel to you for your own further study.

In our next session we will get into the fascinating book and story of Daniel.
