

GOD WITH US
Part 7: Kings & Prophets to Exile and Return
Judah's Fall and God's Faithfulness

Message 10 – The Sovereign Lord leaves His temple
Ezekiel 1-24

Introduction

Ezekiel was born in a priestly family. He was deported to Babylon at the time of the 2nd invasion by Nebuchadnezzar (597 BC), 11 years before the final destruction of Jerusalem (586 BC). He was 30 years old when God appeared to him and called him to speak. He prophesied for 22 years while living among the Jewish exiles in Babylon. His home was among the exiles at Nippur, roughly 50 miles south of Babylon on the Euphrates River. Ezekiel was married, but lost his wife by sudden death on the same day that Nebuchadnezzar besieged Jerusalem.

A major uniqueness of Ezekiel is God's constant use of the title "**Adonai-Yahweh**" to introduce the words of God (210 times!). Bible translations vary as to how to translate this dual title of God; but the New International Version wisely translates this as "**Sovereign LORD.**" This highlights a key point in Ezekiel's theology. Yahweh is the "sovereign" (king) over *all nations*, not just Israel. As even Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon learned through his 7-year experience of humbling before God: "*His dominion is an eternal dominion; His kingdom endures from generation to generation ... He does as He pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth ...*" (Daniel 4:34-35).

Another uniqueness of Ezekiel centers around his heritage as a **priest**. He *did* function as a priest in one sense: he stood between God and man mediating the passionate heart and message of God toward rebellious humanity. However, the "normal activity" for a Jewish priest would have been to minister in the Lord's temple in Jerusalem. Ezekiel was unable to do so due to his exile in Babylon (where there was no Jewish temple). But he was given a unique opportunity to "see" two temples of the Lord. In the first section of his book he was transported in visions to the temple in Jerusalem, where he saw sins of idolatry being committed. Along with these visions, he saw the "glory of the Lord" departing from the temple in stages (9:3 > 10:4 > 10:18,19 > 11:22-23). Then, in

the last section of his book, Ezekiel was given a detailed and grand vision of a future temple (likely the temple to be built during the millennial reign of Christ) and he saw the glory of God returning to dwell in the midst of His redeemed people (43:1-5). Yes, Ezekiel was deprived the opportunity to minister as a priest in a physical temple; but as a prophet he was *“in the temple”* both present and future, beholding the glory of God in relation to His people.

The book of Ezekiel contains more symbolism than any of the prophets. Yet, his prophecies have been arranged with great attention to order and chronology. An outline is as follows:

1. Ezekiel’s vision of God and call to minister: chs.1-3
2. Prophecies of Jerusalem’s destruction: chs.4-24
3. Prophecies against foreign nations: chs.25-35
4. Prophecies of Israel’s future restoration: chs.36-48

Ezekiel’s vision of God and call to minister: Chs.1-3

Ezekiel saw a glorious vision of the glory of God where He commissioned him to go and speak (similar to Isaiah’s experience, but more detailed – see Isaiah 6). The audience for his message was the “rebellious” people of Israel (“rebellious” or synonyms occur 9 times in ch.2 alone; 20+ times in the whole book). He was given a scroll to “eat” that contained lamentations, mourning and woes (the sovereign Lord’s message to His rebellious people). God assured Ezekiel that although the people were stubborn and rebellious, He had made the prophet’s face *“as hard as their faces”* – *“like emery harder than flint I have made your forehead”* (3:9). Ezekiel would be able to withstand their stubbornness and, even if they refused to respond, *“at least they will know that a prophet has been among them”* (2:4,5).

Ezekiel was then transported by the Spirit to a group of exiles where he sat for 7 days *“causing consternation among them”* (3:15). Ezekiel was told that the people would arrest and imprison him. Further, God would make him unable to speak until such times as God would open his mouth to speak (3:26,27). He was warned by God to be a faithful *“watchman”* over the people, delivering God’s messages no matter how people responded (see all of 3:16-21 for this significant watchman analogy).

“Son of man, I have appointed you a watchman to the house of Israel; whenever you hear a word from My mouth, warn them from Me” (3:17).

