

SESSION EIGHTEEN

EZEKIEL: ISRAEL'S FUTURE BLESSINGS

Ezekiel 33–48

INTRODUCTION

The primary theme of the book of Ezekiel is the concern for God's glory. In the first three chapters, Ezekiel has a vision of the glory of God that is meant to impress upon him the greatness and holiness of Israel's God. But Israel, because of her idolatry and disobedience, has dishonored God's glory. Therefore, God will have to act to defend His glory. Hence, the primary concern of the book is how God will glorify His name in light of Israel's covenant failure. He will do this by (1) bringing judgment upon Israel in the near future (the destruction of 586 BC); (2) bringing judgment upon pagan nations that have unduly harmed His covenant people (and rejoiced in Israel's downfall); and (3) by ultimately restoring Israel in holiness under the righteous rule of the Messiah.

These chapters can be divided into two parts: chapters 33–39 treat the future restoration and blessings to come upon Israel when Messiah rules, and chapters 40–48 elaborate on the new temple and worship in the land in the future restoration.

I. ISRAEL'S FUTURE RESTORATION AND BLESSINGS IN THE LAND (33–39)

In contrast to the first part of the book that was strongly condemning of Israel, these chapters are generally quite positive. They are meant to prompt the nation to look beyond her present dilemma and envision the glorious future under the Messiah, thus giving the nation hope. The first major section ended with the note that the Babylonians had laid siege to Jerusalem (24:2). Yet Ezekiel does not detail the fall of the city. In fact the drama is suspended for several chapters, as Ezekiel digresses to discuss God's judgment on the Gentile nations (chapters 25–32). Early in the third major section, notice is given that the city had fallen:

"Now it came about in the twelfth year of our exile, on the fifth of the tenth month, that the refugees from Jerusalem came to me, saying, 'The city has been taken'" (33:21).

This news reached Ezekiel in the year 585 BC. This simple record of the fact of Jerusalem's fall is briefly stated. If the Babylonians have destroyed the city and temple, what are the implications for God's program with Israel? Chapters 33–39 answer this question: God will eventually restore and cleanse the nation. Significantly, however, this *restoration* looks far beyond the restoration and regathering from the Babylonian exile. This is primarily concerned with the *ultimate restoration* when Israel is regathered, cleansed, made to enter into a "covenant of peace", and ruled by the Messiah. The details simply cannot be attributed to the *near restoration* of the people from the Babylonian exile.

A. Ezekiel As God's Watchman To Duly Warn Israel (33:1-20)

The unit begins with the responsibility being given to Ezekiel to be a watchman for the nation. It is his responsibility to duly warn the nation about her wicked ways and the judgment that God brings. Hence, Israel is accountable for her own ways. She cannot blame God for the tragic things happening to her, for God has clearly raised up a prophet to warn the nation. Apparently, some were making suggestions that God was not being fair in His dealings with Israel (33:20).

B. God's Judgment On The Land Is Just (33:21-33)

Having established Israel's accountability for her own wicked ways, this unit opens with the announcement of Jerusalem's fall (33:21). For the present, God has determined that the promised land is to be made desolate:

"And I shall make the land a desolation and a waste, and the pride of her power will cease; and the mountains of Israel will be desolate, so that no one will pass through. Then they will know that I am the LORD, when I make the land a desolation and a waste because of all their abominations which they have committed" (33:28-29).

The blame lies with Israel, not God, and several examples of the nation's sins are stipulated in 33:25-26.

C. God's Love And Care For His Flock (34:1-31)

Having confronted the nation with her sin in the previous section, this unit metaphorically describes God's love and care for His covenant people. Despite the fact that God has brought judgment upon the nation, His love and commitment to them remains. He had said previously, "As I live!" declares the LORD God, "I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked" (33:11). Now His compassion for them is demonstrated.

Though His people had wickedly turned against Him, they are still to Him as a flock of sheep. A flock, however, needs care and direction lest they be endangered or become lost. Israel's leaders are then likened to *shepherds* whose responsibility it was to care for God's flock. God holds them especially accountable for the nation's failure:

"Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel. Prophesy and say to those shepherds, 'Thus says the Lord God, "Woe, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flock?"'" (34:2).

Though the shepherds of Ezekiel's day had been faithless, God promises to care for His sheep. He states,

"I will feed My flock and I will lead them to rest," declares the Lord God" (34:15).

