

## SESSION SIXTEEN

### EZEKIEL

#### *A Synthesis of the Book*

#### INTRODUCTION

The prophet Ezekiel (עֶזְקִיֵּאל – "God shall strengthen") was a contemporary of Jeremiah and Daniel, who also ministered in the distressing days of the Babylonian menace against Judah. According to Ezek 1:3, he was not only a prophet but also a *priest*. Interestingly, his initial visions came in the 30th year (probably a reference to his age), which is the age at which a young man entered the priestly service according to Num 4:23,30,39,43. The fact that he was a priest explains his interest in the Temple, the priests and the future Temple (ch 40–48). He thus appears to have been somewhat younger than Jeremiah.

As a very young man, the Babylonians invaded his country of Judah in 605 BC at which time Daniel was taken away into exile. In 597 BC, the Babylonians returned and took many of the nobility (including King Jehoiachin) away into exile to the realms of Babylonia. It was in this second deportation that Ezekiel went away into exile. Five years later in 593 BC (Ezek 1:2), he received the vision of the cherubim and God's glory which is recorded in chapter one.

The last of Ezekiel's prophecies is dated about 571 BC (see 29:17). Thus, his recorded ministry covers the period from 593-571 BC, a span of at least 22 years. His ministry would clearly overlap with the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC when the Temple was destroyed. Since he does not record anything of Jehoiachin's release in 561 BC (2 Kgs 25:27-30), the book may have been composed sometime during the period 571-561 BC.

Thirteen of his messages are introduced by a date formula.<sup>1</sup> There is a *general* chronological arrangement of the material, with three exceptions (29:1,17; 32:1). But these three oracles are against Egypt and have been placed together with the other Egyptian prophecies.

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<sup>1</sup>The chronological notations are given in 1:2; 8:1; 20:1; 24:1; 29:1,17; 30:20; 31:1; 32:1,17; 33:21; 40:1.

## STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

The book has three main sections (for more details, see the book chart in the supplemental notes).

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>JUDGMENT UPON JUDAH</b></p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>JUDGMENT ON OTHER NATIONS</b></p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>FUTURE BLESSINGS FOR ISRAEL</b></p>
<p style="text-align: center;">— <i>What it entailed</i> — <i>Why it was coming</i></p>	<p style="text-align: center;">— <i>Near neighbors</i> — <i>Tyre</i> — <i>Egypt</i></p>	<p style="text-align: center;">— <i>Future restoration</i> — <i>Future restored Temple</i></p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Chapters 1–24</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Chapters 25–32</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Chapters 33–48</p>

- A. The first main section (chapters 1–24) looks at the judgment upon Judah. The prophet explains what is entailed in this judgment and why it is coming. The highlight of this section is the departure of God's "glory" from the Temple in 11:23.
- B. The second main section (chapters 25–32) depicts the judgment of God that is going to fall upon certain Gentile nations. Notice that Babylon is not included. These prophecies are connected with the "Day of the Lord" (see 30:1-3).
- C. The final section of the book (chapters 33–48) is a "salvation" section, in which the future restoration of the nation is described. This will include a new Temple and a renewed service of worship.

## THE MAIN THRUST OF THE BOOK

Although the books of Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel all deal with the period of the Babylonian exile, each of these has a unique contribution to make to the progress of God's revelation. Some of the unique contributions of Ezekiel include:

- 1) A greater stress on the glory and character of God
- 2) More elaboration on the future regathering of the nation when God effects the New Covenant with her
- 3) A detailed description of a future battle with "Gog"
- 4) A detailed description of the future Temple and renewed service of worship

Of these various contributions, it is the concept of God's "glory" that stands out the strongest in the book. The dominant theme of the book is the "glory of God" . . . the honor of His name, His integrity, etc. The book opens with a vision of the glory of God. Many people have speculated what this

strange vision of chapter one is intended to convey, but the main point is simply to symbolically depict the glory of God. This is clear from the explanatory statement in 1:28. The glory of God is situated above four "living beings," which are interpreted elsewhere (Ezek 10:15,20) as *cherubim*, i.e., angelic beings. Andrew Hill elaborates the significance of this:

The basic intent of the vision, however, is unmistakable. The God of Ezekiel and the Hebrews lives and reigns in the heavens, majestic in his transcendent "otherness." He exercises full control over all his creation, even those Israelites held captive in Babylon. The very throne of Yahweh rests upon a magnificent carriage, enabling his movement to and signifying his presence in any location. More than this, his eyes see all, and because he sees he will certainly act on behalf of his people. This was joyful news indeed for the Hebrew captives exiled some six hundred miles away from Yahweh's temple in Jerusalem!<sup>2</sup>