Before launching Oak Pointe Church in 1997, Shirley was studying Ezekiel. Here is her journal entry: "I am amazed at some of the callings mere men received from God for their mission and ministry. Ezekiel was warned that his ministry would bear little fruit, but "at least they will know they have a prophet among them" (2:5). Ezekiel would sacrifice a normal life (and even his speech) for the high privilege of a personal contact with the living God. But his FAITHFULNESS as a WATCHMAN was crucial, otherwise God would be quick to punish him and hold him accountable. I'm thinking in regards to Bob and me doing a church plant – God certainly wants a FULL COMMITMENT. There's no doubt that as in days past, the cost will be there and yet there is no greater calling and privilege than being used to call men and women to repentance and holiness. Lord, make us ready and full of YOUR SPIRIT to succeed in fulfilling our calling to plant YOUR CHURCH. I am willing – make me ready." (April 17,1996)

Prophecies of Jerusalem's destruction: Chs.4-24

Most of the first half of Ezekiel is devoted to a description of the sins of God's people, and God's judgment for their sin (the Babylonian overthrow of Jerusalem, resulting in the expulsion of God's people from the land).

Ezekiel acts out the siege: Chs.4-7

The Babylonian siege of Jerusalem was acted out symbolically by Ezekiel. He used a brick to depict Jerusalem, and miniature ramps and battering rams to depict the attackers. He then lay on his left side for 390 days depicting the years of Israel's iniquity (Northern kingdom), and 40 more days depicting the years of Judah's iniquity (Southern kingdom). He then cut off the hair of his head and beard. One third was burned at the center of his miniature city. One third was struck with the sword all around the city. One third was scattered to the wind (driven from the city). Only a few hairs were kept, bound safely in Ezekiel's robe (God's promise that a remnant would be preserved, see 6:8-10).

No matter how difficult or strange God's assignment was, Ezekiel faithfully obeyed and carried out his duties so as to accurately deliver God's messages to His people. Has God been inviting you to obey Him in some way that seems difficult or strange to you? Is He asking you to take a step of faith into the unknown? Take courage from Ezekiel. God always honors our steps of obedience to His promptings.

Ezekiel is taken in visions to Jerusalem: Chs.8-11

Ezekiel was visited by the elders of Israel in his home in Babylon. It is likely that they came to inquire of him concerning conditions back in the homeland. While meeting with them, he was transported “in spirit” (in visions given by the Spirit) to Jerusalem where he beheld all sorts of abominable idol worship. At the same time, he saw the glory of God gradually departing from the temple in Jerusalem.

1. The idol of jealousy 8:1-6. He was first taken to the entrance of the north gate of the inner court, *“where the seat of the idol of jealousy was located – which provokes (the Lord) to jealousy.”* We do not know which “god” this idol was pointing to, but it likely involved the sacrifice of children in fire to appease the god. We do know that it provoked the Lord to jealousy (the theme of divine jealousy appears repeatedly - 5:13; 16:38,42; 36:6; 38:19).

God is a jealous God (Exodus 20:5). He rightly deserves our devotion (because He made us for relationship with Himself) and He is righteously angry when we devote our hearts to other “gods.” Is there some “idol” in your life right now that you are devoting yourself to, that is causing God to be jealous for you? Remember: You are God’s “living temple” right now (1Cor.6:19). James wrote: “He jealously longs for the Spirit that He has made to dwell in us” (James 4:5).

2. The secretive seventy elders 8:7-13. Ezekiel was next led (still “in spirit”) to dig through a hole in the wall of the temple. He entered a dark inner room where he saw 70 elders of Israel secretly making incense offerings to animal inscriptions on a wall. The Lord told Ezekiel what these men were thinking in their hearts: *“They say, ‘The Lord does not see us; the Lord has forsaken the land’” (8:12).* Yet, the Lord always sees and judges *the secrets of men’s hearts (Romans 2:16).*

The apostle Paul wrote about how humanity had “exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles” (Romans 1:23). This is sin that greatly grieves the heart of God – when we worship what He has created in place of Him, THE CREATOR! It is like going to an art gallery and worshipping a painting, instead of honoring the artist who created the painting. There are many amazing things in creation to marvel at; but check yourself as you marvel. Give praise to the artist/Creator Who made it all!

3. Women weeping for Tammuz 8:14,15. Ezekiel next saw women crying out to Tammuz, the Babylonian god of fertility. The legend was that this god “died” during the dry summer months of June and July, resulting in the crops drying up in drought-like conditions. By “*weeping for Tammuz,*” these women were beseeching the god to “rise from the dead” and bring back the rains that would cause their crops to grow again. They were looking to this god as their provider and sustainer in times of need.

Today, we may not weep for Tammuz; but we may look to sources other than God for our provision and sustenance in times of need. God can use other sources as channels through which His provisions flow (a job, savings, an investment, a friend, an inheritance, a gift); but we dishonor God our Provider and Sustainer when we worship these “gifts” rather than the God behind the gifts. What circumstance(s) causes you to trust in someone or something other than God?

