

EZEKIEL

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LEVEL** 
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OZARK CHRISTIAN COLLEGE

Ezekiel Session 1 Introduction and Overview

The book of Ezekiel is a challenging book of the Bible to study for various reasons (length, timing, type of literature), but includes timeless truths about God's character, God's priorities, God's way of dealing with his people, and how God's people should respond to him.

Historical Situation

The period of history covered in the book of Ezekiel is from about 593 B.C. to 571 B.C.

Ezekiel the prophet, and many of the other major leaders and influential people in Israel, had also been taken to Babylon, but the city of Jerusalem had not yet been destroyed.

Much of the book of Ezekiel predicts the destruction of Jerusalem, but it also speaks of its eventual rebuilding.

Big Themes of the Book

Seriousness of Sin – God takes the idolatry and injustice of the people of Israel and surrounding nations seriously. Through this we are reminded that God is always watching and will eventually bring justice to the world.

The Presence of God – For the people of God during Ezekiel's time, God's presence was equated with the temple in Jerusalem. But being taken from the city and that temple being destroyed could make people ask the question, "Where is God?"

The Heart – While God gave his people commands in the Old Testament Law, in various ways the book of Ezekiel reminds us that God's priority is a heart that is devoted to him, eager to do what is good. God promises his people he will give them a new heart.

Future Restoration – The book of Ezekiel points ahead to a future rebuilt city with a temple. And while the city of Jerusalem was rebuilt and a new temple constructed in the Old Testament time, there are hints in the book of Ezekiel about the ultimate restoration God will bring for the world at the end of time.

Knowledge of God – The key phrase in the book of Ezekiel is, "And then they will know that I am the Lord."

Questions for Discussion/Reflection:

- What are some of your expectations or preconceptions of the book of Ezekiel?
- How are some of the big themes of this book relevant to your own situation in life?
- When you think about the end of the world, what sort of feelings emerge?
- What are some ways in which you want God to give you a "new heart"?

Ezekiel Session 2

Ezekiel 1-3

Ezekiel the Person

In chapter 1 we learn some basic biographical information about Ezekiel. He was a 30-year-old priest living in exile in Babylon.

Ezekiel had been in Babylon for 5 years, which means he wouldn't have served yet as a priest in Jerusalem. And because he was a captive in Babylon, he wouldn't have been allowed to go serve in the temple now that at the age of 30 he was eligible for service.

But God had an unexpected way for Ezekiel to serve him and his people: as a prophet.

Ezekiel's Vision

Seemingly without seeking it, God gave Ezekiel an awe-inspiring vision.

Initially Ezekiel notices four living creatures with four faces, four wings, and four wheels. But the figure on a platform above them is the main attraction. A figure on a throne that looked like a person, but was like glowing metal and fire. It was the likeness of the glory of the Lord.

Ezekiel's Commissioning

Ezekiel is told by the voice of God that he will be sent to the people of God to speak on God's behalf. But much like Isaiah and other prophets before him, they would mostly reject his message.

In spite of the rejection that Ezekiel would experience, God promised him that he would equip Ezekiel with the resolve he needed for his task. This reminds us that God has given us what we need to serve him. It also reminds us that we are not responsible for the results of our service to God and others. We are just responsible to be faithful to God's calling.

Questions for Discussion/Reflection:

- How do you think you would have felt if you were living as a captive in Babylon like Ezekiel had been?
- What impression does Ezekiel's vision of the creatures and the figure on the throne give you?
- What are some of the promises God has given us to enable us to serve him faithfully?
- What would it look like in your life to give yourself wholeheartedly to serve God and his people and not concern yourself with the results?

Ezekiel Session 3 Ezekiel 4-7

In this section, Ezekiel begins his ministry preaching to the people of Israel. His primary message is a prediction of the destruction of the city of Jerusalem. 2 Chronicles 36 gives a brief narrative description of the events predicted by Ezekiel.

Dramatizations

Ezekiel's preaching also involves dramatizations of the predicted destruction of the city.

First, he is told to build a model of the city and construct siege-works against it.

Second, he is told to lay on his side for over a year and cook his food on cow dung! This represents the fear and anxiety with which the people will ration their food during the siege.

Third, he is told to shave his hair and beard and separate the hair into groups. The first portion of hair is to be burned in the model of the city. The second is to be scattered with a sword. The third is to be scattered to the wind. But he is told to tuck a few hairs in his pocket. These represent the ways the people will be harmed and scattered as a result of the destruction of the city.

Mountains

If these dramatizations seem strange, the next portion of Ezekiel's message doesn't make it any less weird. He is told to prophecy against the mountains of Israel.

The mountains are a picture of the high places throughout Israel where altars had been built to false gods. They also connect with the prosperity and security the people had relied on instead of trusting God.

