

## **THE PROPHET EZEKIEL**

### **Disaster, Hope & the God of Renewal - Chapters 20 to 37**

We begin this session still in the section generally known as the Oracles of Judgement. Ezekiel begins Chapter twenty with a precise date:

***Ch 20:1 In the seventh year, in the fifth month, on the tenth day of the month,***

That is July/August 591 B.C. about a year from the last dated section, which was chapter eight and the vision of the abominations in the Temple which concluded with the terrible sight of the glory of the Lord departing the Temple.

Ezekiel then went on to preach strong messages of judgement that Jerusalem will fall, and he methodically built his case that this was because of their sin and idolatry. They had broken their side of the covenant. But even then the window of hope was kept cracked open. He was still the faithful covenant God. Would they turn back to him?

#### **AN OUTLINE OF CHAPTERS 20 - 37 (Adapted from The NIV Study Bible @Biblica.com)**

- Oracles of Judgment against Israel continued:
  1. Apostate Israel purged and renewed through judgment (20:1-44)
  2. Babylon, God's sword of judgment (20:45;21:32)
  3. The sins for which Jerusalem is judged (ch. 22)
  4. Jerusalem and Samaria allegorized as adulterous sisters (ch. 23)
  5. Jerusalem cooked over the fire (24:1-14)
- The Death of Ezekiel's Wife Symbolizes Jerusalem's Fall (24:15-27)
- Oracles of Judgment against the Nations (chs. 25-32)
  - A Prophecy against Ammon (25:1-7)
  - A Prophecy against Moab (25:8-11)
  - A Prophecy against Edom (25:12-14)
  - A Prophecy against Philistia (25:15-17)
  - A Prophecy against Tyre (26:1;28:19)
    1. Tyre's destruction announced (ch. 26)
    2. A lament over Tyre (ch. 27)
    3. A prophecy against the king of Tyre (28:1-19)
  - A Prophecy against Sidon (28:20-24) (For Israel, a restoration, 28:25-26)
  - A Prophecy against Egypt (chs. 29-32)
    1. Egypt a doomed monster (29:1-16)
    2. Egypt a payment to Nebuchadnezzar (29:17-21)
    3. Laments over Egypt (30:1-19)
    4. The pharaoh's arms are broken (30:20-26)
    5. The pharaoh a felled Lebanon cedar (ch. 31)
    6. Lament over the pharaoh (32:1-16)
    7. The pharaoh consigned to the realm of the dead (32:17-32)

- Oracles of Consolation for Israel (chs. 33-48)
  - Renewal of Ezekiel's Call as Watchman (33:1-20)
  - Jerusalem's Fall Reported and Its Remnant Condemned (33:21-33)
  - The Lord to Be Israel's Shepherd (ch. 34)
  - A Prophecy against Edom (ch. 35)
  - Israel's Complete Restoration Announced (ch. 36)
  - Israel's Dry Bones Revived and Unity Restored (ch. 37)
    - Israel's dry bones restored to life (37:1-14)

## THE SHAPE OF THIS WEEK

Ch 20 - 24	Reinforcement of the prophecies of judgement
Ch 25 - 32	Prophecies against the nations
Ch 33	The Fall of Jerusalem
Ch 34 - 37	Hope rises for the future and new life is promised

Chapter 20 opens a new period of prophetic messages. Some elders of the Jewish exiles pay a visit to Ezekiel 'to enquire of the Lord'. We can imagine they are keen to know if there are any updates on when their exile will be over? However, Ezekiel is now asked to prophecy against his fellow exiles.

### 1. A REMINDER OF THEIR HISTORY – CHAPTER 20

Here the leaders receive a not so gentle reminder of the lessons of their forefathers and the exodus from Egypt. This is part of their heritage of which they are also a part of.

#### **The LORD reminds them of what He had done v4-7**

- He chose them and he named them. He promised to be their God
- He brought them out of their slavery in Egypt, and into their own land.
- He called them to love him and obey him

#### **Then he reminds them of what they did v7-8**

- They rebelled against him and defiled themselves with idols
- They broke his law and rejected his ways.
- They did not listen to him.