4. Twenty-five sun-worshipping priests 8:16. Continuing in the vision, Ezekiel saw the inner court of the temple where 25 priests were worshipping the sun, “*the crowning insult to the Lord of heaven and earth*” (Feinberg, Ezekiel). These 25 men represented the 24 Levitical-priestly courses, with the high priest at their head. It is noted that they had turned their backs to the temple of the Lord, while their faces were turned toward the sun!

5. The pronouncement of God’s judgment 8:17-9:2. Ezekiel heard God call forth angels to execute His judgment against the city of Jerusalem. Of course, the human instrument was Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian army; but as we have seen in the book of Daniel, angels (both good and evil) were (and still are) working behind the scenes in every city.

“... in the 19th year of Nebuchadnezzar ... he came to Jerusalem. He set fire to the temple of the Lord, the royal palace, and all the houses of Jerusalem. Every important building he burned down” (2Kings 25:8,9).

6. Those who sigh and groan 9:4. Before the judgment of God fell on Jerusalem, the Lord sent an angel out to “*put a mark on the foreheads of the men who sigh and groan over all the abominations*” being committed in Jerusalem (9:4). These individuals cared greatly about the things that God cared about. Those without the mark fell under the judgment of God. This is

significant, for in the midst of a *nation-wide judgment*, God still knows people *individually* and will deal with them according to their *personal relationship with Him*.

The Lord sees and knows each of us. He knows what we are doing, what we are thinking, and what we are passionate about. He knows when we compromise our convictions. He knows when we stand for them and grieve over injustice. Jesus said: "Blessed are those who mourn" (Matt.5:4). James also wrote about "mourning" over sin (James 4:9,10). What injustices and evils are being committed in our world today that cause you to sigh and groan? What grieves your heart?

7. The presence (glory) of God departing. Throughout this section of Ezekiel (chs.8-11), there is a sweeping contrast between *the glory of God* and *the abominable idolatries of man*. Sadly, Ezekiel saw the glory of the Lord gradually departing from Jerusalem, as a direct consequence of their refusal to love Him. *"The rabbis enumerated 10 stages whereby the Shekinah (glory of God) withdrew. These stages unmistakably reveal the loving and longing reluctance of God to leave His sanctuary where He dwelt in the midst of His beloved and erring people" (Feinberg, Ezekiel, p.67).* Recall that when Moses first constructed the Tabernacle of God, the glory of the Lord descended upon it when it was completed (Exodus 40:34-38). He also displayed His glorious presence at the opening of Solomon's temple (2Chronicles 7:1). Now, God was departing from Israel. The glory of the Lord moved from the Ark of the Covenant inside the Holy of Holies to the threshold of the temple (9:3 and 10:4); then from the threshold to above the cherubim carrying the chariot of God (10:18); then to the entrance of the east gate of the Lord's house (10:19).

God's presence gradually left the temple, and no one (but Ezekiel) even noticed! In the New Testament, we are taught that the Holy Spirit who indwells us will never leave us or forsake us (Hebrews 13:5). Yet, we can willfully stifle the Holy Spirit's work in our lives by turning our backs on His presence, choosing instead to follow our own self-willed ways. IF the Holy Spirit's dynamic work in your life was shut down (by you) today, would you notice a difference? What thoughts and behaviors would change?

8. Twenty-five bad leaders 11:1-13. 25 leaders are singled out for attention. Ezekiel saw them at the east gate of the temple. They were called out for their special role in leading the people

away from God's counsel. ***"These are the men who devise iniquity and give evil advice in this city" (11:2).*** An example of their bad advice is given: ***"They say, 'Is not the time near to build houses?'"*** In short, they contradicted God's words concerning the length of the captivity (70 years). They have ***"multiplied the dead in the city, filling its streets with them" (11:6).*** The blood of the followers will be required of the leaders. As an immediate statement, Ezekiel was commanded by God to prophesy against the leaders. As he did, one of the 25 leaders, Pelatiah, died!

Leadership is a major issue in Ezekiel. We see the power of failed leadership that brought great harm to the people. In contrast, we see a faithful young leader in Ezekiel, as he followed God and spoke God's words without compromise (in contrast to the many bad leaders). We all lead in various ways. Who has God called you to lead? Who follows you? Children? A classroom full of students? Employees? A team? Friends? Are you being faithful in your role as a leader to speak truth and live rightly?

9. God will someday restore the exiles 11:14-20. Ezekiel's vision of Jerusalem draws to a close with *the first message of future hope* for God's people. Those who had remained in Jerusalem had become arrogant and disdainful toward the exiled community in Babylon, saying that the Lord had given the land to them and He had forgotten about those who went into exile (11:15). On the contrary, God assured Ezekiel that *those who went into exile* (their descendants) would someday constitute the regathered nation who would be restored to the land (a promise partially fulfilled in the post-exilic period, but more fully in the millennial kingdom, still future).

