

EZEKIEL

*Message from God
for the Church and World
in Deep Trouble*

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EZEKIEL

INTRODUCTION

Why 'Message from God for the Church and World in Deep Trouble'?

Ezekiel is the prophet at the lowest point of Israel's history. He is the prophet of the Exile. Of the 'big three' prophets, Isaiah's prophecy spoke of these things from afar, and also spoke of the restoration that would follow; Jeremiah prophesied in the decades that led up to it, and at the time when it happened; but Ezekiel was actually deported in the exile to Babylon, and began his prophesying there. He spoke out of Israel's experience of ignominy, devastation and defeat, and brought the word of God directly into that situation.

We speak today at a very low point in the church's history. Many of us in ministry over the past twenty-five years have known little but setback after setback. The former glory we once knew has largely departed. 'Babylon', or the secular world view, has made severe inroads into the church, and could be said to dominate it at this time. Weakness and helplessness seem to have paralysed the church's life. Some church people attempt to make out that it is 'business as usual', but many others have voted with their feet. Not many are willing to face up to how far gone we are. There is a lot of anxious clutching at straws. This is the time of the church's 'exile'.

No less is the world in deep trouble today. The optimism of earlier decades has gone. The older certainties have been eroded. Economic stability has been shaken. Whole nations are in turmoil. Ecological disasters threaten our security. Difficulties in the church are matched by global disturbances in the world.

Perhaps we may be enabled to see what is happening to us more clearly, and face it more squarely, if we are prepared to study the prophet who wrote at a similar time in Israel's history, and whose words still have a bearing on our own times. 'These things happened to them as a warning, but they were written down for our instruction, upon whom the end of the ages has come' (1 Corinthians 10:11). We may gain some insight and encouragement from it. It may even change the whole way we think about life, God, the church, the world, and everything!

Question: What has been your experience of church life, or of life in the world, over recent decades? What can you remember from times past? How do you see it now?

Ezekiel the priest

I speak from a particular experience of the Anglican Church in South Australia during my own lifetime, from the middle to the end of the twentieth century A.D. I also speak from a certain position within that experience. I am an ordained priest of the Anglican Church, as my father and both my grandfathers have been before me. That is probably as close as you will get today to the notion of a 'priestly family' in Israel, such as that to which Ezekiel belonged (1:3). Other prophets, such as Amos, could stand in some sense over against the establishment in Israel and denounce it from there (see Amos 7:14–15), and it was necessary that they should do so. That way was not open to Ezekiel. His place was right at the heart of Israel's 'establishment', in the very temple itself, where he felt personally its every tremor. He was himself caught up in Israel's fate, and could not dissociate himself from it if he wanted to. It was there that God spoke to him.

Taking heart for today's church

It would seem that nothing less than the perspective of a prophet such as Ezekiel is necessary for the church in our own generation. Many times over these years I have found God speaking to me through the words of Ezekiel, bringing me encouragement, hope, and strength for ongoing ministry. So now I want to share this more widely with my fellow-believers who find themselves in a similar position, that we may be encouraged by God together.

To give one example: There was a time when I was smarting somewhat under the jibes of some of the newer churches, that the older established churches, such as the one to which I belonged, had gone far from the Lord, and that they were the ones now occupying the true territory. I could sense some truth in that, for I could see ways in which my own denomination had gone awry, and was on the outer. And yet I also knew that it was there that God had made Himself known to me and to countless others. Ezekiel 11:14–21 spoke powerfully to me:

“Son of man, your brethren, even your brethren, your fellow-exiles, the whole house of Israel, all of them, are those of whom the inhabitants of Jerusalem have said, ‘They have gone far from the Lord; to us this land is given for a possession.’ Therefore say, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD: Though I removed them far off among the nations, and though I scattered them among the countries, yet *I have been a sanctuary to them for a while* in the countries where they have gone.’ Therefore say, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD: I will gather you from the peoples, and assemble you out of the countries where you have been scattered, and I will give you the land of Israel.’ And when they come there, they will remove from it all its detestable things and all its abominations. And I will give them one heart, and put a new spirit within them; and they shall be my people, and I will be their God.”

What a good promise! Yet I realised also that any who persisted in following the wrong ways would finally come into judgement:

“Yet as for those whose heart goes after their detestable things and their abominations, I will requite their deeds upon their own heads, says the Lord GOD.”

I remember showing this passage to an aboriginal Anglican deacon from Queensland while he was visiting our underground church at Coober Pedy. He went away excited, and greatly heartened.

Approach to Scripture

Before we start making direct applications, however, we need to understand how we are going to approach the Scriptures. I suggest we do this in three ways. These three belong together, and each way needs the others. (Acknowledgments to P. T. Forsyth, *The Work of Christ*, 1910, Fontana edition 1965, pp. 58–63.)

1. We should try to understand the meaning of the text in its original historical setting. For this we need all the help we can get from commentaries and other forms of Bible scholarship. This stops us from making the text say something it was never meant to say, and saves us from making inappropriate applications.
2. We also need to realise that each passage of Scripture has its place in the entire plan of God through all the ages, often in a sense beyond the immediate understanding of the original writers and hearers (see 1 Peter 1:10–12). For this we need to draw on our knowledge of the Bible as a whole, and bear in mind what it has to say about the plan of God (eg. Ephesians 1:3–14), and about the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (see 2 Peter 1:20). At the centre of this plan of God is Jesus Christ, and his crucifixion, resurrection and ascension. (Anglican Article VII throws light on this. Articles VI and XX are also pertinent, and dear to my heart.) In these studies we shall use *italics* to denote this element.
3. So the Scriptures can also be God's voice to us in every age (see 2 Timothy 3:14–17). We need to see and feel their application to us now. This is done, not by trying to work it out in some clever way, but by asking the Holy Spirit to speak to us here and now through the Scriptures he has inspired in time past. We can record these applications in this kind of printing, and opportunity will be given for us to record what we hear God saying to us in this way.

Ezekiel's historical setting

We shall learn much about the life and times of Ezekiel as we go through his writings. At this point we need to be aware of two major events:

In **597 B.C.** Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, besieged and captured Jerusalem, and took the king and all the leading people of Judah into exile to Babylon (see 2 Kings 24:10–17). Ezekiel, probably then in his mid-twenties, was among those taken away.

In **586 B.C.** Nebuchadnezzar, after a two-year siege, finally destroyed the temple and the city of Jerusalem, and carried off most of the remaining population into exile in Babylon (see 2 Kings 24:18–25:21, 27–30). Jerusalem remained in ruins until about 539 B.C., when the Babylonian Empire fell, and Cyrus the Persian ordered the return of the exiles (see 2 Chronicles 36:22–23).

EZEKIEL CHAPTER I—THE VISION

- 1:1 “thirtieth year”—of Ezekiel’s life? When he would normally have expected to take up full duties in the temple as a priest (see Numbers 4:3). God has something even better for him in exile. We should not underestimate this experience: “the heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God.”
- 2 The year 593 B.C.
- 3 God calls prophets into His presence and reveals Himself to them so that they can speak His word. The “vision of God” and the coming of “the word of the LORD” are part and parcel of the same thing (see 1 Samuel 3:21–4:1, Isaiah 6).
- 4–14 The living creatures! The elements of a vision are not necessarily to be pictured visually, but each element has deep and rich significance. These attendants on God’s throne embody what is high and strong in God’s creation: human beings, wild and domestic animals, and the lord of the air. These are the four lords of creation. They stand upright, and all their movements are direct, swift and purposeful.

The same elements are found, in slightly different form, in the description of the four living creatures in Revelation 4–5. Here their chief function is to lead in the worship of heaven.

- 15–21 The wheels. Not a description of a spaceship (*contra* von Daniken and his *Chariots of the Gods?* 1969). The wheels signify universal mobility, and the eyes all-seeing vision. Is it not significant that God is appearing to Ezekiel by the river Chebar, and not in Jerusalem or on mount Sinai? What does this tell us about God? He is Lord of the whole earth!

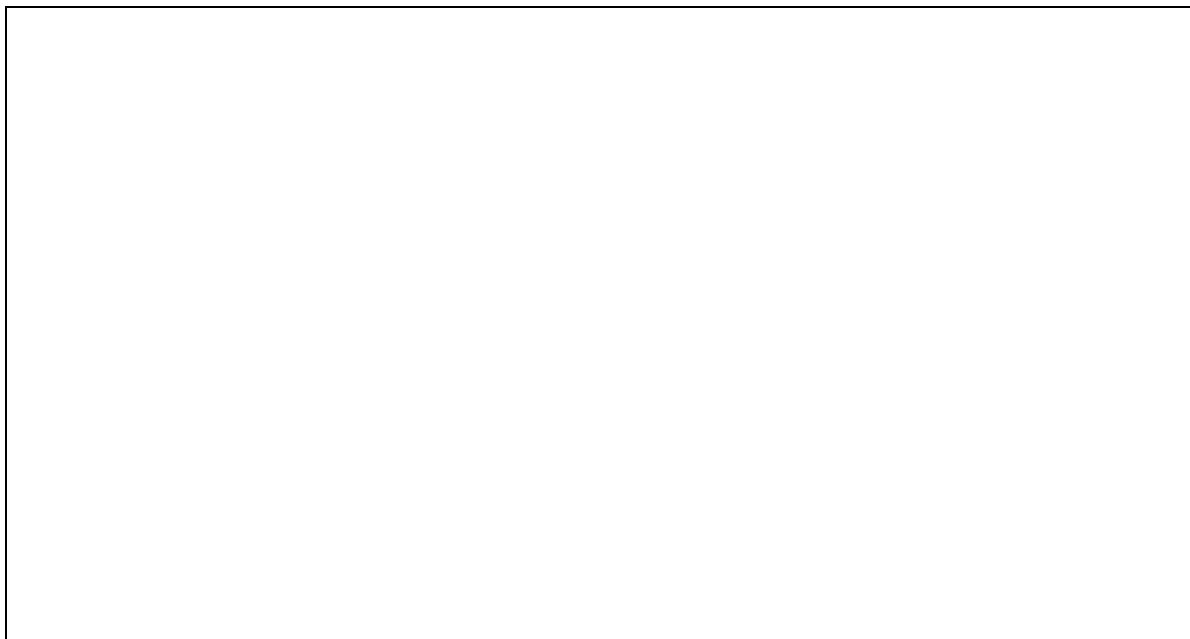
See St Paul’s summary in Acts 17: 24–28. God is in charge of the rise and fall of nations and the movement of peoples, and is never far from any of us. His purpose in all of this is that human beings should relate intimately with him, in whose image we are made (see Genesis 1:26–27). This purpose is focussed on the man Jesus Christ—see Acts 17:29–30.

- 22–25 “the likeness of a firmament”—like a vast sky. What appears above the firmament is sufficient to make even the dynamic living creatures drop their wings and stand still.
- 26–28 “a likeness as it were”—Ezekiel is very guarded in his description of what he saw of the God of whom no image can be made (see Exodus 20:4–6). Even so, this was not enough to prevent some rabbis from wanting to ban the book (or to restrict its readers to those over thirty?—a book for the mature!) But see how ‘the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD’ is the dazzling brilliance of blazing fire (as in Deuteronomy 4:11, Hebrews 12:28–29), and feel the effect that it has on Ezekiel himself.

“Like the appearance of the bow that is in the cloud on the day of rain”—see also Revelation 4:3. The rainbow was the sign of the covenant which God established with the whole earth in the time of Noah (Genesis 9:8–17)—a covenant that had been in place since the beginning of creation (see Jeremiah 33:14–26, 1 Peter 4:19). Here it is seen to be the very expression of God’s own nature—holy, relational, and gracious.

Oh, to be in the direct movement of the action of God's Spirit, as it appears the living creatures were! Or to be in the burning glory of that sublime presence, under the thunder of their wings! Yet is that not where we have been brought in Christ? (See Hebrews 12:18–29)

Write here what God is showing you of Himself in this vision of Ezekiel.



EZEKIEL CHAPTERS 2–3—THE MINISTRY

“Such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD. And when I saw it, I fell on my face, and I heard the voice of one speaking.” We are now to hear the voice of the One who sits upon the throne, the Ruler of all things.

2:1 “Son of man”: “son of...” in Hebrew thought means “having the nature of...” (as in Mark 3:17, Luke 9:58, Mark 1:1). This is God’s common appellation for Ezekiel (used over 90 times), and denotes Ezekiel’s human frailty before the majesty of God. Yet God requires Ezekiel to be standing up when He speaks to him, rather than prostrate. This is a high honour. What does it tell us of God’s regard for humanity?

“Son of man” is also used in Daniel 7:13–27 for the kingly figure who is given dominion over all peoples, together with “the saints of the most high”. Jesus used this designation of himself to denote both his human frailty and his high calling, which he shares with us. What incredible creatures we must be!

How do I see myself before God? Prostrate? or standing? or nowhere much at all? (Have a look at the ‘Prayer of humble access’ An Australian Prayer Book, p.143)

2 It is significant that Ezekiel can only stand before God by an infusion of Spirit from God. The same goes for being able to hear God’s voice, which is significant for what follows.

It is ever that way with human beings. See Genesis 2:7, Jeremiah 10:23, Proverbs 14:12, Matthew 4:4. Why did we ever think that we could live somehow out of ourselves, apart from God?

3–7 “a nation of rebels”: see also Stephen’s similar assessment in Acts 7:51–53. The Hebrew reads “nations”, i.e. the Gentiles. Israel is no better than all the surrounding pagan nations; but has more to answer for (see Amos 3:2).

4 “impudent and stubborn”: lit. “hard-faced” (shameless) and with “fixed hearts”. “Thus says the Lord GOD”: Ezekiel is to speak only what comes directly from God—as we shall see.

5 “whether they hear or refuse to hear”: prophets are often called to speak in a situation where they will not be heard (see Isaiah 6:9–13, Jeremiah 1:13–19), and to suffer rejection and deep anguish (see v. 6). But God’s word will still do its work (Isaiah 55:10–11, Hebrews 4:12–13), for blessing or for judgement, and so must be spoken.

Jesus made the same thing clear in his own ministry (see Mark 4:10–12, 33–34, John 12:36–50). He underwent the ultimate suffering (Mark 12:1–12). Our eternal destiny now hangs on where we are with regard to him and his words (see Mark 8:38).

2:8–3:3 The prophet himself must be open to God’s word, and must receive it first into himself, if he is to speak it truly (see v. 10). To do so is a sweet joy, even if the

message itself is one of anguish, that turns his stomach. Ezekiel is given a full and complete message, to which he himself can add nothing. (Compare Jeremiah 15:16, Revelation 10:8–11, Psalm 119:103.)

- 3:4–11 God’s word must come first of all to Israel (now in exile), “the people whom I formed for myself that they might declare my praise” (Isaiah 43:21). Even though, God says, the foreign nations would be an easier prospect at this time. Later, God’s word will go out to the other nations (see chapters 25–32).

Israel, and later with it the church, plays a key role in God’s plan for the whole world (see Genesis 12:1-3, Deuteronomy 7:6–11, Isaiah 49:1–6, Romans 9–11). Jesus followed the same dynamic in his own ministry (Matthew 15:24, 10:5–7, 28:18–20). As with Israel then, so with the church now: judgement begins with the household of God (1 Peter 4:17). How else can we have a message for the world that God is both Judge and Saviour (Acts 17:30–31)?

Does this help us to understand what is happening in our church at this time? What light does it throw on our present situation?

On a personal note: While I am a keen supporter of mission overseas, I am aware that my own calling up to now has been very much to the nation of Australia. People are surprised when I say that Australia is as hard a mission-field as anywhere in the world. Other nations are much more spiritually aware and open. Australia would be one of the most determinedly secular nations in the world. Even so, wonderful things happen here. And if God can bring revival here, He can do it anywhere. What a ministry we shall have to the other nations then!

What has been your experience of encountering hardness of heart, or openness to God, in this nation, or elsewhere?

- 12–15 The vision departs. Its impact on Ezekiel is measured by what happens to him afterwards. “I sat there overwhelmed among them seven days.” (Seven days is how long it would have taken for Ezekiel to be made a priest—see on 1:1, and Leviticus 8:33. Here ritual ordination is replaced by seven days of sitting in stunned silence.) This must have made quite an impression on the other exiles. The sign of the hand of the LORD being strong upon him is his own bitterness and heat of spirit, by which perhaps he participates in something of God’s deep and holy concern for Israel’s present condition, and the state of the whole world.
- 16–21 Ezekiel, as a true prophet (see Exodus 7:1-2, 4:15–16) is to speak only directly from God’s mouth. The word of God to humanity is no Sunday morning jaunt, but a matter of life and death. The prophet is obliged to speak it, come what may, and woe betide him if he does not! (see also Jeremiah 20:7–11). If he speaks it, even if people refuse to listen, he has done his job. If he does not, and people suffer for not hearing, then the prophet is responsible.

This is why St Paul, after declaring to the Ephesians “the whole counsel of God”, was then able to say, “I am innocent of the blood of all of you” (Acts 20:26–27).

No ministry of the word of God is to be taken lightly. The Anglican Ordination Service draws strongly on this passage. See An Australian Prayer Book P. 609–611: “... you know the greatness of the fault, and the judgement that will follow.” Is that how we see it today?

3:22–27 At the end of the seven days, Ezekiel is told to go out, probably to some lonely place on the plain (or in a flat-bottomed valley), where the whole vision as before comes back to him, to confirm and further elucidate his prophetic ministry. Severe restrictions are to be placed on him, as he mirrors Israel's deafness and immobility. All he will be able to do is to speak God's word when it comes—and that at times will be in the form of a dumb-show—otherwise he is to remain silent and still. A telling and powerful witness, even if it remains unobserved except by the few.

“He that will hear, let him hear” (v.27) is reflected in Jesus’ words, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear” (Mark 4:9). Let us pray that we will not be deaf to what God is saying to us here, through these words of Ezekiel, and in our daily lives.

EZEKIEL CHAPTERS 4–7—THE MESSAGE

Remember that Ezekiel has had restrictions of silence and immobility placed upon him by God, mirroring Israel's own deafness and paralysis. Nevertheless, the message must come through. Here we begin to see what the message is. At this time it is largely in acted prophetic signs (compare Isaiah 20:2–4—naked and barefoot for three years!—and Jeremiah 19—the potter's flask and the point of no return). These present the message with great clarity.

4:1–3 In 593 B.C., Ezekiel is told to make a model of Jerusalem under siege, as it will be in 586 B.C., to show the exiles (and any with whom they communicate back home) what God is going to do.

2 'siegeworks': same word as in 2 Kings 25:1.

3 Ezekiel himself is to play the part of Yahweh, in His unrelenting determination to bring full measure of judgement on Jerusalem at this time (see 2 Kings 21:1–16).

4–8 This judgement is the culmination of a whole history of apostasy and idolatry on the part of Israel and Judah since at least the time of Solomon. Here Ezekiel is called to represent in his own person God's judgement on both those kingdoms. Lying presumably east-west, with his head towards Jerusalem, he lies first on his left side, facing north, for 390 days, representing 390 years worth of judgement on the northern kingdom of Israel. Then for 40 days he lies on his right side, facing south, representing 40 years of judgement on the southern kingdom of Judah. The numbers could be construed as follows:

931 B.C. Separation of Israel under Jeroboam from Judah under Rehoboam (see 1 Kings 12)—beginnings of false worship away from Jerusalem.
(Samaria and Israel destroyed by the Assyrians in 721 B.C.)