They are strongly reminded of this pattern of breaking the covenant, and again it is spelt out that the consequence of this will be to incur the Lord's wrath (v13). Then we read:

**Nevertheless, my eye spared them ... v17**

Then the history lesson continues to tell how the next generation did exactly the same. They rebelled, they broke covenant, and they incurred His wrath (v18-21). And again we read

**But I withheld my hand and acted for the sake of my name v22**

And then again when they were in Canaan, they continued the same pattern and even worse, they followed the Canaanite ways including the horrors of sacrificing their firstborn children (v26). But once again the window of hope is opened.

## **A 2<sup>ND</sup> EXODUS IS PROMISED – Hope is kept alive v33-44**

Read Chapter 20 vs 33-44

Although, the Judgement to come is now unavoidable, yet again it is met with the grace and mercy of the covenant God as he promises to bring his people home. BUT

### **2. THE SWORD IS DRAWN – Chapter 21**

Next comes three chapters where the sword of judgement is said to have been drawn out of its sheaf. Again there is the use of dramatic action to portray the word of the Lord, and the use of very descriptive language. We find Ezekiel as:

#### **The Sword Wielding Prophet**

Throughout these prophecies it seems that Ezekiel used a sword as a prop. Some scholars think that it may have been a 'prophetic dance' of sorts, and that he may have sung some parts given sections are in poetic format. Ezekiel is also instructed to employ other modes of acting to make the prophetic statements strike home. So we find Ezekiel as:

- **The Groaning Prophet - v6** \_\_\_\_\_
- **The Wailing Prophet - v12** \_\_\_\_\_
- **The Clapping Prophet - v14** \_\_\_\_\_

#### **The Sword of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon vs18-25**

Ezekiel then makes clear who the instrument of the LORD will be. In this enactment he pretends to be the King of Babylon at a crossroads deciding whether he would first attack Rabbah or Jerusalem, and he was using divination as a means to making a decision, something which was common in those times. Ezekiel though asserts here that it is Yahweh who is the decision maker, and it is he who is using the Babylonians in his greater purposes.

#### **The last King of Judah – vs 25-27**

Then follows some damning prophecies against those who Ezekiel calls the 'princes of Judah'. Through his writing Ezekiel mainly uses the word prince, rather than king, for the monarchs of Israel. Perhaps his way of showing that the true king was always meant to be Yahweh himself.

However, the king who would have been ruling in Israel, from the blood line of Judah was King Jehoiakim now exiled in Babylon, and who would die there. His uncle, the puppet king Zedekiah who was installed by Nebuchadnezzar in Jerusalem, is now called by Ezekiel the 'profane wicked prince of Israel' who will lose his crown. It will be his rebellion against Babylon which would be Jerusalem's downfall, and it would mean his own death.

#### **A Messianic Hope**

Therefore this would be the last Judean monarch, until the rightful kingship of the Davidic Messiah came into the world – who will be given the crown by God himself (v27). Another window of hope is opened (and will be expanded on in chapter 34).

### **More Judgements of Jerusalem's Sin – Chapter 22**

We find yet more condemnations of Israel's sin. The words bloodshed and profane are the defining images through this chapter, because of the terrible sin and injustice in the city:

#### **READ Chapter 22 vs 6-12**

This is again powerfully shows how they have broken the covenant bond with the LORD in the deepest of ways. Therefore Ezekiel says they are now

### **Worthless Dross – for the Refiners Fire – vs 17-29**

There are many biblical images of the refiners fire in the scriptures, e.g. Isa 1:22-25; 48:10; Jer 6:27-30; 1 Pet 1:7; Rev 3:18. However, in Ezekiel this is a severe refining being described. All have failed to uphold righteousness.

### **No one to stand in the Gap - 30-31**

Ezekiel adds in the end of this chapter a sad indictment.

***And I sought for a man among them who should build up the wall and stand in the breach before me for the land that I should not destroy it, but I found none. 31 Therefore I have poured out my indignation upon them. I have consumed them with the fire of my wrath.***

He is challenging them – and us. Who will stand for the Lord? Isaiah also recorded such words in Is 59:16; Is 64:7. We are particularly reminded of Moses being such an example in previous generations – Ex 32:7-14.