Thus says the Lord GOD, "I will gather you from the peoples and assemble you out of the countries among which you have been scattered, and I will give you the land of Israel." When they come there, they will remove all its detestable things and all its abominations from it. And I will give them one heart, and put a new spirit within them. And I will take the heart of stone out of their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in My statutes and keep My ordinances and do them. Then they will be My people, and I shall be their God" (11:17-20).

Note: God's promise to give them "new hearts" (Ezekiel 11:19,20; 36:26,27) formed the basis for Jesus' teaching about the "new birth," a concept which He expected the Jewish teacher Nicodemus to know about! (See John 3 for this important encounter.)

10. The glory of God departs 11:22-25. The final scene in Ezekiel's vision shows God's glory moving up from over Jerusalem to the mountain just east of the city. This would refer to the Mount of Olives, the very same mountain from which Jesus departed the earth (Acts 1), and to it He will return at His second coming (Zechariah 14; Luke 21:20; Matthew 24:3). The fact that God's glory was last seen hovering over the mountain east of the city gives a dramatic effect. It feels as if a departing lover is looking back waving goodbye to His beloved, and looking longingly for the day He will return. As the vision ended, Ezekiel found himself once again with the elders in his house in Babylon.

Have you ever had to leave ... to walk away from someone because of their repeated sins against you and their stubborn refusal to acknowledge their sins and repent? So it was with God. After many centuries of patiently enduring Israel's unfaithfulness to Him, and after endless pleas for them to return to Him, God finally handed His people over to their own way and He abandoned His house (temple) among them. Today, God dwells in temples of human hearts. He never leaves us or forsakes us . . . but He is grieved when we stubbornly refuse to walk in partnership with Him. On the other hand, He is delighted when we choose to "walk in the good works that He has prepared in advance for us to do" with Him (Ephesians 2:10). If you were to ask God, right now, what it feels like for Him to live in the temple of your heart, what do you think He would say?

Pictures of Israel's unfaithfulness/God's judgment: Chs.12-24

While the vision of chs.8-11 formed a clear unit, the following chapters are a compilation of scenes, messages and parables. They all center on the repeated theme of Israel's unfaithfulness to the covenant with Yahweh, and the Sovereign Lord's decision to judge His people.

1. Ezekiel enacts the exile: Ch.12. Ezekiel enacted the inhabitants of Jerusalem going from the city into exile. Specifically, "the prince" is depicted going to Babylon blind, a clear reference to king Zedekiah who was blinded by Nebuchadnezzar before being taken away (see 2Kings 25:7). The people contended that Ezekiel's visions were for the distant future; but God insisted that His judgments would be delayed no longer.

2. False prophets singled out for judgment: Ch.13. God pronounced judgment on the false prophets (male and female) who had led His people astray. They were speaking from their own inspiration, rather than from the Lord (13:2). They were like builders who plaster over a wall to make it look new; but do not really deal with the damage in the wall that makes it fatally flawed (13:10). There were also female prophetesses who dabbled in magic and sorcery, using magic bands and veils as instruments in their trade, in exchange for meager wages (a handful of barley).

The false prophets plastered over walls (made things look good on the outside, when the inside was broken). Today we “plaster over our walls” when we blame, minimize, rationalize or deny the root causes of our behaviors. How much wiser to invite the Spirit of God to reveal what He sees in the deep places of our hearts. “Search me O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there be any way of pain in me, and lead me in Your everlasting way” (Psalm 139:23,24). Are there any broken walls in your heart that you are trying to “plaster over?”

3. Elders with idols in their hearts: Ch.14. Here were leaders sitting with Ezekiel, acting like they were heeding his words. Yet, God saw that there were idols in their hearts that would prevent them from responding to what Ezekiel was saying. God told Ezekiel to speak a message confronting them on their hidden idolatries, which he did. God’s stern rebuke was intended to bring about a good end: He will ***“lay hold of the hearts of the house of Israel”*** (14:5). The sin of Israel had gone so deep that even if Noah, Daniel and Job were alive and interceding, they could only deliver themselves, not the nation. This was a grave assessment of the spiritual condition of the nation, and a firm warning that God’s hand of judgment could not be turned back. Yet, after the judgment had run its course, ***“you will see their conduct and actions; then you will be comforted for the calamity which I have brought against Jerusalem . . . they will comfort you when you see their conduct and actions, for you will know that I have not done in vain whatever I did to it”*** (14:22,23).