539 B.C. Fall of Babylon and beginnings of return to Jerusalem.
392 years (rounded to **390**)

586 B.C. Destruction of Jerusalem and Judah.

539 B.C. Fall of Babylon and beginnings of return to Jerusalem.
47 years (rounded to **40**—recalling the years in the wilderness?)

(The returned exiles, according to their writings in 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah, saw themselves as the continuation in one of both the former kingdoms of Israel and Judah—see 1 Chronicles 2:1–2, 2 Chronicles 30:1–22, Ezekiel 37:15–28. So 539 B.C. can be seen as the end of the judgements on them both. The "seventy years" of Jeremiah 25:8–14 and Daniel 9:1–2 can be taken as the time of Babylonian supremacy from the battle of Carchemish in 605 B.C. to the fall of Babylon in 539 B.C.—65 years, rounded to 70.)

This scheme makes more or less tidy something that does not fit exactly into any explanation—see the commentaries for other possibilities. It may be that the numbers are not meant to be taken literally, but convey an impression which is more subliminal. We need to imagine the impact upon the observers as this built up over the prolonged period. We also need to appreciate the cost to Ezekiel of his personal involvement in this portrayal of God's action.

The overall message is that God's judgement is not arbitrary. 'The years of their punishment' are now set and pre-determined, measured and full. They are also limited and will come to a glorious end (see Isaiah 40:1–2, contrast Amos 1:11–12). What does this tell us about God's actions in history?

A child is sent to its room as consequences of an unacceptable action. The time is served, and it comes out, free and restored, with a new and relieved attitude—for the time being, at least.

What has been your experience—good or bad—of being disciplined like this?

What has been your experience of God's discipline or judgement in your life?

4:9–17 Ezekiel's rations during this time are limited to 230g (half a loaf) of bread and about half a litre of water per day. Thus Ezekiel foreshadows and participates in the suffering of Jerusalem under siege (see 2 Kings 25:3, Jeremiah 37:21). When they are scattered among the heathen nations, the exiles will be forced to eat ritually unclean food, contrary to the law of Moses (Leviticus 11), and so become defiled and separated from God. To cook his bread over dried human dung, rather than the usual cow's dung, would be a deliberate defilement and indignity. This is too much for Ezekiel's priestly conscience, and God graciously excuses him from that. But the message is still plain.

The purpose of the food laws under the Old Covenant was to teach the people to make a distinction between what is clean and what is unclean, and a separation between them and the other heathen nations, and so learn something of what it means to belong to the holy God (see Leviticus 11:46–47, 20:22–26). The reference is to the deeper uncleanness of sin (see Mark 7:14–23), in which all the nations participate by their rejection of God. Once this deeper uncleanness has been dealt with, and cleansing has been effected for all the nations, in the cross of Christ (Ephesians 2:11–22), then for those who accept this by faith the distinction no longer applies (see Acts 10, Galatians 2, 1 Corinthians 8, Romans 14).

5:1–17 A dramatic depiction of what will happen in the siege to those who will perish in the city by pestilence and famine, those who will be killed in battle in the surrounding countryside, and those who will be fugitives.

1 Note again Ezekiel's personal involvement in Jerusalem's fate: he is to be shaved, like one who is in mourning or disgrace (see Jeremiah 48:37–38, 2 Samuel 10:4).

4 Of those who remain, even they will be subjected to further bloodshed, confusion, dispersal and destruction (see Jeremiah 40–43).

10 A terrible consequence of famine and the breakdown of family relationships (see 2 Kings 6:24–31, Jeremiah 19:9, Lamentations 4:10).

13 Better translated, 'I will quieten [appease] my fury, and I will be comforted [relieved of my anger and grief].'

'in my jealousy': a husband who is not jealous when his wife is taken by another could be said not to love her very much. God's holy love for us is no less fierce, and zealous for His honour and our good. God's jealousy of course does not participate in sinful envy or self-pity, as ours might, but is strong and pure in righteousness and true holiness.

As Israel has been raised up to be a light and blessing to the nations (Genesis 12:3, Isaiah 49:6), so in its failure to do so it now bears its shame amongst the nations (compare Amos

3:2). *But it is heartening to know that it is God Himself who is doing this, and not some other supposedly superior power before which God is helpless. God is the one who wounds and heals, who kills and who makes alive (Deuteronomy 32:39, Isaiah 45:6–7). He is the propitiating God, the one who alone works, in his holiness and love, to make himself justly propitious or favourable to sinful people (Luke 18:13–14). Only in the death of His own Son is this matter finally resolved. ‘But if God spared not His own Son, He will spare no historic convulsion needful for His kingdom’ (P.T. Forsyth, The Justification of God, 1917, New Creation Publications Inc., Coromandel East, South Australia, 1988, p. 194). These things bear thinking about.*

People sometimes rebuke me for saying that it is God who brings about ‘accidents’ and such happenings. Reading Ezekiel (e.g. 5:13–17) and the rest of the Scriptures, what else can I say? If this is not so, what kind of God (or devil) do we have?

6:1–14 ‘the mountains of Israel’ were the places where Israel had engaged in false worship. God had ordained that there was one place in Israel where He was to be worshipped (see Deuteronomy 12:1–14), which came to be the temple in Jerusalem. But the people mixed or substituted their worship of Yahweh with the worship of the local deities in the Canaanite shrines ‘on every high hill and under every green tree’ (see e.g. 1 Kings 14:22–24).

1–7 Idolatry is condemned as a self-destructing exercise, under the wrath of God.

Idolatry has ever been the bane of human existence, and a snare to the people of God. See Romans 1:18–32, Psalm 115. Idolatrous worship is that which gives the worth that belongs to God to something that is not God. God in His judgement gives us over to the full measure of our foolishness, to recall us to Himself and to our senses. We become like what we serve.

8–10 Here God spells out the end purpose of His judgements: that there may be those whose wanton hearts and roving eyes may be broken (v.9 ‘blinded’ is not in the original), that they may see the truth and know that God is God, who rules all things and is true to His word.

11–14 God’s three dire judgements of sword, famine and pestilence will put paid to the false idolatrous worship of Israel, in the very places where it has been perpetrated, and so defile those sanctuaries for ever. The wasting of the land will match the desolation of the human spirit that idolatry engenders.

It is worth noting that the mountains of Israel are addressed again in a later prophecy (36:1–15) in the context of restoration and renewed fruitfulness. Again, God’s wrath comes to an end when all its work is done. (It is notable that when the exiles returned, there was no trace of the idolatry that had been rampant in Israel’s history up to that time. Jesus, when he came, had other things to rebuke in the nation’s life, but idolatry was not one of them.) The purpose of these actions is that people may ‘know that I am the LORD’ (v.7, 10, 13, 14—a recurring refrain in Ezekiel). This is our glory, for which we have been made (Jeremiah 9:24); this is our eternal life (John 17:3). This is no optional extra—not to know God in this way is to be in death. That is why God will not leave us alone—He wants us alive.

7:1–27 ‘the end has come’. The people of Israel, and particularly those still left in Jerusalem, would like to think that things will not now get any worse after the events of 597 B.C. Perhaps they think that Jerusalem would never fall (see Isaiah

- 37:33–38), and that God would never finally destroy His beloved temple (Jeremiah 7:1–4). But it was Ezekiel’s job to let them know that they had passed the point of no return, and the worst was still to come (compare Amos 5:18–20, 8:1–3).
- 7:7, 10 ‘Your doom’: the Hebrew word means something more like a ‘diadem’—here used perhaps in the sense of a ‘crowning misfortune’ (or as a parent might say to a child, ‘Do that again and I’ll crown you!’)
- 10–11 Iniquity is now ripe for judgement, according to God’s most patient assessment (compare Genesis 6:3—possibly a 120-year warning of the Flood—and Genesis 15:13–16—a 400-year respite for the wicked Amorites).
- 12–13 This approaching end now makes a mockery of normal commerce and living. Compare 1 Corinthians 7:29–31.
- 14–27 The actual fall of Jerusalem is foretold in horrifying detail.
- 19 The money in which they trusted is now worthless—it cannot save their lives.
- 22 Even God’s beloved temple, where He has caused His name and eyes and heart to dwell, will not remain inviolate (see 1 Kings 9:1–9), as we shall see.

‘I am the LORD, who smite’ (7:9). This message may be as hard for us to accept as it was for Ezekiel’s contemporaries. Especially when we are used to more ‘care-bear’ notions of God. Perhaps we shall never see it until we see Jesus as the one from God who came under the rod of God and bore our judgement in a way we never could. Only then can we face the reality of judgement in history and in our personal lives on an even keel, because we know the love and saving power of our Judge.

‘The end’ could come to any of us at any time. The New Testament has a healthy sense of living constantly in the light of the end of all things (see Matthew 24:44–51). This is sustainable because as believers we know the One who is coming, who is bringing this about (see 1 John 2:28).

EZEKIEL CHAPTERS 8–11—THE DEFILED TEMPLE

8:1–4 Fourteen months later (compare 1:1–2), the vision of God returns (compare 1:26–27, 3:22–23). This time Ezekiel is transported in the vision to Jerusalem itself, and shown in symbolical form what is going on there. It is not suggested that Ezekiel was taken physically to Jerusalem, about 1,000 kilometres away, but that *in the vision* (like in a dream) that is where he was. Ezekiel finds himself standing in the outer court, facing the northern gateway into the inner court. For Ezekiel, this would have been like coming home—a very emotional experience. But even more, here in the temple he sees the same vision of God and the heavenly chariot that he has seen before.

THE TEMPLE! Built by King Solomon in about 966 B.C. See 2 Chronicles 2–5. Built according to plans given by David from the LORD (see 1 Chronicles 28:11–19). Just as Moses was shown the pattern of the tabernacle when he was on Mount Sinai (25:8–9, 40, 26:30, 27:8). It is designed to reflect something of the heavenly sanctuary (see Hebrews 8:1–5, 9:114) and of the nature of God Himself in His dealings with us. So it also represents our humanity, made in the image of God, to be the dwelling-place of God, as individual persons (1 Corinthians 6:19–20) and together as God’s people (1 Corinthians 3:16–17, 2 Corinthians 6:16, Ephesians 2:19–22, 1 Peter 2:4–5).

Read 2 Chronicles 3:1–14. Try to imagine the sheer beauty of the temple, as Ezekiel faces it now. Note in verses 8 and 9 the weight of gold used—over twenty tonnes in the Holy of Holies alone, and 570 grams just for the nails! Read also 2 Chronicles 4:19–22, 5:11–14. What does this tell you about God? What does it tell you about yourself and your own humanity?

Now read on to see what we have done to God and to ourselves as God’s temple.

3b, 5–6 ‘the image of jealousy, which provokes to jealousy’: Manasseh had set up in the temple an image of Asherah, the Canaanite mother-goddess (2 Kings 21:7). Subsequently removed (2 Chronicles 33:15), it was back in there by the time of Josiah (2 Kings 23:6), and it seems this false worship was still firmly entrenched in the hearts of priests and people.

This is the first brazen defilement of God’s holiness. See Exodus 20:4–6. Romans 1:18–32 sets out the giddy downward spiral, from the making of false images of God, through false and unsustainable sexuality, on to all kinds of impurity and evil. More than once are we warned about the false image of worship set up in the very temple of God—right in the midst of God’s holy people: see Daniel 11:31, Mark 13:14, 2 Thessalonians 2:3–4, Revelation 13:11–15).

Where do we see ‘the abomination that makes desolate’ set up in the church today? Be careful—the answers may not just be the obvious ones.

7–13 Ezekiel is taken to see what is going on inside, in the secret place.

10 Compare Romans 1:23.

- 11 The bulk of the elders, thinking God is no longer around, have sold themselves out to false worship; among them Jaazaniah, a member of one of Israel's leading families (see 2 Kings 22:3).

'The LORD does not see us' (v.12) Yet here the prophetic word probes to the heart of what is really going on in Israel, and leaves nothing uncovered. See Hebrews 4:12–13.

Would I like God, or anyone else, to see what is going on in my heart? What have I got hanging in my 'room of pictures'? When we think that God is no longer powerful (because things may not be going the way we would like them to), how easily we slip into trying to make our own arrangements!

'Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hidden, cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy name, through Christ our Lord. Amen.' (*An Australian Prayer Book*, page 135)

- 14–15 Tammuz was a Sumerian deity who was trapped in the underworld; possibly, like the Greek Proserpine, connected with the coming and going of the seasons; i.e. a nature religion. Lamentations were characteristic of Tammuz worship—perhaps as a way of bringing pressure on reality to make it do what you want. Here the women find a special attraction to this. This is far gone from the worship of the Lord Yahweh.

- 16–18 Sun-worship provokes the ultimate insult to the Creator Yahweh.

- 17 'they put the branch to their nose' is obscure—possibly 'they are a stench in my nostrils'. They have their backs to God—and we all know what comes out the back. This is what they think of God. Their false worship is also manifested in their miscarriage of justice—they 'fill the land with violence'. God cannot allow this to continue, and no excuses can stave off the final reckoning.

2 Kings 21:1–16 speaks of the point of no return, reached during the reign of the evil Manasseh, son of the godly Hezekiah. According to 2 Chronicles 33:1–20, Manasseh repented before his death (see also 'The Prayer of Manasseh' in the Apocrypha), and Jerusalem was spared in his day. Nevertheless, despite the reforming efforts of Manasseh's grandson Josiah (see 2 Kings 22:1–23:30), the abominable practices clearly remained entrenched in the life of the nation, and the judgement was inexorable.

- 9:1–11 Radical surgery—a sobering but necessary treatment.

- 1–2 Ezekiel is now standing in the inner court of the temple, near the altar of sacrifice outside the temple building itself (8:16). The six executioners come from the northern gate, which Ezekiel has been looking at before (8:3, 7, 14); just as the destroying armies of Babylon will approach Jerusalem from the north.

- 3 'the cherubim on which it rested': i.e. the two large carved figures in the inner sanctuary of the temple (1 Kings 6:23–28), and/or the figures overshadowing the ark of God that was placed there (Exodus 25:10–22, 2 Kings 8:4–11); not the cherubim in the vision of the heavenly chariot. Ezekiel sees the glory of God come out to the doorway of the temple, ready to leave.

- 4 Even in the midst of the terrible judgement, those whose hearts are with God are preserved in faith and [eternal] life.

Such was the case with Jeremiah's scribe Baruch (Jeremiah 45), and the Ethiopian eunuch Ebed-melech, who helped Jeremiah (Jeremiah 38:1–13, 39:15–18), and Jeremiah himself (Jeremiah 40:1–6). Jesus urged us to abide in him when the sharp knife of judgement and persecution comes upon 'the vine', i.e. on all of God's people in him, so that we may be pruned and cleansed by that action, rather than be cut off and destroyed by it (see Isaiah 5:1–7, Psalm 80, John 15:1–16:4). So the Lord keeps for Himself those who are His (Revelation 7, 14:1–5).

If the man with the writing case came around now, would he put a mark on my forehead? Do I 'sigh and groan over all the abominations that are committed' in our church and nation? Or do I just stand back and criticise them? Or am I so caught up in them myself that I do not see them as being so very wrong after all?

- 5–7 This actually happened in 586 B.C. See 2 Chronicles 36:11–21, where again this action is attributed directly to the LORD.
- 8–11 This is too much for Ezekiel, who feels in himself deeply and personally the devastation of the beloved city and temple. Yet in his grief and anguish he has not seen what the Lord has already shown him of the remnant that will be preserved (v. 4). His immediate heartfelt plea is unavailing (see later 14:12–20), yet his unspoken prayer is in line with what is already in the ultimate purposes of God.
- 10:1–8 This passage makes clear that the judgements on Jerusalem, the 'burning coals' scattered over the city, come from the heart of heaven itself. They are the fire of God's holy love. This in itself is our saving hope.
- 1, 3 This time, the cherubim of the awaiting chariot, in the inner court outside the temple building.
- 4 A reiteration of 9:3, referring to the cherubim figures inside the holy of holies. Yet both the carved figures inside and the vision figures outside signify the same reality.
- 7 The man receives the burning coals into his hands—and we know where they have come from—and he goes out to scatter them over the city. But the scattering of the coals—the actual execution—is not here described. In the midst of the terrible judgements, Ezekiel is now more preoccupied with the glory of God.
- 9–22 The heavenly chariot and the glory of the LORD now absorbs the whole of Ezekiel's attention. The original awe and wonder of it all at its first appearance to him at the river Chebar has not left him.
- 15–19 The fearful and rapid judgements are now in train. By contrast, the movements of the heavenly chariot and the glory of the LORD are measured, timely and deliberate: from the inner sanctuary to the threshold, from the threshold to the waiting chariot in the inner court, and thence to the door of the east gate. Yet no way can these movements be said to be tardy or ponderous, for the chariot itself is full of fiery dynamism (e.g. 'the whirling wheels', and the great impression they made on Ezekiel, v. 2, 13), and the glory is the heart from which everything is happening. So what is Ezekiel being shown here of God's actions in history? Here, at least, there is no trace of panic.

*No more need there be any trace of panic in our response to the upheavals of history, or the traumas of our personal lives. See Isaiah 28:16, 30:15–18. Rather, like Ezekiel, need we to be wholly absorbed, in these events, with the glory of the Lord. If we have Jesus' perspective in John 12:27–33, 13:31–32, where the crucifixion itself is seen to be **the** setting-forth of the whole glory of God, then we shall also have Paul's perspective in Romans 8:18, 37–39, with*

regard to our present sufferings, which 'are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed in us.'

What are some of the things in our lives and in contemporary events that appear to be haphazard, bitter, and sudden? How does the vision of the glory of God in Ezekiel 10 change our way of perceiving and experiencing these things?

11:1–13 Before the final departure, a message is given for those who still hold power in Jerusalem, whose cocky warlike policies will be their ruin. In the vision, Ezekiel sees twenty-five men, including two notable princes, standing by the east gate of the temple. These were the ones who, with king Zedekiah, were instigating rebellion and resistance to Babylon's rule (2 Kings 24:18–20). In their false belief that Jerusalem was impregnable (see Jeremiah 7:1–15), they were saying to the population of Jerusalem, in effect, 'We are the chosen portion of the LORD. We shall be kept safe in this city, as the prime meat is protected from the fire by the cauldron, when the offal [the exiles who have already been taken away?] is thrown away and burned. But this is not a time for looking after yourselves and building your own houses—an all-out commitment is required for the war effort.' This was the policy denounced time and again by Jeremiah (Jeremiah 27–28, 21, 37:1–10, 34:1–7). Jeremiah knew that Jerusalem's fate was already sealed by the LORD, and said the Lord would save any who surrendered and submitted to the Babylonians. On account of this he was imprisoned, under suspicion as a traitor, for weakening the war effort (Jeremiah 38:1–6, note also v. 14–28). Ezekiel, in chorus with Jeremiah, now sends his similarly prophetic words to those left-behind leaders in Jerusalem who held the puppet-king Zedekiah under their thumb. No doubt his messages were relayed to them from Babylonia, as Jeremiah's were the other way to the exiles (see Jeremiah 29). Obviously, God is prepared to go to a lot of trouble to let His people know what He is doing.