Who will stand righteously before him and stand in the gap for the nation and the people? To rise up in intercession and spiritual warfare?

### **3. A TALE OF TWO CITIES – Samaria and Jerusalem - Chapter 23**

This prophecy is given in the style of an allegory or parable. There is again the use of strong and explicit language to describe the unfaithfulness of God's people, similar to chapter 16, and which was only allowed to be read by those mature enough.

Ezekiel tells a story of two nymphomaniac sisters of one mother. The first sister Ezekiel calls Oholah - representing Samaria the capital city of the tribes of Israel in the Northern Kingdom.

They were the first to fall in judgement for their unfaithfulness. It was the prophet Hosea who warned them of their adultery. Samaria was destroyed in 722 and the people were taken into exile by Assyria and assimilated by them – they became a mixed race. This is what led to the enmity between the Jews and Samaritans.

We can imagine the exilic leaders now, no doubt nodding their approval over the judgement of what they thought were their ungodly relatives.

But then Ezekiel turns to them. They are called Oholibah, a very similar name, and they are judged to be worse than their sister in their infidelity. And so now their judgement was here.

But still they would not accept the word of the LORD. They seem to believe that they were invincible. That they were better than others and especially their sister. They even believed that they deserved to enjoy the favour of God and that they would always have his blessing.

### **The Cooking Pot - vs 3-14**

The people of Jerusalem had a saying – a proverb - which they had used once in chapter 11:3 and which Ezekiel now quotes back to them. They probably sung it as in chapter 24:3-5:

*Set on the pot, set it on; pour in water also;  
put in it the pieces of meat, all the good pieces,  
the thigh and the shoulder; fill it with choice bones.  
Take the choicest one of the flock;  
pile the logs under it; boil it well, seethe also its bones in it.*

Here they speak as if they are the choicest cuts, the favoured ones, and that is why they belonged in Jerusalem. It was a sign of their pride and arrogance, presumption and false confidence.

But now the phrase is used back on them. Ezekiel adds to their saying, but rather than describing a tasty stew being made, he describes the pot boiling dry and the bronze of the pot melting, and a poisonous scum being produced (vs 6-12). They who once thought of themselves as choice cuts of meat are now poisonous scum!

### **THE SIEGE HAS BEGUN - Chapter 24:1**

*In the ninth year, in the tenth month, on the tenth day of the month, the word of the Lord came to me: "Son of man, write down the name of this day, this very day. The king of Babylon has laid siege to Jerusalem this very day. (24:1-2)*

The fateful day is reckoned as January 588 B.C. (see also 2 Kings 25:1; Jer 52:4)

### **Ezekiel's wife dies - Broken Hearted without Mourning – Chapter 24 vs 15-27**

This hard piece of scripture tells of a deeply sad part of the life of Ezekiel. The Lord reveals to Ezekiel that His wife, the delight of his eyes (v16), was going to suddenly die. The text says that the Lord is 'to take her away from you' – but we can understand this phrase just the same as when we would say the Lord has taken a loved one home to himself. She was very possibly sick already.

The main point of this is that the Lord has given Ezekiel advance warning which he is to use as part of his prophetic ministry. Again the prophet himself becomes the prophecy. She was the most precious thing to him. It would feel like his world had ended. What a difficult thing he is then asked to do, to not mourn his wife in the normal way.

This would have once again got people's attention very closely. It was a sign that those in exile were not to mourn the loss of Jerusalem. It may feel to them like the end of their world – but it was not going to be. There was another future for them.

## God Uses Hardship and Suffering to Speak

In his providence the Lord uses the hardest of situations to speak to his people.

Which stories have inspired you?

What experiences have you had of this?

### 4. PROPHECIES AGAINST THE NATIONS - Chapters 25 to 32

The attack on Jerusalem has started, but it was going to take time for the Babylonian forces to do their work. In this time Ezekiel gathers together his material and takes the opportunity to compile some oracles against the surrounding nations.



### **Ammon (25:1-7)**

Ammon was a son of Lot, nephew of Abraham. While relatives of Israel the Ammonites consistently treated Israel with contempt. 25:3,6 tells how they gloated in the down fall of Israel and Judah, and they clapped and cheered when the temple was desecrated and the people were deported.