4. Pictures of Israel’s unfaithfulness: Chs.15-17 Israel had become like the useless wood of a vine (ch.15). When intact, vine wood is of little use for building anything; much less after it has been burned in a fire and only a small middle section remains intact. Israel had become an unfaithful wife (ch.16). God had

loved Israel from her youth, taking her from nothing and making her beautiful and famous in the earth. In return, Israel ran off with many other lovers (Egypt, Assyria, Babylon), thus she will fall under judgment. Yet, in spite of Israel's unfaithfulness, God will remember His covenant with her and restore her in the future (16:60-63). The parable of the eagles (ch.17) depicts the stubbornness of God's people in trying to run away from His hand of discipline. Israel should have submitted to the Babylonian captivity as God's will; instead, they rebelled and ran to Egypt for help.

5. Individual responsibility for sin: Ch.18. A major theme in Ezekiel is the idea of *personal responsibility for choices*. While the nation as a whole was falling under the judgment of God for sin, the prophet's message was clear: *Each person will be judged/rewarded for their own behavior*. As for divine judgment: God has no pleasure in the death of the wicked. He desires that each person repent and live.

6. Lamentation for Israel's fallen kings: Ch.19. A poem of lament tells of the demise of the "lions of Judah" (her kings and princes). As Ezekiel ministered, Jerusalem was going through the reigns of its last 3 kings before exile: Jehoahaz, Jehoachin and Zedekiah. After them, the line of Davidic kings would be cut off, until Jesus the son of David arrived.

7. God recalls His history with Israel: Chs.20-22. God's painful history with Israel is rehearsed from the beginning (ch.20). Idolatry had always been in her, from the time God drew her out of Egypt until the present. Now, Israel is destined to meet "the sword of the Lord" – Babylon (ch.21).

"The house of Israel has become dross to Me." "I searched for a man among them who should build up the wall and stand in the gap before Me for the land, that I should not destroy it; but I found no one" (22:30).

8. The carousing of two sisters: Ch.23. The Northern and Southern kingdoms are depicted as two sisters, Oholah and Oholibah, who were both carousing with many lovers. After watching the Northern kingdom associate with "other lovers" (like Assyria), the Southern kingdom did the same, only more so (turning to Assyria, Babylon and Egypt for security). This extended parable shows God's dismay and disgust at the repeated and flagrant unfaithfulness of His people, both North and South.

9. The “death” of God’s wife and Ezekiel’s wife: Ch.24. This section of Ezekiel ends in a shocking way. It happened on the very day Nebuchadnezzar laid siege to Jerusalem. God told His servant that he would lose his wife! On that very same day, in the evening, Ezekiel’s wife died. The prophet’s loss became a picture of God’s loss of Israel, His “bride” (Israel). Yet, Ezekiel was told not to mourn the death of his wife (only groan quietly) thus providing a picture of the fact that God would not mourn the overthrow of Jerusalem – a fate that she deserved.

With this symbolic act (the loss of his wife) the prophet Ezekiel had to go a step beyond what even Hosea the prophet was called to endure (marrying an unfaithful woman as a symbol of God’s “marriage” to unfaithful Israel). How difficult it must have been for him to refrain from mourning the loss of his wife; but this he did in order to faithfully portray God’s message concerning the necessity and righteousness of the “death” of the nation Israel at the hands of the Babylonians.

Ezekiel the man stands in stark contrast to nearly every other character in the book. All were turning away from Yahweh in rebellious disobedience, pursuing self-willed paths and pleasure. Ezekiel, on the other hand, sought to live a life that was pleasing to the Lord, no matter what the cost. Jesus said of Himself: “I always do the things that are pleasing to Him” (John 8:29). Paul sought to always “be pleasing to Him” (2Corinthians 5:9). Ezekiel stands tall among those giants of the faith that served the purposes of God in their generation. May his life encourage us to do the same!

Discussion Questions

1. God departed from His people. How do you think God felt at this time? What do *you feel about God* as you read about His departure?
2. Review the many groups of people shown to be rebelling against God. How do they impact you/serve as a warning to you?
 - Secretive 70 elders (8:7-13)
 - Women weeping for Tammuz (8:14,15)
 - Sun-worshipping priests (8:16)
 - 25 bad leaders (11:1-13)
 - False prophets and prophetesses (ch.13)
 - Elders with idols in their hearts (ch.14)
 - Two carousing, immoral sisters (ch.23).
3. How does the life and character of Ezekiel challenge you in your walk with God? What do you most appreciate about this man?