While these images are not immediately comforting to consider, we learn about the seriousness of sin and the reality of God's discipline for his people. He had warned them many times against turning away from his law and depending on false. The time had come for them to experience the consequences of their choices.

Questions for Discussion/Reflection:

- How do you feel about the idea of God allowing his own holy city and temple to be destroyed because of the idolatry of his people?
- How does this section inform your understanding of God's perspective on sin?
- What are ways that you might be tempted to minimize the seriousness of sin?
- What would you say to someone who finds these images of judgment impossible to mesh with the idea of a loving God?

Ezekiel Session 4

Ezekiel 8-11

In this section Ezekiel is transported in a vision to the city of Jerusalem where he sees the idolatry that is occurring there. This gives us more detail as to the nature of God's disapproval of the people, but it also helps us to grapple with the nature of idolatry and how it can creep into our own hearts.

The City Full of Idols

The figure of glowing metal and fire gives Ezekiel a tour of the temple in Jerusalem. From various vantage points he can observe different kinds of idolatry.

There was an "idol of jealousy" and altars to unclean animals. There are people showing devotion to the Mesopotamian god Tammuz, who is associated with shepherd and flourishing fruit. Other people are bowing down to the sun.

At the heart of all of this is that the devotion God's people should have for him, the one true God, has been directed toward anything and everything that the people think may be able to secure a better life for them.

As a response to the people's idolatry the glory of God departed from the temple.

Promise of Restoration

In light of the idolatry of the people of God, God reconfirms his intention to bring judgment on the city. But out of this ruin will come restoration.

Ezekiel 11:17

"Therefore say: 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: I will gather you from the nations and bring you back from the countries where you have been scattered, and I will give you back the land of Israel again.'"

Ezekiel 11:19-20

"I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh. Then they will follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. They will be my people, and I will be their God."

Questions for Discussion/Reflection:

-Essentially idolatry is trusting other things for something only God can provide. What are some things you might be tempted to trust in more than God?

-If you were to imagine yourself as the people in Ezekiel's vision bowing down to your idols, how does that make you feel?

-As believers, we have the presence of God within us through the Holy Spirit. What does an undivided heart look like as we cherish God's presence with us?

Ezekiel Session 5

Ezekiel 12-15

Back from his visionary journey to Jerusalem, Ezekiel continues his dramatized predictions of the coming destruction of Jerusalem. First, God tells Ezekiel to pack up his things and make a public departure to symbolize how the people in Jerusalem will be forced to leave the city. Many will be scattered, but some will testify throughout the nations about what had happened. Second, Ezekiel is told to tremble as he eats and drinks. Similar to his earlier enactment involving food, this symbolizes the anxiety the people will experience because of their separation from God.

It is in this section that we learn that Ezekiel is not the only person at this time claiming to have a message from God. There are others who “prophecy out of their own imagination” (Ezekiel 13:2) and are guided by “their own spirit” (Ezekiel 13:3).

Perhaps surprisingly the message of the false prophets is “peace” when there isn’t peace. Essentially they are saying that everything is fine the way it is. In contrast to Ezekiel’s message of warning because of the people’s disobedience, these prophets say that there isn’t anything wrong. So Ezekiel is told to prophecy against these prophets for giving false hope to the people. In 2 Timothy 4:3 Paul warns that in a similar dynamic can take place in our own era. “To suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear.”

While it is uncomfortable to face our mistakes head on, that is the path to restoration with God. In Ezekiel 14:5 God describes his loving discipline of his people: “I will do this to recapture the hearts of the people of Israel, who have all deserted me for their idols.” God wants his people to find true flourishing, not false peace, which only comes from him.

In Ezekiel 15, Jerusalem is pictured as a vine that does not bear fruit. In John 15:1 Jesus says, “I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener.” When we go our own way, it leads to fruitlessness. But when we put our faith in Jesus, we will bear much fruit to the glory of God.

Questions for Discussion/Reflection:

- The false prophets during Ezekiel’s time preach a false peace, rather than helping the people of God come to grips with their rebellion. What are ways you might be tempted to deny, deflect, or distract from true repentance?
- Both Ezekiel 15 and John 15 speak of how fruitless a life apart from God is. How can you see this in your own life prior to faith in Jesus?
- Jesus is the true vine and all who remain in him will truly flourish. While this may not always look like an easy, successful life in the ways we might naturally think of it, what does a godly, fruitful life look like?

Ezekiel Session 6

Ezekiel 16-24

This is the most poignant element of Ezekiel's prophecies about the people's idolatry and disregard for God's will. Their unfaithfulness is portrayed as adultery and prostitution.