- 1, 5 Again, it is only by the Spirit of God that Ezekiel is able to move in the vision (compare 2:2, 24), and to speak the prophetic word.
- 5–12 Ezekiel turns their words against them: 'Sure there is meat in the cauldron—all the slain whose innocent deaths you have caused! (Compare 8:17, 9:9.) You will not be protected—you will be taken out of the 'cauldron', and will be taken to the borders of the land to be put to death.' This actually happened at Riblah (see 2 Kings 25:18–21).
- 13 Just as Ezekiel speaks, Pelatiah drops dead before him in the vision. Presumably this actually happened in Jerusalem at much the same time. This would have given poignant verification to Ezekiel's prophecy when it arrived.

Pelatiah was not the only one of this party to drop dead under the hand of the Lord at that time (see Jeremiah 28:15–17); nor was he the last (see Acts 5:1–11). How much warning do we need?

I remember hearing a sermon preached at the time of the Vietnam War moratorium demonstrations in the late 1960s, which likened the protests at that time to the prophetic stance of Jeremiah (and Ezekiel). The protesters were saying that it was a wrong and unwinnable war (a position largely vindicated since) and were accused of disloyalty and of undermining the morale of the troops. I am not suggesting that the protesters were prophets of God—many clearly were not, and made no claim to be. But that may help us to sense how the prophets were not prophesying in a political

vacuum, but were inevitably caught into the political machinations of their day. The same thing happened to Jesus, though his kingdom was not 'of this world' (John 18:36), and has happened since to his followers, bringing persecution and death to many. We should not be surprised: God is dealing with the nations!

Where is God calling us today to take a stance that may involve us in the political rough-and-tumble?

Where have we avoided the issue for fear of becoming politically involved?

Where have we sought to be purely political, i.e. on the world's terms?

- 13 At the death of Pelatiah, Ezekiel cries out again to God for the dwindling remnant of Israel (compare 9:8). God answers him in the verses that follow.
- 14–21 It is with those who have been taken into exile that God will now be directly concerned as His people, rather than with those who have been left behind in Jerusalem. They will return with cleansed, purified and obedient hearts (see on 6:11–14, p. 10). This must have been a message of great surprise and encouragement to the despised exiles. (For a personal application, see Introduction, p. 2.)
- 21 Those who refuse this cleansing will be judged and given over to their evil.
- 22–23 The glory of the LORD finally departs from the city and moves to the Mount of Olives, there to await the completion of the judgement, in readiness for His return in 43:1–4.

God had said in 1 Kings 9:1–9 that this is what He would do to the place where He had made His name and eyes and heart to dwell, if the people proved unfaithful. And now, in the vision, it has happened. All entreaties are now in vain (Proverbs 1:24–28). Yet God still stands by, and the promise is made of a remnant who will be kept secure: 11:14–21 (compare Proverbs 1:33). How can this be so?

*We still have not exhausted the full meaning of the temple. Remember, its design was seen in heaven (Hebrews 8:5, see p. 12) When Jesus came, he said, 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.' And we are told, 'He spoke of the temple of **his body**.' (John 2:13–22). On the cross God brought to bear the full and final judgement for the whole human race—in His Son (Isaiah 53:6, Lamentations 3:1–26, Romans 8:3–4, Mark 14:34). Had this come on us in an unmeasured way, that would have been the end of us, with no remnant. But he went through it as solid gold right through, and came out unscathed, bringing us with him—as solid gold! This is what God was looking towards in His dealings with the temple in Jerusalem, and this is why He was able to spare a remnant at that time. That is why He is able to spare us now.*

- 24–25 Still in the vision, the Spirit returns Ezekiel from Jerusalem to Babylon, and the vision departs. Ezekiel is left with the exiles—with plenty to tell them!

EZEKIEL CHAPTERS 12–15—FULL JUDGEMENT

12:1–7 Another acted sign, in the hope that something might get through (v. 3). The actions once more are meticulous and detailed (compare chs. 4 and 5).

1–3 ‘a rebellious house’: see 2:1–3:11.

Jesus always spoke in parables when the crowds were present ‘as they were able to hear it’—so that he could be understood. But the effect of the parables upon those who did not wish to hear and obey God was to harden them in their resistance, so that they could not make sense of them, and would not respond. See Mark 4:33–34, 10–12.

8–16 A very precise prophetic prediction of the events of 2 Kings 24:18–25:7—from 1,000 kms away, 6 years earlier! See also Jeremiah 52:1–11, 24–30; and Jeremiah’s predictions to Zedekiah in Jeremiah 37:16–17, 38:14–28.

13 ‘he shall not see it’—because by then he will have had his eyes put out (2 Kings 25:7).

14–16 Compare 5:1–4: the sign of the hair.

16 ‘that they may confess all their abominations’: compare 14:22–23, 36:31–32: the deep shame and awareness of sin that comes with the grace of forgiveness.

17–20 This is no time for presumptuous hope. The violence practised and condoned (see 9:9, 11:6) will now reap its full reward (v. 19). Ezekiel’s dumbshow of fearful eating would make a powerful point.

21–25 Compare 2 Peter 3:3–15, esp. v.9. The gracious and merciful forbearance of God can often be taken for His approval, condoning, or helplessness in the face of evil, and an excuse to continue from bad to worse (see Ecclesiastes 8:10–13). This is a bad mistake.

26–28 Compare 2 Corinthians 6:1–2: ‘now is the day of salvation.’

*We need to be clear about the distinction between God’s **forbearance** and God’s **forgiveness**. God’s forbearance is when He overlooks our sins and restrains his wrath for the time being, according to the purpose He has for us (see e.g. Matthew 5:45, Acts 14:15–17, 17:30). This is never meant in any way to approve, condone or endorse sinful action. God’s forgiveness is only ever with a view to God’s forgiveness and justification through our repentance and faith in Jesus Christ (2 Peter 3:9, Romans 3:20–26).*

When we ask for God’s forgiveness, we are often only asking for his forbearance. We are asking him to pat us on the head and say, ‘That’s all right; only don’t do it again.’ God can never say ‘That’s all right’ to sin. Deep down we are glad that He cannot, and we would never respect him or feel secure ourselves if He did. But such is the deceitfulness of sin that we never of ourselves ask for that total, radical, cleansing, redirecting judgement of Christ in the cross, that is our only true forgiveness. (See *The Vinedresser: An Anglican Meets Wrath and Grace* by Martin Bleby, New Creation Publications Inc., South Australia 1985.)

Have I received God’s forgiveness? Or am I still presuming on his forbearance?

13:1–7 Jeremiah and Ezekiel were not the only prophets around at this time. Wherever there are true prophets of God, there are also false prophets countering their messages. See Jeremiah 28 (Hananiah in Jerusalem), 29 (Shemiah in Babylon) and 23:9–32 (message against the false prophets). False prophets always tell the people what they

want to hear (compare 1 Kings 22:1–40: Ahab and Micaiah, 1 Timothy 4:1–3, 2 Timothy 4:1–5), but their motivation comes from the world, the flesh and the devil.

13:3, 6–7 False prophets speak off their own bat, when God has not spoken to them.

4–5 The effect of this is unhelpful. They do not face people with the truth, so that people are not ready and strong when disaster comes, and are unable to stand in the face of it. Rather, they accommodate themselves and others to the disaster around them, like foxes making burrows among the ruins. This is neither edifying nor uplifting.

How are we to discern true prophecy from false? True prophecy always comes in the name of the one true God, and not in the name of anyone else (Deuteronomy 13, 18:20). Because God's word is sure and true, and does what it says (Isaiah 55:10–11), true prophecy always comes true (Deuteronomy 18:21–22). True prophecy points towards Jesus as the Son of God, and participates in God's plan of salvation in him (Revelation 19:10, 1 John 2:20–27, 4:1–6, 13–16). True prophecy can be tested and confirmed by those who are godly (1 Thessalonians 5:19–22, John 8:47, 1 Corinthians 14:29–32). True prophets bear good fruit in their lives, and live consistently with their message (Matthew 7:15–20).

Are there false prophets today? To what extent have we gone along with them, in order to 'play it safe'? Where will this end up?

8–16 God will see to it that the message of the false prophets will end in ruins. The false prophets themselves will fall with it.

10 False prophets bring a message of false peace. Compare Jeremiah 6:13–15, 8:8–13. 'God will not heal over the top of a cess-pool'—He will clean it out first. Neither will he paper over the cracks—He will expose them for repair, or for demolition and rebuilding.

13:10–16 is another passage that has spoken powerfully to me in time past. What are the structures ('walls') we build up around ourselves to gain a sense of (false) security? What do we do to obscure reality ('whitewash') and assure ourselves that all is well? Sometimes God in his mercy brings the whole thing crashing down around our ears. Only then is true living and loving possible.

17–23 Prophets can be female as well as male (see Exodus 15:20 Miriam, Judges 4:4 Deborah, 2 Kings 24:14 Huldah, Nehemiah 6:14 Noadaiah, see also Joel 2:28, Acts 2:17, 21:8–9, 1 Corinthians 11:4–5). Women also are just as capable of being false prophets as men are. Everyone needs to have prophecy of one kind or another, in order to know where they are going in their lives. Where the true word of God has been rejected, false prophecy will often take the form of occult magic practices, sorcery and witchcraft (see Deuteronomy 18:9–22, 1 Samuel 28:3–25). In Jerusalem at that time there were women who indulged diligently in worship of the mother goddess (see Jeremiah 7:16–20, 44: esp. 15–19). The practices described here (wristbands and veils) appear to be ways of applying power to the lives of those who came and paid to consult these women, which would draw them away

from dependence on the living God and his word. God undertakes to put a stop to this, to make Himself known.

14:1–11 Ezekiel is told not to answer the enquiries of any who ‘have taken their idols into their hearts’. They are to be told simply to repent of their idolatry. If not, God will answer them personally Himself—with judgement! Any prophet who attempts to pander to them with answers while they still maintain this condition will suffer the same fate (compare Matthew 7:6, Acts 19:28–31). The purpose and outcome of this punishment is ‘that they may be my people and I may be their God’ (v. 11).

God had told Hosea (750–715 B.C.), with regard to the northern kingdom of Israel, ‘Ephraim is joined to idols, let him alone’ (Hosea 4:17). We are made for union with the living God; but if we will not have that, then there is a kind of covenant-bonding with idols that will take its place, and that fusion can go very deep. It can be broken only by the taking away of guilt by the gospel and the freeing of a person to relate with God as Husband and Father (see Hosea 14, 1 Thessalonians 1:9, Galatians 4:8–9, 1 Corinthians 10:14–22, Acts 17:28–30).

12–21 Once God’s judgements of famine (v. 13), wild beasts (15), sword (17), and pestilence (19) are in train, righteous men of prayer will not be able to save the land. Their righteousness will avail only for themselves (compare ch. 18). Noah and Job were figures well known from ancient writings as men who by their righteous (justified) relationship with God were able in some instances through prayer to bring with them into deliverance members of their families and others (see Genesis 6:8–10, 8:20–22, Job 1:1–5, 42:7–10). Many commentators think it unlikely that the Daniel referred to here was the prophet Daniel in the biblical book of that name. The Hebrew spelling of the name here is slightly different, and more closely resembles Dan’el, the name of a just dispenser of fertility in Canaanite mythology unearthed in the Ugaritic Ras Shamra tablets discovered in 1930, dating from about 1400 B.C., who may have been paralleled in some now unknown Hebrew writings. However, I do not find it impossible or improbable that it is the prophet Daniel referred to here. Daniel would have been roughly the same age as Ezekiel, about 30 years old at this time; but he had already been in Babylon 13 years since 605 B.C. (according to Daniel 1:1)—long enough to rise to prominence in the court of Babylon as depicted in Daniel 1–2. Daniel would have already been known as a wise and upright man of prayer (a practice he maintained all his life—Daniel 6:1–11 and ch. 9) who had been able to save his fellow-exiles from destruction (Daniel 2:17–24). However this may be, the point is that no intercession or intervention can now save Jerusalem from its doom (compare 7:1–4, 8:18), and only those who have the ‘mark’ of God’s favour (as in 9:3–6) will survive.

The matter of intercession by the righteous for the unrighteous is deep and far-reaching. In Genesis 18:16–33, we see Abraham, by God’s disclosure and leading, pressing through towards the heart of God to discover that if there were ten righteous persons in Sodom, the city would be saved on their account. As it turned out, there was only one, Abraham’s nephew Lot (see 2 Peter 2:6–9, compare Ezekiel 9:4), who was removed from the city with members of his family before it was destroyed (Genesis 19:1–29). No doubt if Abraham had pressed further, he would have found that in God’s purpose one single righteous person in the city could have saved it. But that was a calling no sinner, not even the likes of Moses (see Exodus 32:30–34), could fulfil. Only the Son of God, come in human flesh, as ‘the righteous for the unrighteous’ could bear the necessary condemnation in us and for us, that would deliver us from our sin and its deadly judgement to bring us back to God (Romans 8:1–4, 1

Peter 3:18, 2 Corinthians 5:21). And this would avail for the whole world (John 1:29, 1 John 2:1–2).

14:22–23 Commentators ask, are the ‘ways and doings’ of these survivors who will end up in Babylon righteous or unrighteous? If righteous, the exiles will be consoled by seeing the good outcome of these judgements in changed hearts and lives. If unrighteous, then they will be ‘consoled’ (or set at rest) to see how God was justified in the treatment He had meted out. In the light of v. 12–21, would the survivors have survived if they were not ‘righteous’ (justified sinners) before God? Perhaps it is both: these are the ones who have sighed and groaned over all the abominations that are committed in Jerusalem (9:4), *including their own*, and acknowledge the justice of God’s treatment of them; and who in this full and clean repentance and change of heart now bring glory to God (compare 6:8–10, 26:28–32).

Just as we can say, ‘It was right that I should have been crucified with Christ—I deserved nothing less. Now I shall honour that action of God in my life, by living in the cleansing that it has brought to me.’

15:1–8 This reinforces the message that the judgement on Jerusalem (begun in 597 B.C.) will be carried right through and fully completed (in 586 B.C.), against those who say that the worst is now over, and Jerusalem will now be spared. A vine is useful only for producing fruit. If that is not happening, it cannot be used for anything else except burning—particularly if it has been through the fire once already.

The vine is a common corporate image for the nation of Israel, intended to signify fruitfulness, peace and prosperity (see 1 Kings 4:25, Psalm 128:3, Genesis 49:11, Micah 4:4, Deuteronomy 32:32–33, Isaiah 5:1–7, Hosea 10:1–2, Jeremiah 2:21, Ezekiel 19:10–14, Psalm 80:8–19). Most of the usages in the Old Testament refer to a vine that is not bearing the fruit it should, but rather is bearing the wild and bitter fruit of idolatry and sin. Despite what it is meant to be, Israel has become a false vine. That is why Jesus referred to himself as the ‘true vine’ (John 15), the true Israel. As such he accepts the judgement of the Vinedresser’s pruning knife on himself, and bids us abide in him when that sharp knife of persecution comes on us, that we may be pruned by it to bear much fruit in him, rather than be cut off as dead fruitless branches to be destroyed and burned.

God’s people came under judgement at this time ‘because they have acted faithlessly’ (v. 8). Now Jesus bids us abide in him by faith. Where are we in that?

EZEKIEL CHAPTERS 16–19—A MAKER OF ALLEGORIES

- 16 A parable or allegory that would have been shockingly confronting to Ezekiel's hearers; not just by its sexual connotations, in calling Jerusalem a prostitute, but also because of the comparison of Jerusalem with the abhorred foreign nations.
- 2 This is 'to make known to Jerusalem her abominations': to bring home the horror, perverseness and pollutedness of what they were doing.
- 3 Israel prided herself on somewhat different ancestry from this: see Genesis 10, 11:10–32, Deuteronomy 26:5. Ezekiel is saying here, with poetic directness, that the Amorites and Hittites of Canaan, with their deadly idolatrous practices, are the ones Israel has taken after.
- 4–5 Jerusalem is depicted as a newborn abandoned baby girl, denied the normal care, rejected and exposed to die.
- 6 The LORD saves her in this helpless state.

The LORD had already made clear to Israel in Deuteronomy 7:6–16 that He had saved her by no commendable virtue or deserving on her part, but simply by the choice of His love. This is no different from how God's love comes to those who are in Christ: see Romans 5:5–11.

- 7–8 She comes to puberty, and the LORD betroths her to Himself (compare Ruth 3:9). This is called a 'covenant' (compare Proverbs 2:17, Malachi 2:14)—a reference to the covenant with Abraham (Genesis 12:1–9, chs. 15, 17), reinforced and established with Israel at Sinai (Exodus 19–20, 24). See Jeremiah 31:31–32.
- 9–14 The LORD cleanses and adorns her for marriage—a rich reference to His care and provision for them in bringing them into the promised land (see Deuteronomy 8:1–10, 32:10–14).
- 12 Compare Genesis 24:27.

No less are those who belong to Christ by faith and baptism cleansed and adorned in preparation for this one-flesh marriage-union with Him (see Ephesians 5:21–32, referring to Genesis 2:18–25. See also Revelation 7:9–17, 19:6–9).

- 15–22 Israel has taken the very gifts bestowed on her by God to use in idolatrous practices. Compare Hosea 2, Jeremiah 3:1–5. While harlotry is being used here as an allegory of idolatry, Canaanite fertility religion included the practice of ritual prostitution (see 1 Kings 14:23–24, Leviticus 19:29).
- 16 Compare 2 Kings 23:7—in the temple itself!
- 20–21 Sacrifice of children: see Ahaz and Manasseh, 2 Kings 16:3, 21:6.

Child sacrifice was taken to be the epitome of religious devotion, and a powerful talisman (see e.g. 2 Kings 3:26–27), while in fact it is nothing more than a daring but calculated attempt to get God on your side, at fearful cost, without necessarily a change of heart on your own part (see Micah 6:6–8). Such practice was forbidden to Israel (Leviticus 18:21). God called Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac, and then prevented him from doing so (Genesis 22:1–19). The emphasis here was on the sacrifice that the LORD Himself would provide, shown in the New Testament to be God's own Son (Romans 8:32). Nothing we have to offer could ever equal or replace that.

In what ways do we 'sacrifice' our children to justify ourselves? (Can abortion, and pressures we place on young people, be seen in this light?) Where do these stand in the light of God's once-for-all sacrifice of His Son for us and for our children?

- 16:22** This is ignorant ingratitude.
23–29 This refers to forming political and military alliances with neighbouring nations, rather than relying solely on the LORD. But it would have involved also taking on something of the culture and worship of these larger and more powerful nations, as a kind of 'selling their soul' to them. See 2 Chronicles 16:1–10 (especially after chs 14–15), and Isaiah 30:1–7, 31:1, Hosea 7:11.
30–34 This is different from normal prostitution—Jerusalem actually pays her customers (as in 2 Chronicles 16:2).
35–43 God's fitting judgement comes, and then is complete. The 'lovers' that Jerusalem has been wooing prove to be her destruction and shame (see Hosea 2:10, Lamentations 1:2, Revelation 17:15–18).

What illicit unions have we formed in the church, or in our personal lives, against the perpetual covenant-care of our Husband-Father God?

