

Introduction to Ezekiel

Let's read Ezekiel 1:1-3, and then PRAY.

1. Where does Ezekiel fit in the story of the Bible?

How do we get from the start of the Bible to Ezekiel? From creation and covenant... to God's people exiled and receiving a message of condemnation from Ezekiel's mouth?

The story of Genesis to Ezekiel is really important background. It helps us understand Ezekiel – and in particular why the sin of Ezekiel's people was so serious.

(a) God's covenant with Abraham

Out of all the families of the earth, God chose one family. In the great "covenant" chapters of Genesis 12, 15 and 22 God joined himself to Abraham and gave him the most wonderful promises: he would be in a unique covenant relationship with the Lord.

And this promise – which is nothing less than the beginning of the promise of the Gospel – would eventually include people from every nation, tribe and tongue. Thus we read:

Genesis 22:18, "... and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice."

The rest of Bible is the story of how God keeps his promise to Abraham. And it's the story of what it means to be a true child of Abraham who receives the blessing of the Gospel.

(b) Exodus: redeemed for holy worship

By the end of Genesis God's people are numerous (just as God promised Abraham). But they find themselves enslaved under Pharaoh in Egypt. Their slavery is a picture of sin (the New Testament speaks of slavery in this way): they are helpless, unable to free themselves.

Their salvation is entirely the gracious and powerful work of their covenant God, who has not forgotten his covenant promises. He frees them by means of Passover: the blood of the lamb is a picture of the Cross – bringing deliverance through a penal and substitutionary atonement.

The Exodus rescue is not an end in itself. Rather, God's redeemed people are brought to Sinai in order to WORSHIP the Lord and be commissioned as a nation of holy priests who have a holy job to perform. So we read:

Exodus 19:5-6. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; ⁶ and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel."

To them is given the Law of Moses. Within the overall framework of the Abrahamic covenant an additional covenant relationship is formed: what we sometimes simply call the Mosaic covenant.

This is headed by the 10 Commandments which remind the people of their Lord's high holiness and the high calling of living as his people.

But we mustn't forget that the Law of Moses is nonetheless a gracious covenant. It's given to an already-redeemed people (they don't and can't save themselves); the Law itself is good – behind every prohibition, for example, is something good and holy; and built into the Law are the sacrifices of atonement which make it possible for sinful people to remain in fellowship with a holy God.

(c) No presumption: covenant blessing... AND covenant curse

The terms of the covenant made it clear to God's redeemed people that they were never to take their relationship with the Lord for granted. There was never to be any presumption upon God's grace and mercy.

One way the Lord made this clear was through the Law's promise of covenant blessing AND its warning of covenant curse. Here in Leviticus 26 we see what the Lord promises if his people continue to trust and obey (note the key promise of the covenant that "I will be your God, and you shall be my people) AND what he says will happen if they do not:

Leviticus 26:3-4, "If you walk in my statutes and observe my commandments and do them, ⁴ then I will give you your rains in their season, and the land shall yield its increase, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit

Leviticus 26:11-13, I will make my dwelling among you, and my soul shall not abhor you. ¹² And I will walk among you and will be your God, and you shall be my people. ¹³ I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, that you should not be their slaves. And I have broken the bars of your yoke and made you walk erect.

Leviticus 26:14-16a, "But if you will not listen to me and will not do all these commandments, ¹⁵ if you spurn my statutes, and if your soul abhors my rules, so that you will not do all my commandments, but break my covenant, ¹⁶ then I will do this to you...

A whole generation rebelled against the Lord – grumbling against him in the wilderness just weeks after their mighty deliverance from Egypt. That generation was condemned to die in the desert. Then, when the next generation was poised to enter the promised land Moses again brought the covenant to the people and warned them against the dangers of covenant disobedience, including the specific threat of exile to a pagan land:

Deuteronomy 28:36,49-50,64, "The LORD will bring you and your king whom you set over you to a nation that neither you nor your fathers have known. And there you shall serve other gods of wood and stone... The LORD will bring a nation against you from far away, from the end of the earth, swooping down like the eagle, a nation whose language you do not understand, a hard-faced nation who shall not respect the old or show mercy to the young... "And the LORD will scatter you among all peoples, from one end of the earth to the other...