He will do this by regathering His flock from the lands to which they have been scattered and by planting them in the promised land once again (34:12-13). This promise, however, looks beyond the near future, because it will be fulfilled in conjunction with the Messiah ruling over them as the Good Shepherd:

"Then I will set over them one shepherd, My servant David, and he will feed them; he will feed them himself and be their shepherd. And I, the LORD, will be their God, and My servant David will be prince among them; I, the LORD, have spoken. And I will make a covenant of peace with them and eliminate harmful beasts from the land, so that they may live securely in the wilderness and sleep in the woods. And I will make them and the places around My hill a blessing" (34:23-26).

The reference to the "shepherd, My servant David" speaks of the Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ, for He is the one who was promised to arise from the line of David (recall the Davidic Covenant in 2 Sam 7). No wonder Jesus spoke of Himself as the Good Shepherd! This promise, however, looks to the time of the Second Coming, for Israel has never lived securely in the land. But in the millennial kingdom following His Second Coming, the Lord Jesus will bring about the promised "blessing" (thus giving a complete fulfillment to the Abrahamic covenant). At that time, the nation of Israel shall enter into the New Covenant, here spoken of as "a covenant of peace" (cf. 16:60; 20:37; and 37:26).

D. The Question Of The Possession Rights Of The Promised Land (35:1–36:15)

If God is judging Israel and removing His people from the promised land, what implications does that have for the future of the land? This is answered in two ways, first in regard to other nations who might wish to seize the land for themselves, and second in regard to the specific promises for Israel's future in relation to the land.

1. Judgment On Israel's Enemies Who Desire to Possess the Land (35:1-15)

This section concerns a denouncement of Mount Seir (another term for Edom). With Israel's downfall, her neighbor Edom seized the opportunity to profit from the occasion. She even wanted Israel's land for herself, but God promises that He will bring judgment upon Edom.

"Because you have said, 'These two nations and these two lands will be mine, and we will possess them,' although the LORD was there, 'therefore, as I live,' declares the Lord God, 'I will deal with you according to your anger and according to your envy which you showed because of your hatred against them; so I will make Myself known among them when I judge you'" (35:10-11).

Probably this warning extends to other neighboring enemies as well, for in 36:5 we read,

"Therefore, thus says the Lord God, 'Surely in the fire of My jealousy I have spoken against the rest of the nations, and against all Edom, who appropriated My land for themselves as a possession with wholehearted joy and with scorn of soul, to drive it out for a prey.'"

2. God Assures That the Land Will Be Given To Israel to Possess (36:1-15)

Whereas 35:1-15 assured Israel's neighbors that they would not ultimately possess the promised land, 36:1-15 states the positive side that Israel will. After affirming that the enemy nations were acting in divine accord when they made Israel's land desolate (note 36:2-3), God promises that ultimately He will regather His people and plant them again on the promised land (see especially 36:8-12). God states,

"Yes, I will cause men—My people Israel—to walk on you and possess you, so that you will become their inheritance and never again bereave them of children" (36:12).

Care must be taken not to misapply these promises of the land to present-day political Israel. The fulfillment is not with political Israel today (which at the national level is still in unbelief and under God's discipline). The following context (36:16–37:28) makes clear that the fulfillment of the land promise is with a still future "eschatological Israel" . . . one that repents, turns in faith to Jesus as Messiah, and is delivered by Christ's personal return. Present-day Israel has no biblical basis today for an exclusivistic claim to the land promised to Abraham.

E. Israel's Restoration: Regathered And Cleansed Under Messiah's Rule (36:16–37:28)

Throughout the book of Ezekiel, there have been scattered references and hints to the regathering and restoration of Israel to the land (e.g., 11:17-20; 20:33-44). Now this important topic receives a more thorough treatment. Yet these chapters look beyond Ezekiel's day to the ultimate regathering and restoration of the nation in conjunction with Messiah's return to rule over them in the land.

1. Israel Will Be Regathered and Cleansed (36:16-38)

a. Introductory Reminder Why The People Were Exiled (36:16-21)

This section on Israel's regathering begins by reminding the people why God allowed them to be exiled: "they defiled it [the land] by their ways and their deeds" (vs 17), and "they had defiled it with their idols" (vs 18). The result of this was the profaning of God's holy name among the nations. Thus, God will need to act to counter what Israel has done to His name. He will do this by ultimately regathering the nation and cleansing them as a Spirit-filled people.