### **Moab (25:8-11)**

Moab was the other son of Lot. The Moabites like Ammon were a constant threat to Israel in their history and were gleeful over Judah's downfall. Isaiah had described Moab as arrogant and prideful (Is 16:6) as they treated Israel and Yahweh with contempt.

### **Edom (25:12-14)**

Edom is where Jacob's twin brother Esau went after giving up his birth right (Gen 32:3). His descendants were called Edomites. In these troubled times Edom kept raiding Judah and according to Ezekiel they were acting in vengeance of the loss of this birth right.

### **Philistia (25:15-17)**

These are the Philistines, a thorn in the flesh to Israel from the earliest times. Again the judgement comes because of their acts of revenge against Judah when they are laid low.

### **Tyre (26:1 to 28:19)**

This prophecy is a lot longer than the previous ones. Tyre was the capital city of Phoenicia an area that was populated with people who were culturally Canaanites. It was the commercial centre of the whole region and the major port at the time. It was booming. They were also the suppliers of the Babylonian army. Very lucrative.

It seems that Tyre was taking advantage of them commercially. The cut throat nature of aggressive economics and corporate business can be just as destructive to people's lives as a knife or sword.

### **Egypt – Chapters 29 to 32**

Next we have another long prophecy against the most ancient of the powers, Egypt, who was the only real threat to the Babylonians in the region This meant the smaller nations often flattered her to stay in her good books, always hoping she would come to their defence if the northern powers threatened, although they too may threaten them at times. She was not to be trusted.

Fatefully though, King Zedekiah in Jerusalem put his trust in them and called upon Egypt to help, but this backfired because Egypt soon withdrew and then Babylon turned on Jerusalem, exactly as Ezekiel had foreseen.

### **The God of the Nations**

We are reminded that the LORD is the God of the nations. He is not indifferent to what the nations do and the responsibilities they have. They too will be held account for their deeds and works, their rebellion and sin. History is under his control and he judges all.

We also are reminded that his judgement on nations has purpose – so that they may come to know that he is the LORD. Indeed Israel's role in the world was to be a witness to that reality, however they were now a mockery among them.

## **5. EZEKIEL PART TWO - Chapters 33 to 37**

Now there comes a marked change in the writing of Ezekiel. This part is like the second part of his book. The focus will turn from sharp words of warning to some of the most hopeful words in all of scripture, words of renewal and restoration.

However, first there was a final tough message for Ezekiel to bring.

### **The Watchman – a Call to Repent and Live - 33:1-20**

First Ezekiel receives a renewal of his call as a watchmen (ch 3). He had obediently and clearly warned the people as a good watchman. However, they had failed to listen. They had numerous opportunities to repent but they had not. They were still relying upon their heritage and trusting in their own righteousness v12-14. Indeed they were blaming God and had laid an accusation against him. They say:

**“The way of the Lord is not just” (33:17; 20).**

How easily we can blame God or others rather than facing our own responsibility!

### **The Fall and Destruction of Jerusalem is Reported – Chapter 33:21-33**

Then the shocking news comes to the exiles. Jerusalem has fallen. It should not have been a surprise given all of the warnings, but it still is (33:21).

Jerusalem had actually fallen in 586 B.C. but it took many months for the news to get to the exiles. A messenger needed to come from Jerusalem and during a time of war needed to come over the back routes to avoid being captured, covering nearly 3000 km in distance!

### **A Wasteland – 33:24-33**

The Babylonian conquest was complete. Jerusalem was destroyed. The city was torn down and burned. The great temple of Solomon was ransacked, its riches taken. It was burned and raised to the ground. Judah is now laid to waste. We can imagine a scene from a disaster movie!

The chief priest and the temple priests were killed. All the leaders were captured, together with the skilled tradesmen and soldiers, along much of the population, and were carried off into exile. This was their darkest hour to date.

## **6. PROPHECIES OF HOPE**

### **Bad Shepherds and the Good Shepherd – Chapter 34**

The sword of the word of the LORD comes again – and it is double edged. First it is a condemnation of the shepherds of Israel.