The theme of God's glory is underscored elsewhere by the fact that over sixty times in the book God said that he acted so that people would "know that I am the LORD." Also, fifteen times God said that He had acted for the sake of His name to keep it from being profaned.<sup>3</sup>

The people must understand that God's glory is at stake in their covenant failure. They are a most rebellious people, stubborn and obstinate (2:3-4,8; 3:7). But God is determined to speak to them anyway, and Ezekiel must proclaim God's message no matter what the response (2:4-5). In fact, their skepticism of Ezekiel's message is why his message is so drawn out. Notice 3:11, "And go to the exiles, to the sons of your people, and speak to them and tell them, whether they listen or not: 'Thus says the Lord God.'" The concern for God's glory is underscored in the very next verse: "Then the Spirit lifted me up, and I heard a great rumbling sound behind me: 'Blessed be the glory of the LORD in His place.'" This helps explain the abundant graphic images that are utilized by the prophet in the communication of his message to drive this home to such a "hardened and obstinate" people. Dyer notes,

These included proverbs (12:22-23; 16:44; 18:2-3); visions (chaps. 1-3; 8-11; 37; 40-48); parables (chap. 17; 24:1-14); symbolic acts (chaps. 4-5; 12; 24:15-27); and allegories (chaps. 16-17).

By these means Ezekiel presented his messages in dramatic and forceful ways, thus getting the people's attention so they would respond.<sup>4</sup>

In chapters 8-11, Ezekiel is transported by vision to Jerusalem and made to see the corruption of the worship of YHWH in Jerusalem. But God will not allow His name to go on being profaned, and for this reason He will bring judgment and cause them to know who He is.

*"You will fall by the sword. I shall judge you to the border of Israel; so you shall know that I am the LORD. This city will not be a pot for you, nor will you be flesh in the midst of it, but I shall judge you to the border of Israel. Thus you will know that I am the LORD; for you have not walked in my statutes nor have you executed My ordinances, but have acted according to the ordinances of the nations around you" (Ezek 11:10-12).*

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<sup>2</sup>Andrew E. Hill and John H. Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Pub. House, 1991), 345.

<sup>3</sup>See 20:9,14,22,39,44; 36:20-23 (twice in 23); 39:7 (twice); 39:25; and 43:7-8.

<sup>4</sup>Charles H. Dyer, "Ezekiel," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary (OT)*, 1226.

Ezekiel knew that the LORD had revealed through Isaiah that He would continue to carry out His covenant promises through a remnant of the nation. In concern, Ezekiel asks, "Alas, Lord God! Wilt Thou bring the remnant of Israel to a complete end?" (11:13). This leads to a ray of hope in the midst of the announcement of impending judgment. God responds to Ezekiel's question by promising that He will regather the remnant to the land in the future (11:14-18). This theme will receive more elaboration later in the book (see ch 20 and 36). God does promise that the nation will be cleansed (11:18) and that He will enact the New Covenant with them:

*"And I shall give them one heart, and shall put a new spirit within them. And I shall 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" (11:19-20).*

With the promise of fulfilling the New Covenant with them, however, God clarifies that He must remove His glory from the nation for now. He will not allow His glory to remain in this apostate Temple. Ezekiel is allowed to witness this by vision:

*"Then the cherubim lifted up their wings with the wheels beside them, and the glory of the God of Israel hovered over them. And the glory of the LORD went up from the midst of the city, and stood over the mountain which is east of the city. And the Spirit lifted me up and brought me in a vision by the Spirit of God to the exiles in Chaldea" (11:22-24).*

This needs to be seen against the backdrop of the Old Testament and the connection of God's glory with the Temple. At the close of the book of Exodus, the Shekinah glory of God came and dwelt above the mercy seat of the Ark at the Tabernacle. All these years, God had allowed His glory to dwell with the nation in the Tabernacle and Temple. Now He is removing it prior to the Temple's destruction.

At the end of the book of Ezekiel, we see that the glory of the LORD is reinstated in the "New Temple" (see 43:2-5). This probably denotes that God's glory will be with them at some eschatological future time. During the earthly ministry of Jesus, however, the nation will experience God's glory in their midst in a unique way:

*"And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14).*

Throughout all this, the message is clear. God's people did not render to YHWH the glory He rightfully deserved; therefore YHWH will act in history both by judgment as well as the future restoration of Israel to bring glory to Himself. This becomes clear in the section dealing with Israel's restoration (chapters 33–39). God is regathering Israel not for their sake, but for the glory of His holy name. He will bring Himself glory (see Ezek 36:16-23, especially vv 21-22).