- 44–52** Jerusalem is further shamed and condemned by association in the parable with the sinful nations Samaria (the northern kingdom of Israel, destroyed in 721 B.C.) and Sodom to the south, destroyed in Abraham's day (Genesis 13:12–13, 18:16–19:29). Compare Matthew 11:24.
45 Those who forsake God as their true Husband do despite to the children He has given them.
50–51 This does not necessarily exclude the sin of 'sodomy' attempted in Genesis 19:4–5.
53–63 God's determined adherence to His 'everlasting covenant' (v. 60) envisages the restoration, not only of sinful Israel, but also of despised Samaria and Sodom. This shows it to be a covenant with all the nations; indeed, with the whole creation.
63 Not the shame of guilt, but the humble realism that follows conviction and forgiveness of sin (compare 36:31–32).

If this is the way God is in His marriage with us, how are we to be in our marriages with each other? What are the implications of this for questions of divorce and remarriage?

- 17:1–21** Another poetic allegory of Israel's recent history.
3–4 (See v. 12) Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, took captive to Babylon Jehoiachin, king of Judah, and all the leading officials (including Ezekiel) in 597 B.C. (2 Kings 24:8–16).
5–6 (See v. 13–14) Nebuchadnezzar made Jehoiachin's uncle, called Zedekiah, king in Jerusalem, under Babylonian domination (2 Kings 24:17).

- 7–8 (See v. 15) Zedekiah rebelled against Babylon, seeking an alliance with Egypt (2 Kings 24:18–20, Jeremiah 37:1–10). This is depicted in Ezekiel’s allegory as another (enfeebling and mistaken) transplanting of Israel’s affections and strength.
- 9–10 (See v. 16–21) God brings fitting judgement on Zedekiah and Jerusalem.
- 14 Note the reason God subjected Jerusalem to Babylon at this time. So Zedekiah’s breaking of his covenant with the pagan enemy king Nebuchadnezzar (v.18) is seen as a break with the covenant of God (v.19).

In the same way, Christians are bound by their covenants with each other, and with unbelievers. See 1 Corinthians 7:12–16 (the word for ‘bound’ in v. 15 is different from that in v. 39). Compare Proverbs 2:16–17.

17:22–24 This promised action of God goes beyond anything that Nebuchadnezzar or Zedekiah could do. It is reflected in Jesus’ parable in Mark 4:30–32.

‘With what can we compare the kingdom of God...?’ (Mark 4:30) ‘What will our mean little kingdoms be worth, When God has unveiled the new heaven and earth?’ (Supplement to New Creation Hymn Book, 31)

18 The classic passage on personal responsibility for our own behaviour, which puts paid to any notion that we are the helpless victims of our heredity, environment or circumstances. It needs to be understood in its wider Biblical and historical setting.

Careful attention needs to be paid to the wording of the second of the ten commandments in Exodus 20:4–5: ‘...for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.’ Sometimes we see children actively carrying on the same sins as their parents, in what appears to be a perpetual downward spiral. This commandment assures us:

- (a) *that God in his mercy and grace will limit this downward spiral in any particular family to only three or four generations. At that point someone will turn back to God and break the cycle. (It would be interesting to trace the history of the kings of Israel and Judah in this connection);*
- (b) *this will only apply to generations that remain at enmity with God. At any point in the cycle anyone who ceases to hate God and turns to love Him will immediately be in God’s favour and steadfast love;*
- (c) *this condition of favour and steadfast love can continue uninterrupted for generations without number.*

We have a constant mistaken tendency to see God as being bound and driven by our behaviour, right or wrong. Here we find that God, in His forbearance, mercy and love, is calling the tune. Rightly considered, any sin, once committed, is liable to full and final judgement, whether later repentance occurs or not. Here clearly God is working to another deeper principle, based on His righteous dealing with all sin in the cross of His Son (see Romans 3:20–26, 8:1–4).

It is true that we find the Israelites caught up in the sins of their forebears, and suffering on that account (see e.g. Lamentations 5:7, Daniel 9:1–19, Ezra 9:1–15). In each instance it is clear that these sins are still being perpetuated into the present (as in e.g. Ezekiel 8), and the judgement that has come is fully justified. Some of the people, however, were misconstruing this doctrine to opt out of their own responsibility for their sin by claiming

that they were suffering unjustly on account of the sins of their forebears. Here Ezekiel presents, not a new or modified doctrine, but a reassertion of God's original undertaking.

- 18:1–2** The proverb (compare Jeremiah 31:29) expresses well the popular misconception.
- 3–4** ‘all souls are mine’ is a keynote phrase for the understanding of this chapter (compare Jeremiah 10:23, Proverbs 16:1–4, 9, 25). For the Hebrew word ‘soul’ (*nephesh*) read simply ‘life’ or ‘person’—not the pagan Greek notion of an insubstantial entity that can be separated from the material body which it indwells. The Hebrew notion is all of a piece with ‘body’ and ‘spirit’ (or ‘breath’), and is very concrete and real.
- 18:4** ‘the soul that sins shall die’: fitting judgement will be directly applied. However, as we shall see, not *every* soul that sins shall die, for there is provision in God's mercy for repentance and change of life, by which even a sinful soul may still live.
- 5–9** This is a straightforward keeping of the law of God (e.g. Leviticus 18:19–20), and walking with God in the way of life.
- 10–14** The sinful son of a righteous father cannot presume upon his father's righteousness, and will bear responsibility for his own sin.
- 14–18** the righteous son of the sinful father will not be responsible for bearing his father's sin; nor will his righteousness avail for his father. (Compare Psalm 49:7–9: no amount of moral or physical riches can avail to ransom your own or another human life. Only the sacrifice of the sinless one can do that—Hebrews 9:13–14.) Note that he ‘fears’ the Lord (v. 14), i.e. takes God and His commandments seriously.
- 19–20** Some actually look for children to bear some responsibility and consequences for their parents' misdoings. But God's provision allows freedom for each person to be able to live in righteousness with God. (Compare Deuteronomy 24:16, 2 Kings 14:6.)
- 21–23** Here is a new twist, that defies all natural (rough) ‘justice’. Even the wicked man, when he turns to the way of righteousness, can be spared to live. We are not told how God can rightly do this; here it is simply a fact of God's mercy. It makes good sense in the light of what God has now done in Christ (see Romans 10:8–13).
- 24** Nevertheless, anyone who turns to the way of wickedness will bear responsibility for their sin, and their former righteousness will not avail to save them. See how it does not depend on some kind of ‘merit storage’—as if we could somehow independently of God build up some such thing—but on direct relationship with God in righteousness.
- 25** This leaves the so-called ‘justice’ of the house of Israel way behind. In their iniquitous dealings with each other (e.g. 9:9), they are not even measuring up to fair dealing, let alone coming near the mercy of God that is here implied.
- 26–29** The teaching is summarised and reiterated.
- 30–32** God's heartfelt appeal to Israel—a far cry from any calculated weighing up of good and evil. All of this is only possible on the basis of ‘a new heart and a new spirit’ that comes as the gift of God to recalcitrant sinners (see 36:22–32). While death will surely come to any who reject the One who is the source of their life, note that God's pleasure is to give life (compare John 3:16–17, 10:10, 12:47–48), not to take it away.

How sorely needed is this teaching today! Not only as a counter to those who would seek to cure all our ills by going back through our ancestry and ‘healing the family tree’, but to avert all attempts to demean the nobility and dignity of human beings before God by taking away personal responsibility and making us all helpless victims of our heredity, environment and circumstances.

In what ways have we sought to evade our personal responsibility for our own behaviour? How has that hindered our direct relationship with God and with others?



- 19** Another parable or allegory of the immediate past history of Israel. The background is in 2 Kings 23:24–25:7. After the death of the godly king Josiah in a foolhardy engagement with the Egyptian army in 609 B.C., Josiah’s son **Jehoahaz** became king for three months. He was taken captive by Pharaoh Neco, and replaced by his brother Eliakim, whose name was changed to **Jehoiakim** (here passed over and not mentioned in Ezekiel’s parable). He reigned for eleven years (609–598 B.C.), and was taken away by Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon. He died, and was succeeded by his son **Jehoiachin**, who reigned in Jerusalem only three months before being taken captive by Nebuchadnezzar to Babylon in 597 B.C. (in the first wave of the exile, which included Ezekiel). He was replaced by his uncle Mattaniah, another son of Josiah and brother of Jehoahaz and Jehoiakim, whose name was changed to **Zedekiah**. He was the king in Jerusalem at the time Ezekiel was prophesying in Babylonia. He lasted until the final wave of the exile and the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. This prophecy can be dated about 592–591 B.C.
- 19:1** (see also v. 14) ‘a lamentation’: This has to do with the end of the line of David as reigning kings in Jerusalem, with whom God had made an everlasting covenant (2 Samuel 7). While God here, in fact, is implementing faithfully the terms of that covenant (see 2 Samuel 7:14), this is a matter that brings no joy to the heart of God or His prophet. They weep together.
- ‘the princes of Israel’: After the defeat of the northern kingdom of Israel in 721 B.C., Ezekiel, in common with the post-exilic historians in 1 and 2 Chronicles, sees the southern kingdom of Judah, together with the remnant of the northern tribes who took refuge in Jerusalem, as the inheritor and focus of God’s promises and action towards Israel as a whole (as in Ezekiel 4). So Ezekiel consistently refers to the nation now centred on Jerusalem, and even the exiles in Babylonia (11:15), as ‘the house of Israel’ (i.e. the descendants of Jacob—see Genesis 32:28—the father of the twelve tribes).
- 2 ‘your mother’, referred to here as ‘a lioness’ and ‘a vine’: not the physical mothers in each case, but the nation itself.
- 3–4 This refers to Jehoahaz. He died in Egypt (see Jeremiah 22:10–12, referred to as ‘Shallum’)
- 5–9 This is Jehoiachin (Jehoiakim his father is not included in this parable).
- 10–11 Ezekiel’s contemporary, Zedekiah.
- 12–14 A bitter prophecy of what will happen to Zedekiah in 586 B.C. (see 12:1–16).

So ends the rule of the house of David on the throne of Israel, until from the root of its cut-down stump there comes the one who shall rule, not just Israel, but the whole world for ever, in fulfilment of God’s covenant with David, and with the whole of creation (see Isaiah 11, Jeremiah 33:14–26, Matthew 1:1–17, Acts 13:22–23, Romans 1:1–6, Revelation 22:16).

EZEKIEL CHAPTERS 20–22—THE BLOODY CITY

- 20 Here, unlike the allegories in chapters 15–17 and 19, the past history of Israel is expressed directly. God will use every method to get the message through to His ‘rebellious house’ (see 12:3).
- 1 July–August 591 B.C., nearly a year after the previous time designation (8:1), five years before the terrible events of 586 B.C.
- 2–3 Compare v.31. It would appear that the hearts of these elders remain unchanged from the idol-ridden condition described in 14:1–11. So God tells Ezekiel to give them a history of the idolatry of their forebears, in which they still participate.

‘Is it to enquire of me that you come?’ No doubt the elders thought they were enquiring of Yahweh the God of Israel, by consulting His prophet. But the notions of God that they carried in their hearts precluded them from receiving a true revelation. No revelation of God can be received apart from a direct relationship with God as He is. God Himself in His love for us will not allow us to settle for anything less. Do we come to God and His church ready for this, or with some other preconceived notion of what we want to hear, and a god of our own contriving that goes with it?

- 4 God urges Ezekiel to pronounce judgement on them by the word of the Lord.
- 5–6 ‘I am the LORD your God’: see Exodus 3:13–16.

*The name Yahweh (Hebrew YHWH, sometimes transliterated as Jehovah) was revealed as the name of God to Moses at the burning bush in Exodus 3:15. There it is given the meaning ‘I AM WHO I AM’ (or ‘I WILL BE WHAT I WILL BE’). God showed Himself to Moses as the God who acts in history according to His own nature, and the God who would save Israel from slavery in Egypt and bring them into the land promised to their forebears Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. In Exodus 6:2–8 this is reinforced, and it is said that God did not reveal Himself to Abraham with this name in this same way (even though we have a record of God being known by this name from the time of Seth: see Genesis 5:26). It is by these actions that God would make Himself known to the Egyptians (Exodus 7:5), and to all the nations (Exodus 9:13–16, Romans 9:17, Joshua 2:8–11). It is clear from this that God makes His good name among the nations to be tied inextricably with the actions and destiny of Israel. This why in this chapter of Ezekiel it is God’s concern for His **name** that is the driving power in His preserving and disciplining of Israel (v. 9, 14, 22, 38, 42). In the same way, as Israel’s poor behaviour reflects badly on God’s name (see Exodus 20:7), so God will act for His name by judging, cleansing and correcting it (v. 19–20, 38, 43–44, compare 36:22–32).*

- 7–8a Israel had set store by idols and entertained idolatrous worship from the early days of its history. See Genesis 31:17–35, Exodus 32, Joshua 24:14, Judges 17–18.
- 8b–9 See above, on v. 5–6. If God had completely destroyed Israel (which He had every right to do), this would have gone against His expressed purpose by which he had bound Himself to Israel’s destiny. This becomes a kind of refrain throughout this chapter (see v. 13–14, 21–22).
- 10–11 The exodus, and the giving of the law at Sinai.
- 11 ‘my ordinances, by whose observance man shall live’: compare Leviticus 18:5. Not the way **to** life, but the way **of** life with God (see Galatians 3:10–14). Not to live in this way is to be in the way of death.

- 12 'my sabbaths': see Genesis 2:2, Exodus 16:22–30, 20:8–11, Deuteronomy 5:12–15, Nehemiah 13:15–22.
'sanctify them': keep them in holiness with God. The sabbath is a powerful reality, present from the time of creation, as an anticipation of and participation in the great rest and peace of God's own being (see Hebrews 4:1–13).
- 20:13–14 See above, v. 8b–9. Rebellion in the wilderness: see in Exodus and Numbers; e.g. Exodus 17:1–7.
- 15–16 See Numbers 14.
- 17 See Deuteronomy 2:7, 8:2–4.
- 18–22 See Numbers 20. Even though practically the whole earlier generation had died out, the Israelites were still as difficult at the end of the wilderness wanderings as they had been at the beginning.
- 23–24 The outcome of the exile as a consequence of disobedience was written into the original terms of the covenant with Israel: see Leviticus 26:27–46, Deuteronomy 28:64.
- 25–26 God made it clear in the law that the firstborn of every creature is His right by sacrifice (Exodus 22:29–30). Order was given for firstborn human children to be spared and redeemed by payment of money (Numbers 18:15). However, this seems to refer to the practice of child sacrifice to the idols (compare v.31), a practice forbidden to Israel by God (Leviticus 18:21). So this is more in the order of Romans 1:24–25, where God in wrath gives people over to the evil that is in their hearts, to bring them to judgement and repentance (see further on 28:17–18). This is indeed a horrifying thing, which shows God to be unremitting in the pressure of His holy love.
- 27–31 Idolatry in the promised land (compare 6:13).
- 29 'Bamah' ('High Place'): a play on words in Hebrew: 'ba' means 'go', and 'mah' means 'what'.
- 32 This shows that the elders who have come to Ezekiel still have a hankering after idolatry. It is motivated by the desire to be like the impressive and powerful nations round about them; most notably Babylon where they now dwell. But God will never allow them finally to follow that way. They are irrevocably His, whether they like it or not.

Christians and churches are often tempted to follow the ways and take on the values of the worldly system. Rarely are we very good at it (see Luke 16:8), and sometimes it makes us look quite pathetic. This is because God has already laid claim to us, and will never let us get away comfortably with any such attempts.

Has this been true of your own experience?

- 33–36 (Compare Deuteronomy 26:5–9.) God will bring about another exodus-like deliverance to end the exile (compare Isaiah 43), and will bring Israel back into another 'wilderness' experience, here seen as a place of reckoning.
- 37 'pass under the rod': the sign of a subjugated people, or of God's disciplining of His people.
'I will let you go in by number' (Greek version): the original Hebrew says, 'I will bring you into the bond of the covenant'. Here God's covenant relationship with His people will be re-asserted.
- 38 The finally impenitent will not come in, but all will know that God is God.

- 39 If they will not obey God, then they will have to serve the idols. Every human being is designed by God for worship and service of God, and if we will not have that, then it will have to be worship and service of something else (compare Joshua 24:15). ‘You gotta serve somebody’ (Bob Dylan).
- 40–41 As always, there is the promise of restoration, in an act of God that will establish pure and acceptable worship. This anticipates Ezekiel’s full-blown vision of the new temple and city and land in chapters 40–48.
- 20:42–44 This will be a time of sobering shame, brought on by the goodness and loving-kindness of the Lord (compare 36:28–32). This is a contrast to the elders who have come, and still have no shame (as in 3:7).
- 44 Note that it is not the people’s evil ways or corrupt doings that determine God’s actions, but at all times only the nature of His own holy name, which is pure and strong, loving and full of mercies.
- 45–48 Ezekiel is given another parable to perform: the prophecy of a raging bushfire in the then heavily wooded region of the Negeb to the south of the land of Israel. Far from being seen simply as a natural occurrence, this is to be seen as a thorough-going judgement of God.
- 47 Both good and bad (‘green’ and ‘dry’) will be affected by it.

The thorough-going nature of this judgement perhaps indicates it could be a parable of the final judgement of the whole earth (compare 2 Peter 3:10–13).

- 49 By now, Ezekiel has been given a nickname as a ‘riddler of riddles’. This is perhaps the exiles’ way of keeping his messages at arm’s length from themselves. It appears that Ezekiel is a little sensitive about this, and does not relish the prospect of having to convey to them another message that is strong in imagery.
- 21:1–7 God gives Ezekiel a further powerful image to act out, with sword and sighing, this time inescapable in its impact, to convey the same message of total devastation of the land of Israel.
- 3, 4 ‘both righteous and wicked’: see above on 20:47. Yet, in that, the faithful righteous are preserved (see on 9:3–4).
- 4–5 Echoes 20:47–48.
- 8–17 A poetic and dramatic sign, packed with abrupt action. The ‘rod’ could mean the subjecting of Israel to Babylonian rule, which Israel is now resisting. The ‘sword’ would then be the final invasion and destruction of the city that will result. (See on 11:1–12.)
- 14, 17 The clapping of the hands appears to indicate decisive fury.
- 18–22 Another prophetic sign (literally—a signpost!), in which Ezekiel in the name of God is almost urging the king of Babylon to make his move against Jerusalem. The word-picture is of the king of Babylon deciding whether to invade Ammon or Jerusalem. For this he uses all his occult arts, and the choice is made for Jerusalem.
- 23–24 To the Israelites, with their superior religious knowledge, this seems like false divination, and therefore not to be feared. But God is in charge even of the outcome of such auguries (see Proverbs 16:33), and on this occasion their shameless acts are to be shown up for what they are through fitting retribution.
- 23 ‘they have sworn solemn oaths’ may refer to the broken oaths sworn by Zedekiah to the king of Babylon (see 17:11–21). Or it may resemble the false ‘covenant with death’ made by the leaders of Jerusalem in Isaiah 28:14–18.
- 25–26 A special message for Zedekiah: God is bringing his proud ambition to an end.

'Exalt that which is low, and abase that which is high' has a number of parallels in the action of God in the Scriptures: (17:24, 1 Samuel 2:7–8, Psalm 113:7–8, Luke 1:52) and in the teaching of Jesus (Luke 14:7–14, 16:19–31, 18:9–14, 21:1–4, 13:30).

