

## Ezekiel and the Glory of the LORD

The exile. It sounds like a simple concept. Babylon conquered Jerusalem, took the people away and kept them there until their empire collapsed. Then they all went home again. Actually it was a lot more complicated than that. There were four exiles, starting with Daniel and some other bright young men when Nebuchadnezzar first laid siege to Jerusalem in 605 B.C. Then, when King Jehoiakim decided not to pay tribute to Nebuchadnezzar, the armies came back, Jehoiakim was trucked off to Babylon, and his son was sent there a few months later along with 10,000 Jews, including the prophet Ezekiel. The year was 597 B.C. and, because someone had to be king, Nebuchadnezzar placed Zedekiah on the throne, who made life miserable for the prophet Jeremiah. He managed to submit to the king of Babylon for a few years, but then he, too, rebelled and the cycle of siege and famine and destruction followed. More people were sent into exile in 586 and more again in 582, although by that time the Babylonians had given up on the idea of Judah having its own kings anymore. And when Cyrus eventually defeated Babylon and allowed the Jews to return, that return stretched out over many decades. Even Ezra and Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem in the following century, more than 80 years after the fall of Babylon.

So, at the same period of history, you have Jeremiah bringing God's words to the people of Judah and Jerusalem and Ezekiel bringing God's words to the exiles in Babylon. Jeremiah began to prophesy before the fall of Jerusalem and therefore well before Ezekiel. An interesting fact about Ezekiel is that he was very precise in giving dates of the visions he had or the calls to prophesy to the exiles.

I'm going to put a chart up here that shows you what I mean by precise. His first vision, the beginning of his prophetic ministry, was, by our calendar, July 31, 593 B.C. And they carried on from there for over 20 years, ending in April of 571. Ezekiel was from a family of priests and we know from Numbers 4:3 that a priest would serve for 20 years. Ezekiel was right on track for that, but had a final word from the LORD regarding Babylon and Egypt a couple of years later -- that's number 7 up there. So, a priest who has spent his lifetime expecting to serve in the temple, finds himself in exile in Babylon with an entirely different kind of ministry than he had been preparing for. Instead of serving as a priest, offering sacrifices at the temple of Yahweh in Jerusalem, he is a prophet speaking to confused and discouraged exiles in Babylon.

You might expect that he would have some things to say about the temple ... and you would be right. In chapter 8, Ezekiel is taken by the Spirit to a place where he sees visions of Jerusalem, and particularly of the temple. He had earlier seen a vision of the glory of the LORD and now, looking at the temple courtyard, he sees the same vision.

*And there before me was the glory of the God of Israel, as in the vision I had seen in the plain (v.4)*

Later in this chapter, the LORD has Ezekiel dig a hole in the wall which reveals a doorway into the temple.

*Then He said to me, "Go in and see the wicked and detestable things they are*

*doing here.” So I went in and looked, and I saw portrayed all over the walls all kinds of crawling things and detestable animals and all the idols of the house of Israel. In front of them stood 70 elders of the house of Israel, and Jaazaniah, son of Shaphan was standing among them. Each had a censer in his hand, and a fragrant cloud of incense was rising. He said to me, “Son of man, have you seen what the elders of the house of Israel are doing in the darkness, each at the shrine of his own idol? They say, ‘Yahweh does not see us; Yahweh has forsaken the land.’” Again, He said, “You will see them doing things that are even more detestable.” Then He brought me to the entrance to the north gate of the house of the LORD, and I saw women sitting there, mourning for Tammuz. He said to me, “Do you see this, son of man? You will see things that are even more detestable than this.” He then brought me into the inner court of the house of Yahweh, and there at the entrance to the temple, between the portico and the altar, were about 25 men. With their backs toward the temple of Yahweh and their faces toward the east, they were bowing down to the sun in the east. (8:9-16)*

That’s a pretty long passage, but it helps us see what is on Ezekiel’s heart. He is a seer, and he is given insight into the hearts of his people, especially those who have taken over as religious leaders since the exile.

The women mourning for Tammuz needs some explanation. Tammuz was a Babylonian deity representing the summer solstice, the beginning of the decline in day- light hours and the onset of intense summer heat. In the Ancient Near East the arrival of the summer solstice was accompanied by a time of mourning -- every year they would have a six-day “funeral” for this god Tammuz. He was an annual life-death-rebirth deity and the women of Judah have entered in to the “celebration” of this “funeral”.