To understand this chapter, we must realize that there is a large time gap between vs 21 and vs 22. Although God did regather Israel to the land following the Babylonian exile, that regathering did not fulfill the details of vv 22ff. The regathering that God has in mind in 36:22-38 is a yet future regathering of the nation of Israel, one that will coincide with the Second Coming of Christ. That the passage does not refer to the regathering of 538 BC is evident, since the "cleansing" and outpouring of the Holy Spirit did not happen at that time.¹ The Romans would disperse the Jews from the land again in AD 135. The cleansing and outpouring of the Holy Spirit mentioned in this chapter is what Israel as a nation will experience when the New Covenant is ultimately fulfilled with them at the Second Coming (see Rom 11:25-27; Jer 31:31ff.).

b. The Basis For Israel's Regathering and Restoration (36:22-23)

Before He gives the details of Israel's blessing, God wants everyone to understand His rationale for doing so. Israel profaned God's holy name, so He will act to vindicate it, so that all nations will know that He is the Holy God. This is GRACE . . . Israel does not deserve this nor is God doing it for Israel's sake.

c. The Effecting of the New Covenant with Israel As A Nation (36:24-28)

Jeremiah had predicted that God would one day regather Israel to the land and "restore her fortunes" (Jer 30:3) after she had gone through "the time of Jacob's distress" in the "latter days" (Jer 30:7,24; cf. Deut 4:27-31). God would then write His law on their hearts (*internal!*) in contrast to the Law on stone tablets, and He would forgive their iniquity (Jer 31:31-34). As a result of effecting the New Covenant with Israel, God declared "And I will be their God, and they shall be My people" (30:22; 31:1,33). This latter phrase is found in Ezek 36:28 as well, thus confirming that Ezek 36:24-28 is also looking at the effecting of the New Covenant with Israel. Ezekiel also speaks about God giving the people a "new heart," which corresponds to what Jeremiah had spoken about when he said that God would write His law on their hearts (compare the promise of the "circumcised heart" in Deut 30:6).

The cleansing with water mentioned by Ezekiel (36:25) is a figurative act depicting their cleansing from sin. This is confirmed by 36:33 which states, "On the day that I cleanse you from all your iniquities." Throughout Israel's history, she had

¹Actually there were several returns from the Babylonian captivity, the initial one being in 538 BC following Cyrus' decree permitting the Jews to return. However, most of the Jews did not return to the land at that time but remained in the regions of Babylon (Ezra 2:64-67 specifies that only about 50,000 took part in this first return). There was another major return under Ezra in 458 BC (Ezra 7:6-9) and still another under Nehemiah about 444 BC.

celebrated the Day of Atonement in which God had removed the sin of the nation. There will be a *national* and *eschatological* Day of Atonement, however, at the time of Christ's Second Coming. When Israel looks in faith to Jesus as the Messiah (Zech 12:10), He will deliver them from destruction and cleanse them. This national cleansing that Ezekiel mentions is also reflected in the prediction of a "fountain" for Israel in Zechariah 13:1-2:

"In that day [the context refers to the Tribulation when Israel finally turns in faith to the Messiah] a fountain will be opened for the house of David and for the inhabitants of Jerusalem, for sin and for impurity. And it will come about in that day,' declares the LORD of hosts, 'that I will cut off the names of the idols from the land, and they will no longer be remembered; and I will also remove the prophets and the unclean spirit from the land.'"

The distinguishing feature of Ezekiel's description of the New Covenant bestowment upon Israel (in contrast to Jeremiah's) is the promise of the giving of the Holy Spirit within them (cf. Ezek 11:17-20; 37:14; 39:29). Although Jeremiah does not speak of the Holy Spirit's outpouring, Joel (2:28-29) and Isaiah (32:15; 44:3; 59:21) do. In fact, the blessing of the Holy Spirit being bestowed will become one of the primary features of the New Covenant. Hence, it is because of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit that God's people can walk in His ways and obey the Lord (Ezek 36:27).

As a result of the New Covenant being effected with Israel, the nation will "live in the land" that God had promised to their forefathers. This *land promise* can only be properly interpreted within a Premillennial theology, for take note that the dwelling in the land follows the effecting of the New Covenant with Israel. If there is no earthly millennium following the Second Coming, how could this promise be fulfilled? Furthermore, the matter of the *land* cannot be spiritualized, for the following verses give details about the agricultural blessings that will come about. Nothing in the text suggests a *spiritualized interpretation* of the land!