God will prove Himself "holy" (36:23), and this word *holy* has the idea of *separateness*. God is distinct, not common. He is not to be treated lightly. The nations will also receive a good lesson through God's working with Israel. It will all work to demonstrate to everyone who God is! Notice that this is in the context of Israel's being regathered to the land (36:24)—an event still waiting fulfillment.

Though it is a good lesson, it is to the shame of this nation that has been so disobedient. But God's favor in restoring the nation is not for their sake, but for His.

*"'I am not doing this for your sake,' declares the Lord God, 'let it be known to you. Be ashamed and confounded for your ways, O house of Israel!'" (36:32).*

This is a marvelous testimony to the depths of God's grace! There is not a more undeserving people of God's grace than Israel. Yet God will keep His covenant promises to them. So Israel becomes a means of teaching all men about the depths of God's grace. He will teach all men through His Son Jesus (through His obedience), and He will also teach everyone through His son Israel (through their disobedience).

## A MESSIANIC PROPHECY

In chapter 21, the last king of Judah at Jerusalem's fall is denounced. This was Zedekiah. He is referred to in 21:25,

*"And you, O slain, wicked one, the prince of Israel, whose day has come, in the time of the punishment of the end, . . ."*

As a result of the judgment on him, the last king of Judah, God is going to do a remarkable thing in changing the relationship between king and priest (which were always distinct in the OT).

*"Thus says the Lord God, 'Remove the turban [the head gear of the High Priest; see Ex 28:37], and take off the crown [the head gear of the king]; this will be no more the same" (21:26a).*

Although these had always been distinctive offices in the OT, God is going to change this principle and give them both to one person. But this must be a person of *humility*:

*"Exalt that which is low, and abase that which is high. A ruin, a ruin, a ruin, I shall make it" (21:26b-27a).*

God is going to reserve this privilege for the One to whom it rightfully belongs:

*"This also will be no more, until he comes whose right it is; and I shall give it to him" (21:27b).*

This phrase "until he comes whose right it is" is reminiscent of the prophecy in Gen 49:10 to the tribe of Judah which the *NASB* translates,

*"The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until Shiloh comes, and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples."*

Unfortunately, this is a difficult translation, and the *NASB* rendered this "until Shiloh comes." Their marginal note, however, alerts us that this could be rendered "until he comes to whom it belongs." This latter translation is to be preferred, which the *NIV* has correctly done so. In this case, Gen 49:10 is promising that the ruler's staff (the symbol of kingship) will remain in the tribe of Judah until the One comes to whom it belongs. Ezekiel seems to play on this same expression, adding a new dimension that this special One will not only wear the king's crown but the head piece of the priest as well. In other words, he will be both king and priest. In the OT, the king was always of the line of Judah, whereas the high priest was in the line of Levi (through Aaron in particular). So, how can one person be both king and priest? Because there is another priesthood besides the Levitical priesthood (in fact, it is even superior to that of Levi/Aaron). The OT also mentions the priestly line of Melchizedek (Gen 14). His priesthood is superior, because he preceded the establishment of a priesthood through Levi/Aaron. Jesus Christ is descended through Judah (qualifying Him for kingship), but He is also a priest after the order of Melchizedek (qualifying Him to be a *superior* priest). See Psalm 110 (cf. Heb 5, 7–8). All of this is prefigured in the person of Melchizedek, for he is a priest, but a priest whose name means "king of righteousness." What is prefigured in the person of Melchizedek is promised in Ezekiel 21:25-27, and finds its fulfillment in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ!

## A LESSON FOR OUR LIFE

God did not ask Ezekiel to do something that was easy when He commissioned him to speak to Israel:

"Then He said to me, 'Son of man, I am sending you to the sons of Israel, to a rebellious people who have rebelled against Me; they and their fathers have transgressed against Me to this very day. And I am sending you to them who are stubborn and obstinate children; and you shall say to them, 'Thus says the Lord God.' As for them, **whether they listen or not**—for they are a rebellious house—they will know that a prophet has been among them'" (Ezek 2:3-5).

God did not guarantee Ezekiel that he would have a receptive audience. In fact, He assured him that those to whom he was to minister would be stubborn and obstinate. Ezekiel was not to focus on whether people liked him or his message. He was to focus on being faithful to what God had called him to do. God measured the success of Ezekiel's ministry by how faithful he was to what God had called him to do and speak. When we give a "Thus says the Lord God" to people, we must be prepared for the fact that they may not listen to us. Whether they listen (or not) is God's concern. We must be careful not to fall into the temptation to preach what people want to hear and what will make us "popular" in their eyes. Don't be a men-pleaser! Seek to always be faithful to give people God's message . . . whether they listen or not!