Notice as well that the 70 elders have brought into the rooms that remain all the things that God had named as being “unclean” according to His law, pictures of all the creatures that the Israelites were not supposed to eat, all of them scavengers, feeding on the flesh of dead animals. And their argument is, “Yahweh does not see us; Yahweh has forsaken the land.” And then the vivid picture at the end of this section, with 25 men bowing towards the sun, with their backs to the temple. They had a new master now and were bowing to the gods of Nebuchadnezzar. They had turned their back on Yahweh, literally and figuratively. They would pursue whatever they wanted to pursue, thinking that Yahweh had forsaken them and was no longer able to see what they were doing.

Now already you can see some things about Ezekiel as a person, the things that would be his passion as he saw the visions God gave him, as he acted out the parables as God instructed him and as he proclaimed the words God asked him to speak. In the verses we just read, you can see his horror at the defilement of God’s temple. You can see that he was repulsed by the things that the Jews who remained

in Jerusalem were doing there, that they had no respect for God, that they weren't willing to honor His holiness. And that becomes a central theme in the entire prophecy: a holy God who has chosen a people to be holy unto Him, who has set aside a holy space in which they are to worship Him within His holy city in the land that He set apart centuries earlier to be the land of His chosen people.

Remember that the word "holy" means "set apart". God had set this nation apart to be a special people, a people who would show the world the blessings of obedience, the blessings of knowing and obeying the Word of Yahweh. The temple was "set apart" space in which God and God alone was to be worshiped. And the picture that this priest of Yahweh would draw to portray Israel's sin was the picture of them defiling everything that was holy -- God's people, God's temple, God's land -- it was all made into nothing special, nothing uniquely tied to a holy God. The people had treated God with contempt and had become like all the nations around them, with nothing to offer them. They were just as sinful, just as idolatrous, just as selfish and spiritually dull as the Canaanites who they had dispossessed when they entered this land of God's promise.

There are a couple of chapters where Ezekiel goes to great lengths in detailing how Israel had defiled God's name, which means they had smeared His reputation in the world by their rebellious and decadent actions. They are chapters 20 and 36 and I'll quote a bit and then try to summarize the message:

*When I chose Israel and revealed Myself to her in Egypt, I swore that I, Yahweh, would be her God. I promised that I would bring her and her descendants out of Egypt to a land I had discovered and explored for them -- a good land, a land flowing with milk and honey, the best of all lands anywhere. Then I said to them, "Each of you, get rid of your idols. Do not defile yourselves with the Egyptian gods, for I am Yahweh your God."*

*But they rebelled against Me and would not listen. They did not get rid of their idols or forsake the gods of Egypt. Then I threatened to pour out My fury on them to satisfy My anger while they were still in Egypt. But I didn't do it, for I acted to protect the honor of My Name. That way the surrounding nations wouldn't be able to laugh at Israel's God, who had promised to deliver His people. So I brought My people out of Egypt and led them into the wilderness. There I gave them My laws so they could live by keeping them. Yes, all those who keep them will live! And I gave them My Sabbath days of rest as a sign between them and Me. It was to remind them that I, Yahweh, had set them apart to be holy, making them My special people. (20:5-12)*

This story is recycled over and over again in the rest of this chapter and in chapter 36. In the wilderness, Israel rebelled against the LORD and smeared His great Name. Again, they deserved to be punished and abandoned, but God acted to honor His Name in the sight of all the nations who had seen Israel's deliverance from Egypt.

Again, the next generation, still in the wilderness, acted in similar ways, failing to honor Yahweh their God and, again, He acted in ways that would cause the nations to

acknowledge His presence with His people. Once they had entered the Promised Land, the same cycle is repeated. The people abandon worship of God and begin to worship the idols of the surrounding people. They offer their children as sacrifices, they offer perfume and incense and drink offerings to Baal. And God confronts their rebellion:

*You say, 'We want to be like the nations all around us who serve idols of wood and stone.' But what you have in mind will never happen. (20:32)*

And from there God says that He will continue to work with this people, continue to confront them, challenge them, discipline them, teach them until they respond to Him as they should. And He reminds them that He had told them way back in the wilderness that it would take an exile to bring about the needed changes. Then this:

*When I bring you home from exile, you will be as pleasing to Me as an offering of perfumed incense. And I will display My holiness in you as all the nations watch. Then when I have brought you home to the land I promised your ancestors, you will know that I am the LORD. You will look back at all your sins and hate yourselves because of the evil you have done. You will know that I am the LORD, O people of Israel, when I have honored My Name by treating you mercifully in spite of your wickedness, says the Sovereign LORD (20:41-44)*

In chapter 36, God continues to speak this way to His people. He promises great blessings: "the mountains of Israel will produce heavy crops of fruit to prepare for My people's return" (36:8). And from there He assures them that their cities will be rebuilt, the population will grow, the flocks and herds will multiply and they will be prosperous. And He reassures them that their shame in the sight of the surrounding nations will be ended, that God Himself will not allow those peoples to sneer at Judah any longer. (15)

But then He returns to the theme we saw in chapter 20, of how Israel has defamed the LORD their God wherever they have gone, including in the Promised Land and including in the land of their exile.