Why is this significant? Because, when the Lord – in due time – exiled the people of Judah to a new slavery in Babylon, his actions were both predicted and entirely just: they were contained within the terms of His covenant with Israel.

How then did this situation come about?

(d) The kings: mediators of blessing... and disaster

The actual spiritual decline of the nation began in the era of the Judges. Under the kings, after a false start with Saul, David and Solomon (initially) brought a glimpse of true blessedness. The land, under their rule, looked for a while like a mini-Eden. In particular, a godly king is a mediator of God's blessing to his people. Thus, in his very final words King David said this:

2 Sam. 23:3-4, The God of Israel has spoken; the Rock of Israel has said to me: When one rules justly over men, ruling in the fear of God, ⁴ he dawns on them like the morning light, like the sun shining forth on a cloudless morning, like rain that makes grass to sprout from the earth.

It is a wonderful thing to have a faithful and God-appointed king. However, these words were far more predictive of the reign of the Lord Jesus than they were ever experienced during the rule of Israel's human kings.

Solomon strayed into immorality and idolatry. Under his son, Rehoboam, a rebellion of the northern tribes led to a permanent split in 930BC. The southern kingdom (formed of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin) is referred to in the Bible either as "Judah" or (confusingly) as "Israel". The northern tribes (sometimes called "Israel") took on a separate identity under a series of entirely ungodly rulers, and were destroyed by the Assyrians in 722BC. The Bible's clear verdict is that this was God's doing:

2 Kings 17:7, "All this took place because the Israelites had sinned against the LORD their God, who had brought them up out of Egypt from under the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt. They worshiped other gods."

(e) The last kings of Judah

The decline of Judah accelerated under its latter rulers. Manasseh (reigned 687-642) was miraculously converted late in life, but earns the terrible distinction of being labelled the worst king to sit on David's throne (2 Chronicles 33:10-20, 2 Kings 21:1-18, 24:3-4)

The kingdom of Judah never recovered from the spiritual degradation to which he had brought the nation. After 45 years of court-sponsored paganism, Judean apostasy was deeply entrenched.

The wicked Amon reigned briefly (r.642-640). Then followed the sweeping reforms of the godly king Josiah (r.640-609). But they could not reform the nation.

Josiah tried his best: he purged the nation of pagan cult objects, eliminated divination and magic, centralised worship in Jerusalem, and reinstated the Passover (2 Ki. 23, 2 Chr. 34). But it was too little, too late. And Josiah died at the age of 39 (2Ki. 23:38-40, 2 Chr. 35:20-27). Did the Lord remove Josiah because the divine plan was to bring judgement on the nation? We'll never know.

Throughout its history, the nation of Judah (and before it the united kingdom of Israel) found itself surrounded by a succession of world powers: Egypt, Assyria, Babylon and later the Greeks and Romans. On the one hand these powers sought to subject God's people to slavery. On the other hand, God's people continually found themselves tempted to ungodly alliances with these powers – often adopting their immorality and idolatry as well.

After Josiah his middle son, Jehoahaz, reigned briefly in 609 before being deposed by the Egyptians.

Then Josiah's older son, Jehoiakim took the throne (r. 608-598. See 2 Ki. 23:31-37). His was a fateful reign. Judah had come under the control of the Babylonians, after the brilliant Nebuchadnezzar (a great general, and later King of Babylon) had destroyed the Egyptians at the Battle of Carchemish in 605. To maintain Judean loyalty, Nebuchadnezzar had taken leading nobles like Daniel and his friends away to exile. This was the first in a wave of exiles taken during the Babylonian captivity of God's people.

But in 598 Jehoiakim rebelled. Nebuchadnezzar besieged Jerusalem, captured and executed Jehoiakim.

He installed his son Jehoiachin in his place (2 Ki. 24:8-17). He reigned briefly, from 598-597. But he was unable to serve the Babylonians as they wished, and he was exiled too – along with his queen, royal officers and 3,000 people. He lived out his days far from home. Many of these captives – including Ezekiel – were settled in a Jewish colony on the Chebar Canal. (Interestingly, when Ezekiel dated the different oracles of his book he did so according to the reign of Jehoiachin, ignoring the existence of Zedekiah).