In Ezekiel 16, the story of God's selection and provision for the people of Israel is described as a marriage. God, as a husband, generously expressed love for his wife, the people of Israel. But the very gifts given to her were used to pay her lovers as a prostitute. Ironically these lovers are the historic enemies of God's people such as the Egyptians, Philistines, Assyrians, and Babylonians. During this period of time, the leaders in Jerusalem allied with Egypt to try to free themselves from Babylonian oppression, rather than turning to God as their Savior.

In the midst of this grim scene, Ezekiel 17-18 gives a glimmer of hope that God will eventually restore his people and show grace to the repentant. But until that time, his discipline will be applied to his people.

In Ezekiel 23, imagery similar to Ezekiel 16 is used to describe the unfaithfulness of God's people. In this case it is two adulterous sisters. The reason there is two here instead of one is because there had been an earlier split among the people of Israel. But even though they have gone their separate ways, they have a lot in common regarding their unfaithfulness.

This section ends with the sober words that Ezekiel's wife dies and he will not prophesy anymore to the people of Israel until the destruction of Jerusalem is completed.

All of this is uncomfortable to read and apply to ourselves. But it shows us the passionate love and commitment that God has for his people. If we have a humble heart toward him, we can see these strong words as an invitation to become faithful to him since he is always faithful to us.

Questions for Discussion/Reflection:

- Unfaithfulness to God being portrayed as adultery and prostitution is striking. Have you ever thought of your own sin in these terms?
- What sorts of thoughts and feelings does it prompt in you to think of sin in this way?
- Though Israel's, and our own, unfaithfulness is tragic, God promises to receive his people back to a loving relationship with himself. How can you demonstrate more faithfulness to God?

Ezekiel Session 7

Ezekiel 25-32

This section of the book of Ezekiel is an interlude of sorts since Ezekiel's mouth is "closed" until the destruction of Jerusalem in terms of his prophecies to Israel. This section contains prophecies to the nations surrounding Israel.

While the message to the nations is a warning for them and prediction of future judgment, it reminds us that God is the God of the whole world. And while God had established a special arrangement with the descendants of Abraham, God's promise to Abraham in Genesis 12 involves blessing the whole world through his family.

Various offenses by the nations:

- Pride – Tyre even says about itself "I am a god."
- Gloating over Israel – Rather than seeing God's actions with Israel as discipline, Ammon and Moab see it as a sign God has forgotten them.
- Treating God's people poorly
- Self-Reliance – Egypt consider themselves invincible and saw their Nile River as a never-ending supply of sustenance
- Idolatry – They trusted in their own gods instead of the one true God.

Some lessons from God's rebuke of these nations:

1. Be careful not to be shaped by the environment more than by God's Word.

Israel had lost their way because of allowing their surrounding nations to influence them rather than staying faithful to the instructions God had given them. This is a risk for all of us. In Matthew 13:7, 22 Jesus speaks about seed sown among thorns. The worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it out and it does not thrive.

2. The unfaithfulness can detract from God's mission.

Israel was supposed to be a light to these nations. Rather than helping them see God more clearly, they gave into the influence of the culture and religion of those nations. Even now when Christians fail to live according to God's will, opportunities are missed to be a light to the world.

Questions for Discussion/Reflection:

- Though these ancient nations seem distant from us, the types of things that characterized them are just as much a possibility for us today, such as pride, disregard for others, and self-reliance. What are ways that you can identify with the struggles of the nations mentioned in this section?
- What are some ways that your surrounding environment in this season of life could threaten your faithfulness?
- What is a way you can be a brighter light in your current context to point people toward God?

Ezekiel Session 8

Ezekiel 33-36

In this section, the predicted destruction of Jerusalem takes place. But right after this takes place, God begins to speak through Ezekiel promising to restore his people to their homeland and rebuild his temple.

Where the leaders of Israel, pictured as shepherds, had failed, God will succeed as a good shepherd of his people. The leaders of the people looked out for themselves. But in John 10:11 Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."

God's plan for the restoration meant that they would thrive in the promised land again. Their crops would flourish and they would be safe. In John 10:10 Jesus said, "I have come that they may have life, and life to the full."

God's blessing on his people will be a marvel to anyone who passes through their territory. They will once again be a light for the nations. In John 10:16 Jesus said, "I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd."

Though God's discipline was painful for Israel, he restored them to the land, enabled them to build a new temple, and had peace. Through their blessings they would once again help the surrounding nations know God. Now Jesus, our good shepherd, has come. He has given us life and brought in people from all parts of the world to be part of his one flock. Out of the blessed life we have in Christ, we share the good news with the world.

Questions for Discussion/Reflection:

- God used the destruction and rebuilding of Jerusalem to bring his people back to a peaceful relationship with him. How has God used difficulty in your life to increase your spiritual maturity and love for him?
- How can you further be a witness to the world about the good news of Jesus?