- 27 'A ruin, ruin, ruin': emphatic and final (as in Isaiah 6:3, Jeremiah 7:4). Ezekiel prophesies the end of the royal line of David with an eye on the ancient prophecy of Jacob, as on his deathbed he blessed his son Judah, from whom David, and the promised Messiah, would come (Genesis 49:10).
- 28–32 The Ammonites, spared for the time being by Nebuchadnezzar's decision in v. 20–22, stand by with drawn sword to gloat and take advantage of Jerusalem's downfall. They too consult their oracles and are hopeful of seeing the end of hated Israel. But God has a message for them (consistent with his promise to Abraham in Genesis 12:3), expanded in 25:1–7, which consigns them to oblivion.
- 22 Three prophecies which summarise the condition of Jerusalem ripe for judgement.
- 1–5 The bloody city; compare 7:22–23, 9:9, 16:21–22.
- 6–12 Brings home forcefully the more generalised strictures of chapter 18, where these same instances of law-breaking are given.
- 13–16 God will take decisive action to bring Israel into profanation among the nations, as Israel has already profaned the holiness of God's name.
- 17–22 Compare Jeremiah 6:27–30, Isaiah 1:22, Malachi 3:2–4. Even though all is 'dross', i.e. worthless, and consigned to the furnace, the presence of silver in it all gives hope that something precious will emerge.
- 23–31 All classes of society stand condemned by their actions. Compare chapter 13.

If one could have been found to stand in the breach (v.30), no doubt this could have availed to save Jerusalem. Compare Genesis 18:16–33, Exodus 32:30–34, Numbers 16:41–50, Psalm 106:19–23. But in the end, it is only the Lord's own intervention that can save any sinners (see Isaiah 59)—supremely in our Lord Jesus Christ (see Romans 5:6–11).

Are we finding these repeated prophecies against Jerusalem distressing and wearisome? No doubt Ezekiel felt a little the same. But it affected him much more deeply and personally than it does us—this was his own beloved home city. Yet it shows us that God will stop at nothing to get His message through to those whom He loves and desires a relationship with. Ezekiel, gripped by God's own heart, could not stint on his message, or keep it only to levels that may be acceptable without offending. Neither should we.

EZEKIEL CHAPTERS 23–24—THE SWORD FALLS

- 23** As a final broadside, Ezekiel is given another parable after the manner of chapter 16 (the adulterous bride), yet even more crude and disgusting in its presentation. This is not just to make a strong point. It accurately depicts the utterly shameful affront that Israel's unfaithfulness is to the strong pure holy love of God.
- 1–3 Israel's dalliance with idolatry, later to become an uncontrollable passion, took root among the idols of Egypt before the exodus (see on 20:6–7). Here it is depicted as a gross and seamy illicit love affair.
- 4 Samaria was the capital of the northern kingdom of Israel (destroyed in 721 B.C.) and Jerusalem the capital of the remaining southern kingdom of Judah (about to be destroyed in 586 B.C.). 'Oholah' means something like 'her tent', perhaps referring to a prostitute's booth, or a pagan place of worship (the two sometimes amounted to the same thing—see on 16:15–22). 'Oholibah' could mean 'My tent is in her': a reference perhaps to God's sanctuary in Jerusalem, which has now been used in effect as a prostitute's booth, and so defiled. 'they became mine': they truly belonged in marriage to God, in an intimate and exclusive relationship.
- 5–10 The fate of Samaria. Israel was intent on preserving herself by tributary alliances with the great power of Assyria, rather than by trusting in Yahweh alone. See 2 Kings 15:19–20 (Menahem, about 752–742 B.C.) and 17:3–6 (Hoshea, the last king of Israel, about 732–721; contrast Hezekiah in Jerusalem at the same time, 2 Kings 19:15–20, 32–36). Compare Hosea 8:9, 5:13, 7:11, 12:1. This would have involved taking on the customs and submitting to the worship of the Assyrians, depicted here as lewd and promiscuous harlotry. These relationships with the Assyrians proved to be their downfall: it was Assyria that destroyed Samaria in 721 B.C.
- 11–21 The lewd unfaithfulness of Jerusalem. Despite the fate of Samaria, Jerusalem carried on in the same way, and worse. Not only with Assyria (see 2 Kings 16:1–16, where king Ahaz substitutes Assyrian worship for the worship ordained by Yahweh), but also with Assyria's successor Babylon, by whom even the godly king Hezekiah was enticed (see 2 Kings 20:12–19).
- 19–21 Jerusalem's current preoccupation with support from Egypt in her rebellion against Babylon (see 17:1–21, also Jeremiah 37:1–10) is possibly reflected in these verses, harking back to the time before the exodus. The vulgar caricature of the Egyptians with grossly enlarged genitals would not have sat comfortably with Zedekiah's delicate political intrigues at that time.
- 22–35 The fate of Jerusalem.
- 22 Jerusalem's rejection of Babylon in favour of Egypt will bring the wrath of Babylon against them.
- 23 'Pekod and Shoa and Koa': probably Aramean tribes to the east of the river Tigris on the far borders of the Babylonian empire, representing the full might of Babylon. 'desirable young men': an ironic echo of v. 12—arrayed against them in battle, the warriors will not look so fancy or attractive.
- 24–25 The treatment of Jerusalem by the Babylonians will be God's indignation against her.
- 26–27 The end of the God-given glory of Jerusalem.
- 28–30 Jerusalem's despising of Babylon as her legitimate ruler at this time (see 17:11–21) will now be returned in kind, as God's judgement on Jerusalem's faithless leagues with the other nations and their idols.
- 31–35 A terse song—possibly a parody of some popular ditty—underscores the fate that Jerusalem will now share with her despised sister Samaria.

The cup of God's wrath, full of the abominations and impurities of the nations (see Revelation 17:1–6, 15–18, also 16:4–7), is a figure commonly used of the judgements of this time. See Psalm 75:7–8, Jeremiah 25:15–29. This gives us some idea of what Jesus accepted in his suffering and death on the cross (see Mark 10:38, John 18:11, Luke 22:42–44). He took it in the strong moral purity of his love, and swallowed it up there until it was no more. It is this action alone that enables us now to contemplate these things in history, and in our own time, with some degree of equanimity, and in secure hope.

23:36-49 Ezekiel is told to summarise the misdeeds of Samaria and Jerusalem, and to pronounce judgement upon them.

45–49 Under the law of God, the penalty for adultery and shedding of innocent blood was death by stoning (see Leviticus 20:10, John 8:5) and, in the case of a priest's daughter, burning by fire (Leviticus 21:9). This here becomes a fitting picture of the retribution that comes upon Samaria and Jerusalem.

24:1–2 'In the ninth year [of the reign of Zedekiah], in the tenth month, on the tenth day of the month': the same date given in 2 Kings 25:1 and Jeremiah 52:4 for the commencement of Nebuchadnezzar's siege of Jerusalem. According to our calendar: 15th January 588 B.C. God made Ezekiel aware of this happening, about 1,000 kilometres away, on the very day it happened, before any message could get back to the exiles. Ezekiel's noting of this, and informing of others at this time, would have endorsed the veracity of all that he had said so far, when the message finally came through.

3-14 The allegory of the boiling pot. This harks back to the vain proud boast of the rulers in Jerusalem in 11:1–4, and God's answer to them at that time (11:5–12). All the inhabitants of Jerusalem will be boiled up and emptied out, bones and all. The pot itself is rusted, and all the meat is spoiled. The rust is the innocent blood violently shed in their midst, still unatoned for and crying out to God from the bare rock for justice. The entire contents of the pot will be consumed, the pot itself will be burned red-hot and melted down to get rid of the 'rust' of its 'filthy lewdness'. So will the city of Jerusalem be burned to the ground.

13 Many times before this would God have cleansed Jerusalem at their request, but they would not have it so (see 2 Chronicles 36:15–16). Now nothing less than the full fury of God, poured out until its work is done and its mission is accomplished, will suffice to cleanse the people whom He loves.

15–24 The death of Ezekiel's wife. Here we discover most poignantly the personal cost to Ezekiel of his prophetic ministry, in his inextricable identification with the people of God in God's dealings with them at that time.

Hosea in his tragic marriage with Gomer was called upon to witness in a similar way at great cost to his personal life (see Hosea 1–3). Thus were the prophets given a taste and demonstration of God's own personal identification with us. Is not this supremely the ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ, particularly in his suffering and death for us on the cross (see 2 Corinthians 5:21)?

15–18 God tells Ezekiel that his wife would die that day. Although we have heard nothing about her in the book of prophecy up to this point, it is clear that he was deeply devoted to her: God calls her "the delight of your eyes". Ezekiel is to display no public sign of mourning—unusual in a society that gave public and formal vent to their personal grief (as in Mark 5:38). He is simply to notify the people in advance.

When she dies, he is to abstain from any sign of mourning or grief, however deeply he feels it personally. This he does.

- 19 The people sense that this is another of Ezekiel's signs from God for the people.
- 20–24 It has to do with the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, beloved by God (2 Chronicles 7:16) and all the people. When this happens, they are to make no objection to that happening by way of mourning. The judgement will be just. Let it be rather a bringing of their sin to remembrance, that they may grieve with one another over that. Ezekiel himself is the sign that this will surely happen, and that Yahweh in all His actions is true. If no other sign or parable moved the exiles, surely this one must have done so.

24:25–27 God gives a personal promise to Ezekiel that he will be told of the fall of Jerusalem directly by a fugitive from that city, and that before the fugitive arrives, Ezekiel will be able to speak in normal converse, and his God-imposed dumbness (3:26–27) will be lifted. This actually happens in 33:21–22. This will be the vindication of all Ezekiel's prophesying up to this time, and will be a turning-point in his ministry. No longer will he have to reiterate the messages of doom. Then he will be called upon to major on God's work of restoration of His people, hinted at so many times in his prophecy already (4:4–6, 5:13, 11:17–20, 23, 12:16, 14:22–23, 16:59–63, 17:22–24, 18:30–32, 20:40–44, 21:27).

So the judgement of God, when it finally falls, is a great relief. Like a child to whom a just punishment is meted out for some misdemeanour, we are, in a strange way, glad to see it come. For then the worst is over, and we can start to get on with things more the way they are meant to be. That is why we can pray to God with confidence, 'Your kingdom come, Your will be done'—whatever it may bring.

EZEKIEL CHAPTERS 25–28—JUDGEMENT ON THE NATIONS

While we are waiting for the siege of Jerusalem to end, we hear eight chapters of prophecies addressed to other nations: Ammon, Moab, Edom and the Philistines in chapter 25, Tyre and Sidon in chapters 26–28, and Egypt in chapters 29–32. These were given at different times, and have been collected together at this point.

God has never been concerned just with the nation of Israel. He is God of the whole world, and His plan incorporates all of the nations (see Acts 17:24–31). Israel had always known this, even if it did not always live up to it. The ‘Table of the Nations’ in Genesis 10, encompassing the whole of the world known to them at that time, is a remarkable document in any nation’s religious literature. The promise to Abraham, while giving a special place among the nations to Israel, has all the nations of the earth in view (Genesis 12:1–3). God made Joseph ruler of the nation of Egypt to further his purposes for the nation of Israel. One purpose of the Exodus was to make known God’s power among all the nations (Exodus 9:16, Romans 9:17, Joshua 2:8–11). One of God’s purposes in Joshua’s conquest of the promised land was to bring God’s (patient and timely) judgement on the immoral nations of Canaan (Genesis 15:13–16, 18–21). David’s conquest of the nations round about, which fulfilled God’s territorial promises to Abraham, anticipated the rule of the Messiah over the nations (Psalms 2, 47, 110), and the Exile heightened the awareness of Israel’s vocation, and of the Servant who would come from Israel, as ‘a light to the nations’ (Isaiah 49:6–7, 52:13–15). The major prophets devoted a large proportion of their prophecies to the word of the Lord regarding various nations (many of them no doubt transmitted to those in authority by normal diplomatic channels): Isaiah in all or part of 20 chapters, Jeremiah 8 chapters; these chapters in Ezekiel as well as further references in Chapters 21, 35 and 38–39; and the first two chapters in Amos. The books of Obadiah, Jonah and Nahum are wholly concerned with nations other than Israel. Habakkuk, Daniel, Esther, Zephaniah and Malachi also depict clearly God’s purposes among the nations.

While Jesus came and ministered principally to Israel (Matthew 15:24, 10:5–6), his ministry spilled over to those outside (John 4, Matthew 4:13–16, 8:5–13, 15:21–28) as an anticipation of his universal reign (Matthew 8:11–12, 21:33–43, 25:31–33), and he sent his disciples out with a message for all the nations (Matthew 28:16–20, Luke 24:46–47). The book of the Revelation displays the final outcome (Revelation 7, 21:24–22:2): rulers and people all of nations brought into the blessing of God’s forgiveness, healing and love.

- 25:1–7** Prophecy against the Ammonites, across the Jordan river to the east of the land of Israel. Related to Israel through Abraham’s nephew Lot, according to Genesis 19:30–38, where disreputable origins are ascribed to Ammon and Moab as the offspring of Lot begotten in drunkenness from his own daughters. Traditional enemies of Israel; see e.g. Judges 10:7–9, 2 Samuel 10:1–14.
- 1–3 Reference to the profaning of the sanctuary (i.e. the temple in Jerusalem) dates this prophecy after 586 B.C. (see 26:1–2). Psalm 137, written in exile, shows how the surrounding nations (specifically Edom) took advantage of Israel’s misfortune at that time (e.g. 2 Kings 24:2), and joined in the shocking treatment meted out to Jerusalem by the brutal Babylonians.
- 4 ‘people of the East’: nomadic desert tribesmen, forerunners of the modern Arabs.
- 5 Present-day Amman in Jordan.
- 6–7 An outcome of God’s faithfulness to His covenant with Abraham in Genesis 12:3: ‘whoever curses you I will curse’. (How many nations have fallen prey to that, down to the present day, while the people of Israel, amazingly, have survived with a continuous existence).

- 7 'Then you will know that I am the LORD': This is the destiny of every human being, as blessing or judgement—see on chapter 6. Does this hint at some final restoration of the devastated nations, as in Jeremiah 49:6, 48:47?
- 25:8–11** Prophecy against Moab, alongside the Dead Sea to the south-east of the land of Israel. For origins of Moab see on 25:1–7. Homeland of David's great grandmother Ruth (see Ruth 1:1–5, 4:13–22, Matthew 1:1–16, 1 Samuel 22:3–4).
- 8 'like all the other nations': a denial of Israel's special relationship with God.
- 10–11 Not long after this both Ammon and Moab were overrun by Nabatean tribesmen, and ceased to exist as nations.
- 12–14 Prophecy against Edom, in the mountainous country south of the dead sea, to the far south-east of the land of Israel. Descended from Jacob's older twin brother Esau (Genesis 25:19–26—they fought each other even in the womb! Also Genesis 27, 32–33, 36). Edom is singled out for particular mention in Psalm 137, for being in for the kill at the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C., and for picking off the fleeing refugees. This also occasioned the prophecy of Obadiah, devoted entirely to the demise of Edom.
- 15–17 Prophecy against the Philistines (including the 'Cherethites'), along the southern coastal region of Israel (the present day 'Gaza Strip'), where they had settled via the sea, probably from Crete ('Caphtor', Amos 9:7). Traditional enemies of the Israelites since the time of the Judges (e.g. Judges 3:1–3, 31, 10:6–7, chs 13–16, 1 Samuel 4–7, 13–14, 17–18, 27–29, 31, 2 Samuel 8). Subdued by David, they had remained as a thorn in Israel's side ever since. Disappeared from about the second century B.C.

To what extent do we see God dealing with us as individuals, or as whole nations (or ethnic groupings)? What are the implications of this for the mission of our church in our own nation, and amongst all the nations? Have we grasped the grand vista of God's plan through the ages for all the nations (see Romans 11:25–27)? Do we see our own life and calling in the light of that?

- 26–28** A prophecy for Tyre and Sidon, sea-trading cities on the coastline to the north of the land of Israel (in present-day Lebanon). Tyre, a coastal city linked by causeway to an island harbour, with a strong fleet of merchant vessels, was a wealthy sea-terminal for the eastern land-trade routes. It had special monopolies in glassware and coveted purple-dyed materials.
- 26:1–6** Destruction of Tyre.
- 1 'the eleventh year': i.e. of the exile: 586 B.C. The month is not given. If we take 33:21 (the date of the news of the fall of Jerusalem reaching Ezekiel) as 'the eleventh year', and this month as the eleventh month, then this prophecy comes just a month after Ezekiel has received the news.
- 2 'the gate of the peoples': the removal of Jerusalem from its strategic position straddling some of the trade routes would open to Tyre greater opportunities for control and exploitation.
- 3–6 Tyre, for all its wealth and security, will not prove impregnable. Its harbours and dependent villages on the mainland will be overrun. God uses sea imagery to impress this upon a sea-faring people.

- 7–14 Nebuchadrezzar (closer to the Babylonian spelling), in typical style, will bring the might of his military machine against Tyre (compare 4:1–3), and the same fate that came to Jerusalem will overtake Tyre.
- 14 (compare 5–6). ‘It is now unoccupied, except by fishermen’—report from a nineteenth century traveller on the island of Tyre.
- 15–18 We can imagine the economic impact on the region, and around the Mediterranean Sea, of the collapse of Tyre and its trade, and the devastated distress of those who were economically dependant on it. (Compare Revelation 18:9–10.)
- 26:19–21 Tyre, drowned like a sunken ship, is consigned the realm of the dead, along with the other failed empires (compare 32:18–32).
- 27 ‘The good ship Tyre’—fittingly likened to a magnificent merchant vessel, full of precious cargo, that will suffer shipwreck.
- 1–11 This mainly poetic description emphasises the multi-national character of Tyre and its enterprise, drawing on the best of everything from everywhere.
- 12–25a A fascinating directory of cargoes, and of trading partners and destinations, from Spain, Greece and Turkey round to Africa and the Persian Gulf. No one could fail to be impressed at such a rich and wide-ranging commercial enterprise.
- 25b–36 The poem continues to describe in graphic terms the wreckage of all Tyre's hopes and activities, and the appalling distress of those affected by her fall. (Compare Revelation 18.)

Ezekiel is clearly unstinting in his admiration of Tyre. The whole chapter is a lamentation (see v. 2, 32), in which God and His prophet bewail, with the victims, the passing of one so beautiful and strong. Yet God does not withhold His hand against Tyre on that account. What is the awful rottenness at the heart of this beautiful one that calls for such a terrible demise? Chapter 28 will spell that out to us.

Do we regard economic success, and the amassing of wealth, as the one thing impervious to criticism? To what extent does this determine our social policies today, or affect the decisions of our daily lives? Even in the church, to what extent does anything that makes money remain unchallenged and untouched on that account?

- 28:1–10 A prophecy against the king of Tyre.
- 1–2 The sin of Tyre is the root sin of the whole human race (see Genesis 3:5: ‘you shall be *as God*’).
- 3 ‘wiser than Daniel’: either Ezekiel’s contemporary in Babylon, already famed for his wisdom (Daniel 1:17–21, 2:46–49), or some other earlier figure now unknown to us (see on 14:12–21).
- 4–5 ‘your heart has become proud in your wealth’: for this to happen, the king of Tyre would have been saying that all this wealth and goodness comes from himself and his own wisdom and effort, and not from God (compare Deuteronomy 8, esp. v. 17–18). This deception is at the root of all human evil (see Romans 1:21).
- 6–10 The king’s death, in shame and uncleanness, will bring home to him the limitations of his humanness, and his mortality.