In Jehoiachin's place Nebuchadnezzar installed Zedekiah (r. 598-586. See 2 Ki. 24:27-28). He launched an open revolt, and the Babylonians responded by torching Jerusalem. Nebuchadnezzar executed the king's sons in front of him, before gouging out the king's eyes (2 Ki. 25:1-21, Jer 52:9-11). The nation of Judah had vanished.

But remember this: this terrible calamity was precisely what the Lord warned would happen. It was not unjust. Nor was it outside of the sovereign will of the Lord. Rather, it was His precise and faithful enacting of the curses contained within the covenant.

2. Who was Ezekiel? What was his job?

(a) Ezekiel the man

In Ezekiel 1:1 attention is drawn to "the 30th year." To what does this refer? It probably means that Ezekiel began his ministry at the age of 30. This is significant, since a man from a priestly family (as Ezekiel was) would ordinarily begin his temple service at this age. However, 700 miles from the temple this was an impossibility.

Strikingly, Ezekiel writes his book entirely in the first person: "I" ... "me." He was personally affected by his ministry in an extraordinary way. As you read his book you see the cost of faithfulness in ministry. As we listen to his message we get to feel some of the pain to which the Lord called Ezekiel. And whilst none of us are Old Testament prophets, we will be helped by noting the price which Ezekiel paid in his faithful ministry.

(b) The Old Testament prophets

How was Ezekiel *like* the other O.T. prophets, and how was he *un*-like them?

The Lord sent numbers of prophets – to Israel and to Judah – before, during and after the exile. You'll see the relevant Bible books listed here:

<p>OT books addressing the northern kingdom of Israel, prior to 722BC... Amos, Hosea</p>

OT books addressing the southern kingdom of Judah...		
BEFORE the exile (from c.800-597BC) Joel, Micah, Isaiah, Nahum, Zephaniah, Jeremiah, Habakkuk	DURING the exile Lamentations, Daniel, Ezekiel, Obadiah	AFTER the exile Esther, Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi

What was the job of an O.T. prophet?

(c) God’s mouthpiece... a covenant enforcer

Firstly, they were God’s mouthpiece. That’s why we read repeated phrases like, “Thus says the Lord.” The apostle Peter explains the origin of the prophet’s words:

2 Peter 1:21, “For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.”

Sometimes we think of the O.T. prophet as being occupied with fore-telling coming events. However, they are much more interested in forth-telling: that is, reminding God’s people of God’s holiness, their sinfulness, and calling them to repent and believe. Their task could be described as being “covenant enforcers,” calling wayward people back to their covenant Lord.

For Ezekiel, a particular focus is his warning of the coming destruction of Jerusalem and terrifying *departure* of God’s glory from the temple where it had dwelled for centuries:

Ezekiel 10:1-2, 18-19, “Then I looked, and behold, on the expanse that was over the heads of the cherubim there appeared above them something like a sapphire, in appearance like a throne. ² And he said to the man clothed in linen, “Go in among the whirling wheels underneath the cherubim. Fill your hands with burning coals from between the cherubim, and scatter them over the city.” And he went in before my eyes... ¹⁸ Then the glory of the LORD went out from the threshold of the house, and stood over the cherubim. ¹⁹ And the cherubim lifted up their wings and mounted up from the earth before my eyes as they went out, with the wheels beside them. And they stood at the entrance of the east gate of the house of the LORD, and the glory of the God of Israel was over them.”

Here we come to something unique about Ezekiel:

(d) Ezekiel: the spokesman who wasn’t allowed to speak

What do we mean by that rather cryptic phrase?! Three key passages must be noted here: Ezek. 3:22-27... 24:15-27... and 33:21-33.

Ezekiel was a typical O.T. prophet in this respect: God spoke TO HIM. Some 49 times we hear the prophet say: “The Word of the Lord came to me...”.