The term Shepherd was commonly used in the Ancient Near East to refer to the leaders of nations, and that is how it is used here referring to the leaders of the people of God.

- Ezekiel first describes how they have been bad shepherds.
- They have fed themselves, not their people vs 2-3.
- They have harmed and abused, not tended and healed v 4
- They have lost sheep rather than found and rescued strays vs 4-5.
- The sheep are therefore now scattered (in exile) v 6-7

What an indictment of Israel leaders. But there is good news – the other side of the sword.

### **The Good Shepherd (34:10-16)**

This is the most encouraging chapter in Ezekiel so far.

#### **READ Chapter 34: 11-16**

The LORD himself will be their shepherd. This true Shepherd has the qualities of love, patience, strength, courage. He will be their healer, their rescuer and protector. Even though at the moment it looked like they were lost, doomed to be exiled for ever, one day the people of God will be brought home. This was to physically happen when Cyrus of Persia came to power and released the exiles.

### **The Messianic (Good) Shepherd**

We also note how verses 23-24 tells of the Davidic Shepherd, one in line of King David. David was a Shepherd, the man of Judah whom God himself chose because he had a heart after God's own heart (1 Sam 13:14; Acts 13:22). It was one from his line who was promised to come and rule again (Jer 23:5-6) and to be the Shepherd King.

### **Jesus The Good Shepherd.**

Jesus uses a number of images and phrases from Ezekiel to speak of himself and his person and ministry. Of particular importance is that he said "I am The Good Shepherd" (John 10:11). In John ch 10 and Luke ch 10 particularly we find that Jesus is the One who calls us home. Who saves us when we are lost, when we have fallen into sin. Who comes out to rescue us and who gave his life for us. Who knows us by name. Who calls us by name. Who leads us and feeds us. He is also the one who separates the sheep from the goats (Matt 25:32) as the judge of all people.

### **Fruitfulness Restored – Chapters 35 to 36**

Having addressed the Davidic Covenant and looked ahead to its fulfilment we come to the Abrahamic Covenant. Here we find more prophecies against the mountains. Amongst this is another prophecy against Edom, who had invaded the eastern heartlands of Judah and laid it to waste. Once again the situation looks hopeless. But then

#### **READ Chapter 36:8-11**

Having addressed the Davidic Covenant and looked ahead to its fulfilment, we come to the Abrahamic Covenant. The Abrahamic covenant was associated with the Land that God promised – which has now been conquered by foreign powers. Babylon has taken Jerusalem and while that was happening Edom had invaded and taken Israel heartland of East Judah and laid it to waste. Hence the prophecy against them just before this in chapter 35.

Israel are judged again for desecrating the land that God had given them. We are reminded again of chapters 15 & 17 & 19 when they are said to be a fruitless vine rather than producing the abundance of God's blessings through the land and to the nations they were supposed to. Indeed they had spread rotten fruit.

### **Jesus – I am The True Vine**

Again this is a scriptural image which Jesus picks up and uses to speak of his person and ministry. In John chapter 15 he announces; "I am the true Vine" and he then speaks of how it is those who are connected to him, and who abide in him, who find the life of God and true fruitfulness. This applies to us of course. This theme of abundance is picked up again in ch 36.

Next we come to another familiar scripture:

### **RENEWAL & A NEW COVENANT - Ch 36:24-28**

The window of this promise was opened in ch 11 & 16 as we saw last week. Now the faithful God of covenant says:

***I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries and bring you into your own land. 25 I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleanness, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. 26 And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. 27 And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. 28 You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God.***

Israel had consistently broken the covenant. They proved unworthy to keep them. They had profaned and the land given to them. They had turned it into a place of blood and death.

So, what could they do to be saved?

They could never cleanse themselves from the filth of their sin and idolatry.

They could never in their own strength change their hearts – or make themselves new.

They could never give themselves the total renovation that they needed

They could do nothing but cry out to him and trust themselves to his mercy. It can only be by grace. "How then can we live?" they cried out in chapter 33.

What is impossible for man – is possible for God. It is all his work. We see how the words "I will" are used 8 times just in this short section. It is all him.