This prediction of the New Covenant in Ezek 36:24-28 pertains to the outworking of the New Covenant with Israel as a nation. This will come about at the time of the Second Coming of Christ. That does not mean, however, that there is no fulfillment of the New Covenant prior to the Second Coming. Indeed there is! I have tried to clarify this matter in the notes on "A Progressive Fulfillment View of Israel's Old Testament Covenants and Promises." Individuals, whether Jews or Gentiles, can partake of the New Covenant today (and this has been true since the death of Christ on the cross). Not all the promises of the New Covenant mentioned by Jeremiah and Ezekiel are being realized today (e.g., the land promise for Israel). However, the spiritual blessings certainly are! This would include the eternal forgiveness of sins, inner cleansing, and reception of the Holy Spirit.

Relationship to New Testament Salvation

There is a very close relationship between the New Covenant predictions of the Old Testament and the matter of personal salvation from sin that is spoken of in the New Testament, because it is precisely at the moment when a person believes upon the Lord Jesus Christ that these spiritual blessings of the New Covenant occur. Furthermore, it is probably against this backdrop of the New Covenant promises in Ezekiel 36 that Christ engaged the rabbi named Nicodemus in a discussion about

the "new birth" in John 3. Jesus got right to the heart of the matter when He told Nicodemus, "unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (Jn 3:3). When Nicodemus expressed his difficulty in understanding this, Jesus went on to say, "unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God" (Jn 3:5). Christ's mention of "water" probably alludes to God's promise in Ezek 36:25, "I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean." Being born of the Spirit refers to what had been promised in Ezek 36:27, "I will put My Spirit within you." Nicodemus should have been familiar with these Old Testament teachings. That is why, when Nicodemus remarked "How can these things be?" the Lord Jesus replied, "Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not understand these things?" What Jesus was saying was that this was the most foundational truth there was when it came to spiritual matters. Until one has entered into the New Covenant and been born of the Spirit, he is nothing more than a mere physical creature ("That which is born of the flesh is flesh"). Nicodemus may have been born of the seed of Abraham, but that was not enough.

Years later, the apostle Paul would describe *personal salvation* in the same kind of New Covenant terminology, once again drawing upon Ezek 36:

"But when the kindness of God our Savior and His love for mankind appeared, **He saved us**, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior" (Titus 3:4-6).

Christ as the Mediator of the Holy Spirit

The verse mentioned above in Titus 3:6 calls attention to the role that the Lord Jesus serves in relation to the pouring out of the Holy Spirit. The book of Isaiah had made it very clear that the Spirit would be upon the Messiah (Isa 11:1; 61:1). In the first Servant oracle, the Lord had declared,

"Behold, My Servant, whom I uphold; My chosen one in whom My soul delights. I have put My Spirit upon Him" (Isa 42:1).

Matthew's gospel connects this promise with the occasion of Jesus' baptism:

"And after being baptized, Jesus went up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove, and coming upon Him, and behold, a voice out of the heavens, saying, 'This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased'" (Mt 3:16-17).

The Spirit certainly authenticated Jesus as the Messiah and empowered Him for His public ministry. However, Jesus' connection with the Spirit would become even more involved following His death and ascension. Hence, Peter could declare on the day of Pentecost,

"Therefore having been exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He has poured forth this which you both see and hear" (Acts 2:33).

In His position as the exalted Davidic king, the Lord Jesus now has the prerogative to give the gift of the Holy Spirit to those who repent and recognize Him as

Messiah.² How ironic that Nicodemus spoke face to face with the very One who could give the New Covenant promise of the Spirit!

2. Israel's National Resurrection (37:1-28)

Chapter 36:22-38 has stated plainly what Israel's future is to be. Now in chapter 37 her future (following regathering and entering into the New Covenant) is depicted metaphorically. This will involve two visions: the vision of the valley of dry bones (37:1-14) and the vision of the one stick (37:15-28).

a. The Vision of the Valley of Dry Bones (Ezek 37:1-14)

(1) The Vision Described (37:1-10)

(2) The Vision Explained (37:11-14)

The Bible does use symbolism upon occasions, but we need to be cautious not to take something as symbolic that was never intended to be such. In this case, however, the valley of dry bones is symbolic, and the text even interprets the meaning for us. According to 37:11, "these bones are the whole house of Israel." The point of the vision was to depict Israel as being destitute and without hope. God's promises had not been fulfilled in regard to her, and all seemed hopeless. Could the nation ever live again?