To be human is a wonderful thing (see on 2:1). It is to be like God, and to be one with God in affinity and loyal love, but it is not to be God ourselves. It is good to acknowledge that we are human beings, and not God ourselves, and to be glad in that—for that is the way things are. It is good to acknowledge that God is God, and that we are not, and to rejoice with God in that. It takes away a lot of the strain in living.

11–19 This poetic lamentation now takes this further, by showing the pattern and dynamic of the sin and destruction of the king of Tyre to be that of the whole human race.

The imagery here is reminiscent of the beginnings of the human race in Genesis 1:26–3:24. Yet it also draws on elements of how we are to be in the end-time, as set out in Revelation 21. What is clear is that this is more than just the king of Tyre that God is talking about here. This is something that involves us all.

28:11–14 While drawing upon elements of the creation stories in Genesis, this clearly goes beyond it, in the light of our ultimate human destiny, and is a fresh and new composition in itself.

15 Iniquity is found in Tyre itself. The evil comes from within (compare Mark 7:14–23).

16 ‘you were filled with violence’: The business successes of Tyre, as so often, were undergirded by oppression and back-stabbing.

17 (Compare Romans 1:21–22.) Taking credit ourselves for what are in truth gifts from God (see John 3:27, 1 Corinthians 4:7), is to distort and defile whatever good wisdom we have.

18 ‘I brought forth fire from the midst of you; it consumed you, and I turned you to ashes...’: How tellingly this depicts the dynamic of sin and the action of God’s wrath in human life! Compare Romans 1:18–32, 7:7–13. ‘God’s wrath is not sin, but *sin* [unconfessed, internally active] *is God’s wrath*’ (Geoffrey C. Bingham, *Angry Heart or Tranquil Mind?* New Creation Publications Inc., Blackwood S.A., 1984, p. 42). Evil is found in the human heart. God, by the pressure of His holy love, brings it out into the open and sees it activated, to show up its deadly effects, and if necessary, bring about its destruction.

19 No one is left in any doubt as to the horror of what was in the heart of Tyre, despite its outward glory and success.

We are told in the New Testament that Christ ‘bore our sins in his body’ on the cross (1 Peter 2:24), and that he also bore God’s condemnation of sin in his flesh (Romans 8:1–4, Galatians 3:13). Could it be that these two statements are one and the same? Sin has its own inbuilt penalty, pain, shame and defilement, and this is brought to bear in our lives by the determined and active wrath of God, by the unrelenting pressure of His holy love, to bring us to repentance, if we will have it, or, if not, to just judgement.

What does that tell us about what Jesus, in all purity, suffered for us on the cross? What does it tell us of the cost to God of our repentance and turning again to Him in forgiveness and love, that He has now brought to us? Where are we now in all of that?

20–23 Tyre’s neighbouring city Sidon will share in Tyre’s downfall. Note how the manifestation of God’s glory in Sidon will be the execution of His holy and cleansing judgements in her midst. This will make God known to them.

But there is a more final and terrible judgement than that which came upon Tyre and Sidon. It is to reject the One whom God has given to be our salvation in all these things. See Matthew 11:20–22, Hebrews 2:1–4, Mark 3:28–30, Hebrews 6:4–9, 12:25–29.

24 God’s faithfulness to His covenant with Israel (as in Genesis 12:3) will see the removal of those nations that have done despite to Israel.

25 Here again is a glimpse of the restoration of Israel, by which God will make Himself known to His people.

EZEKIEL CHAPTERS 29–32—EGYPT'S DOOM

Egypt was one of the earliest and most developed of settled human civilisations, built on the dependability of the great river Nile for agricultural cultivation, stretching back to 4–3,000 B.C. The great pyramids were built around 2900 B.C. For centuries Egypt had dominated the lives of peoples round about. The early history of Israel was inextricably bound up with this great power (Abraham, Genesis 12:10–13:1; Joseph, Genesis 39–50; Moses and the exodus, Exodus 1–15). God rescued His people Israel from slavery in Egypt, and told them they were never to go that way again. If they did, it would be a judgement on Israel for not keeping the covenant with God who had saved them from Egypt and its ways (Deuteronomy 17:14–16, 28:68).

The other great power axis at the time was the civilisation of the Mesopotamian region, where the empires of Assyria and, latterly, Babylonia had arisen. In 604 B.C. a decisive battle at Carchemish by the river Euphrates between Pharaoh Neco of Egypt and Nebuchadrezzar of Babylon determined the dominance of the Mesopotamian power, and the end of Egypt once and for all as an international force. (See Jeremiah 46. The godly king Josiah of Judah, in a fit of ambitious pride, sought to become involved in this stoush, and suffered for it—see 2 Chronicles 35:20–27, where it is clear that God was doing something greatly significant with these powerful empires, in which Israel was not to interfere.) This was a turning-point in history, from which Egypt has not recovered to this day. Ezekiel here in these four chapters, about the time of the fall of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. and later, chronicles prophetically the fallout of that decisive turning-point in his own day, and into the future.

Ezekiel's messages had a particular contemporary force when we remember that Zedekiah and the ruling princes in Jerusalem had been looking to Egypt to save Jerusalem from Babylon (see Jeremiah 37:1–10, Ezekiel 17:1–21, 23:19–21). They should have known better, partly because of the warnings of God, and partly because as early as 700 B.C., in the prophet Isaiah's time, Egypt already had the reputation of being unreliable as an ally (see Isaiah 31:1–3, 36:6).

So, at this momentous time of Israel's history, at its point of lowest weakness, we are given a glimpse of what God is doing among the great nations of the world, down to our own time, and beyond. It is a stunning vision. The astonishing thing is that it is little Israel's great God, and no one else, who is doing all this.

Do our particular troubles preoccupy us to the extent that we do not see what God is doing in the wider picture? Let us be enlarged by Ezekiel's vision.

Do we, like Josiah, for all his good intentions, seek to make a place for ourselves among the powers of the world, and so actually get in the way of God's direct dealings with them? Do we see them to be as answerable to God as we are, and do we tell them so? Do we have any ministry other than this among the powers that be?

29:1–16 Prophecy against Pharaoh and all Egypt.

1 'the tenth year': i.e. of the exile. January 587 B.C., a year after the siege of Jerusalem was begun (compare 24:1–2).

2–3 'the great dragon': Egypt is pictured here, as elsewhere (Psalm 74:13–14, Isaiah 30:7, 51:9–10), as a huge crocodile in the Nile, or as the great water-monster (also known as 'Rahab' or Leviathan). This has overtones of the chaos-monster employed

- in the creation myths of the other nations—one who when used in Israelite imagery (Psalm 89:10, Job 9:13, 26:12) is no match for Yahweh the God of Israel.
- 3 ‘My Nile is my own; I made it’: a deluded denial of God’s provision for Egypt’s well-being. If translated ‘I have made myself’ (a claim made by the Egyptian sun-god Re), this goes further into proud and arrogant usurping of God’s position (compare Tyre: 28:2, 6–9, 17; contrast Psalm 100:3, ‘It is he that has made us, and not we ourselves’). Although not at this time included in the covenant with Israel, the other nations are still answerable to God their creator for their denial of God’s ‘eternal power and deity’ (see Romans 1:18–23, Ephesians 2:11–13).
- 29:4–5 ‘the fish of your streams’: Egypt with her dependencies will be beached like a carcase in the desert.
- 6–9 Although Zedekiah’s appeal to Egypt was opposed by the words of Jeremiah and Ezekiel, Egypt’s failure to be a support to Israel is culpable under the terms of the covenant with Abraham for all the nations (Genesis 12:3, ‘I will bless those who bless you, and him who curses you I will curse’).
- 10 Migdol, in the Nile delta, and Syene, which is modern-day Aswan, lay at the opposite extremities of the land of Egypt.
- 11–12 A similar ordeal is envisaged for Egypt as is coming to Israel and Jerusalem. While it appears that Egypt did not undergo exile to the same extent, nevertheless it was invaded and dominated by Babylon for this period, and no doubt there was some similar dispersion of Egyptians.
- 13–16 A restoration is envisaged for Egypt, but never to its former glory—a situation that pertains to this day. From that time onward it knew mainly subjugation—at the hands of the Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, and Romans, and in latter centuries the French and British. In its clashes with the modern-day state of Israel, it has come off second-best. The main message for Israel in Ezekiel’s day is never to rely on Egypt again.
- 17–20 Nebuchadrezzar’s invasion of Egypt.
 ‘the twenty-seventh year’ of the exile: 571 B.C., the latest of Ezekiel’s dated prophecies in the whole book. After destroying Jerusalem in 586 B.C., Nebuchadrezzar turned to the siege of Tyre (see 26:7–14), which lasted a wearisome thirteen years. This was severely taxing for the Babylonian army, as supplies needed to be kept up and soldiers’ wages paid for all that time. When Tyre finally fell, it was found to be hardly worth it—all its valuables had been sent off by sea, or worn down by the siege. Nevertheless, God considers that Nebuchadrezzar has been doing this at His bidding (see 26:7), and Himself takes responsibility for reimbursing Nebuchadrezzar, by giving him the whole of Egypt, with all its land-locked riches, as easy prey in compensation. By contrast to the long drawn-out siege of Tyre, Nebuchadrezzar’s invasion and conquest of Egypt (which happened in 568–567 B.C.) was to be swift and total.
 (Jeremiah and the remnant of Judah, despite Jeremiah’s warnings from the Lord, were also caught in this action—see Jeremiah 42–44).
- 21 This is when strength (‘a horn’) will begin to return to exiled Israel, and the vindication of Ezekiel’s words will bring hope and promise.
- 30:1–19 An undated collection of oracles, probably from about 587 B.C. (see 29:1).
- 1–5 ‘the day of the Lord’: as in 13:5 a day when God brings judgement to a head—there for Israel, here for Egypt. A common conception among the prophets (see e.g. Amos 5:18–20, Isaiah 2:12–22, Joel 1:15, 2:1–2, 30–32), represented as a ‘day of thick darkness’, and prefiguring the Day of Judgement of the whole earth.

When Jesus was crucified, there was darkness over the land (Mark 15:33). Was this to indicate that the Day of the Lord had now come? Certainly Peter related Joel’s prophecy to this time. It is in the cross of Christ that all judgement of the human race is focussed, and it is

on the basis of our participation in that through faith that we are now judged for all time (see Mark 8:38, John 5:24–27, Revelation 20:11–15, 13:5).

- 5 Compare 29:4—Egypt’s dependencies.
- 6–9 The consternation of the other nations at the fall of Egypt; e.g. Ethiopia, at the other end of the Nile. This is the action of God, and it is God who sends the message.
- 10–19 A chain of place names in Egypt that will be devastated by Nebuchadrezzar, including the ancient capital Thebes (v.14, 15, 16), which is modern Karnak and Luxor, with the valley of the kings.
- 30:13** ‘the idols’: it was in Egypt that Israel was schooled in idolatry (see 20:7–8), where images can still be seen carved into the rock. Here the idols are summarily dealt with, at their point of origin.
- 19 As always, it is God’s heart’s desire that all should know and relate with Him as God.
- 20–26 The incurable brokenness and weakness of Egypt.
- 20 ‘the eleventh year’: April 587 B.C.
- 21–26 The retreat of Pharaoh Hophra the previous year, after coming out ostensibly to aid Jerusalem under siege (see Jeremiah 37:1–10), was no temporary setback. It was an indication of Egypt’s now permanent incapacity, which is about to be finalised. The sword of God has been placed into the hands of the king of Babylon to finish the job.
- 31** Allegory of Egypt as a cedar of Lebanon.
- 1–9 The glory that was Egypt is depicted. As with Tyre (chapters 27–28) God is unstinting in His praises of Egypt (as in v.7). After all, He says ‘I made it beautiful’ (v. 9)—its beauty and power came from God (compare Romans 13:1). Again, as in chapter 28, there are echoes of the glories of the original creation ‘in the garden of God’.
- 10 Egypt forgot that its glory was from God, and attributed its power and beauty to itself.
- 11–14 The tall tree comes crashing down over the whole of the land of Egypt. The fate of Egypt will ensure that no such proud empire rises again on the banks of the Nile.
- 15–18 Egypt, still dressed as a great tree, is consigned to the world of the dead, along with all the other tree-nations, in a picture of the mournful outcome of all untoward personal and national pride, which is expanded in the next chapter. Mortality is the great leveller.
- 32:1–16** The passing of such a great power from among the nations of God’s earth does not occur without being marked by an appropriate lamentation on the part of God and His prophet. Although it is still some years before Pharaoh and Egypt will succumb to Nebuchadrezzar’s conquest, Ezekiel is already singing at his funeral.
- 1 March 585 B.C., after the exiles had received the news of Jerusalem’s fall (see 33:21), and it was abundantly clear that any hope in Egypt’s aid had been totally misplaced.
- 2 Pharaoh, who had regarded himself as lion-like (what shape is the body of the Sphinx in Egypt?), is likened again rather to a crocodile or sea-monster who muddies and pollutes the waters.
- 4–8 As in 29:4–5, the monster is captured by God, this time in a net, and exposed as a carcase for wild birds and beasts to devour. The filling of the rivers with blood and the coming of darkness recall in a pictorial way God’s earlier judgements on Egypt at the time of the exodus (Exodus 7:14–24, 10:21–23).
- 9–16 The fall of Egypt will put fear into the hearts of many nations and their rulers, as they tremble for their own demise. Once Egypt, with her troubling and polluting of

- the nations, is removed, the waters will once again flow clear and smooth, free from idolatry and false pride.
- 17–31 Pharaoh’s descent into the world of the dead.
- 17 The month is not given in Hebrew—possibly a fortnight after 32:1 in 585 B.C.
- 18–32 With grim repetition, the majesty of Egypt is reduced to the ignominy of other fallen empires in the shadowy realm of the dead. This picture is particularly poignant in the light of the extensive measures the Pharaohs went to in order to ensure some kind of quality survival after death.
- 22–23 Assyria was the brutal and tyrannical military empire in Mesopotamia defeated by Babylon in 612 B.C.
- 24–25 Elam, to the east of Babylon, was still a force to be reckoned with—here spent in Sheol.
- 26–28 Meshech and Tubal were warlike nations to the north of Babylon.
- 29 Edom (see 26:12–14) has also met its doom.
- 30 The Phoenician states to the north of Israel, such as Tyre and Sidon, are there too.
- 31 Pharaoh’s cold ‘comfort’, on seeing all of these, is perhaps the thought, ‘Well, at least we are not the only ones to suffer this fate’.

It is notable that Babylon itself is not included in Ezekiel’s prophecies against the nations. This could be because, in all this, Babylon is the instrument of God in judgement upon these nations. Ezekiel also, it must be remembered, was living in Babylonia at the time, and enjoying Babylon’s protection and hospitality (see Jeremiah 29:1–9, in which the exiles are bidden by God to seek the welfare of their captors). But Babylon’s time would also come, as made clear particularly in the prophecies of Isaiah, including one in Isaiah 13:1–14:23 which has some elements much on the same pattern as Ezekiel 32.

The Old Testament has, in the main, a vague and shadowy notion of life after death. More questions are asked than answers given. Nevertheless, faith in God, in the face of death, is present from the beginning. Psalm 6:4–5 sees death and Sheol (the place of the dead) as a state in which God is neither remembered or praised, and looks to God for deliverance. Psalm 30:1–3, 8–10 asks questions about that, and looks to God as the One who can bring us back from [the brink of] death. In Psalm 49:7–20, death, which comes alike to animals and humans, is a place without light. No one, except God, can ransom anyone’s life back from the power of death. Psalm 88:1–13 asks, without receiving any answers, whether God’s love and help can be known in the land of ‘darkness’ and ‘forgetfulness’, but still cries out to God. Psalm 139:7–12 answers decisively, ‘If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!’ Job also calls death ‘the land of gloom and deep darkness’ (10:20–22), but also has the great affirmation that he expects to see and be vindicated by God after death (19:23–27). Towards the end of the Old Testament period, specific expectation of the resurrection of the dead begins to emerge (Ezekiel 37:1–14, Daniel 12:1–3), though this was implicit from the beginning (Genesis 22:5, Hebrews 11:17–19), and was borne out by instances of people being raised from death (1 Kings 17:17–24, 2 Kings 4:32–37, 13:20–21). This was still disputed in Jesus’ day (see Acts 23:6–8), but was clinched by the actual resurrection of Jesus as the first to rise from death for ever (Acts 26:22–23). This was then the basis of the apostles’ preaching and teaching (e.g. 1 Corinthians 15, 2 Corinthians 5:1–10).

Do we have a full-orbed biblical view of life after death? Have we faced the darkness of death as ‘the last enemy to be destroyed’ (1 Corinthians 15:26), and is our trust in the power of God alone to raise us from that to full and eternal life? Or do we look to some inherent immortality of our own by which we ourselves will bypass the terrors of death and enter into something ‘nice’?

EZEKIEL CHAPTERS 33–35—THE WATCHMAN AND THE SHEPHERDS

- 33** Now that Jerusalem has fallen, in fulfilment of Ezekiel's former prophecies (v. 21–22), Ezekiel's ministry in Babylon turns from what Israel has been to what Israel is to be. This transition is marked by a kind of recommissioning, in which the responsibilities of the prophet and his hearers are outlined once again (v.1–20). In this new situation, the same parameters apply. There are also new misconceptions and continuing injustices to be addressed (v. 23–29), and new dynamics and potential pitfalls in ministry to which Ezekiel needs to be alerted. The coming of blessings can be just as sobering and hazardous as the coming of judgements.
- 1–9 Ezekiel is reminded of the nature of his call in 3:16–21. His responsibility is to relay faithfully what he sees and hears. The responsibility of his hearers is to heed his warnings. His words from God are still a matter of life and death.
- 10–20 This recalls and summarises the principles of chapter 18.
- 10 As the people see the fate of Jerusalem, they begin to acknowledge their sins as they have never done before. But they do this in a morbid and pessimistic way, indulging in over-reaction as we like to do, perhaps thinking that this will somehow compensate for their former iniquity. This is out of place in God's way of doing things. Dealing with sin is God's business, not ours, and He does that in ways we never could. Our part in that is simply to repent and change, as this wonderful mercy is given to us.
- 11–16 Ezekiel is told to spell out again the principles on which God deals with us.
- 11 The truth that God has no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but works for repentance and life, needs to underscore all our understanding of what has been said hitherto about God's judgements.
- 12–13 The righteous can build up no bank balance of goodness, no 'treasury of merit', since all goodness is from God and comes by living with Him in obedience (see Mark 10:17–19).
- 14–16 Despite any amount of former wickedness, anyone who turns back to God and His ways will receive immediate forgiveness. Such is the amazing mercy of God. The consistent thing in both situations is being in that relationship of intimacy with God, for which we have been made.
- 17–20 This is still incomprehensible to normal human conceptions of justice and behaviour. But this is the way it is in God's universe, and it is spelled out in summary form once more.
- 21–22 The news of the fall of Jerusalem comes to Ezekiel as promised by God in 24:25–27. Ezekiel's tongue is now released from the restraint laid upon it by God seven years earlier in 3:25–27.
- 21 'the twelfth year' (585 B.C.): this could have been eighteen months after the actual fall of Jerusalem; rather a long time for a journey that normally took only a few months (Ezra 7:9). Some texts read 'the eleventh year' (586 B.C., about six months after the fall of Jerusalem), and this may be more probable.
- 23–29 Those 'poorest of the land', left behind by the Babylonians after the devastation of Jerusalem to be 'vinedressers and ploughmen' (Jeremiah 52:16), are now taking advantage of the situation to claim possession of vacant land to which they have no legal right (just as looting is an unsavoury feature of riots, warfare or civil disorder today). They claim some bogus theological justification for this from the story of

Israel's ancestor Abraham (just as the remnant left behind in 597 B.C. had claimed God's special favour on that account: see 11:14–21). But their hearts remain unchanged towards God and His law, as evidenced perhaps by their grasping nature, and by their resort to unlawful shedding of blood (see Jeremiah 40:7–41:18). And so they come under God's censure, by the word of Ezekiel.