*But when they were scattered among the nations, they brought dishonor to My holy Name. For the nations said, "These are the people of Yahweh, and He couldn't keep them safe in His own land!" Then I was concerned for My holy Name, which had been dishonored by My people throughout the world. (20f.)*

And then comes this central, powerful passage, in which God shows clearly what's important for the people who live on this planet:

*Give the people of Israel this message from the Sovereign LORD: I am bringing you back again, but not because you deserve it. I am doing it to protect My holy Name, which you dishonored while you were scattered among the nations. I will show how holy My great name is -- the Name you dishonored among the nations. And when I reveal My holiness through you before their very eyes, says the Sovereign LORD then the nations will know that I am Yahweh. (22,23)*

This is vital knowledge. God is holy and He deserves to be honored, to be respected, to be obeyed. His people hadn't done any of those things, but had insulted His great Name wherever they had gone. Yet, God is so moved by love and so committed to honoring that which deserves to receive honor, that He acted in ways that were both loving and which brought Him fame among the nations. And then, the prophet gives us two vivid pictures of the new life, the hope and joy, that God has promised.

In the very next chapter Ezekiel is taken by the Spirit to a valley filled with dry bones. They walked together over the valley floor and then the LORD asked His prophet:

*Son of man, can these bones become living people again?*

*O Sovereign LORD, you alone know the answer to that.*

*Then He said to me, "Speak to these bones . . ."*

He spoke what he was told to say and the bones came together, muscles and flesh formed over them, skin covered the flesh and the valley was now filled with lifeless bodies. Then the LORD told Ezekiel to speak to the winds and say, "Come, O breath, from the four winds! Breathe into these dead bodies so that they may live again." Life returned to these men and they stood up on their feet -- a great army. And the LORD told Ezekiel to encourage the people of Israel so that their hope wouldn't disappear. Tell them that the grave of their exile would be opened and that they would return to their homeland.

The other vision that was meant to inspire hope is found in Ezekiel 47 where a man who has been leading the prophet to different parts of the Temple in Jerusalem now takes him to the entrance where he sees a stream flowing eastwards from the threshold of the Temple. They follow the stream and, every 1750 feet, the man asks the prophet to cross. At first, the water was just up to his ankles, then to his knees, then to his waist, then too deep to cross without swimming. As they return to the temple, Ezekiel notices that there are trees growing on both sides of the river -- he calls it a river now, not just a stream. And then the man tells him that the river will heal the salty waters of the Dead Sea and that life will flourish there, fishermen's nets will be drying on the shores and that all kinds of fruit trees will grow on both sides of the river. Their leaves won't turn brown or fall, and a new crop of fruit will appear every month, without fail.

There is only one other tree in Scripture that is described as having 12 crops of fruit with a new crop each month and that's in the last chapter of the entire Bible, Revelation 22.

*The angel showed me a pure river with the water of life, clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb, coursing down the center of the main street. On each side of the river grew a tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, with a fresh crop each month. The leaves were used for medicine to heal the nations (22:1,2)*

Notice that the source of both these rivers is the presence of God. In Ezekiel's vision, the river came from under the Temple, the place of God's dwelling among people; and here in Revelation it comes from the throne of God and of the Lamb. From God's

presence comes life and from God's presence comes fruitfulness and from God's presence comes blessing and healing for the nations of the world.

What are the lessons of Ezekiel for us today?

1. The obvious and ultimate lesson from this prophet is that God is holy, He is worthy of the honor of the nations, He is worthy of our praise. So, whether we think we're a good singer, or a good prayer, or can put our thoughts together well ... we need to find a way to give Him thanks, praise and honor for who He is and for what He has done for all of us. Even the simple act of obeying His word and trusting Him with the outcome is an act of honoring God. Don't let a critical, dishonoring word move from your mind to your lips. The world needs to know people who know, and love, God.

2. The second application is to never lose hope. Ezekiel was taken to a valley of dry bones, of hopelessness. What can you do with dry bones? But what came out of that was a vast army. God can do anything -- with your need, with your pain, with your challenges. We have to see Him, and keep our eyes on Him, in order to not be overwhelmed.