Israel does have a future hope, because God will work by His Spirit (note 37:14) to bring her life. In light of the context of chapter 36, this will take place at the Second Coming of Jesus Christ when Israel experiences the New Covenant. Notice that the promise of the land is mentioned again (vs 14). Not only will this be a spiritual resurrection of the nation, but it will involve a literal resurrection as well (Jewish believers throughout the ages will be resurrected to participate in Christ's kingdom on earth (Dan 12:1-3; cf. Heb 11:39-40).

b. The Vision of the One Stick (37:15-28)

Once again, a symbolic act is depicted. Two sticks are joined to become one. The first represents Judah (the southern kingdom) and the other Joseph (representative of the northern kingdom). In other words, the separation that had taken place with the nation years before would one day be reversed. God's people would all be one again (37:22).

Like the previous vision, this will come about in the eschatological future when Israel experiences the New Covenant. This is clear from the additional details that are given about Messiah's reign and the mention of "cleansing them" so that "they will be My people, and I will be their God" (37:23). The reference to "My servant David" is a reference to the Lord Jesus, the promised son of David (cf. 2 Sam 7). The reference to the "covenant of peace" (vs 26) refers to the New Covenant that was already described in chapter 36. So the rule of the Lord Jesus (the Davidic

²This should not be taken to mean that Jesus has already entered into the fulness of His reign upon the Davidic throne. Analogy can be drawn with David in the Old Testament. Before David formally entered into his kingship, he was anointed by Samuel as king and received the Holy Spirit (1 Sam 16:13). So, even in the Old Testament, the possession of the Holy Spirit was a kingly matter. In the case of the Lord Jesus, He (the king) shares the Holy Spirit with all His subjects.

king) and the New Covenant go hand in hand. When Jesus rules over them, the people will dwell in the land that had been promised to the fathers (vs 25), once again demanding a premillennial interpretation.

II. EZEKIEL'S TEMPLE AND WORSHIP (40–48)

A major interpretive issue in Ezekiel is the matter of what to make of the prediction of the temple in the latter chapters of the book. Three general interpretations have been advanced:

- 1) Ezekiel predicted a rebuilding of Solomon's temple after the Babylonian captivity.
- 2) Ezekiel was prophesying about the "church" in a figurative sense.
- 3) Ezekiel was giving a description of a future literal temple that will be constructed during the millennial kingdom.

The problem with view #1 is that Ezekiel's prophesy never came true. In other words, we would have to say that Ezekiel was mistaken. This, however, would be a denial of the inspiration of the Scriptures. The problem with view #2 is that it violates the normal meaning of Ezekiel's words. There is no implication in the text that these words should be spiritualized. If Ezekiel's other prophecies have been fulfilled literally (e.g., predictions of Babylon's invasion and Jerusalem's destruction), why should we assume that the ones in 40–48 should be spiritualized? In other words, we need to be consistent in our treatment of prophecy. Furthermore, if a *spiritual temple* was intended, why is there so much elaboration on the architectural details of the temple? That seems to be completely unnecessary.

View #3 actually makes the best sense, especially in light of the reference to the "sanctuary" in Ezek 37:26:

"And I will make a covenant of peace with them; it will be an everlasting covenant with them. And I will place them and multiply them, and will set My sanctuary in their midst forever."

In the very context in which Ezekiel predicts the regathering of the nation, the rule of Messiah over them, and the effecting of the New Covenant, he also predicts the setting up of the "sanctuary." The term that is used for sanctuary is the same one used numerous times in the latter part of the book (e.g., 44:7-9). A problem for view #3 is the specification of animal sacrifices in the millennial temple. That, however, is not impossible, as strange as it may seem at first. Some premillennialists believe that the sacrifices will be literal, but they will be offered only as a memorial to commemorate what Christ had done at the cross.³

A LESSON FOR OUR LIFE

In Ezekiel 36, the prophet announced that Israel's restoration would also mean the granting of the New Covenant with them. This would include the Holy Spirit: "And I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances" (36:27).

³For further discussion of the matter of animal sacrifices, see Jerry M. Hullinger, "The Problem of Animal Sacrifices in Ezekiel 40–48," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 152:607 (Jul-Sep 95): 279-89. Hullinger defends the notion of the temple being in the millennium, but rejects the "memorial view" of the sacrifices. Regarding the temple, see John W. Schmitt and J. Carl Laney, *Messiah's Coming Temple: Ezekiel's Prophetic Vision of the Future Temple* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1997).

Although Israel, as a nation, must await this future event, those of us in Christ have already been given the Spirit. "And I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever; that is the Spirit of truth" (Jn 14:16-17a). This does not guarantee that we will always be obedient, but if we appropriate the Spirit's filling we can: "But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh." Remember that you cannot conquer the flesh in your own strength. Each of us needs to *walk by the Spirit*. Are you appropriating the indwelling Spirit today?