However, for most of his ministry (and for all the early part of it) Ezekiel was forbidden from and prevented from uttering ANY other word to the people EXCEPT God-given oracles of judgement. We read of this enforced silence:

Ezekiel 3:22-27, And the hand of the LORD was upon me there. And he said to me, "Arise, go out into the valley, and there I will speak with you." ²³ So I arose and went out into the valley, and behold, the glory of the LORD stood there, like the glory that I had seen by the Chebar canal, and I fell on my face. ²⁴ But the Spirit entered into me and set me on my feet, and he spoke with me and said to me, "Go, shut yourself within your house. ²⁵ And you, O son of man, behold, cords will be placed upon you, and you shall be bound with them, so that you cannot go out among the people. ²⁶ And I will make your tongue cling to the roof of your mouth, so that you shall be mute and unable to reprove them, for they are a rebellious house. ²⁷ But when I speak with you, I will open your mouth, and you shall say to them, 'Thus says the Lord GOD.' He who will hear, let him hear; and he who will refuse to hear, let him refuse, for they are a rebellious house. (Ezek. 3:22 ESV)

Imagine: Ezekiel can have no normal speech or interaction with his community of exiles by the Chebar Canal. Even more tragically, it's implied that he may not pray to the Lord for the exilic community. After all, past prophets like Moses had interceded for the people in the face of coming judgement. Why is Ezekiel not to do the same?

- Firstly, judgement on the temple, on Jerusalem and on the land of Judah is now assured. It is the irrevocable plan of God.
- Secondly, the spiritual state of the exiles is so serious that the Lord saw fit initially to preach them *only* a message of judgement: perhaps we're used to thinking of the *weakness* of the exiles (as in Ps. 137:1, "By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion"); however, they were actually deeply compromised – being as immoral, idolatrous, presumptuous, and mistrustful as those doomed individuals back in the land of Judah.

In chapter 24 we read of (perhaps) the most grievous incident in Ezekiel's life: the Lord revealed that he was going to kill Ezekiel's wife – and that he was forbidden to utter words of mourning or grief. This was to function as a sign to the people, of the judgement that He was going to bring on the Jerusalem temple in which they trusted idolatrously for their spiritual and practical security. Only on the day when a messenger came to report the news of Jerusalem's destruction would Ezekiel be allowed to open his mouth to speak normally – and to bring words of grace and hope. Thus we read:

Ezekiel 24:15-27, The word of the LORD came to me: ¹⁶ "Son of man, behold, I am about to take the delight of your eyes away from you at a stroke; yet you shall not mourn or weep, nor shall your tears run down. ¹⁷ Sigh, but not aloud; make no mourning for the dead. Bind on your turban, and put your shoes on your feet; do not cover your lips, nor eat the bread of men." ¹⁸ So I spoke to the people in the morning, and at evening my wife died. And on the next morning I did as I was commanded. ¹⁹ And the people said to me, "Will you not tell us what these things mean for us, that you are acting thus?" ²⁰ Then I said to them, "The word of the LORD came to me: ²¹ 'Say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I will profane my sanctuary, the pride of your power, the delight of your eyes, and the yearning of your soul, and your sons and your daughters whom you left behind shall fall by the sword. ²² And you shall do as I have done; you shall not cover your lips, nor eat the bread of men. ²³ Your turbans shall be on your heads and your shoes on your feet; you shall not mourn or weep, but you shall rot away in your iniquities and groan to one another. ²⁴ Thus shall Ezekiel be to you a sign; according to all that he has done you shall do. When

*this comes, then you will know that I am the Lord GOD.'*²⁵ "As for you, son of man, surely on the day when I take from them their stronghold, their joy and glory, the delight of their eyes and their soul's desire, and also their sons and daughters,²⁶ on that day a fugitive will come to you to report to you the news.²⁷ On that day your mouth will be opened to the fugitive, and you shall speak and be no longer mute. So you will be a sign to them, and they will know that I am the LORD." (Ezek. 24:15 ESV)

Ezekiel's ministry was to call the exiles to align themselves with the viewpoint of a holy and aggrieved God. However, they proved resistant to his words of warning, presumptuously believing that their possession of the temple, their covenant with Abraham, and the gift of the promised land could never be revoked. Only when they receive news of the judgement (meted out by God's tool of the Babylonians) will they accept Ezekiel's warning and be ready to hear news of a salvation and a transformation that only the Lord can work. Thus we read:

Ezekiel 33:21-33, In the twelfth year of our exile, in the tenth month, on the fifth day of the month, a fugitive from Jerusalem came to me and said, "The city has been struck down."²² Now the hand of the LORD had been upon me the evening before the fugitive came; and he had opened my mouth by the time the man came to me in the morning, so my mouth was opened, and I was no longer mute.²³ The word of the LORD came to me:²⁴ "Son of man, the inhabitants of these waste places in the land of Israel keep saying, 'Abraham was only one man, yet he got possession of the land; but we are many; the land is surely given us to possess.'²⁵ Therefore say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: You eat flesh with the blood and lift up your eyes to your idols and shed blood; shall you then possess the land?²⁶ You rely on the sword, you commit abominations, and each of you defiles his neighbor's wife; shall you then possess the land?²⁷ Say this to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: As I live, surely those who are in the waste places shall fall by the sword, and whoever is in the open field I will give to the beasts to be devoured, and those who are in strongholds and in caves shall die by pestilence.²⁸ And I will make the land a desolation and a waste, and her proud might shall come to an end, and the mountains of Israel shall be so desolate that none will pass through.²⁹ Then they will know that I am the LORD, when I have made the land a desolation and a waste because of all their abominations that they have committed.³⁰ "As for you, son of man, your people who talk together about you by the walls and at the doors of the houses, say to one another, each to his brother, 'Come, and hear what the word is that comes from the LORD.'³¹ And they come to you as people come, and they sit before you as my people, and they hear what you say but they will not do it; for with lustful talk in their mouths they act; their heart is set on their gain.³² And behold, you are to them like one who sings lustful songs with a beautiful voice and plays well on an instrument, for they hear what you say, but they will not do it.³³ When this comes - and come it will!-- then they will know that a prophet has been among them." (Ezek. 33:21 ESV)

This helps us to understand Ezekiel's big message...

(e) Ezekiel's big message...

In understanding the purpose of the book we need to understand that there are two groups of people in view: those still in Jerusalem, and the exiles. Both are equally guilty before the Lord.

But whilst Ezekiel's message is ABOUT Jerusalem, it is *not* FOR the people of Jerusalem. For them there is no hope or possibility of escape.

This raises a question (and an apparent problem): doesn't God always give everyone another chance to repent? Or, to put it another way, are not God's warnings of coming judgement conditional, such that they'll not be carried out if you repent?

- Certainly, there is a type of prophecy which is like this. An important passages states: *Jer. 18:7-10, "If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, ⁸ and if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I intended to do to it. ⁹ And if at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, ¹⁰ and if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will relent of the good that I had intended to do to it.*
- That's what happened with Jonah and Nineveh: God declared coming judgement... Nineveh repented... and the Lord relented. It's not the case that the Lord "changed his mind", for he knew what would happen and will always save those who repent.

However, there are other types of prophecy in the Bible which are unconditional. And the prophecy of Jerusalem's destruction falls into this category. For those left in Judah there would be no repentance and no salvation. It is a chilling and salutary thought.

Rather, the prophet's message calling for repentance is for the exiles. They were being called to align themselves (painfully) with the Lord of Hosts, to accept the goodness of his holy judgement, to cease presuming on the kindness of the Lord and his covenant, and to repent of those sins which were every bit as gross as those left behind in Judah.

This was the "pastoral intent" of the book back in Ezekiel's day, and points us towards the big message and pastoral intent of the book for us now. (You could liken the "pastoral intent" of a Bible book to medicine. If we take a good dose of Ezekiel, for what should we look in order to tell if it's having the right effect?).

So, here's the message of Ezekiel in three sentences:

*** God's church is to repent of presumption, idolatry and immorality.

She's to welcome the terrifying judgement of a holy God.

She's to look to the Lord alone for salvation and security. ***

3. Getting to know Ezekiel better...

In our next session, God-willing, we'll work through an **outline** of the whole book. We'll see how the book divides into sections, what is the main message of each section, and how it all fits together.

In private study...

- You could read chapters 1-12, as a great introduction to the book.
- You could chapter 16, if you wanted to read just ONE chapter that includes many of the book's big messages and aims.

Bibliography

- *The book of Ezekiel*, Daniel Block (two vols).
- "Ezekiel," in *An introduction to the Old Testament*, eds. R.B. Dillard & Tremper Longman III.
- "The message of Ezekiel: paradise," in *The message of the Old Testament*, Mark Dever.