- 30–33 Ezekiel is now in the changed position of a prophet whose word has come true. After scorning or ignoring his message before, the exiles now come in large numbers to hear his word. But their hearts remain unchanged, still 'set on their gain'. So Ezekiel is warned by God not to be taken in by their apparent devotion and solicitude.
- 33 'When this comes—and come it will!': remember that Ezekiel is no longer majoring on judgement, but on the coming blessing of God, which no less than judgement has important implications for present behaviour (compare 1 John 3:1–10).

Jesus himself was aware of this same propensity of human beings to continue to seek their own advantage even in the act of embracing religious devotion (see John 2:23–25), and he knew it would take more than signs and wonders to change the human heart to true obedience and love (see Luke 16:27–31). Only the gift of genuine heartfelt repentance through faith in a sovereign propitiating God will make the important difference (see Luke 18:9–14). That is why Jesus knew that the action of the cross was so necessary (see Luke 12:49–53).

In the same way, we need to beware not to be taken in by the numbers game, or by human praise, especially in situations of apparent success. A steady and faithful proclaiming of the full and true gospel word of God, whether people want to hear it or not, is what is required of our churches today (as in 2 Timothy 4:1–5, 1 Corinthians 4:1–5). We will then have a wise and godly estimate and expectation of human beings, that will not be cynical of all change, but will warmly welcome genuine conversion.

We also need to be aware of the times and seasons when it is necessary to major on judgement, and when it is time for hope and time to 'tell them about the banquet'. In reality, these messages should always go hand in hand.

- 34 'Shepherd' in the Old Testament is often used to refer to rulers or leaders in the community (see e.g. Jeremiah 23:1–6, and Zechariah 11:4–17: n.b. v.6, where 'shepherd' and 'king' are equivalent). So this is a chapter addressing the past and future leadership of Israel.
- 1–6 The exile has come about largely because of a failure in right leadership. True rulers use their authority in the service of those for whom they are responsible (see Mark 10:42–45, John 10:11). These rulers have been using their position to serve themselves, to the detriment of those over whom they rule.
- 7–10 This puts God against these rulers. They will no longer be able to exercise this leadership, and their subjects will be rescued from this exploitation.
- 11–16 God Himself undertakes to be the leader and ruler of His people (compare Psalm 23), as He brings them back from exile, and restores the nation of Israel in its land.
- 12 'a day of clouds and thick darkness': see on 30:3.

- 17–22 Not only the kings and princes, but also the rich and powerful in Israel, had used their position to their own advantage over against the weak and the poor. They too now come under God’s strictures.
- 23–24 The promise of a new king or Messiah, descended from David, who will rule in concert with God. This will not just be another ruler who comes and goes, for this king will rule for ever (see 37:24–25). So a whole new regime is envisaged.
- 25–31 The covenant of peace (‘shalom’ = functional well-being), by which God relates Himself with His people, and His people with Himself, is enhanced by the whole of creation conspiring with God to bring blessing, protection, and fruitful provision to God’s people (compare Leviticus 26:3–13). This is an expression of God’s covenant of creation (see Genesis 8:22, 9:8–17, Isaiah 11:1–9, Jeremiah 33:14–26).

When Jesus came, he presented himself as the true shepherd (John 10:1–30), as distinct from the false ‘shepherds’ of his day, the Pharisees who had cast a believer out of the synagogue (John 9). This was his claim, in effect, to be the promised Davidic Messiah of Ezekiel 34; but it was not received at the time (see John 10:24–25). His action on the cross to take away sin is the fulfilment of this prophecy, not only for Israel, but for all the nations (the ‘other sheep’ of John 10:16).

What does this chapter say today to our leaders in church and nation?

- 35** A prophecy against Edom (compare 25:12–14), in the light of its inimical treatment of Israel at the time of Jerusalem’s fall (compare Obadiah). ‘Mount Seir’: the hill country south-east of the Dead sea (see Genesis 36:8–9). ‘Seir’ means rough, wooded or ‘hairy’; ‘Edom’ means ‘red’; hence Genesis 25:25, 30, 27:11!
- 1–9 Edom has made two mistakes as far as the Lord is concerned. The first was ‘you cherished perpetual enmity’ (v. 5). This is entirely out of keeping with God’s way of doing things: see on 4:4–8, and Amos 1:11–12. The wonderful thing about God’s wrath is that it comes to an end when it has done its work. (Compare Christ’s cry from the cross, ‘It is finished!’ John 19:30—a cry in which we can join by faith.)
- 10–15 Edom’s second mistake was to think that God had abandoned His people Israel in His harsh treatment of them. This was not the case: ‘the LORD was there’ still (v.10). So in attempting to take over the land of Israel for themselves, they were encroaching on God’s territory, which He still held in trust for His people, and were denying God’s continued love for Israel in His plan for all the nations. Edom is thus opposing itself to God and His purpose, which will be ‘for the rejoicing of the whole earth’ (v.14). So they now face the opposition of God.

When have we tried to hijack God’s purpose ourselves, particularly by cherishing ‘perpetual enmity’? Where do we stand with God in that regard?

EZEKIEL CHAPTERS 36–37—THE WHOLE HOUSE OF ISRAEL

- 36:1–7 Ezekiel now addresses ‘the mountains of Israel’, that have been invaded and encroached upon by Edom and the other nations at the time of Israel’s calamity. They are still the Lord’s territory, promised by Him to Israel, and God is still jealous for His people in his love for them. How heartened the exiles would have been by this message, as they thought of their now desolate and uninhabited homeland, still being kept for them by God!
- 8–15 Remember how Ezekiel had been told to prophesy against the mountains of Israel in chapter 6. These mountains were the ‘high places’ where Israel had indulged in false, immoral and idolatrous worship, and for this reason destruction had come upon the land. None of that taint remains here—there has been a very thorough cleansing. What is promised here is blessing and fruitfulness greater than has been known before (compare Job 42:10). Because of the devastation that has occurred, the countryside now has the reputation among the nations of a land that devours its inhabitants (compare Numbers 13:32). Indeed the land itself had co-operated with God in ejecting those who refused to live in God’s ways (Leviticus 18:24–30, 20:22). But God will now gainsay this reproachful reputation, by causing the land to be repopulated with an upright people.

Note how in the Scriptures ecological health and moral uprightness before God are all of a piece. What message does that have for the ecological concerns of our own day? What does that tell us of God’s covenant with the whole of creation, and of our place within that?

- 16–19 A brief historical survey, which gives the rationale for the exile. It has come about as a judgement on Israel’s impure conduct, which had defiled the land.

‘The uncleanness of a woman in her impurity’ (v. 17) does not refer just to the insanitariness of menstrual and after-birth discharges in an age before feminine hygiene came to be what it is today. In the Old Testament, God used regular everyday occurrences, such as birth, death, various diseases, the eating of certain foods, the treatment of particular sacrifices, and normal male and female bodily discharges, to teach Israel that there is a difference between what is clean and what is unclean (see e.g. Leviticus 15, esp. 31–33, 11:46–47, 20:22–26). Certain states of ‘uncleanness’ disqualified a person for a time from entering the sanctuary and participating in the worship of God. This was always intended to point to the reality of moral purity before God, and the gross defilement that moral impurity is in a human being, who is made in the image of the holy God and is called to belong to Him (Leviticus 19:1). Jesus made this clear in Mark 7:14–23. The point being made here in Ezekiel 36:17 is that Israel through its immoral and lawless conduct had rendered itself unfit to be in the presence of God.

- 20–21 The problem was that when God disciplined Israel in this way, Israel’s fate reflected poorly on Yahweh’s reputation among the nations. Their thought would have been, ‘Yahweh can’t be much of a God if this is what has happened to His people.’ God’s purpose is that through Israel His name as the holy Creator be honoured among all the nations He has made. Israel’s reversal is counter-productive to this purpose; hence ‘when they came to the nations, wherever they came, they profaned my holy name’ (v. 20; compare chapter 20, where God’s concern for his holy name is the driving power of His action).

- 22–32 God’s mighty act of restoration.
- 22 Note how as human sinners we have nothing to commend ourselves to God. It is purely out of His own love and according to His own holy nature that God acts for our good (compare Romans 5:6–8).
- 23 The holiness of God’s name will be vindicated among the nations by restoring Israel to set forth that holiness of God in the world. This awesome holiness includes God’s great mercy in acting towards Israel with such grace. So also God sanctifies us, that we might participate in and bear witness to His life.
- 24 The first action will be the physical return of Israel to the promised land. This denotes the end of judgement and the enjoyment of God’s good favour.
- 25 Sprinkling with water was part of the ritual of, for example, cleansing and making atonement for a house that had been infected with a malignant disease (see Leviticus 14:43–53). Such Israel had become by its idolatry and unlawful practice. God undertakes sovereignly to effect this cleansing.
- 26 The nation will be renewed in its innermost being: no longer hardened in rebellion (as in 2:2–3), it will become soft and responsive to God.
- 27 The coming of God’s own spirit to the nation will result in heartfelt obedience to all God’s law.
- 28 The restoration of the people to the land will be matched by the restoration of their covenant relationship with God. Compare Jeremiah 31:31–37.

This passage, addressed to the nation of Israel, has many parallels with David’s prayer of personal repentance in Psalm 51:

Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin!...
Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow....
Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me.
Cast me not away from your presence,
and take not your holy Spirit from me.

This kind of true and deep repentance towards God is available to nations and individuals at any time in history. When the exiles returned, the Spirit of God was very much in evidence (see Haggai 2:5, Zechariah 4:6). But true prophecy spreads out through time, like ripples in a pond, and has application beyond the immediate context of the prophet’s own time, in ways the prophets themselves can scarcely guess at (see 1 Peter 1:10–12, 2 Peter 1:20–21). We shall find this increasingly in the later prophecies of Ezekiel. This passage has particular appositeness in the light of the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, bringing to Israel, and to all the nations, the gifts of repentance, cleansing, the forgiveness of sins, and the relationship of faith with God, wrought through Christ in his suffering and death on the cross and his rising to life (see Acts 2, 5:30–32, 11:15–18). It has many parallels in New Testament experience (e.g. John 3:5, 14:15–17, Acts 9:17–18, 22:16, 1 Thessalonians 1:5, 9, Titus 3:3–7, Ephesians 5:25–27).

- 29–30 This coming restoration is seen as a time of great fruitfulness and abundant provision.
- 31 It is often only after we have been rescued from something that we can see what great peril we have been in. This is certainly the case when we are rescued from sin. Before that happens, the ‘deceitfulness of sin’ (Hebrews 3:12–13) obscures from us our true condition. Once saved from that, when we see what God has had to do to set us free, and the terrible cost of that, then we see our sin for the first time as it really was. We stand in His grace, and we shudder with shame.

- 32 Once again, we are reminded that, as sinners, we have nothing with which to commend ourselves to God (see v. 22), but that God acts from His own nature to redeem us. This also gives us no leg to stand on in our own right.
- 33–36 In answer to the taunt of the nations in v. 20, God vindicates His holiness in the sight of all the nations by restoring the land and its peoples. Mention of ‘the garden of Eden’ (see 28:13, Genesis 2:8–15) likens this to the original act of creation.
- 37–38 God promises to increase Israel like the flocks of dedicated animals thronging the streets of Jerusalem at festival time (as in 2 Chronicles 35:7–9)—a scene that Ezekiel and his fellow priests had not seen for a long time.

Often we take these ‘purple passages’ of Ezekiel and select the bits we like to hear, without paying much attention to all that has gone before. Only as we have travelled with the prophet through the judgements that have occurred earlier, can we fully appreciate the joys of renewal and restoration, and not receive them lightly.

By the same token, if we have not ourselves been ‘crucified with Christ’ (Galatians 2:20), can we really know what it means to live by faith in him?

37:1-14 The valley of dry bones.

- 1–2 Possibly in the same place that he had seen the vision of God (3:22), Ezekiel is now given a vision of the desolation of Israel. The dead dry bones represent how the exiled Israelites see their hopeless situation after the destruction of their beloved city (v. 11). But God has other ideas, that He will effect through the word of his prophet.
- 3 Ezekiel is prepared to give God the benefit of the doubt in a seemingly impossible situation.
- 4–8 Ezekiel addresses the bones with the word of the Lord, and there is a coming together of bones. (Note: ‘breath’, ‘wind’ and ‘spirit’ in this passage are all the same word in the Hebrew. This turns out in verse 14 to be none other than the very Spirit or breath of God, as in v. 1, and 36:27.) This brings real life into the situation.
- 11–14 The interpretation of the vision is given. The restoration of Israel will be like a resurrection from the dead. It will be clear that this is something that could have happened only by God’s action.

Once again, Ezekiel is addressing the situation of Israel in his own day. What he is foretelling here is the miraculous re-establishment of the nation of Israel. It is not necessarily to be taken as teaching the personal resurrection of the dead, as found in Daniel 12:2 and the New Testament passages. Yet the God of the Old Testament had always been the one with power over life and death (Deuteronomy 32:39, 1 Kings 17:17–24, 2 Kings 4:18–37, 5:7, 13:20–21). And it is likely that this passage lies behind such teaching as John 3:1–10 and Romans 8:9–11, 11:1–36. It has brought personal inspiration to many who have found themselves in a dry or dead situation.

- 15–28 The reunification of Israel and Judah. Saul, David and Solomon had ruled over a unified kingdom (from 1050 B.C.). The northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah separated out through enmity under Jeroboam and Rehoboam in 930 B.C. (1 Kings 12). Yet even at that time, God had said, ‘This thing is from me.’
- 15–22 God’s final plan for Israel cannot see the continuation of this division, and Ezekiel is told to prefigure their unification in another prophetic sign. How and when this is to come about is not specified.

- 23 Again the cleansing and renewal of the nation is foretold.
- 24–25 The everlasting reign of the Davidic Messiah indicates a new and glorious age beyond the confines of normal historical existence.
- 26–28 The repeated promise of the covenant of peace (see 34:25–31) this time focuses on the dwelling of God in His sanctuary among his people, and prepares the way for the vision of chapters 40–48.

Is Church unity, or any other kind of unity, something that we think we can accomplish, or does it come by the action of God?

Are our divisions eternal, or should we see them being eliminated in the age to come, and start living with each other accordingly here and now?

EZEKIEL CHAPTERS 38–39—ISRAEL AND THE NATIONS

In these chapters we come to what may be called the ‘supra-historical’—that which lies beyond normal historical experience, but which impinges directly upon it. People here begin to use words like ‘apocalyptic’ (pertaining to visions and revelations) and ‘eschatological’ (belonging to the end-time). But it is firmly rooted in Israel’s past experience, and has meanings which bear upon Israel’s present situation and future hope.

The notion of a cataclysmic battle at the end-time before the beginning of the new age is a common one in Scripture. As we have seen, the land of Israel was subject to frequent invasions by foreign powers, so this loomed large in the people’s thinking. We may begin with reference to the invasion by Assyria after the destruction of Samaria in 721 B.C., when helpless Jerusalem was surrounded by the armies of Sennacherib (as told in Isaiah 36–37). The miraculous deliverance that occurred there imprinted itself on the memory of Israel. We have seen how the people of Jerusalem in Ezekiel’s day were wrongly presuming upon such a deliverance happening again for them at that time (see 11:1–12, Jeremiah 7:1–15). Yet the picture-language given to Ezekiel draws on the imagery of that great event.

Many of the prophets, in the turmoil of their own times, spoke of a final battle that would encompass the whole earth, and signal the end of all things as we know them. See Joel 2:1–11, 20, 30–32, Amos 5:18–20, Zephaniah 1:14–18, Jeremiah 4:23–28. These may be just poetic ways of referring to the crises of their own time. But they are couched in ways that have reference to the larger sense of calamity that overhangs us all. Jesus’ own predictions in Matthew 24, Mark 13 and Luke 21 participate in this same dynamic. Do they refer to the destruction of Jerusalem that actually occurred later in 70 A.D., or to the tumults of the end-time? The two cannot finally be extricated from each other, and so the answer is probably ‘yes’ to both. Every crisis experienced in history and in personal life is an impinging upon us of the final reality. The end is always just this far above our heads. And it is all in the good hand of God.

The final battle, whatever event or events it may signify, denotes the judging, cleansing and removal of all that is opposed to God, and everything that is evil in God’s universe, before the final age of God’s goodness can be ushered in (see 2 Peter 3:7–13). Ezekiel’s prophecy is presented with characteristic realism, in which visionary and historical elements are all of a piece. This has led some to identify details of this prophecy with current and predicted contemporary events (most notably the discredited identification of Gog with Russia, Meshech with Moscow and Tubal with Tobolsk, in the Scofield Reference Bible, which is still adhered to in one form or another by some groups today). It is best to stand at some distance from the detail, without speculation, and to receive the impact of the whole picture. Ezekiel’s prophecy finds its ultimate fulfilment in the reality, still expressed in picture language, that is depicted in Revelation 16:14 and 20:7–10.

38:1–9 This prophecy is undated, but from v. 8 it appears to look forward to a time after the return from exile. ‘Gog’ is an unknown ruler, possibly derived from Gyges or Gugu, a king of Lydia in Asia Minor, or ‘Gagaia’, known as a land of barbarians, or Gaga, the name of a Canaanite god. (We can see that the scholars are guessing here!) He is possibly not a particular historical figure, but represents the head of the forces of evil that are intent on destroying Israel. ‘Magog’, ‘Meshech’ and ‘Tubal’ are located in and around Asia Minor (modern Turkey); Persia (modern Iran), Cush (Ethiopia), and Put (probably northern Africa) are nations further afield; Gomer and Beth-togormah are north and east of the Black sea. Mention of these peoples reminds us of Israel’s place among the nations (Genesis 10; see on chapters 25–28). These all assemble for war against Israel (v. 7–8), described in terms suggestive of the coming ‘day of the LORD’ (v. 9; see on 30:1–5).

- 10–14 V. 4 suggested that Gog was being dragged into this conflict by the action of God. Here we see it is Gog's own evil intent to do despite to this peace-loving and unprotected people, urged on by other nations that hope to profit from Israel's fall. Thus God brings out whatever is in our hearts, by the pressure of His holy love (see on 28:18).
- 14–16 The purpose of this action is, by the destruction of Gog and all these evil forces, to show God among the nations to be holy and true.
- 17 This will happen in fulfilment of many earlier prophecies (see above, on the 'final battle').
- 18–23 This time it is Gog, not Israel, that suffers at the hand of God, in shakings and judgements that indicate of the end of the world. This is the time when all will know, willingly or unwillingly, that God is God (compare Philippians 2:9–11).