“How then can we live?” they asked. The answer is: It must be the work of his Spirit. This is all about conversion and a total renovation of the heart.

Then there is another astounding promise

### **Paradise Regained – Chapter 36 vs 33-36**

**“Thus says the Lord God: On the day that I cleanse you from all your iniquities, I will cause the cities to be inhabited, and the waste places shall be rebuilt. 34 And the land that was desolate shall be tilled, instead of being the desolation that it was in the sight of all who passed by. And they will say, ‘This land that was desolate has become like the garden of Eden (also see Isaiah 32:15; 35:1; 51:3)**

A New Creation will come – we will come back to more of this next week. Here though, following such extraordinary prophecies of hope the people could be forgiven for thinking, really! Look at our situation. These are wonderful words, but how can it ever be? The next vision recognises their feelings of desperation and distress.

In week we saw that one of the 7 wonders of the ancient world was the hanging gardens of Babylon. This area was in antiquity a place of great fertility and beauty, indeed the area between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, is where it is thought the Garden of Eden was.

We can imagine that being an inspiration here to the exiles, that one day they will live in the land again, and that the wasteland will bear fruit again. But again there is also a looking ahead as Ezekiel is giving an eschatological perspective – he sees Eden restored - a new creation which is to come. We will come back to more of this next week.

These wonderful images that Ezekiel is now giving the people are to them as hard to believe than the judgements before. After such extraordinary prophecies of hope we can imagine the people thinking, really! But look at us! Look at our situation. These are wonderful words, but how can it ever be?

Now we go from the image of the people made new and the land of promise being restored to the paradise of Eden to an opposite image:



## THE VALLEY OF DRY BONES - Chapter 37:1-14

READ Ch 37:1-14

### The Restoration of Israel

Here the restoration of the nation of Israel is prophesied. Again this is all the work of the Lord alone. The word Spirit used here is the Hebrew word 'ruach' the word for breath or for wind. This is a descriptive word which describes God's life giving breath.

In the vision Ezekiel sees a gruesome sight – the remains of a fallen army. It depicts the destruction and Israel. The exiles themselves have been through a siege and held in captivity a long time. They too were like dried bones. They were in desolation. Very very dry indeed.

Now Judah has been conquered all hope as they knew it had gone. There is now no future for them. Jerusalem is dead. So are they. They could identify with this powerful metaphor.

"How then can we live?" they asked in ch 33

Now the LORD in chapter 37 v3 asks the question 'can these dry bones live'?

And the natural answer to the question is no. But Ezekiel is told to prophesy to the bones vs 4-7 – that is preach God's word of Good news and hope. He is told to call upon the 'breath' of God to come and breathe life v 9.

Then there is the dramatic description of the bones rattling and the muscles forming - and then the breath of life came to them. This was their promise to hold onto.

The breath of God is coming to them. By his sovereign power the nation will rise again. Now this is against all the odds – but also it is no surprise to God.

In his sovereign purposes, and already prophesied by Isaiah, King Cyrus of Persia will soon rise up, Babylon's rule is short lived – and Cyrus will be used by the Lord to release the exiles back to the Promised Land.

Israel will live again. Israel will be restored to the Land. This Restoration is a main theme in the final session next week -

As we close this week there is a question we can ask.

**"How then can I live?"**

- We all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God – Rom 3:23
- We are all dead in our transgressions – Eph 2:1
- Every human heart is deceitful above all things and has no cure – Jer 17:9
- No one is righteous, no, not one. All have turned aside; no one does good, not one.

Rom 3:10-12

Is your heart right before God? Or better, have you had your heart renewed by him?  
Have you recognised the wretchedness of your sinfulness?  
Have you cried out to him knowing that you cannot save yourself?

Know then that Jesus is:

The Good Shepherd who seeks us out, calls us by name and wants to bring us home.

Know that Jesus is the Vine, in him we can abide in the very life of God – and know the abundance of his love within us.

Know that Jesus is the mediator of the Holy Spirit –

It is he who gives us a new heart and makes us new creations. Who immerses us in the very life of God.

So that we might say – I live, and the life I now live, I live for Christ.

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## Readings for the next Lesson

Read Ezekiel chapters 38 to 48.