Ezekiel Session 9

Ezekiel 37-39

In Ezekiel 37, Ezekiel is given a vision of a valley full of dry bones. He is told to speak to the bones. At this point in Ezekiel's ministry, this doesn't seem so weird! He tells the bones that they will live again. The bones rattle and come together, then take on flesh. God says in 37:14, "I will put my Spirit in you and you will live."

This vision points to the new life that is possible through the Spirit of God. God used this imagery to explain the restoration he was bringing for Israel and pointing ahead to our new life in Christ. In John 3:3 Jesus said, "No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again. In 2 Corinthians 5:17 it says, "If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come!"

Then Ezekiel is told to take two sticks and bring them together as one. This symbolized a restoration of the unity of the division the tribes of Israel had before the exile in Babylon. It also points ahead to the incredible new community in Christ that brings Jews and Gentiles together as one. Ephesians 2:14-16 says, "For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility."

This section ends with striking imagery of God's ultimate defeat over evil, personified in a figure called "Gog." This isn't given to us to help us predict the events leading up to the return of Christ, but is intended to fuel our hope in his eventual return when sin and death will be ultimately defeated.

Questions for Discussion/Reflection:

- God is uniquely able to bring life out of death, pictured in the valley of dry bones. What are ways in your own life or the life of others you know that you have seen God bring newness out of a seemingly hopeless situation?
- God's desire is to restore us individually to peace with him as well as bringing unity between us and others. Is there anyone you need to forgive or about whom you need to let go of bitterness to experience a greater measure of this restoration?
- How would your life change if you had more hope in the eventual defeat of evil when Christ returns?

Ezekiel Session 10

Ezekiel 40-46

In this section Ezekiel is taken on another visionary journey to Jerusalem. But this time it is to tour the future temple of God! It is an awe-inspiring vision of God dwelling with his people.

There is meticulous detail given about the dimensions and layout of the temple. But the important point is that it is magnificent and draws people's attention to God. In Ezekiel 43:10-11 God tells Ezekiel that the perfection of the temple should provoke regret for the people in light of their sins. In a sense it invites them to say, "God is so much better than the false gods and idols that we put our trust in."

In addition to the temple building itself being rebuilt, the vision shows the presence of God returning and the priesthood being reactivated. These mark the complete return of God's people to peace with him and the freedom to serve him properly.

A unique element that is introduced in Ezekiel 45 is that the prince should preside at the holy festivals and provide sacrifices for the people. This is a picture of a prince that acts like a priest!

In the book of Hebrews, Jesus is described as our high priest, who is also our king. He fulfills this image of a prince-priest once and for all. Hebrews 9:24 says, "For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made with human hands that was only a copy of the true one; he entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God's presence."

Ironically, the temple rebuilt after the return from Babylon would itself be destroyed in A.D. 70. Now, we are his temple and we await a new city described in Revelation 21:22 that has no temple. Because God himself will be our temple.

Questions for Discussion/Reflection:

- God's temple was the place for the presence of God to be accessible to people. We are now his temple of God on earth stewarding his presence through the Holy Spirit. How does it shape your self-understanding to think of yourself as a temple of God?
- In Ezekiel 43 the perfection of the temple was meant to draw a contrast with sin. How could our way of life inspire as gracious but striking contrast with a way of life apart from God?
- In what way does the hope we have for future total peace in the presence of God inspire you?

Ezekiel Session 11
Ezekiel 47-48

The final two chapters of the book of Ezekiel are a continuation of Ezekiel's visionary tour of the new temple. The focal point is a river flowing out from the threshold of the temple. This river flows out of the city and brings life to the desert and refreshes the Dead Sea so it can support living creatures. Wherever it goes, things flourish.

This water flowing from the temple points ahead to Jesus and the life he grants to believers. In John 4 he offers a woman at a well "living water" that will quench thirst forever and spring up to eternal life. In John 7:37-39 it says, "On the last and greatest day of the festival, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, 'Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them.' By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive." Jesus offers believers eternal life, and then they in turn become a source of refreshment for others through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit.

The final chapter of the Bible, Revelation 22, begins with a description of a river flowing out from the throne of God. It gives us an incredible picture of the eternal flourishing we will have in the presence of God. In the meantime, God has commissioned us to be his messengers holding out the hope of eternal life found in the Gospel.

At the end of the book Ezekiel we learn that though this visionary tour of a temple that would be built in Jerusalem, the name of the city is "The Lord is There." The greatest part about the new heavens and the new earth is that the Lord is there. We will be with him in perfect peace with God and one another.

Questions for Discussion/Reflection:

- The image of the river flowing from the temple symbolizes the flourishing that God provides His people and those they come in contact with. What does true flourishing look like in contrast to the natural worldly definition of success?
- What excites you about eternal life in the new heavens and earth?
- How does your conception of God mesh or contrast with the picture in Revelation of God on the throne as the main attraction in heaven? Is your idea of God as magnificent as he is pictured there?