Imagine what an encouragement this would have been to the exiles, as they imagined themselves in this helpless and vulnerable situation!
This is the sort of predicament that movies have learned to exploit to the full, and we thrill to it. But are we confident, in real life, that evil under the hand of God is a spent force, and that God's victory is ultimately secure?

(This is the blessed theme of the Book of the Revelation.)

- 39:1-16** The prophecy now repeats what has been said, this time in more gruesome detail. Such slaughter is envisaged that the burial of the dead bodies (just outside the borders of Israel, so that the holy land is not defiled) will take seven months, and will require a permanent commission to follow it up until the job is complete and the land has been cleansed. The used weapons will last as fuel for seven years. 'Seven' here, as in the book of the Revelation, is not necessarily literal, but indicates completeness, or fullness of time.
- 7–8 This victory is pre-planned and sure, and will make God known in His holiness among the nations.
- 17–20 These verses expand v. 4 in more detail, picturing the battle as a sacrificial feast to which the Lord invites all the birds of prey and wild beasts to devour the slain. This is not for the squeamish. But then, evil itself has never been pretty.
- 21–24 God's holiness will be manifested by this to the nations in two ways. God demonstrates His holy justice by bringing evil to judgement. He also shows that the exile of Israel, far from being a mark of weakness or helplessness on God's part (see 36:20), was God bringing the same cleansing justice to bear upon His own people. Again the exiles would have been heartened to know that they had not been singled out for unfair ill-treatment, but that in the suffering they underwent they were prefiguring a judgement that would come on all the disobedient nations, and in that they had learned that God is faithful (compare 1 Peter 4:17–19).
- 25–29 So Ezekiel is brought back to address the current plight of the exiles in Babylonia, with the promise of restoration and re-integration. This, more than anything else, will display God's holiness to all. This is the point to which all of God's actions are leading (see Ephesians 1:3–5).
- 26 In contrast to 16:63 and 36:31, not even the memory of their former shame remains in the end, for it has now been fully dealt with and removed, and the people now are fully consumed in the blessing of God.

- 29 Note how the outpouring of the Spirit accompanies the tumults of these stirring times (compare Joel 2:28–32, Acts 2:14–40). Here they will now be face to face with God.

The motif of deliverance in the midst of a great battle or titanic struggle is one which applies also to the ministry and mission of the Lord Jesus. See Matthew 2, 4:1–11, Luke 4:28–30, 22:53, John 14:29–30, 16:32–33. We are caught up into that struggle, and that victory, by the power of his identificatory love (John 12:31–32). This is graphically depicted in Revelation 12. It is by virtue of his victory and deliverance in the great battle of the cross, that we can be sustained and ultimately succeed in the continuing struggles we still experience here and now.

EZEKIEL CHAPTERS 40–44—THE NEW TEMPLE

Fourteen years after the fall of Jerusalem, Ezekiel, still in exile, is given a vision of the new temple, in the new city of Jerusalem, in the new land of Israel. With this his prophecy ends.

These chapters on the temple are linked with the vision in chapters 8–11. There we saw, in vision form, the defiled temple, the orders given for the destruction of Jerusalem, and the departure of the glory of God from the temple.

Remember what we said there about the significance of the temple. Patterned on the heavenly sanctuary, it set forth the nature of God in His dealings with us (see Hebrews 8–9), and represented our humanity, made in the image of God to be God’s own dwelling-place. At its highest, it stands for the Son of God himself. Its destruction prefigured our Lord’s crucifixion, and its restoration his resurrection from the dead (John 2:19–22) and the dwelling of God amongst his people (Revelation 21:3).

As in chapters 38–39, this is vision-language, yet using terms that appear to have historical reality. Again, this has led some to take this vision literally, even as a prediction of an actual rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem, and the reinstatement of the sacrificial system at the end of the Messianic age, still to be fulfilled (as in the *Scofield Reference Bible*. This would make nonsense of the work of the cross as the sacrifice to end all sacrifices; see Hebrews 10:1–25). There are details of the vision, such as the layout of the land in 45:1–8, 48:1–29, that are incapable of literal application, as they take no account of actual geographical features (contrast Joshua 13–19, alongside which Ezekiel’s scheme appears to be quite idealistic). The description of the water flowing from the temple (47:1–12) is obviously visionary and symbolic, yet again with some apparently literal and specific details (e.g. the provision for continuing salt supplies in 47:11). Perhaps in Ezekiel’s own thinking there was little distinction between the visionary and the historical—for him it was all of a piece, all the action of the one God in and beyond history. Our rationalistic and reductionist minds may have something to learn from that. The fact remains that no attempt was made by the returning exiles to implement the details of Ezekiel’s vision. It deals, within history, with a supra-historical reality: the nature of God, and of His life amongst His people (see 48:33: ‘The LORD is there’). Ezekiel writes as a prophet, not as an architect. The interest is in the symmetry of the measurements, and the perfection that symbolises, rather than in making it possible to reproduce the structure in practice. Ezekiel was a priest, with his heart set on the temple where he had never been able to exercise his ministry, which now lay in ruins. God spoke to Ezekiel in terms which answered the deepest longings of his heart, yet which also went beyond that with a message for all God’s people. Once again, let us stand at a little distance from the detail, while still trying to picture and understand it, and seek to hear what God is saying to Ezekiel and the exiles, to the church at large, and to our own situation, and let us receive the promise of God with joy.

- 40:1** ‘the twenty-fifth year’: 573 B.C.—a full thirteen years after the last dated prophecy. For how long had Ezekiel been thinking and praying about these things before the vision came?
- 2 ‘a very high mountain’, ‘a structure like a city’: the language of vision: at one remove from literal reality, yet related directly to it.
- 3 The angelic guide.
- 4 Ezekiel is to absorb all of this fully, in order to be able to give it out.

The next few chapters are best followed with the aid of diagrams which attempt to reproduce what is written in visual form.

- 5 The measuring reed is about three metres long; so that is the height and the thickness of the wall. However, the significance of the measurements is in the total of the number of cubits, not in their modern metric equivalent.
- 6–16 The east gate. Seven steps lead up to a passageway ten cubits wide and fifty cubits long, with three cubicles or guardrooms off each side along the passageway, and a porch at the other end. The overall width of the structure is twenty-five cubits, exactly half its length (note the symmetry of the measurements). The porch and each of the guardrooms have windows, and the doorposts of the porch are adorned with carvings of palm trees.

Could the palm trees indicate that here we are entering somewhere like the garden of Eden? (See Genesis 2:8–9.)

- 17–37 The outer courtyard. The porch of the east gate leads into a large courtyard, with chambers facing into it on three sides: thirty in all, ten on each wall. The walls are each five hundred cubits long. At the centre of the north and south walls are gateways exactly the same as the east gate we have just come through. One hundred cubits in from each of these outer gateways is the wall of the inner courtyard. This is entered up eight steps through three inner gateways directly opposite the outer gateways, and built to the same design, like a mirror-image, with their porches facing towards the outer courtyard.
- 38–43 Just inside and outside the northern gateway to the inner courtyard are tables for the killing, washing and laying-out of the sacrificial animals.
- 44–47 Alongside the inner gateways, on the south and north sides of the inner courtyard, are chambers for the priests. The inner courtyard is one hundred cubits square, with an altar in the middle.
- 48–41:26 Up ten steps on the western side of the inner court is the temple building itself. A fourteen-cubit-wide entrance, with pillars on each side, leads into the temple porch. From there, through a ten-cubit-wide doorway, we enter the nave or main room of the temple, lit by high windows. At the centre of this room is an altar-like table of unspecified use, perhaps corresponding to the table for the ‘bread of the Presence’ in the earlier tabernacle and temple (Exodus 25:23–30, Leviticus 24:5–9, 1 Kings 6:20). Beyond that, through a six-cubit-wide entrance, lies the perfectly square most holy place, or ‘holy of holies’. Each of these chambers is richly adorned with carvings of palm trees and cherubim (again an allusion to the garden of Eden; see Genesis 3:24). The overall length of the temple building is exactly one hundred cubits. Along its three sides are three stories of side chambers or storage rooms, built against the walls of the temple building, with access by outside doors and stairways. The space behind the temple building, made up of a yard and another building of unspecified use, makes up another one hundred cubits, like the inner court in front of the temple building—fine symmetry again.
- 42:1–14 To the north and to the south of the temple building are the priests’ chambers, one hundred cubits long and fifty cubits wide, three stories high, with a corridor down the middle of each. Here the priests eat the edible portions of the sacrifices, and change their clothes as they enter and leave the holy place.
- 15–20 Ezekiel is now conducted outside the whole temple area through the outer east gateway by which he entered. The whole temple area is five hundred cubits by five hundred cubits. The wall marks ‘a separation between the holy and the common’ (N.B. ‘common’ does not necessarily mean unclean. It is simply a neutral term.)
- 43:1–5 Ezekiel sees the glory of the LORD returning to the temple, in the same way He had left it. This is the climax, and the significance, of the whole vision. The LORD is with His people.

- 6–12 The perfection of God’s holiness, represented here by the perfect symmetry of the new temple, is now to be matched by the perfect holiness of the people, among whom God dwells. The setting-forth to the people of Israel of the perfection of the temple will shame them out of their former unholiness. So the area that is ‘most holy’ shall now extend beyond the temple area itself! (Compare the vision in Zechariah 14:20–21, where even the bells on the horses’ harnesses are ‘Holy to the LORD’, and every pot in the whole city of Jerusalem is sacred.)

Up to now, holiness has been a rather fragile thing, which could be easily defiled, and not easily passed on; see Haggai 2:10–14. But when Jesus came, holiness began to flow out from him in the other direction. That which before would have rendered a human being unclean and unholy is now cleansed and sanctified by his touch and command (see e.g. Luke 5:12–14, 8:40–56).

It can be truly said that God’s purpose in making everything is that all might come to participate in God’s own holy life (called in the New Testament ‘sanctification’). Here we see that this holiness has a strong moral element. How much do we down-play the importance of holy living today, for those who belong to God?

- 13–27 The altar of sacrifice (by which the people are cleansed and made holy and acceptable to God), located in the inner courtyard, is now described, and the ordinances for its consecration and use are laid down.
- 44:1–4 The outer east gateway, which the Lord has used to re-enter the temple, is now to remain shut forever. (Is this a way of saying that God will never leave again?) The prince (Messiah?), who enjoys a special relationship with God, may now sit in its porch ‘to eat bread before the LORD’ (a lovely homely image).
- 4–31 Holiness may be spreading out (see above on 43:12), but there is still a marked distinction between what is holy and what is not, and there can be no place in God’s temple for what is not holy. This is set out in terms of who can and who cannot enter or minister in the sanctuary, and the duties of those who are acceptable as priests are set out, largely in terms of the law of Moses. In particular, their job is still to ‘teach my people the difference between the holy and the common, and show them how to distinguish between the unclean and the clean’ (v. 23).

‘I am their inheritance...I am their possession’ (v. 28). What is the significance of saying in the New Testament that all of God’s people participate in the priesthood (Hebrews 12:23—see Numbers 3:11–13, 45, 8:14–19; 1 Peter 2:9—see Exodus 19:5–6; and Revelation 1:6)?

While all of this is spoken of in terms of a reconstituted temple still under the Mosaic covenant, there is still a provisional feel to all of this. The description is almost surrealistic and dream-like. Everything is waiting and in readiness, but there are no people yet in evidence. We can see what is being signified in terms of God and his people being together in holiness, but it seems the fulfilment is yet to come. It would appear that the reference is not

just to the time of the return from exile, but points beyond that to the reality described in Revelation 21–22. Taken that way, we can take this prophecy also into our own hearts. Yet we remember that, in that fulfilment, even the temple itself (and we are that temple) is subsumed into the wonderful reality of ‘the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb’ (Revelation 21:22), in a riotous blaze of intimacy and glory .

EZEKIEL CHAPTERS 45-48—THE NEW ISRAEL

In chapters 45–48 we spread out from the new temple to the whole newly re-constituted land of Israel, while still keeping an eye on the temple and its ordinances at the centre of it all. Remember that Ezekiel is a priest in exile who longs for nothing more than to be in the restored temple, carrying out his priestly duties. It is in this context that God addresses Ezekiel with the message of hope for all Israel (and beyond; see 47:22–23), still largely in terms of a restored Mosaic covenant. But the variations (eg. 46:4–5 compared with Numbers 28:9–10), the omissions (eg. no mention of the feast of weeks, as in Deuteronomy 16:1–17, after 45:24), and the generally sketchy nature of the details, indicate an emblematic rather than a literal treatment. (Some commentators postulate a later reworking of Ezekiel’s writings by lesser minds to explain these aspects, and engage in unprovable and ingenious speculation on that basis. We prefer to take the text at face value, and to see it as the work of a man receiving revelations from God within the limitations of his context, and speaking thus of things beyond his ken, as in 1 Peter 1:10–12 and 2 Peter 1:20–21.) Again, the returning exiles did not implement the literal details of this vision; so it would seem that, as far as they were concerned, this was not its original intention.

45:1–8 Surrounding the sanctuary is an area of land twenty-five thousand cubits (roughly 12.5 kilometres) square, divided into three strips. The central strip containing the sanctuary, ten thousand cubits (5 kilometres) wide, is reserved for the priests. The northern strip, also ten thousand cubits wide, is for the Levites (temple helpers). These two together make up the holy district. To the south is a strip five thousand cubits wide (2.5 kilometres—half the width of the other two strips) consists of the city, four thousand five hundred cubits square, surrounded by two hundred and fifty cubits of parklands, with city land ten thousand cubits long on either side. To the west and east of this whole square is the territory assigned to the prince or ruler, reaching to the Mediterranean Sea on the west and to the Jordan River on the east. (See further details in 48:8–22.) Note that this layout takes little or no account of actual geographical features. The size, shape, and placement of the various sectors indicate their relative place and importance in the new society, not their literal geographical location.

What relative position is given to the religious and civil authorities in this model of the new society? How does that comport with our experience, or that of other ages? If this is the way God sees things, what are the implications of this for how we see ourselves and the place of the things of God in our own society?

8–9 The territory assigned to the prince is to put an end to the ruler’s unlawful acquisition of land belonging to people’s tribal inheritance (as, for instance, Ahab did with Naboth in 1 Kings 21; see also Isaiah 5:8). This practice is to cease in the new Israel.

10–12 The law of just weights and measures (Leviticus 19:35–37, Deuteronomy 25:13–16) is reasserted (compare Amos 8:5). ‘A false balance is an abomination to the LORD, but a just weight is his delight’ (Proverbs 11: 1). God’s justice is to be the hallmark of the new society.

- 13–17 The offerings are redefined and summarised. A new feature is the role of the prince in providing the offerings, out of the offerings of the people.
- 18–25 Some feast days are summarily dealt with, in a way that does not exactly match the old law.
- 18–20 This new year ritual, which has elements of dedication, purification and atonement, is unknown as such in the law of Moses. In v. 20 the Greek translation of the Old Testament has ‘in the seventh month, on the first day of the month’, which would make this part six months later.
- 21–24 The Passover celebration still holds a central place, with variations (compare Numbers 28:16–25).
- 25 A brief mention is given of what would appear to be the Feast of Tabernacles (compare Numbers 29:12–16). There is no mention of the Feast of Weeks, or Pentecost (Numbers 28:26–31).
- 46:1–8** The prince occupies an unprecedented position of honour at the sacrifices, though not as a priest himself, from the porch of the east gate to the inner court, which is now reserved only for this purpose.

Does the prominence accorded to the prince in Ezekiel’s vision signify anything of the later role of the Messiah? There was, of course, no king at the time of the law of Moses, though the king is alluded to there (Deuteronomy 17:14–20). The references here seem unresolved and still incomplete. It is not until the New Testament (see especially Hebrews 4:14–5:10, 6:19–8:2) that the figure of one who is both priest and king, foreshadowed in Genesis 14:18 and Psalm 110, finally emerges in Jesus Christ.

- 9–10 In typical style, Ezekiel notes the practical arrangements for the coming and going of the worshippers, considering that neither of the east gates are now accessible.
- 11–15 The composition and procedures of various offerings are described, for feasts and appointed seasons, for a freewill offering, and the daily offering. Again, the description here is fairly truncated, compared with earlier treatments (eg. Exodus 29:38–42).
- 16–18 A law is made which enshrines the plea of 45:8–9 regarding the true handling of property.
- 19–24 Ezekiel is shown the kitchens in the priests’ chambers of the inner court, and the people’s kitchens in each corner of the outer court of the temple. We are reminded that feasting together was part and parcel of Israelite temple worship.
- 47:1–12** A moving and memorable picture of the river of God, as an image of God’s everflowing life-giving blessings (compare Genesis 2:10–14, Psalm 46:4, 65:9). Unnoticed before, the stream flows from the door of the temple building itself, past the altar, and out under the outer wall of the temple area east towards the Dead Sea. Miraculously, as it flows on it gets deeper and deeper, freshens the waters of the Salt Sea, filling them with life, and giving rise to marvellous trees in either side of the stream. While all this is obviously symbolic and visionary, nevertheless Ezekiel again pays attention to realistic detail, such as the continuing provision of salt in v. 11.

This river is found again coming into its own in Revelation 22:1–2 and 17 (compare Isaiah 55:1). We may see it also being referred to in a personal way in John 4:14, 7:37–39, and Romans 5:5.

- 13–21 In preparation for setting out the inheritance of the tribes of Israel, the boundaries of the land are defined. These correspond to the area promised to Abraham and his descendants, and fulfilled at the height of the reign of Solomon (Genesis 15:18, Numbers 34:1-12, 1 Kings 8:65).
- 22–23 Foreigners also can be included in Israel’s inheritance (compare Isaiah 56:3–8, John 10:16, Mark 11:17, Acts 11:17–18, Ephesians 2:11–22). This matches an earlier concern in 22:7.
- 48:1–7 The distribution of the land among the tribes is now given. Again, with little or no regard for geographical features (contrast Joshua 13–19), each tribe is allotted an equal portion of land stretching in straight lines right across from the Mediterranean Sea to the Jordan River. This is perhaps to indicate that all receive an equal share in the inheritance of the new society.
- 8–22 The central portion (see 45:1–8) is described in more detail, in its central position amongst the tribes of Israel.
- 23–29 The remainder of the tribes are allotted their share to the south.
- 30–35 The gates to the city are named for each of the twelve tribes of Israel. Clearly in all this the reunited Israel (as in 37:15–28) is envisaged.

The Book of the Revelation also recognises the twelve tribes in a similar scheme. In Revelation 7 they are extended to include the ‘great multitude that no man could number’, and in 21:9–14 the gates are augmented by twelve foundations, named for ‘the twelve apostles of the Lamb’. So here Ezekiel’s vision is meshed with the outcome of the ultimate plan of God for all the nations, accomplished in Christ.

- 35 ‘The LORD is there’: the climax of this vision, and of the whole of Ezekiel’s prophecy. Also the climax of all history, and the heart of the purpose of God in creation, and through all the ages, as set out in Revelation 21:3: ‘Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them.’

So ends the prophecy of Ezekiel: the prophet who in exile discovered that God is with His people, and desires to bring them, through thick and thin, to a holy union with Himself that will be forever.

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